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Color Defined: An Autoethnographic Exploration of How Race, Trauma, Gun Violence, and Grief Connect for a Black Mother

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Color Defined: An Autoethnographic Exploration of How Race, Trauma, Gun Violence, and
Grief Connect for a Black Mother

by

Kokita Dirton Wilson

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Innovation
Department of Lang., Lit., Excep. Ed., and Physical Ed.
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Dedication

This autoethnographic dissertation is dedicated to my son, Braelen, with all my love as I am committed to transforming my pain to purpose in the fight to end gun violence and transform the grief process for Black mothers. Furthermore, this work is also dedicated to the larger community of grieving Black mothers who are strong, resilient, and will thrive as empowered agents of social change as destined and purposed for restoration and appointment by the Almighty God. Selah

Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Chapter One.....	2
Introduction.....	2
Purpose of the Study.....	4
Voices Rediscovered.....	5
Research Questions.....	6
Significance of the Study.....	7
Background of the Researcher.....	8
Background of the Study.....	13
Theoretical Framework.....	16
Critical Race Theory.....	17
Navigating the Intersections.....	17
Tenets of Critical Race Theory.....	18
Intersectionality.....	18
Counter Narrative.....	18
Transition Theory.....	21
Assumptions.....	21
Delimitations.....	22
Definition of Terms.....	22
Overview of the Study & its Methodology.....	24
Chapter Two.....	27
Literature Review Introduction.....	27
Race.....	30
History of Race.....	31
Slavery, The Progressive Era & Black Codes.....	32
Jim Crow Laws.....	33
Oppression.....	33
American Dream.....	35
White Privilege.....	36
Disenfranchisement & Oppression.....	37
Social Power Dynamics.....	40
Educational Problems of Practice.....	40
Cultural Trauma.....	44
Gun Violence in the United States.....	45
Gun Violence in the City of Tampa.....	45
Statistics by Race & Gender.....	46

Grief.....	47
Grief & Trauma.....	48
Racialization of Grief.....	48
Black Mothers.....	49
Black Grief.....	50
Mourning Black Mothers.....	52
Grief Curriculum.....	53
Art Therapy.....	54
Visual Art.....	54
Music.....	55
Poetry.....	55
Educational Outreach & Activism by Mothers/Finding Purpose.....	56
Literature Review Summary.....	57
Literature Review Conclusion.....	58
Chapter Three.....	63
Methodology.....	63
Qualitative Research.....	63
Interpretivism.....	64
Research Design.....	65
Narrative Inquiry.....	65
Autoethnography.....	66
Role of the Researcher.....	69
Data Collection.....	71
Data Analysis.....	72
Reflexivity.....	72
Visibility of Self.....	73
Engagement.....	73
Vulnerability.....	73
Open-endedness.....	73
Summary.....	74
Chapter Four.....	76
Findings Introduction.....	76
Background: Spirituality and Parenting.....	77
The American Dream.....	78
Reflection: Living in a World of Unbelonging.....	79
Parenting.....	81
Reflection: It's a Girl.....	82
It's a Boy.....	83
What's Race Got to Do with It.....	85
Parenting and K-12 Education.....	86
Reflection: School-to-Prison-Pipeline.....	87
Trauma.....	90
Reflection: Race.....	91
Policing.....	95

Fatal Shooting	96
Media Reporting	98
Grief	99
Reflection: Grief and Loss	99
Media Reporting	100
Judicial System	101
Purpose and Healing	105
Chapter Five	107
Discussion of Findings.....	107
Purpose of Research Questions.....	107
Epilogue: Writing Reflection.....	107
Findings.....	110
Doctoral Journey.....	112
Limitations	116
Discussion of Findings.....	117
Research Question One.....	118
Research Question Two	120
Cultural Trauma.....	120
Posttraumatic Slave Syndrome	121
Black Mothers.....	123
Black Grief.....	124
Areas of Future Research.....	125
Disruption: My Loss	126
Innovation: The Braelen Foundation	126
Education	127
Pod Cast	127
Job Readiness.....	130
Financial Planning & Management	128
Reform	128
Mother Mediators.....	128
Sistas	129
Grief Support	129
Circle of Mothers	129
Art Therapy	130
Conclusion	130

List of Figures

Figure 1. Transition Theory: Grief-to-Healing process, Kokita Dirton Wilson	21
Figure 2. Data-to-narrative process, Kokita Dirton Wilson.....	71
Figure 3. Dear Braelen, Kokita Dirton Wilson	105

Abstract

Black mothers are disproportionately affected by fatal shootings and the need for making meaning and finding purpose remains overlooked as a vital component of building resilience in their grief journey. The purpose of this study was to (a) reflect on being a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim; (b) understand the grief and healing process that follows; (c) connect my experiences to those within the larger Black grief community, and (d) by example, help other grieving mothers navigate through their grief struggles. I used two research questions: 1) How can I learn about my grief process by using personal narrative and storytelling to explore, write about, and analyze my experience? 2) How can I use my experiences to inform knowledge, be of service to and to support other grieving Black mothers of fatal shooting victims? I documented experiences of my grief journey through the narrative writing of this autoethnographic research reflection using journaling, poetry, drawings, pictures, and other artifacts to provoke further analysis of lived experiences. Using critical race theory as the theoretical framework for this research with counter narrative, I discuss intersectional counter-narratives of 1) power, 2) privilege, and 3) oppression and the role race plays in complicating the parenting and grief process for Black mothers. This study adds to the limited literature about Black grief, healing, and parenting for Black mothers, identifies innovations, and contributes to the existing body of knowledge available to assist grieving Black mothers of fatal shooting victims in navigating their grief journey.

Chapter One

Introduction

I am a semi-grey haired, brown skinned, 52-year-old, broad shouldered African American woman who spends most of my time saying “yes,” helping and mothering others. My name is Kokita Dirton Wilson. Family and friends call me “Kita, Mama and Grandma.” I am a wife, grandmother, educator, and mother scholar (a doctoral candidate), as well as a “Vilomah” (a parent whose child has died), and minister of the gospel. In the winter of 2014, I was thrust into the role of Vilomah as the first mother in our family to lose a child for reasons other than illness. Naturally, this unsolicited appointment manifested emotions of despair, anger and confusion that left me feeling purposeless and without reason to continue living.

As a mother, I have experienced many shifts in my life, all of which centered on the transition of “Becoming” as a mother, wife, grandmother, minister of the gospel and adult learner; but none of these shifts affected me quite like the shifts of becoming a vilomah and mother scholar. Parenting Black children, specifically sons, it was incumbent upon me to acknowledge the existence of racially informed policies and practices within K-12 education so I could teach my children, especially my sons how to navigate around them and excel academically in avoidance of the punitive disciplinary practices and exceptional education labeling that often precedes the school-to-prison pipeline and violent behaviors.

Following the murder of my son in December of 2014, I found myself in a place of grief lined with denial and uncertainty as most mothers would, yet my experience was quite different from that of white mothers because my experience was framed and guided by trauma and race.

The fatal shooting of my son Braelen, facilitated societal, media and legal responses informing me of the power and impact of race, specifically, in fatal shootings of Black males and the grief process of Black mothers as my son was criminalized and made responsible for his death well before witnesses were interviewed. The media's response in how they reported my tragedy, although hurtful and offensive, served as a direct reminder of how deeply embedded race is in this country's history and the power the race narrative has in shaping individual and societal responses, even in times of loss.

Gun violence is and has been a public health phenomenon for more than half a century. Since 1968, more individuals have died in the United States from guns than in battle during all the wars this country has fought since inception (Bauchner H, 2017). Although this Nation's gun problem impacts all individuals regardless of race, ethnicity, and gender, the same cannot be said for victims of gun homicide/fatal shootings or their families, specifically, the victims' mothers, since race has been identified as one of the strongest predictors of morbidity and mortality for Black males (Bell et al 1992). Within recent years, the number of gun related deaths has continued to increase via mass shootings, fatal shootings of African Americans and other gun related crimes. In 2020, 1,285 murders occurred in the State of Florida alone, and 80 percent of those murders involved a gun (Angers, 2021). Resulting in approximately 26 African Americans being fatally shot a day and in larger cities, African Americans making up 68% of gun homicide victims (Everytownresearch.org, 2021).

Losing a child to a fatal shooting is one of the most traumatic experiences a mother will ever face. While mothering and grief processes are viewed the same for all mothers regardless of race because of the shared commonalities, the experience for Black mothers is very different from that of white mothers (Forbes, 2020). Grief is our body's personal and natural emotional

response to the loss of what matters in our lives (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014). These emotions are without formula, allowing the cause and effect to span beyond experiencing loss to also encompass the fear of loss, and the complexity of these emotions do not designate a specific timeframe in which these emotions are experienced (Kubler-Ross, Five Stages of Grief, 2020). For over two hundred years Black mothers have lived with the daily fear of loss from having their children ripped from their arms and sold to plantation owners, seeing their children's lifeless bodies hang from trees, unjustified police brutality, and now the ever-increasing fatal shootings of our unarmed children in city streets (Alexander, 2004). This fear shared between our ancestors and Black women of today unconsciously manifests emotional and physical body responses that emulate grief responses of loss, facilitating fear motivated parental behaviors and responses triggered by the experiences of mothers before us as a form of post-traumatic slave syndrome (PTSS) (DeGruy, 2017). Because of this horrific lived reality, for many Black mothers, grief and mourning begins at the time of conception, becoming more real at birth due to historic trauma, ongoing loss, systemic racism, and daily inequities (Millward, 2016). When a Black mother loses her child to a fatal shooting, she is forced to decide between grieving and fighting for justice on behalf of her slain loved one, often causing her physical, mental, and emotional health needs to go unacknowledged and therefore unaddressed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this autoethnographic research is to reflect on being a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim, to understand the grief and healing process that follows, connect my experiences to those within the larger Black grief community and help other grieving mothers navigate through their struggles. I will examine my journey of parenting Black and bi-racial children as a Black mother to bring awareness to how race shapes parenting methods for Black

mothers and societal responses. I will critically examine the experience of tragedy, trauma, grief, and healing as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim without availability of pragmatic social and mental health support. To do so, I will narrate this research with the use of first-person perspective as gained through my experience as a grieving Black mother of a fatal shooting victim. My research underscores the power embedded in this country's race narrative and its impact on the social, mental, morbidity and mortality status of African Americans as experienced in the United States.

To accomplish this arduous task, I will synthesize my thought process and chronicle significant events of my grief journey through storytelling and narrative writing.

Voices Rediscovered

Storytelling, also referred to as folklore within the African American community, began with our history in 1619 with the arrival of the first slave ship in Jamestown, Virginia (History, 2015). As will be revealed in the literature review, slavery did more than place Blacks in physical shackles. Slavery also removed the traditions, language, and given names of the African culture to force disconnection to their culture and heritage and facilitate servitude through bondage and oppression (dos Reis dos Santos et al 2021). In their fight towards resilience, slaves communicated and preserved what knowledge they could about their culture and experience as slaves through the use of folklore (storytelling) (dos Reis dos Santos, 2021). As a form of concealment to prevent the slave masters from knowing what they were talking about, the slaves often used animals to represent human characters and because the stories were viewed as fictional and entertaining to the plantation owners, they had no problem with allowing the use of folklore (Wilson, 2021).

Black mothers of fatal shooting victims, much like our enslaved ancestors, have our voices stripped away with the fatal shooting of our children in the way the media criminalizes, and asserts blame on the victim for their loss of life. The narrative provided about our loved ones often leaves us bearing the weight of unwarranted shame and despair at a time when the grieving mother needs to be comforted and supported through this tragic journey of grief. Within many Black families, the victim leaves behind children whose only knowledge of their father will come from pictures and storytelling of the individual to preserve their memory. To collect data from my lived experience as a grieving Black mother of a fatal shooting victim, I will use storytelling and narrative writing to rediscover my voice as researcher and participant as well as in proxy for the greater community of grieving Black mothers through this autoethnographic work.

Research Questions

Cresswell (2009) tells us that qualitative research is used to explore and understand individual and group meaning to social or human problems. That the identification of research questions that inform the approach of research design to be used in gathering and analyzing data are formed once the interpretive paradigm has been selected. And that narrative studies do not always explicitly state research questions (Creswell, 2009). However, my track starts with an American dream that turned to tragedy and seeks to understand the impact of race on the grief process and the grief and healing for Black mothers of fatal shooting victims. My lived experience as documented through reflection, journaling, and arts-based artifacts, screams for interpretation and questions that provoke further analysis for understanding. Utilizing the nexus of doctoral work and grief, I will ask the following questions.

1. How can I learn about my grief process by using personal narrative and storytelling to explore, write about, and analyze my experience?
2. How can I use my experiences to inform knowledge, be of service to and to support other grieving Black mothers of fatal shooting victims?

Significance of the Study

In this autoethnography I will synthesize my experiences of parenting, trauma, and grief as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim. The data from this research is vital to understanding my grief process and informing readers of how cultural trauma, gun violence and race intersect and shape the grief process for Black mothers. I will use the academic space provided by this dissertation in practice to reflect on theory and lived experiences of autoethnography including critical race theory, and storytelling to gain understanding to promote healing and inform others as the first step towards awareness. As a mother scholar, I offer my experience as a grieving Black mother of a fatal shooting victim to the greater community of grieving Black mothers as I chronicle the challenging journey of grief after tragedy.

This research concerns fatal shootings and the grief process in connection to my personal life, which builds upon personal experiences and led to engaging in this academic journey as a grieving, Black, mother scholar. I chronicle my experience as a grieving Black mother using critical interpretive inquiry and I turn to process and performance autoethnographic research through storytelling to express the infinite emotions and systemic challenges that came with my son being fatally shot and Black. I often found myself feeling alone and at a loss for regaining a sense of purpose in a world with an increasing community of mothers like myself, yet I had no one to turn to who could understand. My path to survival poses a counternarrative to societal responses and perceptions of mothers grieving the tragic loss of a child, specifically, Black

mothers navigating their grief journey void of needed pragmatic support.

This reflexive study allows me to explore my lived experiences through autoethnographic work to raise self-consciousness and maneuvering through the pain, confusion, anger and uncertainty required to make life better (Bolen, 2012). This study allows me to honor my son, the challenges of my experience that were not initially welcomed, my family and other grieving Black mothers through narrating my journey through the complexities of grief as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim. Because of the sensitive nature of this topic and the insight I share regarding gun violence and identity (i.e., race and gender) that have been overlooked for centuries in studies of experiences within the African American culture, readers are asked to interpret the content of this study in a way that provokes a positive change in how society and individuals respond and provide support. In the next section of this study, I reflect on some of my experiences coming to understand the need for pragmatic support for grieving Black mothers.

Background of the Researcher

My story, unlike the story of many other Blacks, is one of being raised by a single parent but not one of poverty, low expectations, clouded values, and morals. I am treated indifferent at times based on the color of my skin and gender but fortunately for me, I come from a prominent family of medical and legal professionals, entrepreneurs, innovators, politicians, civic leaders, and educators who possessed the drive and fortitude required to rise above the mediocrity, poverty and stagnation that being born to a Black farmer in 1865 would dictate.

My family was wealthy and well respected in Florida and our lineage includes making history being first as an African American County Commissioner in Hillsborough County in 1868 (Mills Holloman -a cousin), the first Black dentist in Tampa in 1918, organizing Tampa's Negro Board of Trade in 1914, organizing the Central Industrial Insurance Company in 1922 and

real estate investment (Drs. George P. and Carl H. Norton – great grandfather and grandfather). Although their educational, political, and financial status provided a life void of lack and poverty that was to be admired, their social and economic status did not provide a life void of other challenges precipitated by race, nor did it make privileges readily available to White people, accessible to them. As generations continued being born and the matriarchs of our history passed away, our family's wealth reduced significantly causing access once available to our founders to no longer be available to my generation and those after me however, our foundation remains intact.

Growing up, I was not a problem child and I never wanted to do what everyone else was doing however, I chose an educational path that initially stripped my mother of all joy and hopes of seeing her dreams for me realized for me. I dropped out of high school in the middle of my senior year and opted to test for my GED (General Equivalency Diploma). Soon after, I met my children's father who was a licensed professional pharmacist, drug addict and alcoholic. From this relationship I bore a daughter and a son and suffered physical and mental abuse for years. When my daughter turned six, I gained the courage to end the relationship and brave life as a single mother of two beautiful children. While this may align with America's narrative for African Americans, it failed to align with my purpose, dreams, and aspirations.

In August of 1997, I met the man I would marry on December 20, 1998, as he registered two of the three-children he was single parenting at the charter school I served as administrator for. The school was Eastside Multicultural Community Charter School located in the East Tampa area. Eastside was one of the first three charter schools approved in Hillsborough County and it proved to be the catalyst for transforming my life as a single parent of two children to a life of

purpose, filled with love, adventure and challenges experienced through daily interactions with the students and my marriage to Oscar.

I considered myself to be a successful parent. Not only was I a mother to the children I had birthed and gained through marriage, but I was also a mother to the village of 244 students I interacted with five days a week. I found myself being just as committed to ensuring the future dreams and aspirations of my students were realized as I was to my own children. Not only did I evolve into a wife and full-time mother of five children, but I also became a mother-educator to my students through interactions and engaging in race talks in efforts to build their character and shape and guide their behavior.

Our new life together consisted of lots of learning, accomplishments, and the utilization of the invaluable arsenal of tools and knowledge inherited from matriarchs who went before us as I purposed for our blended family to transition from blended too whole. Although many books on parenting exist, none of them truly prepare you for parenting and especially parenting blended families because every family, culture and their needs are different. Therefore, I subconsciously and consciously relied upon cultural and life experiences as well as knowledge gained from the stories told and behaviors modeled by my mother and family matriarch's experiences and principles as parents to guide me in my parenting role.

Just as our families had done in our upbringing, my husband and I committed to sheltering our children, instilling the importance of education, teaching love, forgiveness and ensuring they were cultured, well rounded and able to interact with diverse groups of people without losing themselves. Consequently, this exposure presented each of my children with different challenges and opportunities based on the color of their skin and their parents. For my biracial children who look more white than Black, the youngest learned what it was like to walk

a day in a Black person's shoes once her teacher discovered that both of her parents were Black. The very next school day, her desk was placed alongside her teachers and from that moment forward she was labeled as the problem child of the class. Our oldest daughter gets to take advantage of the privileges inherent to White people when competing for jobs as she identifies as white for application purposes. Our middle daughter, petite, articulate, and darker complexioned was bullied by her peers for acting white and our youngest son, big in stature, articulate, and darker complexioned was racially profiled and harassed by law enforcement and repeatedly assaulted by his peers for not being Black enough.

With all the kids out of high school except for the baby girl and everyone thriving, Oscar and I decided it was now time to invest in ourselves. In the Spring of 2012, we enrolled in the undergraduate program at Springfield College to pursue a degree in Human Services. We chose Springfield because they offered a non-traditional, regionally accredited degree program designed specifically for the working adult which would allow us to continue meeting the needs of our family, each other, our classes and jobs as full-time students and professionals. Committed to making up for lost time, Oscar and I completed our undergraduate degrees from start to finish in a 2-year period graduating together on December 13, 2013. We were excited and committed to the journey of legitimizing and bettering ourselves, so in the Spring of 2014, we jumped right back in to pursue master's degrees. Feeling accomplished and validated, this brown skinned girl who derailed her mother's dream for her was finally able to give it back and rewrite the oppressed narrative of disenfranchisement written for my life, turning my unpopular choice for diploma into a journey of education and opportunity.

As a middle-class, Black professional, mother and scholar, a part of me thought our family had reached a social status that would reduce the threat of my children enduring certain

negative encounters and especially gun violence. However, December 23, 2014, manifested the devastating reality that being educated, living in a gated community, having traveled the world, ensuring my children were cultured and well-rounded, nor my family's prominence, could protect my family and I from the threat of gun violence. At both, the beginning and end of the day, my reality is that being Black not only determines my level of success, health, and life expectations; being Black also pre-disposed my son to the likelihood of being fatally shot, made blameworthy and criminalized for his death, dictating society's response to my loss and shaping my grief process with fighting for justice at a time when healing was vital for survival.

December 23, 2014 was the day my Braelen was fatally shot and the day I was thrust into the position of "vilomah," grappling with the loss of my son as the news media defamed him and took away his right to be a victim by making him blameworthy. It was then, I realized my educational and financial status meant nothing to society, however, the color of my skin did, because the racial narrative and ideals of this country would not allow society to see Braelen or myself as anything other than Black. The societal response to our tragic loss forced me as a Black mother to decide between grieving the loss of my child and fighting for truth and justice on Braelen's behalf as if I were fighting for his life. In fact, I was doing just that, as so many other Black mothers are forced to do when tragedy strikes.

Still struggling trying to find my purpose in life, I began my doctoral journey at the University of South Florida in August of 2017. At the onset of this journey, I knew my research focus would be gun violence/fatal shootings. As I broached this research from many angles and remained confident it would be centered on gun violence, I had no idea my research and journey to completion would clarify my grief process and facilitate healing. Through the coursework of my program, I was exposed to various methods of qualitative research, many of which are not

traditional and on the forefront of creativity and innovation. It was a culmination of exposure and knowledge gained from Critical Race Theory in Education, Arts-based Research and African American Community Research that illuminated the research method of Critical Interpretive Autoethnography for my dissertation in practice.

Background of the Study

Useless, uncontrollable, uneducable monsters are just a few of the stereotypes utilized to describe African Americans based on narratives of the Jim Crow era. As cruel and offensive as this statement is, worst is the lived experience of African Americans based on these stereotypes because of race and more specifically, gender for the Black male. As parents, we hope over time, the daily impact of these stereotypes would become lessened in our children's lives.

Unfortunately, this is rarely the case for African Americans who are disenfranchised systemically through race driven structures in our educational, penal, employment and healthcare systems.

This country's offensive narrative used to describe and devalue the lives of African Americans was constructed on the shores of Jamestown Virginia with the docking of three English ships carrying a total of one hundred passengers in 1607 (History.com, Jamestown Colony, 2010). As the English colonists disembarked the ships encountering the Native Americans occupying the land, they saw people of different physical builds and skin tones from themselves. Colonists of European descent lacked the understanding and willingness to consider natives of the New World as human beings with redeemable souls because of their world view distinguishing them as pure, human beings, and children of God based on their white skin, and all people different from them as "others" (Omni & Winant, 1994). It is the narrative derived from this ideology that subjected the natives to the denial of political rights, introduction of

slavery, other forms of coercive labor and the outright extermination as people that America sees yet, denies is being facilitated in the lives of African Americans today.

The history of the United States positions race, pre-eminently as a socio-historical concept that is used to identify a person, their temperament, intelligence, athletic ability, and their potential for being dangerous as well as qualifiers and disqualifiers of freedom, opportunity, servitude, and oppression (Omni & Winant, 1994). Empowering the ideology of supremacy and necessitating the domination of non-white people, specifically Blacks, through the racially driven laws, practices, systems, and narrative; the narrative of race has become the most powerful social construct of this country, not only deciding access to housing, education, and employment but also predicting the morbidity and mortality for Blacks (Bell et al, 1992). As such, a Southern Culture of Violence emerged during slavery (Warren, 2017), that has transcended to present day with the continuation and rise of violent acts, gun violence, and fatal shootings.

Gun violence in the United States has been a public health phenomenon for more than half a century. More individuals have died in the United States from guns since 1968 than in battle during all the wars fought since this country's inception (Bauchner, 2017). This phenomenon is not only shaking our entire country, but also devastating the lives of Americans individually and culturally with no respect of age or social status. However, the disproportionate number of African Americans, specifically, Black male victims, situate gun violence to be a public health crisis of safety, survival, and sustainability within the Black community.

Because of this country's racial narrative, there is an overrepresentation of African American students in the intellectually disabled exceptional education category, the penal system and firearm related deaths within the United States. African American students represent 16% of the U.S. total school population, 38% of the students in intellectually disabled categories (Togut,

2011). African American males represent only 13% of our nation's population and 50% of all fatal shooting victims (Sampson, 1987). Homicide death rates by race in the U.S. per capita indicate Black people are ten times more likely to be killed by guns than Caucasians with Black males, disproportionately representing non-suicide and non-accidental fatal shooting victims in the United States (Kochanek et al., 2004; Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008).

Black mothers have lived lives saturated with cultural trauma from the cotton fields to current day, being forced to parent through fear for their children's safety when encountering white people (Eyerman, 2004). This trauma is then compounded by gun violence which sadly has become a common event in the Black culture with the fatal shootings of Black males. Armstrong and Carson (2019), define cultural trauma as a discursive process channeled through social institutions shaped by race and gender. As such, it is not required for African Americans to have experienced slavery to identify with and experience the cultural trauma associated with slavery in their everyday life (Eyerman, 2004). This trauma is passed from generation to generation in the identity of Black people through values, fears, parenting styles, and experiences; and is compounded in the lives of grieving African Americans when they seek access to existing social supports and systems that more responsive to claims of privileged claims-makers. As a result, racial narratives of blameworthiness and criminality representing the victim begin to shape the meaning of grief – for Black survivors and beyond, specifically, Black mothers of violent/traumatic death victims (Armstrong & Carlson, 2019).

Hall (2014) explains loss and grief as being fundamental to human life and defines grief as a natural and normal response to the loss in all its totality, however, there is nothing natural about fatal shootings or mothers burying their children because of gun violence. The fatal shooting of an individual is sudden, unexpected, violent, final, and incomprehensible, forever

removing that loved one from the very core of your life. Causing a mother's future-plans for her child to become shattered, dreams to become no longer possible, and the sudden loss of relationship to be grieved in different ways (Hall, 2014). America's narrative concerning African Americans must be changed if we are to move forward with preserving the lives of our Black men and boys, as well as begin meeting the specific needs of grieving Black mothers.

Theoretical Framework

The history of this country reveals the social concept of race has been used to decide who has access to the American dream and who does not through social and scientific class systems implemented with the abolishment of slavery (History.com, Black Codes- Definition, Dates & Jim Crow Laws, 2010). Since the settlement of English ships on the shores of Jamestown Virginia 1607 race has served as both a qualifier and disqualifier of freedom, opportunity, servitude, and oppression (Omni & Winant, 1994) as well as a determinant for individual lifespans and causes of death for African Americans. Purposed by design, we as American people know less and less about this country's history pertaining to race, racism; the power it has in determining behaviors, access, and opportunity; and how it is used to develop laws and systems that govern every aspect of human life. In present day as this country would benefit from truly knowing its' history of race and racism regarding people of color, specifically, African Americans, white political leaders are mandating this content be removed from school curriculums of all levels. Citing their fear, the gain of this knowledge will promote further hate in a country whose foundation is saturated in hate and violence mainly towards people viewed to be different from what is idealized as white.

As a Black woman, wife, mother, grandmother, educator, scholar, vilomah, and minister of the gospel; I will use Critical Race Theory (CRT) as my theoretical and conceptual framework

and intersectionality and counter narrative as tenets of CRT to connect race to the African American experience from the counter narrative produced through storytelling of lived experiences. Intersectionality will be used to connect race to the experiences of African Americans regarding gun violence, specifically my experience as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim. Crenshaw (2017) defines “Intersectionality” as a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects (Crenshaw, 2021).

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a lens by which racial tenets are revealed that inform decision making in social movement strategy development (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017), and a framework offering insight to broader conversation encompassing conversations centered on power dynamics and social disparities. As an analytical tool, Critical Theory offers a critical construct on the perception of disparities including race, economics, inequality, power, and privilege (Taylor et al, 2016). For the purposes of this research Critical Race Theory will serve as a lens because it embraces the value and importance of counter narratives in research that construct social reality through the formulation and exchange of stories (Taylor et al, 2016).

Navigating the Intersections

Through this research, I triumph over organized systems constructed by an oppressive and demoralizing narrative as they intersect with motherhood, parenting, gun violence, grief, trauma, and scholarly research, specifically for African Americans. I use critical race theory as a lens by which to embrace the value and importance of counter narratives in this autoethnographic work to explain what racism is, how it functions in our society, and the emotional and psychological experiences of racism (Valdes, 2002). I will use the concept of intersectionality as a tenet of CRT to explore the connection of race, to trauma, gun violence, and grief; and the

concept of counter narrative will be the CRT tenet by which personal lived experiences will be shared through storytelling and writing for this narrative autoethnography.

Tenets of Critical Race Theory

Intersectionality as a tenet of CRT supports my theory that race is positioned at the foundation of life's journey for African Americans, guiding the functions, systems, and experiences of Blacks even in death (Crenshaw, 2021; Omni & Winant, 1994). I will employ tenets of critical race theory to convey how I process my grief journey by acknowledging that racial structures, specifically gender based, control the narrative, images, and the ways in which African Americans are viewed and responded to by society (Ladson-Billings, 1995). I will utilize storytelling through narrative writing as a form of autoethnography to capture my experience, and journaling and poetry as arts-based inquiries to capture moments of grief experienced (Hill & Knox, 2021; Leavy, 2015). I proposition through this research that race continues to be significant in determining the lives of African American people (Valdes, 2002).

Counter Narrative as another tenet of CRT provides a platform for exposing racial constructs and revealing how they impact specific areas of life for African Americans even in loss. Counter Narrative is a tool used by CRT scholars to contradict racist characterizations of social life and to expose racial constructs, revealing how white privilege operates to reinforce and support unequal racial relations in society (Ladson-Billings, 1995). While majoritarian stories draw on the tacit knowledge among persons in the dominant group (Delgado & Stefancic 2000), counter-narratives provide information on the lived experiences of subordinate groups, making those experiences the basis for social change. As a methodology, Counter-narrative offers a means to convey the voices of those underrepresented in research and to utilize these

voices in analyzing data to identify and critique majoritarian narratives that target Black people (Miller et al, 2020).

As a form of storytelling through narrative writing, counter narratives hold promise to expose, analyze, and critique the racialized reality in which experiences are contextualized, silenced, and perpetuated (Delgado & Stefancic, 1995; Solorzano, 2020). Narrative writing will serve as the vehicle needed to examine my lived experience and to make that experience the basis for social change (Delgado & Stefancic, 1995). Using counter narrative as a tenet of CRT for this study, provides a means to communicate my lived experiences and realities through documenting and sharing how race influences the grief experience for African Americans, specifically, Black mothers of fatal shooting victims (Miller et al, 2020). I believe the use critical race theory and counter narratives will best reveal how race intersects with gun violence, trauma, and grief in Black communities as well as demonstrate the effects of fatal shootings on Black mothers through the reliance of shared stories and experiences.

Transition Theory

Transition Theory promotes change through knowledge (education) by helping individuals understand and make sense of the many ways they respond to life changes. The loss of a loved one specifically, a child, is a life altering event in which those who experience the loss spend many days trying to adapt to altered facets of life because of physical, emotional, and supportive voids once filled by their loved one. Schlossberg (1981) defines transition as any event, or non-event resulting in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (p. 33) (Schlossberg, 1981).

Schlossberg (1981) also explains transition is a process that occurs over time as reflected in my proposed “Theory of Grief & Healing” in hopes of countering the effects caused by loss of

life through increasing knowledge (Schlossberg, 1981). The “Theory of Grief & Healing” below consists of building blocks of stages and processes thought to aid in achieving the long-term goal of healing and empowerment after tragedy and trauma in response to grieving Black mothers of fatal shooting victims. This transition theory is hoped to provide a map or pathway to healing and empowerment through increased knowledge and understanding in response to race being a predictor for fatal shootings of Black men and how the power dynamic of race shapes the grief and healing process for Black mothers.

A daily fear for Black parents is the probability of their child not returning home every time they walk out the door. Unfortunately, this is a lived reality for Black parents, and it causes unacknowledged cultural trauma regardless of their educational or financial status. This fear causes parents to worry about their child(ren) being killed simply because the color of their skin makes them a perceived threat to a portion of society as we have seen with the tragic deaths and fatal shootings over the past five years or more. As a result, more and more moments of teaching are taking place at dinner tables, in living rooms and bedrooms within Black families, turning family time into educational moments and parents into educators with conversations strategically centered on the race talk teaching their children appropriate responses to increase their probability of living another day.

Losing a child to a fatal shooting is one of the most traumatic experiences a mother will ever face. It is an event no one can adequately prepare for, and it leaves behind tremendous emotional pain and uncertainty, causing trauma and complicating the grief process. The impact of this trauma for mothers, results in great emotional, psychological, and physical challenges as well as many others. The tragic loss of a child for a mother, hinders her ability to function productively, meet the needs of her family and to find a purpose for living and for Black

mothers, societal and community responses and support begin to complicate life functions and grief even more through victim blaming and a lack of support and services. As a mother-scholar and based on my personal experiences as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim, the model of transition theory below outlines the transition process of grief from tragedy to healing as lived by me and understood through research. The adage “knowledge is power,” not only alludes to the presence of an educational component in this transition theory of change it confirms the importance of education through knowledge in the transition process to identify, acknowledge, understand, and progress (see Figure 1).

Transition Theory of Grief & Healing

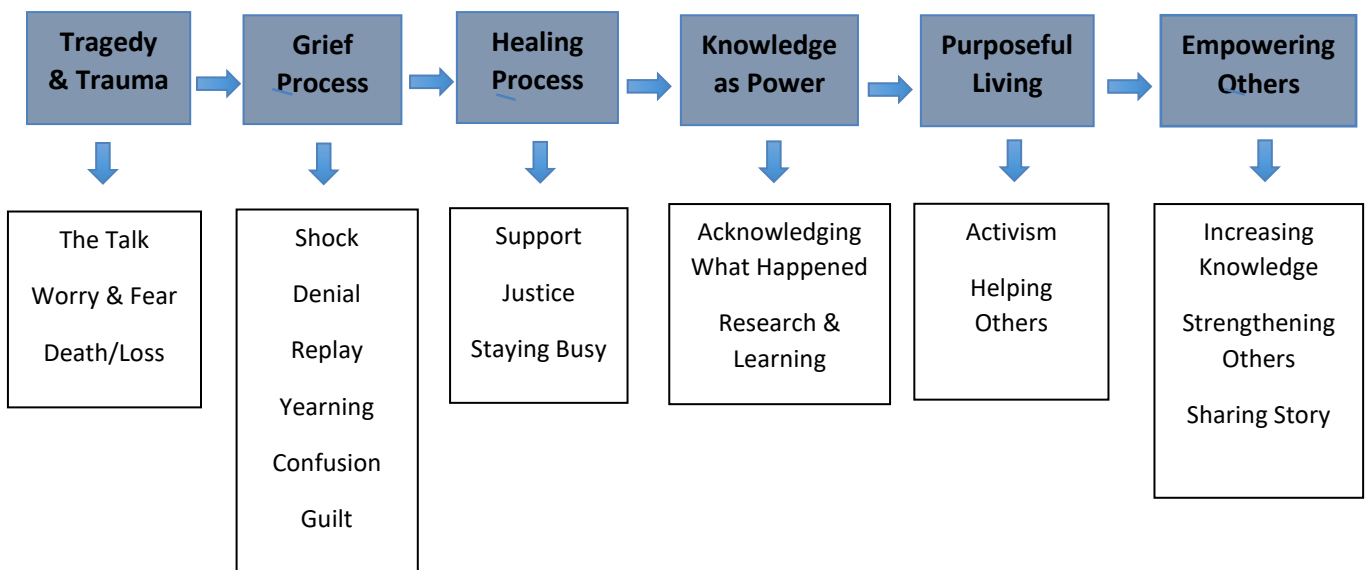


Figure 1. Transition Theory Grief-to-Healing process

My Assumptions

1. I will reflect my experiences, exposures, and challenges with grief based on my lived experiences as the researcher and participant.
2. Statistical data presented is accurate and contextualized.
3. The experience I chronicle is presented within the context of the researched timeframe.

4. Historical knowledge involves interpretation and therefore accounts cannot be entirely objective or completely generalizable to all contexts.
5. Gun violence is a national phenomenon and public health crisis within African American communities.
6. Racism is indigenous to various countries, including the United States.

Delimitations

This autoethnographic work is limited to the grief experience of my adult years as a grieving mother, although the adult experiences described above are influential. The use of personal narrative, life history, and metanarrative as other approaches to connect America's race narrative to the experience of a fatal shooting in the life of a Black mother. However, because of the autoethnographic emphasis of my methodology and my interest in understanding how race impacts and shapes the grief process for Black mothers, I choose to streamline my narratives on those most important to my experience as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim. Additionally, I will analyze poetry I developed, and journal writings created throughout my grief process to help share my experiences with grief.

Definition of Terms

Every research study construct and applies terms differently. As such, the content below provides a brief description of key terms applied throughout this research study. It is also important to note the terms "African American, Black and Black people" will be used interchangeably throughout this research however, they will all represent the same demographic of people. The following definitions will be applied this dissertation in practice research study:

Critical Race Theory: Theory that offers a set of ideas that explain what racism is, how it functions in our society, the emotional and psychological experiences of being subjected to racism, and the factors that contribute to the manifestation of racism (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Narrative: An account or representation of events, experiences and situations that connects and explains to support a specific viewpoint or thesis (Salkind, 2012).

Counter Narrative: A tool employed by CRT scholars that uses the personal experiences of underrepresented people to expose race neutral discourse and reveal how white privilege operates to support and reinforce unequal racial relations in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 1995).

Narrative Inquiry: A qualitative methodology that utilizes the writing process to reflect on connected events, discover meaning and highlight ethical matters as well as shapes new theoretical understandings of people's experiences.

Storytelling: The ability to shape life events into experience in a web of stories.

Oppression: The systemic and institutional abuse of power that invokes feelings of being heavily burdened, mentally, or physically, by troubles, adverse conditions, anxiety, etc. and the use of force to maintain this dynamic.

Race: A socially constructed concept not necessarily biologically grounded and natural that functions as means to maintain the interests of the white population that constructed it (Omni & Winant, 1994).

Reflexivity: The process of examining both oneself as researcher, and the research relationship.

Resonance: A quality rendering a concept or experience personally meaningful or important to someone else.

Intersectionality: A theoretical framework positing that multiple social categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status) intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect multiple interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the macro, social-structural level (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism) (Crenshaw, 2021).

Transition Theory: Process of adapting to life changes (Schlossberg, 1981).

Verisimilitude: Honest and realistic depiction of scenes, settings, and people.

Vignette: Passage depicting a specific scene or experience.

Overview of the Study and its Methodology

This research study calls on the principles of autoethnography as methodology. Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experiences of the author, connecting researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues (Hill & Knox, 2021). This research study is viewed through the eyes of the researcher, individually and contextually. It is written in my own voice as mother, researcher, and grieving Black mother of a fatal shooting victim.

I chose autoethnography to facilitate this study because, within African American culture, storytelling connects our past and future by exposing our roots and giving us wings that help us move. According to the late Congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis, “the movement without storytelling, is like birds without wings.” (Lewis, 2018). Unfortunately, the U.S. narrative of African American history is void of the full body of knowledge regarding the restrictions, treatment, punitive punishments, killing(s) and other lived experiences of our ancestors. Therefore, storytelling has become vital for African Americans as storytellers bear witness to who we are as a people through the ability to share experiences, beliefs, and traditions

of the Black culture. In many cases, storytelling is the only way to evidence our existence even today (Collier, 2019). Utilizing autoethnography to complete this body of work provides the platform needed to share my experience as a grieving Black mother to facilitate understanding through self-revelation, inform knowledge of the reader, and to connect with the greater community of grieving Black mothers to empower and promote transformational change through education.

This autoethnographic dissertation will utilize a five-chapter format consisting of an introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, and discussion and implications. I will include deliberate formations in each chapter that are dedicated to the autoethnographic process to share stories of my lived experience. This dissertation will also comply with scholarly formats within an innovative autoethnographic design which is interwoven in the forthcoming chapters.

Chapter one introduces and frames the study by providing contextual information about the phenomenon (fatal shooting of son), me as the researcher, the problem, purpose, research questions, significance of the study. This chapter also provides information on the conceptual framework, delimitations, definition of terms, and overview of the methodology. Additionally, chapter one covers the gun violence and grief context, population demographics, and the conceptual framework for this study of intersectionality and critical inquiry of gun violence and grief within the African American community.

Chapter two is a detailed literature review that frames this study based on analyzing the power of this country's race narrative that mandates the need to address the selected research questions of:

1. *How can I learn about my grief process by using personal narrative and storytelling to explore, write, and analyze my experience?*

2. *How can I use my experiences to inform knowledge, be of service to and to support other grieving Black mothers of fatal shooting victims?*

Chapter two also provides a historical perspective of race and its' disparate impact on the African American community.

Chapter three provides the description of the methodology I will use to conduct this research as this chapter focuses on components of autoethnography, the use of arts-based inquiry, the role of critical friends and the analysis of data.

Chapter four offers an analysis through narrative writing, journaling and poetry of my lived experience and grief journey as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim. This chapter will be framed around specific experiences and events that I had as a Black mother who lost a child to a fatal shooting and how I conceptualized and responded as a grieving Black mother. It will also include historical reflection of parenting prior to the loss of my son, along with personal and spiritual beliefs and experiences that prepared or failed to prepare me to navigate the barriers experienced as a grieving Black mother of a fatal shooting victim.

Chapter five I will discuss findings in connection with race, gun violence, grief, and trauma as a Black mother, because these components helped to reframe motherhood and parenting for me in the fatal shooting of my son.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

“Only the strong survive.”

-Lottie Ruth Bexley

Introduction

This review of literature aims to put in context the insalubrious effects of the Colonial and Progressive eras of U. S. history in the lives of African Americans. It centers racism as a public health crisis that intersects with K-12 educational problems of practice, the school-to-prison pipeline, gun violence, and trauma for Black mothers of fatal shooting victims. I strategically began this review with our country’s history because studying the past provides for understanding the present and future while promoting critical thinking (Datta, 2017). In the United States, exists a need for cultural sensitivity and transformational leadership that creates innovative efforts to reshape the social culture climate and political systems with equality at the center.

A racial divide in the education of African Americans has been in existence from the days of the plantation when white people forbade enslaved people from learning to read to the days of *de jure* racial segregation when Black people’s access to education occurred as long as it was not equitable to that of white people. This racial divide is evident in the current problems of practice in K-12 institutions that have created the school-to-prison pipeline (dos Reis dos Santos, 2021; Nance, 2016; Togut, 2011; Wilson, 2021). In addition, a half-century ago, students of color, specifically Black students, began over-representing the population of students in

exceptional education categories, further promulgating the ideology of Blacks being uneducable, devaluing their life, and often leading to gun violence (Parker & McCall, 1997; Togut, 2011). Over the past decade, there have been growing concerns experienced within African American communities on the role of race and gender in the increasing incidents of gun violence and fatal shootings. This review will explore literature that focuses on hidden secrets in U.S. history, navigating the life span of Black males, and defining the American Dream for Black lives.

The following literature review delves into two dark eras of our country's history, focusing on social constructs contributing to the power dynamics of race and gender - oppression and privilege. My review of relevant research will allow the identification of specific roles race plays in the morbidity and mortality rate of Black males as precipitated through K-12 educational practices and gun violence. I am assembling this literature review to explore vital research that informs my journey as a grieving Black mother scholar of a fatal shooting victim. In order to understand my mothering and grief journey as a Black mother scholar endeavoring to lead the work of fighting gun violence and sensitizing America's responses to Black fatal shooting victims, this literature review had to uncover America's skeletons and chronicle its' deep and dark secrets concerning African Americans.

I purposefully selected literature informing readers of challenges within the African American culture to provide contextual depth to factors and social structures daily impacting the Black culture in these United States where Black lives do not seem to matter. This literature review will help illuminate the link between my research and the autoethnographic sharing of my lived experience as a grieving Black mother scholar of a fatal shooting victim. I have organized this literature review into four sections. The first section focuses on the U.S. history of race, slavery, and oppression. The second section provides context on the African American

experience governed by race and social constructs. The third section connects the cultural trauma of African Americans, gun violence, and grief. The fourth section focuses on mourning Black mothers, finding meaning, art therapy, and finding purpose as a grieving Black mother scholar to promote healing and effectuate change as I seek to answer:

1. *How can I learn about my grief process using personal narrative and storytelling to explore, write, and analyze my experience?*
2. *How can I use my experiences to inform knowledge, be of service to, and support other grieving Black mothers of fatal shooting victims?*

I will employ exclusion criteria, such as the publication period. I excluded articles published before the early 2000s, with exceptions to gain a historical perspective or identify events and influences leading up to the present-day situations. While books contain an array of valuable content, I have selected more peer-reviewed articles than books because this approach is more conducive to providing a research base for this study. Themes in the chosen literature will serve as a guide for conducting this major literature survey and help establish a rationale for my research.

Section One of this literature review explores the history of race, slavery, and oppression in the United States. Although these subjects are thought of by current politicians, societal members, and many educators as not being noteworthy, and the recognition of their contributions as being divisive, creating fiction, or victimizing others who view this recognition as no more than using sensitive topics to fuel and perpetuate hatred and anger being, I take the positions that one must first acknowledge the problem before one can move towards a resolution. Therefore, understanding this country's history begins to lay a foundation that points to the need for this

study and provides information for understanding the past, present, and future while promoting critical thinking required to work toward change (Datta, 2017).

Race

I was not alone in being taught to think of race as simply a difference based on a person's skin color. However, according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2016), *race* is defined as a concept historically signifying the division of humanity into groups based on some form of biological foundation such as modern genes, ancestry, genealogy, geography, and physical phenotypes. Although there has been much debate over whether race is merely a way to identify and label people based on skin tone, eye color, hair length, texture, and more, racism has persisted, and visual identification has coincided with inclusion or exclusion. This information regarding U.S. history notes well through slavery, the progressive era, and even modern times.

For Black people, racism has been and still serves as a source of disability in terms of narratives attributing limited cognition, intelligence, physical ability, equality, and humanitarianism to racial inferiority - even limiting the value placed on their lives (Paul-Emile, 2018). From the inception of slavery to the present day, the concept of *race* has also served as a qualifier for granting a privilege, access, opportunity, and denial, so that individuals of lighter skin tones benefit automatically. They benefit from unearned and often invisible assets associated with the racial category white that societies bestow unto them through institutionalized practices. As such, the white racial status grants access and the authority to make life better and easier, while this access and authority are blocked and unavailable to individuals of darker skin tones. Therefore, positing race as the foundation of inequality, oppression, and disenfranchisement marginalizing certain groups of people, specifically Blacks,

serving as a predictor of morbidity and mortality for this group of people (Bell, 1992; Kendall, 2002; Parker & McCall, 1997; Paul-Emile, 2018).

History of Race

The history of race began with the need for European explorers in the New World to challenge then existing conceptions of the origins of the human species in their efforts to figure out whether the people they encountered who looked different than themselves could be considered in the same family of man as the European explorers. The European's lack of understanding and unwillingness to consider natives of the New World as human beings with redeemable souls caused the natives to be in jeopardy of the expropriation of property, the denial of political rights, introduction of slavery, other forms of coercive labor and the outright extermination as people, all presupposing a worldview distinguishing Europeans as children of God and human beings and all people different from them as "others." Such a mindset explains why English colonists felt justified in taking land away from Native Americans and transitioning once freed people to people enslaved without rights to land and property they once owned (Omi & Winant, 1994).

The impact of this mindset, as documented, begins with the introduction of American colonization in 1607 and the arrival of three ships carrying 100 passengers total from England at a site on the James River. The 100 passengers disembarked the next day and began working on settling and acquiring Native American land. The acquisition of Native American land by English Colonists was brought about in an effort of King James I to take greater control of the trade situation through the dissolution of the Virginia Company and its establishment of becoming an official crown colony. This new colony continued to grow stronger, forcing Native Americans to sign a peace treaty ceding most of their land to the English colonist and forcing

them to pay an annual tribute to the colonial governor (History.com, Jamestown Colony, 2010). The power dynamics of this paradigm shift created by the illegal acquisition of land from Native Americans would be the beginning of classism as a social structure of power oppressing Native Americans then deemed by British colonists to be inferior.

Over the past four hundred plus years, the concept of race has been explored through various scientific arenas. Omni and Winant (1994) note that biological science suggests the truth of race lies in the terrain of innate characteristics such as skin color and other physical attributes as mostly superficial indicators, while social scientists suggest that race is a social concept. The history of the United States positions race, pre-eminently as a socio-historical concept as rigidly defined and enforced through the white/Black color line where white was seen as a *pure* category, and any racial intermixture made a person *nonwhite*. In the U.S., race is used to indicate who a person is (i.e., temperament, intelligence, athletic ability, and potential for being dangerous) based on the historical construction of racial categories shaping this country's ideology and politics regarding all not considered white (Omni & Winant, 1994).

Slavery, The Progressive Era & Black Codes

Free labor and progressive era economics were birthed when 20-plus enslaved Africans were brought to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 to aid in the production of lucrative crops such as tobacco, rice, indigo plantations, and soon to follow cotton (Geographic, 2020). During this era, racism (racial oppression) and social control came through enslavers making their enslaved Black people dependent upon them and governing their lives through a system of restrictive laws known as "Black Codes." The main purpose of the Black codes was to restrict formerly enslaved people by prohibiting them from learning to read or write and controlling their behavior and movement, ensuring their availability as a labor force after the abolishment of slavery in

1865 (History.com, Black Codes- Definition, Dates & Jim Crow Laws, 2010). Efforts to monitor the movement of those formerly enslaved included requiring them to sign yearly labor contracts with their refusal resulted in being arrested, fined, and forced into unpaid labor, further oppressing Blacks and engendering anger and frustration (History.com, Black Codes- Definition, Dates & Jim Crow Laws, 2010).

Jim Crow Laws

American history documents the roots of *Jim Crow* laws as beginning with the establishment of the *Black Codes* after the abolishment of slavery in 1865. The restricted movement and activities of enslaved people imposed by the *Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws* oppressed Black people through segregation. Those codes and laws regulated activities (i.e., education, apprenticeship, marriages, taxation, and labor contracts), making engagement in these activities a crime based on race and gender (Shofner, 1977). Although these strategies of oppression and instituted class systems have changed names over the years, a lived reality still shapes and restricts Black people's lives today. This oppression in modern form manifests in the lived disenfranchisement of Black people through constructs of privilege, unequal education, unemployment, unequal housing, and the disproportionate incarceration and gun homicide of Blacks, specifically Black males.

Oppression

Throughout the history of the United States, as we know it, socially motivated disenfranchisement has catalyzed oppression by establishing constructs within people and cultures derived from slavery because of colonization (Warren, 2017). From colonization to the present day, people have been divided into social structures of race, ethnicity, culture, poverty, religion, education, and sexual orientation, both foreign and domestic. For example, the 1865

enactment of the “Black codes” created constructs of classism that distinguished between Black and white citizens based on the belief that Blacks were too mentally inferior and incompetent to order their affairs and that the superiority of the white race was a natural condition. This code enacted laws that regulated activities were touching Black lives, such as crime and punishment, apprenticeship, marriages, taxation, labor contracts, and more, clearly establishing a separate class of citizenship for Blacks, making them inferior to whites (Shofner,1977).

As a result, there is an upper class of people perceived to have all the power, a middle class of people who are small business owners or entrepreneurs of some sort, and a lower class of people perceived as being domestic and most times forced into positions of servitude. This class system sets low performance standards for students of color, establishes vast forms of social oppression, facilitates the further disenfranchisement of marginalized cultures, and plays a pivotal role in increasing frustration that produces violent behavior in Black communities.

The Southern culture of violence produced by colonization is seen in violent acts throughout the United States today that did not die with the abolishment of slavery. Although many of the Northern regions’ businessmen grew rich on the slave trade and investments in the southern plantations, slavery was never widespread in the North because they managed to keep it contained in the Southern region of the United States, causing it to become a southern culture. This culture was manifest through governing Black lives through a system of restrictive codes (*Black Codes*) that prohibited enslaved people from learning to read or write and controlled their behavior and movement (Warren, 2017).

Section Two of this literature review seeks to provide a deeper contextual description of the African American experience as governed by race and the social constructs of this country as identified through the body of literature reviewed in section one. This country is the United

States of America - the beautiful home of the free, a land of the brave. A country founded on biblical principles, yielding human equality and the opportunity to not only dream of success and happiness but also work towards manifesting it. Because there are various sides to stories, the literature reviewed in this section starkly contrasts this country's preferred narrative and dream for the American people. Understanding the inequities between the benefits, privileges, and lived experiences of White Americans and African Americans is vital to identifying racial, social constructs and their effect on the past, present, and future of this country's social climate and laws in the lives of African Americans.

American Dream

“I believe that children are our future, teach them well and let them lead the way” is more than just lyrics to a song by the late Whitney Houston in 1985 (Creed & Masser, 1977). Those lyrics can be sung along with the ideology of the American Dream regardless of one's race, ethnicity, gender, and circumstances. Dictionary.com defines the American Dream as the aspirational belief in the United States that all individuals, regardless of race, gender, religious belief, or sexual orientation, are entitled to the opportunity for success and upward social mobility through hard work (ideals of freedom, equality, and opportunity being available to everyone) (Dictionary.com, 2021). In the United States, the American Dream is one of hope for prosperity and happiness, centered on aspirations of quality and equal education, home ownership, and children having the opportunity for a better life than we were able to give them. Individual and cultural concepts and ideals of the American Dream are defined in the 1776 Declaration of Independence stating: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among

these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (Archives, 2021) which provide each of us with specific hopes and aspirations for ourselves and our families.

As a Black mother, the American Dream is one of my children living a life free of restrictions and limits for them to become their best selves, free from their achievements, failures, freedom, and life span being dictated by others, and have a life filled with opportunities to give love, be loved, start a family, pursue their dreams educationally and professionally and to see their pursuits realized through their dedication and hard work. After all, these are the very unalienable rights identified in this country’s founding document as being available to all human beings regardless of color. So, when I dare to dream big as a Black mother, I do not think my dreams are unrealistic as an American citizen. My dreams consist of access to the opportunity to work towards making these dreams a reality and not a free pass, as white America would like to argue. The right to live and positively contribute to this country and our communities as Black people should be the same as what we fought for in previous wars, as did white people.

White Privilege

Many ask, “what is white privilege?” as they argue that white privilege does not exist and that it is just another way for people of color, specifically, Black people, to gain sympathy and justify their anger. Because myths and stereotypes create barriers in how all individuals carry out their lives daily. Therefore, defining “white privilege” is important as it is a major part of what is seen or unseen and defines opportunity in various aspects of life. There are benefits to acknowledging and deconstructing white privilege in the social, political, educational, economic, and legal areas of our lives.

As defined by McIntosh (2001), white privilege is a set of unearned assets that a white person remains largely oblivious to. Yet, in America, they can count on cashing in each day as a

form of societal advantage that comes with being seen as the norm in America (McInstosh, 2001). Emba (2016) states that white privilege is the social advantage that comes from being seen as the norm in the United States. This privilege makes life smoother, is automatically conferred irrespective of wealth, gender, or other factors, and is something that you would barely notice unless it were suddenly taken away or never applied to you in the first place (Emba, 2016).

It cannot be understated that White people's privilege is substantiated by the oppression of minorities. A growing body of research exposes possible conduits for beginning the conversation around White privilege that lays out a path to comprehending the invisible weight of whiteness, white privilege, and racism within America's social and educational confines. She also asserts that lowering the visibility and not acknowledging the weight of these ideologies is necessary to normalize the standards of white supremacy as the standard for everyday transactions and domination.

Disenfranchisement and Oppression

The disenfranchisement and oppression of Blacks through unequal housing and employment began in the 1800s with the abolishment of slavery and the implementation of "Black codes" as the foundation for the Jim Crow era as continued control of freed slaves and Blacks born outside of slavery. This social construct of control has been an easy task from the inception of the Black codes to the present day, with the injection of silent power dynamics of privilege continuing to shape and further disadvantage Black people. The 1865 enactment of the "Black codes" created constructs of classism, establishing social and power dynamics between Black and white citizens based on the belief Blacks were too mentally inferior and incompetent to order their affairs and that the superiority of the white race was a natural condition. Black

codes enacted laws regulating activities touching Black lives such as crime, punishment, apprenticeship, marriages, taxation, labor contracts, and more, clearly establishing a separate class of citizenship for Blacks, making them inferior to whites (Shofner, 1977).

For Blacks, the class system of *Jim Crow* facilitated vast forms of oppression and disenfranchisement through the establishment of pre-designated housing for coloreds, especially those with limited education and financial resources. Despite the Supreme Court's decision to bar the exclusion of Blacks and other minorities from certain sections of cities because of race, this system created yet another face for racism housed under the umbrella of oppression and disenfranchisement through race-based housing in the form of urban, Black inner-city housing and public housing. (History.com, 2010). The bold move and statement of racial supremacy caused by the relocation of whites to the suburbs created a void of the employment opportunities that Blacks needed to survive in once-thriving areas where they could not live. This change led to the birth of ghettos and Black inner-city communities with high populations, high unemployment, crime, and other social ills referred to as “Absolute and Relative Deprivation” (Parker, 1997).

The two socio-economic concepts responsible for the marginalization of Blacks are absolute and relative deprivation. The first concept, “absolute deprivation,” refers to the poverty of individuals because of lacking the economic resources necessary to maintain a healthy standard of living. This concept in the United States marks the poverty disparity between white and Black neighborhoods whereby Black inner-city neighborhoods are extremely vulnerable to a lack of resources, jobs, and housing. The second concept, “relative deprivation,” refers to the presence of blocked and unrewarding legitimate means, whereby the blocked means are perceived as unjust and thus generate resentment causing individuals to become aware of their

blocked economic resources, grow resentful, and increase the potential for violence (Parker & McCall, 1997).

Researchers and theorists refer to absolute and relative deprivation as the *Strain Theory* because of the negative effects imposed by these concepts on the lives of Southerners, specifically Blacks. In 1932, American sociologist Robert Merton introduced strain as a theory, proposing the pressure derived from social factors, such as lack of income and quality education, drives disadvantaged groups to commit crime as a means of survival (Britannica, 2020; Parker & McCall, 1997). As a result, certain economic forces eliminate many jobs for unskilled minorities, increasing the rate of poverty and isolating inner-city residents from accessible employment, causing the increased economic marginalization of Blacks in the inner city that results in disrupted, dysfunctional, and structurally impaired households due to ethnic, racial and class segregation (Parker & McCall, 1997).

According to Messner and Golden (1992), there is a direct relationship between income inequality (relative deprivation) and homicide; however, the debate between relative and absolute deprivation remains unresolved. As this debate remains unresolved, more importantly, these concepts continue to be primarily problematic for minority groups causing marginalized individuals to experience deprivation engendered frustration, often leading to violence (Parker & McCall, 1997). As a result, certain economic forces eliminate jobs for unskilled minorities, increase the rate of poverty, and isolate inner-city residents from accessible employment. This increased economic marginalization of Blacks in the inner city was due in large part to a set of spatial and industrial changes in the political economy to become main contributors to the eruption of violence that often leads to homicide (Parker & McCall, 1997).

Social Power Dynamics

Hogan and Kitagawa (1985) identify race as one of the strongest predictors of major social dislocations in American cities. Black communities are characterized by disproportionately high rates of drug addiction, welfare dependence, out-of-wedlock births, teenage pregnancy, and families headed by females (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985; Wilson & Aponte, 1985; Sampson, 1987). The poverty level of inner-city residents marks the disparity between White and Black neighborhoods, whereby Black neighborhoods are extremely vulnerable due to a lack of resources, jobs, and housing. As inner-city residents become more aware of their blocked economic resources and resentful, the potential for violence increases, creating a direct relationship between income inequality (relative deprivation) and homicide (Parker & McCall, 1997).

The effects of living in a neighborhood overwhelmingly impoverished and marked by family disruption and joblessness contribute to structural social disorganization and cultural social isolation. To cope with bleak surroundings, some residents in disadvantaged neighborhoods incorporate alternative strategies, including violence, to accomplish goals such as gaining respect or admiration from peers (Kurbin & Herting, 2003). The more dangerous the environment a person lives in, the more likely he is to kill, holding firm to their individual attributes. Under these circumstances, expectations of violence are presumed to become self-fulfilling for specific types of dyadic interaction, causing large racial disparities in rates of murder and victimization to be sustained.

Educational Problems of Practice

Educational problems of practice promoting the low academic performance and achievement of underrepresented and marginalized students of color have existed since the

beginning of desegregation. The population of students at greater risk of low academic performance is the social, economic, and racially marginalized students of color that come from single parents, low-income, and minimally educated environments. And the first problem of practice is these students are unjustly presented with defeat before their first day of class because their teachers have preset expectations of their academic and behavioral performance and ability because of their socioeconomic status or skin color (Nance, 2016). Educators often shoulder preconceived expectations for students of color because of dispositions beyond the students' control, such as race, geographic location, economic status, and more. Such lowered expectations of academic ability and performance among this vulnerable population of students engender a mindset of failure and defeat that places them on a fast track to disenfranchisement that ultimately leads to blocked access to legitimate means like jobs, housing, quality healthcare, and more.

The lack of access to legitimate means required for minimal survival incites frustration, often leading to violent behavior and sometimes death. In addition, the overrepresentation of people of color in our penal system sits at the helm of byproducts caused by their receipt of substandard educational opportunities. This educational inequity has been known to facilitate behaviors such as substance abuse, sexual activities, and gun violence. Its' impact is what we see daily in the news media and statistical data that shows a continual rise in gun-related violence and crime in the U.S., causing the poverty level in the inner city to mark the disparity between White and Black neighborhoods. Consequently, increasing the potential for violence creates a relationship between income inequality (relative deprivation) and homicide as inner-city residents become more aware of their blocked economic resources and grow resentful (Parker & McCall, 1997).

Togut (2011), states the 1970s marked the period in which students of color began to be over-represented in exceptional education categories. This representation increased in the 1980s resulting in Black students totaling only 16% of the total school population while representing 38% of children in classes for the intellectually disabled. Today we find ourselves almost forty years later, with the testimony that little has changed – students of color constitute 17% of the total school enrollment and 33% of enrollment in classes for the intellectually disabled. Togut (2011), also asserts that while the reasons for this growing disparity in the identification of students of color in particular education disability categories are complex, students living in impoverished inner-city areas run a higher risk for negative psychosocial and educational outcomes than wealthier African American and Caucasian students (Togut, 2011).

Annually, there are approximately 2.4 million students retained, and the majority of this student population is Black and Hispanic males from poor, minimally educated households (Togut, 2011). These factors are evidenced by the U.S. Department of Education data for the period between 2000 and 2001, indicating that at least thirteen states labeled more than 2.75% of Black students intellectually disabled (Togut, 2011). Nationally, the prevalence of white students labeled mentally retarded was approximately 0.75% in 2001. In no state did the incidence of labeling white students rise above 2.38%, with nearly three-quarters of the highest incident rates (2.75%-5.74%) occurring in the South (Togut, 2011).

As such, there is a correlation between the discriminatory treatment of Black children in school discipline and the overrepresentation of minorities in special education, even if the discrepancies in discipline are not racially motivated. Such overrepresentation of Black students and those of lower socioeconomic status in school discipline contributes to racial stratification in school and society. By grouping children of color into “separate but equal” special education

classes and disproportionately suspending and expelling students of color, the education system is committing the cardinal sin of repeating a dark period in our nation's history (Togut, 2011). This research reveals that these students become less likely to graduate high school and more likely to become at risk of reaching their academic, social, and emotional development potential, placing them on a trajectory from the school straight to prison and, in some cases, the grave.

The school-to-prison pipeline is an umbrella term used to describe the cause and effects heavily embedded in racial and discriminatory social construct guiding Florida's school systems that lead to problems of practice in K-12 education. Educational problems can impact the lives of marginalized students by criminalizing typical adolescent human and cultural behaviors of students. Some practical examples are zero-tolerance policies, exclusionary discipline, increased school policing, laws, overrepresentation of students of color in disabled categories, underprepared educators, fear, and the delivery of substandard education (Nance, 2016).

Section Three of this review focuses on the causes and effects of the racial, social constructs researched in section two as byproducts of this country's secret history regarding the colonial and progressive eras and people of color. The disenfranchisement and oppression facilitated by K-12 educational problems facing marginalized and underrepresented students of color, specifically, Black students, has amounted to criminalistic discipline and substandard educational opportunities. Such opportunities position them to join the penal system or the grave. Previously reviewed literature identified the emotions of cultural trauma, grief, and incidents of gun violence as being among other anxiety-producing experiences in the lives of Black mothers, specifically Black mothers with sons.

Cultural Trauma

What is cultural trauma, and does such a thing exist? Alexander (2004) theorizes that cultural trauma occurs when collective members feel they have experienced a horrendous event leaving indelible marks on their group consciousness, forever marking memories, and fundamentally changing their future identity in irrevocable ways (Alexander, 2004). Culturally, African Americans experience trauma daily, whether in a conscious or unconscious state. The trauma being referenced was constructed during slavery and has been precipitated for centuries through the beliefs, structures, and laws of this country established to set in place dominance, restriction, and fear through racism, violence, oppression, and punitive punishment. As asserted by Eyerman (2004) African Americans are not required to be or have been enslaved people for cultural trauma to manifest in their life. Cultural trauma for African Americans is slavery as a collective memory and form of remembrance that grounds the identity of Blacks based on the ideologies of and treatment by whites (Eyerman, 2004).

More than two hundred years after traumatizing labor in the cotton fields, the war that came with the abolishment of slavery in the U.S., and the lynching's of the Jim Crow era point to how Black /African American communities are subjected to violence and cultural trauma. This traumatization continues with the fatal shootings of unarmed Black men in the streets of our major cities and the use of illegal force by police officers. Although cultural trauma is scientifically thought of as a social theory, it is a daily lived experience in the lives of Blacks, evidenced in just this past year by the killings of more than 164 Black men and women by police officers within the first eight months of 2020 as provided by a CBS news report (Cohen, 2020). As such, African Americans are still experiencing the trauma of forced servitude and complete subordination of the cotton fields and lynching in the present day, referred to as Post Traumatic

Slave Syndrome (PTSS) by way of the penal system and fatal shootings. DeGruy (2017), defines PTSS as a condition when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today (DeGruy, 2017).

Gun Violence in the United States

To understand how gun violence affects our nation and why this phenomenon has become a public health crisis, consider the following statement and statistics: Violent crime, particularly gun violence, is an issue of great concern in the United States. As previously mentioned, since 1968, more individuals have died in the United States from guns than in battle during all the wars the country has fought since its inception (Bauchner, 2017). In recent years, the U.S. has seen an increase in gun violence/homicide via mass shootings, fatal shootings of Blacks, and other gun-related crimes. According to statistics, gun violence is becoming a problem that plagues the United States as the U.S. continues to lead the industrialized world in murders per capita, totaling approximately 100-gun related deaths each day (Bauchner, 2017; Skorton, 2019). In 2012, the U.S. had a per capita gun homicide rate of 4.7 per 100,000 inhabitants (Justice, Crime in The United States, 2012). The rate increased in 2016 to 5.3 per 100,000 inhabitants (Justice, FBI Uniform Crime Report, 2016). According to the Center for American Progress, more than 342,439 people were shot to death in the United States from 2008 through 2017, equating to one person being killed by a gun every 15 minutes (Prevention, 2019).

Gun Violence in the City of Tampa

On a more local level, gun-related offenses and homicides within the City of Tampa doubled from 164-gun related crimes in 2014 to 235 in 2015. Gun homicides increased from 7 in 2014 to 15 by March 2015, and the year was just beginning (Baynews9.com, 2015). Tampa saw

its' highest murder rate in 2017 in over a decade, with 39-gun homicides (Baynews9, Tampa saw the highest murder rate in 2017 in over a decade, 2018). While these statistics are overwhelming, they do not reflect who is impacted by gun violence, how they are impacted, and with what consequences (Armstrong & Carlson, 2019). This Nation's gun problem affects all individuals regardless of race, ethnicity, and gender. Yet, the same cannot be said for victims of gun homicide/fatal shootings or their families, specifically, the victims' mothers.

Statistics by Race and Gender

Kubin & Herting (2003) posit that the long-standing, widespread racial homicide gap is much greater in cities among young men than in other places or age-gender groups. Blacks have been identified as being considerably more likely than whites to be killed by gun violence in the U.S. for as long as good records have been available, causing a person's race to become more powerful than their gender (Kubin & Herting, 2003). This claim is supported by comparing Black gun homicide victimization rates to Hispanics, finding Hispanics are more likely to be murdered than non-Hispanic whites. Yet, they are considerably less likely to be murdered than non-Hispanic Blacks. In addition, research notes gun homicide rates of whites at 2.7 per 100,000, Hispanics at 7.2, and Blacks at 20.1 per 100,000, respectively. As troubling as these statistics are, the disparities are even greater and more disturbing for young men, with the demographic group most likely to be murdered ranking as follows: white men ages 25-34 at 5.5 and Black men at 81.6 respectively, while for Hispanic men in this age group the rate was below 30 (Health, United States, 2006, tables 29 and 45; O'Flaherty & Sethi, 2010).

As previously stated, Blacks, specifically Black males, disproportionately represent non-suicide and non-accidental fatal shooting victims, as confirmed by numerous reports and research efforts. For example, statistics illustrate U.S. homicide death rates by race per capita are

Blacks 22.3 per 100,000 and Caucasians 2.3 per 100,000 (Kochanek et al., 2004; Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Further, Black males represent 13% of our nation's population, yet 50% of all fatal shooting victims in the United States (Pahn, Knopov, & Siegel, 2017; Bauchner, H., 2017). Black males face a 1 in 21 lifetime chance of being fatally shot (Noble & Christian, 2018), equating to the loss of approximately 68,000 Black males to gun violence between now and 2025.

Grief

Grief is a response to losing someone or something, including mental and physical symptoms. Individual responses to grief vary from person to person and are often shaped by relationships and culture (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). Psychology Today refers to grief as an all-encompassing reflection of what we love, the acute pain that accompanies loss (Grief, 2020). It is important to note that grief is not limited to the loss of people. It is an emotion of sadness often connected to loss through divorce, death of a pet, termination of employment, and the loss of other important roles and comforts in life. However, for the purposes of this literature review, grief is discussed in the context of losing someone you love. Grief is a personal and emotional response to the loss of what matters in our lives, the emotions of grief are complex, not neat, or linear, and they obey no formula and have no set expiration date (Grief, 2020 and What You Should Know About the Stages of Grief, 2020).

Kübler-Ross (2005) theorizes five stages of emotions experienced after losing a loved one: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This theory was later converted to a model designed to provide grieving individuals with a framework to assist in identifying their feelings while learning to live with the loss of a loved one (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). While this theory provides helpful points of referenced for those experiencing grief, it is void of the

unique factors impacting the grief process for Blacks. The grief process for Blacks is unfortunately shaped by a history of experienced violence, domination, and fear-producing daily anxiety and trauma functioning.

Grief and Trauma

Several theories exist on experiencing and processing grief. However, they are void of concrete stages, time frames or sequential orders of emotions for individuals experiencing loss to follow because grief stages are interdependent on the individual and the type of grief they are experiencing. Armstrong and Carlson (2019), state that racialized trauma shapes how people in the US experience and expect everyday gun violence (Armstrong & Carlson, 2019). For decades, Black parents have dealt with the anticipation of violence against their children. Those with sons are forced to cope with the anticipatory trauma of their children being racially stereotyped as threats. The race talk teaches Black children to avoid gun violence through self-policing and de-escalation measures meant to avoid being perceived as a potential threat to a would-be shooter. As such, the race talk presumes social disorganization, including depressed resources, gutted expectations about life chances, and anemic institutional support (Armstrong & Carlson, 2019). Thus, causing African American parents to enter a process of grief and trauma long before ever losing their child to gun homicide or a fatal shooting.

Racialization of Grief

Armstrong and Carlson (2019) state that racialized anticipatory trauma guides the African American grief experience through the need for Black parents to anticipate the possibility of gun violence against their children, particularly parts of sons. Black parents are forced to deal with the mental trauma caused by fear of a fatal police shooting of their son during interactions with law enforcement because Black males are viewed as a threat. Having to cope with the

anticipatory trauma of the children being racially stereotyped as threats force them to engage in conversations with their children regarding gun violence and the increased probability it will manifest in their children's lives because of race, predispositions Black mothers to experience complicated grief (Armstrong & Carlson, 2019).

Black Mothers

All mothers play a vital role in raising children, yet the role a mother plays in raising sons receives little attention socially and scholarly. Specifically, the role Black mothers play in the lives of their sons has been almost nonexistent until recently although in single-parent households, Black mothers take on the sole role in raising children. Lawson Bush (2004) states that Black mothers rely heavily upon legacies of other men in their family as examples of what being a man entails and what must be done to assume the role of a man successfully. For single Black mothers, these stories are often the only example of manhood, dignity, pride, and strength sons are to model after (Lawson Bush, 2004). Black mothers like myself are blessed to have fathers in the home modeling appropriate responses to challenges, conflict, and racism daily which increases both the learning and expectations of children, specifically Black sons.

Greene (2008) asserts that whether the parenting role is shared or not, the parenting role for Black mothers differs from that of white mothers largely due to the racial socialization of our Black children. Unlike white mothers, Black mothers deal with stressors of teaching children what it means to be Black in America and modeling how to support the family, what to expect from their culture and the white culture and how to cope with it without yielding the value of who they are as a person. Black mothers are forced to maintain an awareness of the "at-risk" status of their children as related to environmental exposures, nutritional deficiencies, health and disease disorders, the penal system, educational opportunities, violence, risky behaviors, and

now fatal shootings (Greene, 2008). Additionally, Black mothers make concerted efforts to educate their children on the racialized nature of their identities and how their race influences the behavior of others towards them, specifically, law enforcement and other authority figures. As such, methods such as restricted interactions with others, extreme sheltering, and harsh discipline are strategies often employed out of fear to discourage undesirable behavior and minimize racially negative encounters (Harris & Amutah-Onukagha, 2019).

Black Grief

While we are all human beings regardless of race, ethnicity, and gender and there are commonalities in some ways we experience grief, Black grief is different. The cause and effect of grief disproportionately differs from other cultures and races and is also compounded by historic trauma, continuous loss, and inequities. Such historical trauma compounded by economic challenges, substance misuse, incarceration of family members and the fear and anxiety of whether your loved one will return home or not when they leave, make it even more difficult for Blacks to cope with loss and trauma (Forbes, 2020). Yes, Black families lose loved ones to terminal illnesses, deaths of natural causes, and chronic health conditions daily, however, the number of deaths by gun homicide and fatal shootings experienced by this population of people occurs at an alarming rate compared to other races and cultures. The Giffords Law Center (2020), states that unarmed Black civilians are nearly five times more likely than unarmed White civilians and 2 times more likely than unarmed Hispanic, American Indian, or Alaska Natives to be fatally shot by police and Black Americans are ten times more likely than White Americans to be murdered with a gun (Al'Uqdah, 2020; Center, 2020).

Black mothers experiencing the loss of a child to a fatal shooting is the reality of their worst nightmare coming true. When a Black mother loses her child to a fatal shooting, she forced

to process the reality of her life's greatest fear coming to pass. She can then decide if her grieving will include fighting for justice or identifying and seeking available support services to help her through this process. Forbes (2020) asserts the myth of the "strong Black woman" is real and causes the need to be strong and long-suffering to become dangerous for grieving Black mothers by failure to acknowledge the need for help. Also, the unique stages of grief for African Americans, specifically Black mothers, are despair, self-blame, move to action, endurance, and survival. In contrast to the stages of grief for whites, these stages are referred to as Black grief (Forbes, 2020). Tragically, grief for African Americans begins long before experiencing the actual loss of a loved one. For Black parents, the reality is that no matter how many precautions they take, there always remains a sense of hopelessness and helplessness in keeping their children safe. The reality of this "despair" promotes "self-blame" when loss is experienced, by feeling they failed to keep their child protected. Compounded by the need to find strength to exist void of outside support, mandates "endurance" as parents "move to action" in planning the funeral service and navigating the legal system if needed, forcing a need for "survival" (Forbes, 2020).

Section Four of this review focuses on the grief, healing, and activism journey of mourning Black mothers. Utilizing art therapy as an educational, healing, and empowerment tool; and activism to find purpose as a mother educator, promote healing and effectuate change as an educational outcome of losing a child to a fatal shooting. Previously reviewed literature identified mourning Black mothers, art therapy, educational outreach, and activism as coping and healing mechanisms after experiencing the tragedy of a fatal shooting.

Mourning Black Mothers

From the cotton fields to the present day, the condition of life for Blacks has been one of mourning, specifically for Black women and mothers. Millward (2016) posits the condition of mourning for Black mothers began with mothers and children being separated from each other in Africa and transported to the United States to render free labor needed to progress this country's economy. And that through Slavery, planters solidified their ability to profit from their crops through the reproductive capacities of enslaved women and cemented the reality of a price on their children's heads (Millward, 2016). Much like the penal system, police shootings, and other violent acts of degradation of today, slavery left many mothers childless as their children were sold, died, ran away, and killed.

Black mothers who are mourning the loss of a child to a fatal shooting experience grief in ways unimaginable by other non-Black mothers since they also suffer race-based stigmas. This rift and social disparities persisting in Black parents' post-homicide experience can intensify trauma, disenfranchised grief, and withdrawal from social support (Akhtar et al., 2015). In the United States, Black parents are not only disproportionately affected by loss due to gun violence (Phillips, 1997; Sharpe & Boyas, 2011); their psychological outcomes are different from Caucasian parents because at the core of their differential grief experiences is race (Akhtar et al., 2015). As previously stated in the section on Black grief, Black mothers enter the state of mourning at the confirmation of the conception and gender of their unborn child. In addition, black mothers with sons live with the fear and burden of teaching their sons how to interact with police officers, educators, and other members of society in hopes of preventing their sons from being criminalized and even killed by those entrusted with protecting, educating, and advocating

for them. Thus, mothers of Black sons are often navigating through life in a state of mourning even before the death of their child (Dow, 2016).

Grief curriculum

My review of literature on grief curriculum presented a grave challenge. I could not identify curriculum guides or articles on curriculum relating to grief that was not clinical, and even that literature proved to be sparse. For example, Doughty Horn, Crews & Harrawood (2012) state there is minimal research relating to grief and loss education in counseling or other helping professions (Doughty Horn et al., 2012). However, in researching various coping mechanisms and grief, Black mothers' mourning, and PTSD, the one common thread or ideology seemingly most prevalent was the need for awareness regarding the differential struggles of African Americans, specifically Black mothers, in hopes of facilitating more positive professional, legal, and social responses as well as access to pragmatic support services (Forbes, 2020). Another theory closely aligned with a curriculum is art therapy as a method for elevating silence, expressing, and sharing experience that empowers the grieving and promotes healing (Millward, 2016). Rogers (2007) asserts that grief, art, and storytelling are an innate part of the human experience, and art has been a form of human expression since the earliest of times. And that this country's history, both collective and individual, has been chronicled and shared through the storytelling of which the art and myths often found in our stories express what cannot be expressed through mere words (Rogers, 2007). And lastly, although activism is not presumed to align with a healing or grief curriculum, it does however aid in promoting the healing process for Black mothers by helping them regain life purpose.

Art Therapy

Individuals, specifically, Black mothers traumatized by the tragic loss of a loved one to a fatal shooting, are often an overlooked population within our society in need of pragmatic support and opportunities to heal. Casey (2011) theorizes art therapy assists in advancing the healing process with adolescents and adults who have been severely traumatized, in some instances, stop speaking. Netzer (2013) posits art therapy provides traumatized individuals with a platform of expression and communication through the use of imaginal resonance, which allows works of expressive art to emerge from felt experience. Thus, communicating the unspeakable becomes possible through poetry, music, dance, and visual images. Sullivan (2008, p.244) proposes visual images often capture what cannot be expressed in words, therefore becoming the source of questions, problems, and insights (Carroll, 2005).

Visual-Art-Therapy. Visual art is a form of therapy that is a therapeutic process based on spontaneous or prompted creative expression by using various art materials and art techniques such as painting, drawing, sculpture, clay modeling, collage, etc. This art therapy offers a non-verbal language to express emotions and focuses on how the client works and creates. At the heart of art, therapy rests the healing power of the creative process and the special communication between the client, the artwork, and the therapist. Although the art expresses the suffering, it also calls to the creative, healthy part of the client, which enables an authentic, non-threatening expression, opening new possibilities for change and growth. Research indicates that art therapy makes unique contributions in working with victims of PTSD in the principal areas of processing traumatic memories, symbolization integration and containment, transference, and countertransference (Avrahami MA, 2008).

Music-Art-Therapy. Music is another form of art therapy that is innately social, penetrates part of every culture, and positions this form of art as a viable form of communication that serves as the shorthand of our emotions. Thus, listening to and participating in making music may also have unique capabilities to heal and empower (Daykin, 2015). As quoted by Aldous Huxley, “After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music” (brainyquote.com, 2021). This process of grieving through music is evidenced in the African American culture from the cotton fields to individual homes, churches, performance stages and recorded music as the enslaved working the fields communicated in secret about their experiences, fears, plans, and encouragement. Those singing such songs would have garnered severe punishment or death if not hidden within the lyrics.

Within African American homes, elders and parents are often captured moaning and groaning during times of fear and struggle as we with Christian beliefs have been taught this is a deep, emotional, and desperate means of communicating the unspeakable to Jesus Christ as a cry for help and relief. Romans chapter 8, verse 26 of the Bible tells us, “When we do not know how or what to pray (communicate), it does not matter because The Lord does our praying (communicating) in and for us, by making prayer out of our wordless sighs, and aching groans” (Peterson, 2021). And within the entertainment industry, singers of all genres and rappers communicate their experiences, pains, fears, and hope, questions seeking answers, beliefs, and words of encouragement promoting empowerment and healing through songs of relatability that at times seem prophetic.

Poetry-Therapy. Poetry is an expressive form of art therapy that provides a therapeutic platform for communication through poems and narratives to promote the mental and emotional well-being and healing of individuals who have experienced trauma or other forms of deep-

seated emotions. Evans (2015) asserts as Black women are forced to find a balance between strength and vulnerability to navigate their way to private peace and public voice. Writing and poetry assist in the expression of emotion. She also asserts, “poetry is a venue that allows African-American adolescents to be their vulnerable selves and express a range of emotions in an exploration of their many names, forms, and identities unencumbered” (Evans, 2015). The need for Black women to find a balance between strength and vulnerability is not new to the Black culture. It is a balancing act mandated from the brutal and forced rapes of Black women from the slave ships to the cotton fields if they were to survive (DeGruy, 2017). The same mandate for balance and navigation for Black women exists today. However, the locations have switched to our places of employment, politics, learning institutions, homes, and the communities we live in (Beck & Malley, 1998).

As parents, Black mothers can only succeed in parenting their children, specifically their sons, through finding and establishing balance when it is necessary to exhibit strength and appropriate vulnerability (Bekett et al., 2016). Suppressing the stress, fears, and strains of life postures Black women suffer from various mental, depression, and anxiety disorders. Poetry and narrative writing as a form of therapy have traditionally been found to assist this population of people with problem-solving and the ability to move from hopelessness to hope (Carroll, 2005).

Educational Outreach and activism by Mothers/Finding Purpose

Research has identified spiritual coping and making meaning, maintaining a connection to the deceased, collective coping and caring for others, and concealment as four primary themes of coping for African Americans after losing a loved one to a fatal shooting (Sharpe, 2011). The coping themes identified have been discussed or touched on in some way through this literature review except making meaning and finding purpose, caring for others, and activism which were

not identified. Armour et al. (2003) states the murder of a child is one of the most disruptive psychological traumas parents can experience, and it leaves parents struggling with several adaptive challenges (Redmond, 1996), including marital, family, social and spiritual functioning (Davis et al., 2000; Murphy et al., 2003). As such, it is vital for mothers who lose a child to gun violence to make meaning of the situation and find meaning in their lives after experiencing such unanticipated trauma.

Black mothers are disproportionately affected by fatal shootings. However, the need for making meaning and finding purpose remains overlooked as a vital component in building resilience (Bailey et al., 2013). Because Black mothers spend most of their parenting years protecting, teaching their children how to survive negative encounters with police and other members of society and fearing the experience of their child not returning home one day, the need for meaning making (Armour, 2002; Johnson, 2010) and finding purpose becomes an innate part of their grieving process. Neimeyer (2000) suggests that meaning making is important because it aids in reducing mental conflict between the pre- and post-realities of loss and building coherence and continuity in the bereaved person's life. As such, finding meaning as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim requires a new meaning structure of *purpose* to enhance coping skills and aid in positive outcomes.

Literature Review Summary

The concept of race was created in 1607 by English colonists creating a sense of fear towards individuals perceived differently from them. This concept was used to fulfill their need to feel superior and to dominate and oppress people different from them while achieving their goal of illegally acquiring land from native owners. It rests at the core of this country's foundation regarding freedom, life, laws, equality, education, and opportunity (History.com,

Jamestown Colony, 2010; Omni & Winant, 1994). African Americans in this country have suffered physical and emotional trauma that has shaped the movement, cognition, and response of this culture since the beginning of slavery. Black families, specifically, Black mothers, have mourned loss in immeasurable ways from the days of the plantation to the streets of major U.S. cities as they have been forced to stand in silence as their loved ones are snatched from their arms and lives via incarceration, police brutality, fatal shootings, and other violent acts (Forbes, 2020; Lawson Bush, 2004; Millward, 2016). As race determines the lifestyle and lifespan of African Americans through lack of access to legitimate means for survival and violence, Black males are quickly moving towards becoming extinct through the continued rise of police brutality and fatal shootings. Black mothers are forced to live with the reality that their sons, husbands, and grandsons may be next as they delicately navigate and parent through statistics indicating that Black males face a 1 in 21 lifetime chance of being fatally shot, which shapes the way Black mothers, parent and grieve the loss of their children (Armstrong & Carlson, 2019; Forbes, 2020).

Literature Review Conclusion

This systematic review of literature revealed how the phenomenon of gun violence and fatal shootings within the African American culture in the United States intersect with this country's skeletons concerning the treatment and ideologies of African Americans during periods of colonialism and slavery.

Race is a socially constructed concept that has shaped this country for over four hundred years. Initially designed to facilitate separation among humans based on skin color through classism and domination through fear and authority, race has become a powerful social construct governing how Americans live and the quality of life available to them based on their skin color.

More importantly, race has been and continues to be used to promote fear, create a sense of superiority, and the need for domination between whites and Blacks. Race is used to disqualify and deny Blacks in almost every area of their life while asserting privilege, access, and opportunity for whites (History.com, Jamestown Colony, 2010; Omni & Winant, 1994), becoming one of the most powerful social constructs of our country. It works to oppress and control Black communities by setting into place restrictions on movement, education, entrepreneurship, marriage, and taxation. Although Blacks have been thought of and treated as a commodity of little to no value, the overrepresentation of Black men housed in the penal system works to increase the economic power of this country through free labor (Warren, 2017). Research on the role of this country's history in the lives of African Americans indicates that a paradigm shift in this country's ideology of race is vital to improving the lifestyles of African Americans regarding morbidity and mortality.

The second section of this review synthesizes the parallels and variances among white and Black Americans, ability to live the American Dream. This literature on the social constructs of race and the importance of race finds itself subject to demands for validity and denial concerning who has access to the American Dream. A major issue of concern is the impact of racialized social structures in the lives of African Americans concerning education, quality of life, equity, access, and opportunity to means required for survival. Classrooms where Black children are sent to better themselves through education continue to disenfranchise Black youth. Like the *Black Codes*, practices lead to the overrepresentation of Black students in exceptional education programs and the perception that Black students are violent, uneducable, and often less than human. From there often comes unstated rationales for why Black students should receive substandard education, experience isolation and exclusionary discipline, and be further

oppressed. For this already marginalized population, the American Dream is much farther out of reach (Paul-Emile, 2018).

Thus, engendering emotions of anger and frustration because of academic failure and the inability to meet basic life needs leads to the execution of desperate and sometimes violent behavior for survival resulting in incarceration and death (Nance, 2016; Parker & McCall, 1997; Shofner, 1977; Togut, 2011). The shifting of America's culture to one better aligned with reducing the oppression and disenfranchisement via systemic racism, providing more equitable access and opportunity to the American Dream for African Americans, while vital, may be a near-impossible feat. In reality, African Americans are provided limited access to the American Dream; however, they face disparate and differential challenges than those of White Americans.

The literature reviewed in section three confirms that gun violence and fatal shootings in the United States are not only a public health phenomenon but also a public health crisis within the Black community. African Americans, specifically Black mothers, have been required to live in a continuous state of mourning from colonization to the present day as citizens of a country founded on the promise of equality, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness. Unfortunately, such ideas have not been extended to them as statistics suggest. Each year, approximately 1 in 21 Black males are fatally shot, equating to the loss of approximately 68,000 Black males to fatal shootings between now and 2025 (Noble & Christian, 2018). Countless Black mothers live in the daily fear of their children's encounter with law enforcement, and the possible outcome being that of a fatality, specifically for their Black sons. This fear compounded by lived experiences has mandated the need for Black parents to have what is commonly referred to as the "race talk" with their children. This conversation begins as early as five years of age in many households. While Black mothers should be experiencing some of the same joys and dreams for their

children as their white counterparts, the reality for Black mothers is they need to teach their children how to conduct themselves in the presence of police to defuse racially charged situations that often lead to adversity. Such lessons carry the hope their children will return home each time they leave.

Lastly, the fourth section of this review underscores how trauma experienced by enslaved people, from the Virginia shores and plantation cotton fields through killings, rape, and having their children snatched from their arms to ensure the continuation of free labor needed to progress this country (Eyerman, 2004; Geographic, 2020; Omni & Winant, 1994).

Traumatization is still directed toward Black mothers today, who encounter many of the same ways it was directed at Black mothers during slavery. Living in a country of norms, laws, and political and social structures that by design promote inferiority and domination through classism and oppression means Black mothers are constantly challenged with navigating through systems never designed for them. Such systems, including educational systems, were seldom intended to ensure they prosper and keep safe while attempting to process the traumas of slavery inherited by just being Black (DeGruy, 2017). More importantly, Black mothers are forced at the time of conception to make grieved decisions on whether to keep or abort the child for safety reasons. Regardless of their decision, the morbidity and mortality rate for their unborn child, in most cases, has already been decided by society (Armstrong & Carlson, 2019; DeGruy, 2017). This daily traumatizing reality not only shapes the parenting of Black mothers but also shapes the dynamics of their grief journey, often leading to activism being a major part of their healing process.

In Chapter three, I will describe the organizational process I will use to reflect on my experience as a Black mother, scholar, grieving Black mother of a fatal shooting victim, mother

educator, and activist whose reflections are embedded with experiential knowledge of this work as a Black, mother scholar personally grieving the fatal shooting of a son.

In Chapter four, I will share my lived experiences of vulnerability, tragedy, and triumph as a grieving, Black mother scholar of a fatal shooting victim through written stories. I hope to accomplish this goal by examining data provided through storytelling, poetry, pictures, and other written forms of expression in research that chronicle my intimate and lived experience (Hill & Knox, 2021).

In chapter five, I will discuss responses to the research questions and how they provide a counter narrative to societal assumptions about grief being a normative process for Black mothers in a White America (Forbes, 2020).

Chapter Three

Methodology

In this chapter, I will explain my research design of narrative inquiry and the use of autoethnography as the research method. I will explain the key features of autoethnography that make this method the best fit for my dissertation research. I also explain the method(s) I will use to collect data and identify the limitations of using autoethnography for this body of work, ensure the trustworthiness of this research verisimilitude, and the qualitative evaluative criteria. I will then describe how data collected will be analyzed by employing Interpretivism as a tenet of Critical Race Theory and Transition Theory as theoretical frameworks for data analysis (Ladson-Billings 1995; Schlossberg, 1981).

This autoethnographic study will explore my journey of losing a son to a fatal shooting and my grief process as a Black mother and scholar. The research questions being used to understand my grief process and inform readers' knowledge of how cultural trauma, gun violence, and race intersect and shape the grief process for Black mothers are 1) How can I learn about my grief process by using personal narrative and storytelling to explore, write about, and analyze my experience? 2) How can I use my experiences to inform knowledge and be of service to and support other grieving Black mothers of fatal shooting victims?

Qualitative Research

The most profound characteristic of qualitative research and this autoethnographic dissertation, in particular, is the ability it offers its readers and me to understand meanings individuals and cultures assign to their life experiences (Cresswell, 2009). Its' use of words and

open-ended questions to explore and understand is vital in ascribing to the social, human, and health problems of gun violence in this country, specifically within Black communities. For this work, qualitative research provides the opportunity and platform for the researcher to be participatory and self-reflective.

Interpretivism

The interpretive style of qualitative research through narrative inquiry allows the collection and interpretation of data through past experiences, values, identity, and background (Creswell, 2009). Qutoshi (2015) asserts theoretically that the interpretive paradigm focuses on context-based subjective meaning (Denzin, 1997), although it is highly dependent on individual interpretation of events, practices, beliefs, and values. He also states that invisible worldviews are central to cultural, phenomenological, and hermeneutic sensibilities and offer a powerful way of learning about self and others within the form of data generated through innovative research paradigms (Qutoshi, 2015).

My research seeks to understand my grief process as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim. As such, this study is an interpretive process of understanding myself and using my experiences to inform it, Black mothers' grief literature, and the greater community of grieving Black mothers. Through this critical autoethnographic work, I honor and represent grieving mothers of the Black community. Methodologically, this will include constructing data through vignettes to provide context constructed from significant experiences that will enhance understanding through self-connectivity and inform knowledge.

Research Design

The use of narrative as the research design for this study is purposed to share personal experiences as a form of narrative inquiry through storytelling and writing that facilitates the researchers' understanding of self, informs knowledge of the reader, and provides connection to the greater community of grieving Black mothers of fatal shooting victims. Narrative inquiry through storytelling and writing is the autoethnographic method through which I share lived experiences of loss, trauma, challenges, and triumph as a grieving Black mother of a fatal shooting victim. I will begin by discussing narrative inquiry as a research tool prior to discussing my autoethnographic research method and its components.

Narrative Inquiry. It is imperative for readers to understand narrative inquiry, being narrative inquiry will be the medium used in this autoethnography for sharing my personal experiences. Narrative inquiry is a method used by researchers to study the lives of individuals by sharing their personal stories through writing. Creswell (2009) asserts the interpretive style of qualitative research through narrative inquiry allows the collection and interpretation of data through past experiences, values, identity, and background. And that the process of storytelling through writing as a form of narrative inquiry promotes the construction of knowledge, cognitive understanding, processing of lived experiences, thought development, revelation of new data, and increased understanding of data because of idea growth and development as we write (Creswell, 2009).

Using narrative as method, the researcher is both participant and researcher, becoming part of their research and research process. The researcher's intimacy of involvement through this dual role constructs knowledge otherwise not found through

passive observation. Accordingly, for this study, I utilize my lived experiences and perspectives as a vital part of this research instead of the observation of others.

The act of writing constructs knowledge through generating thoughts, revealing new conclusions, and making sense of the data revealed. Historically, the act of writing has been used as a form of therapy for women within the African American culture in helping to communicate experiences and emotions otherwise too deep to tell, finding a balance between strength and vulnerability in a judgement free zone (Evans, 2015). And through writing, we learn to talk about, understand, and deal with experiences that are deep seeded in trauma. As such, writing is the tool of choice I will use to construct knowledge, share my experiences, to connect with other grieving mothers, touching them intellectually and emotionally.

I chose autoethnography as my research method because it sensitizes readers to issues of identity politics such as race, to experiences shrouded in silence caused by trauma, and to representation that deepens the capacity of empathy for individuals different from us (Ellis et al., 2011). Thus, I used my narrative to work through my personal grief process by understanding self, to connect with the greater community of grieving mothers, and to share my story with others to inform knowledge.

Autoethnography. Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experiences of the author, connecting researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues (Hill & Knox, 2021). As quoted by the late Congressman John Lewis, “The movement without storytelling is like birds without wings.” (Lewis, 2018). Therefore,

storytelling is vital for African Americans because it bears witness to who we are as a people through the ability to share experiences, beliefs, and traditions of the Black culture. In many cases, it is the only way to evidence our existence even today (Collier, 2019).

Autoethnography uses story to understand cultural issues and phenomenon such as gun violence through narrative writing restricting the story to truth, personal experiences, notes, and artifacts producing a story rich in meaningful experience and not entertainment (Ellis et al., 2011). Good autoethnography blends story and theory to provoke social change while maintaining narrative truth through the story. While not always verifiable through objective means, narrative truth seeks to be as honest as possible, attempting to accurately convey experiences and events in a non-misleading or misrepresenting manner, and as such we find narrative truth to be more ethical than factual (Hill & Knox, 2021).

This reflective form of writing allows researchers to construct truth and reality from lived experiences, connecting the personal to the cultural, creating a narrative of effects that often counters the standard causal narrative guiding our society (Ellis et al., 2011).

Therefore, I use storytelling through writing as a form of narrative inquiry to construct knowledge as the researcher, inform knowledge through shared experiences, and to intellectually, and emotionally connect with readers provoking thought processes required to promote social change (Creswell, 2009).

People are drawn to stories, whether they are storytellers, listeners, readers, or writers. Bochner and Riggs (2014), submit storytelling and writing are fundamental parts of human life and our study of it, therefore, narrative is not just a research method but an integral part of life. They further submit, that in life we constantly tell stories to give meaning to our lives, so much so that they become our equipment for living as they are

almost as necessary as the air we breathe (p. 39). And that the power of stories – of narrative – is immeasurable and profoundly entrenched in our humanity (Leavy, 2015).

As such, I have chosen autoethnography as method for this dissertation to promote researcher understanding, inform reader knowledge, connect with the rapidly growing community of grieving Black mothers of fatal shooting victims, and to empower members of this community to cope with difficulties encountered through their own experiences. Therefore, instead of observing others to gather data, I will share personal experiences and perspectives through writing as a narrative inquiry to collect data for this study. Storytelling through writing as a narrative inquiry will construct knowledge for the researcher, inform knowledge through shared experiences, and connect the researcher and reader through emotional and intellectual impact (Creswell, 2009).

Telling and writing my experiences has not come without challenges; however, sharing my story through this proposal process and other research classes is therapeutic and transformational for me both as a grieving mother and a scholar. Sharing my experiences with my peers as I matriculate through the doctoral program has also helped those who have lost children while on this educational journey to grab hold of hope and press through some of life's most difficult times as mothers. Therefore, I have chosen autoethnography for this dissertation to promote researcher understanding, inform reader knowledge, connect with the rapidly growing community of grieving Black mothers of fatal shooting victims, and empower members of this community to cope with difficulties encountered through their own experiences.

Conversations With the Father

Conversations with the Father

What would that look like, you ask?

Sci-Fi, Fiction, comedy, or drama?

Decisions, decisions, oh what a task.

Would it be a multi-act play, one-liner, or scene in a production?

It would be my essence in a one-woman play of my life under construction.

Conversations with the Father allow me to see

My dreams, passion, strength, and challenges are all things that make me, me.

The impact of this play would be great I hope,

As my life unfolded is displayed without jokes.

Highlights from multiple scenes you see,

My lived life, highs, lows, and struggles that produced beauty.

A one-woman play of conversations depicting real life.

With a Father who loves me despite my faults

And provides me with instruction for this difficult Christian walk.

Conversations with the Father are my life's work production.

Come one come all, to see my life center stage.

A story of pain, purpose, passion, strength, and dreams.

Center stage tonight. Losses, trials, and victories won.

A one-woman play for the re-telling of my story is not yet done.

(Kokita Dirton Wilson, 2019)

Role of the Researcher

Using autoethnography as a research method that uses data about self and context to promote understanding and connectivity between self and others within the phenomenon under study, I aim for this work to encompass the researcher's vulnerable self, emotions, body, and spirit in framing the stories shared. Producing stories that fashion the effects of reality, examine how lived human experience is saturated with meaning and is concerned with social, moral, ethical, and political structures and consequences. As researcher and participant, I also endeavor

to remain reflexive enough for this process and the data generated to encourage compassion and empathy required to not only help the greater community of grieving Black mothers live, cope, and thrive but to also awaken a sense of awareness in readers from society at large through informed knowledge. Lastly, I endeavor to conduct this research with integrity, goals of coping with my grief, completing my dissertation, and becoming an agent for change in the lives of other grieving Black mothers. I will present the findings in a way that increases understanding, informs knowledge, and facilitates connectivity needed to empower other grieving Black mothers and inspire positive social change.

The interpretive style of qualitative research through ethnography exposes the researcher to great involvement with participants, increasing the probability of the researcher's values defining how the collected data is interpreted because of their past experiences, values, identity, and background (Creswell, 2009). This autoethnographic explorative work is a journey of identity, connectivity, and empowerment through lived experience as an emotional release that informs readers and increases the researcher's understanding. In this study, I fill the dual role of researcher and participant and advocate for the larger community of grieving Black mothers by sharing my lived experiences through storytelling and writing as a form of narrative inquiry.

Regardless of the topic, researchers are challenged with objectivity in qualitative and quantitative research because every aspect of research, starting with what is being researched, is influenced by researcher interests shaped by values and experiences. Self-studies prove more challenging because the research is extremely personal and requires the researcher to share their lived experiences while being transparent about biases and assumptions. Therefore, as the key instrument in the data collection and analysis processes, tenets of CRT will be employed as the

critical lens used to authentically analyze the data in ways allowing the construction of meaning from my past experiences to inform knowledge of self and promote self-healing.

Data Collection

For this research, I will utilize field notes from my grief journals and rely on poetry, drawings, old pictures, text messages, and emails to assist with reflection ensuring as many past details as possible are incorporated into the data. These field notes were developed through my grief journals and assignments from course work to assist with reflection, ensuring as many past details as possible are incorporated in the data. After compiling my field notes, I used them to organize a series of vignettes capturing specific experiences of my grief journey (see Figure 2).

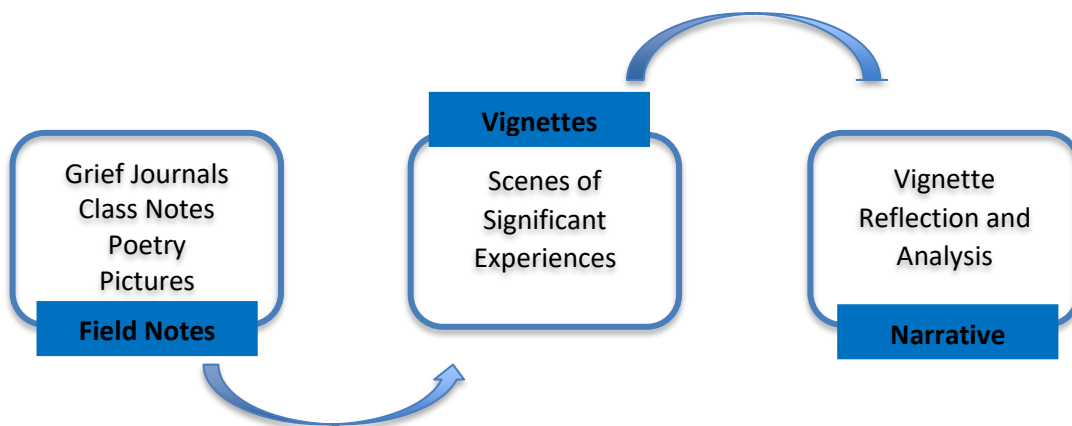


Figure 2. Data-to-narrative process.

The use of personal introspection instead of interviews of other grieving Black mothers allows me to avoid infringing upon their grief and allows for avoidance of ethical issues related to research participants. Choosing this process to gather my data, eliminated ethical issues and concerns connected to gathering data from grieving participants (Cresswell, 2009; Ellis et al., 2011).

Traditionally, in ethnographic work, researchers enter the participant's environment to observe, interview, and record notes, from which impressions of culture and behavior patterns of the people are developed and field notes are based on the observer's experiences in the participants culture (Mendez, 2013). Using autoethnography as a method for this research project, as the researcher, I am already a part of the world, community, and population of people I am studying, consequently making my internal observations external.

The use of personal introspection instead of interviews of other grieving Black mothers allows me to avoid infringing upon their grief and allows for avoidance of ethical issues related to research participants. As I write about my experiences using writing as method for inquiry, discovery, and analysis, the process of reflection produces meaning. To accomplish this goal, I incorporate personal documents and artifacts help contribute details and enhance meaning during the writing process. I integrate photos in the data collection process to enrich the data captured by adding meaning to the narratives. I also use poetry in this process to provide a platform for expression and elevated voice for the researcher of experiences otherwise not communicated.

Data Analysis

Autoethnography requires researchers to examine their lives as they would examine others, using narrative writing as a mirror or reflection of their life to improve understanding of their self and others. As such, reflexivity, visibility of self, engagement, vulnerability, and openness becomes central to the analysis process as the five key features separating autoethnography for traditional ethnography (Hill & Knox, 2021).

Reflexivity requires the researcher to reflect on his or her researcher philosophy on beliefs of truth and reality, values regarding the inquiry process, and how those beliefs and values align with research paradigms. It also requires the researcher to reflect on their relationship to the

research topic, what they already know about what they want to research, what they have experienced, and what they believe about it (p. 325) (Walshaw, 2000).

Visibility of Self is the researcher's clear presence in their work, and it represents the essence of autoethnographic research and writing, which is centered on personal, lived experiences shared for readers (p. 328) (Walshaw, 2000).

Engagement. Researchers use autoethnography with the intent to engage readers in a reciprocal relationship with the text through evocative writing to bring awareness through informed knowledge and connectivity that promotes social change (Ellis et al., 2011).

Vulnerability is another key element of autoethnography. The writing method of autoethnography forces the researcher to relive painful experiences in reflecting upon and analyzing data shared of lived experiences. Although, reliving these experiences can become traumatic, this process also provides the possibility of growth, therapy, and resolution (p.333) (Walshaw, 2000).

Open-endedness is a central component of autoethnography because it offers possibilities for further research by avoiding providing readers with definitive endings and conclusions. This is accomplished through examining insights about experiences, moments, and stimulating discussion that confirms and humanizes tragic experiences in hopes of provoking social change (Ellis et al., 2011). My study offers insight into the grief process for Black mothers of fatal shooting victims, and healing through finding purpose, but it does not offer a conclusive ending.

To ensure representation of these key features, I will use the CRT tenets of interpretivism and counter narrative to help make sense of the data collected from my shared stories using narrative writing to generate a collection of vignettes capturing significant moments of my grief and healing journey as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim. I will use transition theory (1)

to serve as a guide for organizing the narrative, (2) to help me understand and communicate how I have responded or not responded to the transitions in my life since Braelen passed, (3) to help identify phases I have gone through as a grieving mother, doctoral scholar and developing researcher working on the dissertation that mark both failures and successes, and 4) to connect with and inform knowledge within the larger community of grieving Black mothers and other readers.

Summary

The sharing of personal experiences through autoethnography can help researchers enhance and express their understanding of the social world (Woodward, 2019). As such, I strove to accomplish similar goals through this autoethnographic work. Through this process of writing about and analyzing my lived experiences, as I examined the trauma and grief of parenting as a Black mother, and losing my son to a fatal shooting, I found meaning and purpose in my experiences. Although I would without reservation trade the meaning gained for a chance to have my son back, finding meaning and purpose helped me to continue with my life and life's work as a scholar, minister, and agent of change. The process of writing, reading, and analyzing my experiences helped me to see beyond myself and connect with other grieving Black mothers and others affected by gun violence. My story as shared in this work may have begun with myself, but it extends far beyond me, to include unacknowledged experiences of other Black mothers, specifically grieving Black mothers; helping us to overcome the emotions of isolation and degradation experienced when navigating our grief journey.

I practiced precautions in this autoethnographic study by remaining observant regarding self-pity, visibility of self, and unnecessary digressions; being intentional to share only experiences I felt were helpful to my audience. To capture increased meaning of my shared

experiences, I wrote in first person, and used real names of deceased and living characters; I shared my writing with my husband as the one living and identifiable character appearing in my story to ensure he was not uncomfortable with the story being read by others. I also included a message of warning to readers in my abstract regarding the sensitivity, discomfort, and potential pain of this material to grieving mothers and readers of non-color.

Chapter Four

Findings

*The thief comes only to steal,
kill, and destroy; I have come
that they may have life and have
it to the full.*

John 10:10 (NIV, John 10)

Introduction

In this chapter, I share the findings, reflection, and analysis through narrative writing on my grief journey as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim. The purpose of this study is to (a) reflect on being a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim; (b) understand the grief and healing process that follows; (c) connect my experiences to those within the larger Black grief community, and (d) by example, help other grieving mothers navigate through their grief struggles. I employ autoethnography through narrative writing as the research design and method to accomplish these goals. I share and connect personal experiences to the larger population of grieving Black mothers. This chapter outlines stories and counter stories as data that emerged from the writing process to reflect, connect events, and uncover meaning from my lived experiences.

To accomplish this arduous task, I provided background of my experience with the American Dream to lay the foundation for my ideal of parenting. I reviewed journals and kept recounting my experiences with parenting, trauma, and grief as a Black mother and mother of a fatal shooting victim to prepare to write my narrative. I then synthesized my thought process, chronicled significant events of my grief journey through storytelling, and reflected upon

historical data housed in my literature review to find meaning in my experiences and produce knowledge (Miller et al., 2020). Woodard (2019), states that autoethnographic writing promotes a better understanding of affects and emotions because the stories shared through this form of writing provide a way of accessing what is unstated (p.141) (Woodward, 2019). Narratives used to generate data are a collection of vignettes capturing significant moments of my grief and healing journey as a Black mother, followed by reflective sections in which I try to learn from my experiences and find meaning in them by employing the critical lens of CRT for analysis. I used reflective analysis to weave together sections of the vignettes in lieu of presenting them as isolated stories to answer the following research questions:

1. How can I learn about my grief process using personal narrative and storytelling to explore, write, and analyze my experience?
2. How can I use my experiences to inform knowledge, be of service to, and support other grieving Black mothers of fatal shooting victims?

Background: Spirituality and Parenting

As I awake each morning, I tell God thank you. I thank Him for keeping my family safe, for being in control of my life, for allowing me to make a positive difference in the lives of others, and for granting me favor with all I encounter. A morning greeting and conversation with God is part of my daily routine. These conversations are where I find peace when everything around me is in an uproar, comfort when my heart is heavy, and guidance for my life's purpose. *Lord, what is my purpose in life? What work do You have for me to do? Whose life was I created to change? I need Your guidance.*" Finally, the bustle of life has settled for the evening late at night when things are relatively quiet. My hearing was acute to God's voice when the deep conversations took place, and I was hopeful that my children would return home safely again.

“God, I need You to protect my child(ren) and bring them home safe. Spare them from negative encounters that threaten their life and freedom.”

The American Dream

Living in a gated community often presents a false sense of security, but it is what happens outside of the gate at times that matters most. *“Finally, I live in a neighborhood free of crime, and my children will not be exposed to living life in the ghetto.”* For my family, it was the activities and experiences from the other side of the gate that had a far greater impact than what we experienced inside the gate. That darn gate... made me feel as though I had arrived and was living the American Dream. Especially when calling upon law enforcement for guidance, coming to see a Black family on the other side of the door seemed to upset their countenance greatly. *Are they asking themselves, “what are these people doing living in a house and community like this? How can they afford this house being Black?”* During those times, I would chuckle at their astonishment, informing them of their lack of authority to set the tone of our encounter because we called them. They did not come looking for us. At the end of our encounter, I would close the door and say, “Yep, we’re there” (living the American Dream), and they have no clue how to handle this reality.

My access to that gate bared witness that I avoided the shackles of oppression reserved for me as a high school dropout. I gained access to living the American Dream through hard work and alternate paths. No matter how lost I allowed myself to become as an upper-middle-class citizen, there were always social, educational, legal, or employment experiences waiting to remind me that my children and I were Black and expected to operate within the confines of societal limitations and reserved spaces. Regardless of how much I attempted to excel in the world of being Black and living the American Dream, there would always be laws, policies, and

rules binding me to a system void of honor or respect for my presence and my voice as a Black woman. My reality was our family's experiences on the other side of the gate faithfully being in place to remind me no matter how educated or financially comfortable we are, we are still Black. Thus, the dream we gained access to did not belong to us but was on loan. On the other side of the gate, my children were barely viewed as human beings, and their life had little value to most of society.

Reflection: Living in A World of Unbelonging. I parallel being African American in the United States with living in a world of unbelonging. Throughout childhood, I heard tales of the ideal life and way of living being depicted as a complete family unit with children, a good job, and a house with a white picket fence. For as long as I can remember, this ideal life has been referred to as the *American Dream* and like my mother, I also raised my children to believe this dream was available to them. During my proposal defense, I was asked to elaborate on what the American Dream was, I was unable to do so with clarity. Determined to be better prepared to respond to that question in the future, I began to research it only to find that this dream is an American ideal and not a tangible thing.

The American Dream is an aspirational view and belief in the U.S. that its citizens are entitled to an opportunity for success and upward social mobility through hard work regardless of race, gender, religious belief, or sexual orientation (the ideal of freedom, equality, and opportunity being available to everyone) (Dictionary.com, 2021). James Truslow Adams, (1931), defines The American Dream as a dream where life is richer, better, fuller for everyone, and opportunities were dependent upon each person's ability and achievement (Armstrong et al., 2019). However, these aspirations and beliefs are starkly different for Black Americans, as historically, race has been a constant disqualifier for Black people (History.com, Black Codes-

Definition, Dates & Jim Crow Laws, 2010). Furthermore, in this nation where meritocracy is idealized as being woven into the fabric, granting opportunity and equitable access based on talent and ability is more of a myth for Black communities.

Every day as a Black woman and mother, I live with the reality that this world made promises to all American citizens regarding equality, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that it has not and is not willing to live up to regarding people of color, specifically Blacks.

*“We hold these truths to be self-evident,
that all men are created equal,
that they are endowed by their Creator
with certain unalienable Rights,
that among these are Life,
Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”.*

Declaration of Independence (1776)

Despite what this statement of promise illudes to, the belief and statement of human rights were not shared ideologies of the many members of Congress who affixed their signatures to this historical document. DeGruy, (2017), states with the endorsement of slavery as legal, acceptable, and justifiable institution, the Founding Fathers committed America’s original sin, and this sin continues to plague America in present day. Also, that allowing slavery to persist at America’s inception caused those who signed off on the sentiments so eloquently represented in their Declaration of Independence to perjure themselves in its face and doom the nation to a future of lies, pain, and struggle (p.15) (DeGruy, 2017). In this place of unbelonging, the oppressive and restrictive roles and expectations of the Jim Crow era in present-day outline rules of engagement, access, and freedom limitations embedded in the laws and social structure of

society that are sometimes without voice (History.com, Black Codes-Definition, Dates & Jim Crow Laws, 2010). Cernkovich et al., (2000), state that historically, African Americans have been excluded from the promises of The American Dream in the form of barriers specific to their minority status such as racial discrimination and poverty (Armstrong et al., 2019). These rules of engagement restrict movement for me as a Black woman, predict my future, and set survival standards within society for my family and me.

Reflecting upon this country's history, I understand the looks of disgust we receive and stereotypical inquiries regarding my husband being a professional athlete when White people come to our home. Historically, this country's narrative has been lined with racial assertions and race-motivated social constructs that systemically disenfranchise people of color in our schools, courtrooms, employment, and healthcare systems (Omni & Winant, 1994). For decades I have witnessed conversations and ideals of sports, entertainment, and selling drugs being the only way Blacks could live a life void of poverty and struggle. As offensive as it sounds, for many Black males I grew up with, these three paths were the only way out of the ghetto for them, while welfare was the only means of survival for us Black females, especially those of us who were mothers.

Parenting

Many women desire children, yet all are not able to become mothers. Becoming a mother, I watched my values and needs change right before my eyes. I believe parenting is a learning ground that teaches us how to love, nurture, protect, and invest in someone other than ourselves. And that God entrusts us with fulfilling these tasks as we teach our children to be exceptional, caring, and productive beings. *How blessed was I that God chose me and saw fit to bless me with the gift of motherhood? I wonder if it will be a boy or a girl. What do I do now?*

How do I prepare to care for this new life? I want to be the best mother I can be, but what if I fail along the journey. What kind of life will I be able to provide my child? Scared and excited, I could not wait to have and pour love into this child and receive its love. On November 29, 1989, I had my first child, and it was a girl. For the first time in my life, I was not my priority.

Reflection: It's a Girl. Parenting this girl child was special for me. In this role as a Black mother, I had the honor of teaching her kindness and respect for others, instilling in her the belief that she could be anything in life she desired to be, for this is America, the Land of Opportunity! *I wonder... is it a dream on loan, or is it a dream unlikely to be realized if you are Black in this country?*

This country's economics and political power are said to be vested in citizens' talent, effort, and achievement rather than wealth or social class *Meritocracy* (Mark, 2022). As a Black citizen of this country, I have been able to navigate my way into a life void of poverty through hard work and non-conventional paths. In part, meritocracy exists. However, the mythical part of meritocracy is in the inconsistency with which people are rewarded. Also, race was not included out of all the social constructs listed to impact access for U.S. citizens. With race as one of the most powerful predictors and disqualifiers in this country of whether meritocracy works equitably for all U.S. citizens (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985; Wilson & Aponte, 1985; Sampson, 1987)?

In the interim of finding a full-time job with benefits to provide private insurance for my family, I partnered with my mother to provide quality housing for my daughter. Determined to define my own life and success, I worked two part-time to avoid the need for welfare and to fall into the mold created by society's stereotypical view of single Black mothers as *welfare queens*. Parenting this beautiful girl child, it was important for me to combat the effects of racism and

sexism as I modeled strategies and behaviors that my daughter could adopt (Greene, 1990). My baby girl, I kept her close to the vest for protection and endeavored daily to model before her examples of a strong and independent Black woman, countering this country's narrative about Black women (Hogan and Kitagawa 1985; Wilson and Aponte 1985; Sampson, 1987).

A year and a half after giving birth to my first child, I gave birth to my second child, and from the point of conception, this time was different. Once again, I was a single mother, still living at home with my mom and unhappy about being pregnant. I had been able to evade the welfare system and meet my child's needs with one child, but what would I do now? *I felt hopeless and more at-risk than ever of becoming a welfare queen. How could I let this happen, and why? What is life going to be like now, and what kind of life can I offer two children as a single mother?* My reality and the joys of motherhood also come with great concern and the need for sacrifice. I was scared and had no idea of what lay ahead. Finally, August 10, 1991, I gave birth to my second child, and it was a boy! *What in the world am I to do now? How can I succeed in parenting this boy child? I am a woman. I cannot teach him how to be a man.*

Reflection: It's a Boy. The day I learned I was carrying a boy; I began to weep out of concern for my unborn child's safety. I felt an unexplainable sadness, almost like depression. I was worried about the safety of my child, who had not yet been born. *I was afraid he would die prematurely and violently like most men on my father's side of the family. I was afraid of him using and abusing drugs and alcohol like my dad.* My grandfather was fatally stabbed in a robbery as a young adult, my brother fatally shot on a D.C. sidewalk in a case of mistaken identity at the age of twenty-one, and my father had served time in jail for using drugs. In Reflection, I was overcome with fear of my parenting experience duplicating my family's past.

Historically, America's narrative of African Americans is one of poverty, violence, uselessness, crime, incarceration, and addiction, and my father's family history fits right into that narrative concerning Black men. Ironically, in spreading fear about how violent and dangerous Black men are through political views and racist news reporting, the well-kept secret remains America's role in shaping this behavior within the Black culture. The Southern Culture of Violence we see playing out in the streets and communities we live in emerged during slavery through the treatment of the enslaved (Warren, 2017). I was petrified about the possibility of tragedy being a part of my son's life. So much so that I refused to hold and attempt to bond with him for several weeks after he was born. My family thought I was experiencing post-partum depression, but my willful detachment was based solely on fear.

I had to accept the fact that parenting and keeping my children safe in a world plagued with violence that rejects the very existence of their being would be a near-impossible task. Living with the reality day after day, my son may not live to see adulthood. I faced a similar experience to that of Black mothers, one that shaped how I parented my children. Like other Black mothers, I facilitated race conversations with my children and established rules with which they were expected to (DeGruy, 2017), especially my sons. It was a constant struggle not to allow fear to consume me and facilitate the establishment of parenting rules that would prevent my children from experiencing life. As a result, I became more dependent upon my prayer life and faith. Some days I experienced less fear, and other days the fear was more intense. Nevertheless, love caused me to be excited to dream for my children and encourage them to reach for the moon; however, the intense need for conversations about race and acceptable societal behaviors often forced me to dwell in a space of uncertainty for which I have no name (Harris & Amutah-Onukagha, 2019).

Being Black and parenting Black children, specifically boys, my world was filled with emotional chaos and was lined with fear. And I was forced to learn how to love beyond my fears and teach my children life skills and negotiation strategies using my life as a form of navigation in a place that has historically and systematically excluded Blacks from opportunity and the right to life (DeGruy, 2017).

Reflection: What's Race Got to Do with It. As if the stress and concerns of being a Black mother and parenting a Black boy were not enough, my parenting experience was compounded when I gained three bi-racial children to raise through marriage to my husband, Oscar. In this role of Black mother to Black and bi-racial children, race roles in our daily lives and the power of each role in shaping our future became more evident. It was quite difficult for me to smile and swallow when dealing with blatant disparities in how others viewed and responded to my children. *I found myself having to look at all sides of my experiences to determine intent, damage, and other impact as a parent to properly support my children. I had to be strategic and intentional in my responses, sure to arm each of them with knowledge and tools needed to successfully navigate this world's systems and be mindful of the need for knowledge and tools shared to be different because of their color skin. I experienced great doubt about my ability to successful in parenting.*

Blending two families does not come without challenges, however blending families of mixed races compounds the situation. I was fearful of the journey before me and how their teachers and doctors would respond to my bi-racial children having two Black parents. I ensured only one parent attended an open house during the first few years of the children's primary education. *I was concerned about what their teachers would think with two Black parents showing up to represent these little White kids.* I had no life experience with raising bi-racial

children, and the only knowledge I had was through stories shared by my mother and her siblings about segregation and experiences of family members in interracial marriages. Fearful and nervous, I did not know what to expect, but I did want to make sure my bi-racial children's experiences were as least complicated and negative as possible.

Parenting and K-12 Education

It was important for my children to receive a quality education and excel in school, especially being I was a high school dropout. I wanted my children to have access and opportunities I did not have because of making poor decisions. The children soared academically in their K-12 endeavors making the honor roll and principal honor roll home throughout their academic journey. And I was pleased their K-12 experiences were positive both academically and behaviorally, with exception of my youngest daughter and middle son who are both bi-racial.

The year we decided to both attend parent teacher conference night with our youngest and middle children, I was introduced to *privilege* and its' racial impact on my family. Prior to learning both my daughter's parents were black, she had unhindered access to *privilege* in the classroom. I never thought about privilege when parenting my children prior to the phone calls received after the parent-teacher meeting. The first phone call informed me of the need to relocate her seat next to the teacher's desk for behavioral reasons. After talking to my daughter and her teacher, I realized the liberties, access, and empathy (white privilege) previously afforded her exist no more now that her teacher can no longer see herself or children in my child (Emba, 2017). Emba, (2016), defines white privilege as the social advantage that comes from being seen as the norm in the United States, automatically conferred to people of non-color and making life smoother, white privilege is something you would barely notice unless it were suddenly taken away or never applied to you in the first place (Emba, 2016). Consequently, her

teacher became less and less tolerant of behaviors that were once acceptable because she was now perceived as being a black student, so the next school year, we changed schools.

Reflection: School-to-prison Pipeline. Despite them being thought of as inferior to the White students in their classrooms, it was my responsibility as their parent to ensure they knew they were enough and that they could do exploits if they so desired. Smedley & Smedley, (2012), state that Murray and Herrnstein argue, race and class are caused primarily by genetic factors. The upper classes are blessed with high intelligence and the lower classes are not as expressed in IQ scores. Moreover, blacks score lower than whites on average, which explains their low socioeconomic status. And that these features are innate and immutable, therefore no form of compensatory training can bring such low intelligence people up to functioning (Smedley & Smedley, 2012). My children's academic success was important to me because of the vital role it plays in their life's success, and I needed to disprove the un verbalized and profound low expectations of their educators.

Our children thrived academically in school throughout their educational journey. My oldest daughter graduated her junior year of high school through the ACCEL 18-credit program. My youngest son graduated through the standard 24-credit diploma program his junior year at the age of sixteen, so he could walk with his biological sister at graduation, and all have become college graduates except the youngest girl and middle boy. The journey for those two children was starkly different from the others and painstakingly obvious. Feeling defeated, I decided to include them in race conversations I would have with the other children. Why did I need to have conversations centered on race, teaching societal rules, guidelines, and expectations that would govern behavior and responses with these children who look White (Armstrong & Carlson, 2019)?

My children were singled out and separated from other classmates, received out-of-school suspensions, and were threatened with incarceration through antagonistic police interactions for non-criminal school matters. Togut, (2011), states that black students are referred for discipline and subjected to harsher consequences for less serious behavior and for more subjective reasons. And that black students are more frequently exposed to harsher disciplinary punishment such as corporal punishment than other students (Togut, 2011). As a Black mother of bi-racial children my reality is that race and the non-perception of self were very much a part of my children's educational journey. However, this time the mistreatment did not occur because of the color of their skin. It was the color of ours, their parents. Their teachers could not see themselves in my children, which negatively impacted how they interacted with them as educators, the expectations they had for them, and what they were willing to invest in my children. They expected my children to fail and be put out of school. So, each time their teachers revealed their shock at my children's academic success, I stood in amazement and pride as their Black mother.

My children isolated and made to feel as if they did not belong. As a result, they started using marijuana to cope with their negative high school experiences. The feeling of rejection and unbelonging that comes from exclusion and punitive punishment ultimately caused my middle son to drop out of high school. As confirmed in Togut's, (2011), statement that relying upon harsher disciplinary measures contributes to school rejection and dropouts (Togut, 2011). And he has been fighting the battle of not succumbing to the *school-to-prison pipeline* path presented to him because of these experiences since. There are times in life when he is successful in his endeavors and other times when he gets knocked down (Nance, 2016).

This country asserts the school-to-prison pipeline began with the *zero-tolerance* policy of the 1980s. However, I propose the school-to-prison pipeline has been in existence since the Black Codes and Jim Crow Era when people of color were forbidden to learn to read, Black men were lynched, gutted, or fatally shot for looking at White women, and imprisoned for starting their own businesses, creating the oppressive social systems that continue marginalizing people of color today (History.com, Black Codes-Definition, Dates & Jim Crow Laws, 2010). Punitive punishment, substandard living, low academic performance, blocked access to jobs, and overrepresentation of Blacks in jail is not new phenomenon in response to zero-tolerance policies or the war on drugs. This school-to-prison pipeline has existed since the cotton fields and forbidden learning for Blacks (Shofner, 1977). As such, it was vital that my children understood they were more in control of their destiny than society desired them to think. Regardless of setbacks they will face, and there will be many in this life, they could and can choose a path different from the school-to-prison pipeline. Choosing a different path will not come void of challenges. It requires creativity and the application of unconventional strategies, but the key to their life success, worth, and happiness resides within them.

As a Black mother, I needed my sons to know how to and be willing to work hard if required. I also needed them to know they had what it took to work smart and less hard and still realize their piece of the American Dream if they chose to (Mark, 2022). I needed my girls to understand the importance of being self-sufficient and not dependent on systems of welfare (Greene, 1990). I needed them to know the best way to help support their family was to acquire a good education, perfect life skills, and find creative ways to employ their talents to the benefit of their family. I also needed them to understand their career path was not limited to domestic work (Shofner, 1977). Most importantly, I needed them to understand the possible need to travel

an unconventional path to get there, and they could accomplish anything in life they could dream of.

Hey black child

Do you know who you are, who you really are

Do you know you can be, what you want to be

If you try to be what you can be

Hey black child

Do you know where you are going, where you're going

Do you know you can learn what you want to learn

If you try to learn, what you can learn

Hey black child

Do you know you are strong, I mean really strong

Do you know what you can do, what you want to do

If you try to do, what you can do

Hey Black Child

Be what you can be; learn what you must learn

Do what you can do; and tomorrow, your nation

Will be what you want it to be

Useni Eugene Perkins (1975)

Trauma

Trauma is a mighty force to be reckoned with. It comes in different forms, leaving horrific paths of devastation that manifest in our lives and communities in numerous destructive ways. Dr. DeGruy, (2017), describes trauma as a stressor resulting from direct, witnessed, and

indirect exposure to danger, injury, and physical or sexual violence, or the threat of these experiences (DeGruy, 2017). Post-traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) is a real, unconscious emotional reaction experienced by parents of the Black community as a response to trauma, fear, and worry about their child's life, safety, and wellbeing. DeGruy, (2017), also states that through epigenetics, the genes and trauma of others are environmentally influenced and can be transmitted over generations (DeGruy, 2017). *I prayed never to see the day someone would place a price on one of my son's heads.* Dr. DeGruy, (2017), also asserts that beliefs as a characteristic of trauma can so color our minds that we become paralyzed, unable to move beyond our fears and doubts, limiting our choices (DeGruy, 2017). As a Black mother, I lived in a constant state of fear and mourning from the gender reveal to the day of Braelen's passing, silently asking myself the question "is today going to be the day my son does not return home." Throughout the years our f, our family has faced and come through some extremely difficult situations, with many of them leaving us traumatized. Still, this trauma was different, and it hit differently any we had faced before.

Reflection: Race. As I reflect on experiences with trauma as a Black mother, I cannot recall an instance when race was not an underlining factor aside from a few car accidents. It took me a minute, but I finally acknowledged the reality that race in these United States is not a benefit unless you are White. Instead, race, for people of color, primarily serves the purpose of disqualification from social systems, opportunity and benefits, and qualification of incarceration, morbidity, and mortality (Omni & Winant, 1994).

As a Black mother, specifically of sons, I live with trauma every day as I fear some of my children may not return home when they leave. I live in a society that constantly reminds me that my family and are no different from animals and in some cases less valuable (p. 100) just as

Blacks were valued in the cotton fields, and I see patterns of the legacy of that trauma reflected in many of my behaviors and parenting strategies (DeGruy, 2017). My experiences suggest that race determines whether my children are viewed as a threat and survive a routine traffic stop; race determines whether my children are suspended from school or arrested for minor infractions, and race determines my child's guilt and innocence legally and social (Paul-Emile, 2018). Race forced me to digest some of the most difficult servings of life as a parent especially regarding the legal system.

As a Black mother, I sat quietly in a courtroom in 2012 as the presiding judge heard minor criminal cases, rendered disparate decisions on the cases of White, Black, and Brown youth and adults (Emba, 2017). *Surely, when Braelen's case is called, having both parents present, dressed professionally, and articulate in speech will make a difference, not to mention that was the first time he had ever been in trouble. Boy, was I wrong and in for the shock of my life!* When Braelen's case was called, the judge asked if there was anyone in the courtroom to represent him besides his attorney, and he informed the judge his parents were there. The judge asked if he had been given a drug test at that moment could he pass it, and Braelen's response was "No" because it had been less than thirty days since he last smoked. Looking at his record, seeing no other offenses and that he was a college student, the judge asked where he got money to buy marijuana. Braelen responded he uses money given by his parents for food and gas. The judge turns to Oscar and me and calls us stupid, then precedes to completely berate Braelen by telling him he should just drop out of school and stop wasting our money because he was never going to be more than the pothead he was then. He sentenced him to twelve months of probation.

I was livid at the impudent behavior of this elected official who swore an oath to view the evidence before him with an open mind and render non-biased judgment in the best interest of

the parties involved. *I thought to myself, America is always talking about how violent and angry Black folks are but not willing to be accountable for its' role in the provocation. At that moment, I could see how and why people sometimes flip out and become physically confrontational. I was already in battle mode halfway through the insults, and one false move in a different environment would have yielded different results. I may not have gone home from there, but I certainly would have left the courtroom feeling better* (Warren, 2017). Clearly, race was center stage in that courtroom. I had previously watched this judge sentence Latino defendants to six months of probation, withholding adjudication, or referral to a drug treatment program. The younger White defendants all received drug treatment program referrals and the promise that successful completion of the program would remove the charge from their records. But when it came to my child regarding the same or similar charge, he received a probation sentence double what his lighter-skinned peers did (Paul-Emile, 2018). Not to mention, none of the other defendant's characters were assassinated, nor were their family members and their parenting skills openly attacked in a full and open courtroom.

At that moment, I began to know just how powerful this idealized social construct called race really was. *The judge truly did not see humans when looking at me, Oscar or Braelen. And what he did see was pure disgust. I had never felt less human in my entire life* (History.com, Jamestown Colony, 2010). Nash, (1982), asserts it is far easier to rationalize the merciless exploitation of those who have been defined by law as something less than human (p.151). That the dehumanizing process of imposing subhuman status, within the slave context, required the denial of any recognition of the human rights of slaves, thus the property element and prioritizing of owner's rights to their property (Smedley & Smedley, 2012). I wanted to stand up and say, *"who in the hell do you think you are? The young man you are talking to is a human being who*

is not standing in your courtroom alone as someone's mistake or throw-away!" I wanted to remind the judge that he was elected to that position, and responsibilities to more citizens than those who looked like him came with it. That day in court, I was traumatized by the offense committed upon my family and my inability to respond in defense of my son. For the first time in my life, I felt completely powerless and useless as a person and mother (DeGruy, 2017).

The power and impact of race within the African American culture forced me to acknowledge society does not see my children as it sees its' own, and regardless of my family's individual and collective strides, my children are viewed as inferior, useless, incapable, uneducated, non-contributing, non-productive members of society because of their brown skin. Race also determines how long my children live and how they die. Facing the daily fear of my sons being Black and brutally murdered is overwhelming, traumatizing, and sometimes debilitating (DeGruy, 2017). As such, my heart drops every time the phone rings before past a certain hour. My heart races, my legs to get weak, my stomach turns, and I become nauseous. I gather myself before picking up the phone for fear of what may be on the other end. And it is nothing but the early morning and late-night conversations with God, better known as prayers, that strengthen and help me navigate as a parent in a world where my children and I are not made to feel we belong (History.com, Jamestown Colony, 2010).

I was sitting at work in 2013 when my cellphone rang with the panting voice of my youngest son on the other end saying, "mama, they pulled me over for no reason. They just called for backup and the K-9 unit because they say they know I have drugs in my car. They're getting ready to handcuff me and put me in the patrol car." My heart starts beating fast, and I ask, "where are you?" He quickly answers, "I'm on 15th street by the Steak n Shake on Fowler."

Reflection: Policing. I hear the officers strategizing their game plan as they walk back to the car, not realizing there was anyone on the phone (Harris & Amutah-Onukagha, 2019). I quickly grab my purse and keys and drive to the location to make sure my son survives the encounter. On my commute there, I called my attorney and kept him on speaker while I questioned the treatment of my son and the reason he was pulled over. Heart racing and hands shaking, I did not know what to expect. The one thing I did know was that my son was not being left to their mercy. Reflecting on the situation, I realize I did not have time to think of my safety or my job. All I could think of was getting there and ensuring my son survived the encounter.

I patiently waited for them to search his car and found nothing as he initially informed them. It was not until I had gotten my son safely on his way home that I had time to try and process what had just happened. Then the anger came, and the questions of what if began to fuel my thought process. I wondered who and what they saw when they saw my son. That day I wore a suit to work because I of scheduled meetings. I wonder what ran through their minds when this professionally dressed and articulate Black woman showed up and informed them that the improper mishandling of her son was to cease immediately and that my attorney was on speaker recording the entire situation. *I constantly prayed against my sons experiencing negative encounters with law enforcement, and I did my best to teach them how to respond when interacting with police properly.* That day, I walked away feeling like I had been successful in my teachings. If Braelen not called me and responded with calm and humility as he was taught, the entire situation could have turned out different (Greene, 1990).

The trauma experienced in his 2012 arrest on a misdemeanor marijuana charge and fear from this experience traumatized Braelen to the point of telling me later that night, “mama, you don’t have to worry. I am not doing anything that would land me in jail again. I don’t know why

the police keep bothering me. But I promise you that I will force them to kill before I ever let them take me back to jail. I'm not going back to jail!" I will never know what my son experienced during the ten hours he spent in jail before being bonded out, but I know it was saturated with trauma.

I had successfully taught my children to be respectful, exceptional, and productive human beings. I also had evidenced through this situation success in teaching them how to survive negative encounters with police. Still, I was unsuccessful in teaching Braelen how not to lose his life.

On December 23, 2014, *trauma* showed up like a thief on the night before daybreak turning my worst nightmare into reality with the fatal shooting of my youngest son. The news of his shooting came through the phone like a mighty rushing wind paralyzing my ability to feel, think and act. Struggling to breathe, I gasped for air and turned towards my husband to inform him that our youngest son had been shot and critically wounded. With trembling legs and a panting heart fighting to not succumb to the fear of losing my child, we arrived at the scene where we were directed to Tampa General Hospital.

Reflection: Fatal Shooting. I had lived the past twenty-three years, fearing the possibility of my sons being shot and hoping I would never live to see it. But on December 23rd, my worst fear transitioned to my worst nightmare with Braelen being fatally shot. Immediately I thought Braelen had been involved in a police shooting. *Everyone knows that African Americans live under active terrorism from police officers* (p.89) (DeGruy, 2017). Then my mind shifted to wondering about the severity of his injuries and if he was still alive. Holding on as best I could to what little hope I could find that he would survive his injuries, a battle ensued in my head of visions of Braelen being dead (Bauchner, 2017) .

Shortly after arriving at the hospital, we were placed in a consultation room to wait. *Why did they place us separate from everyone else in the ER? What did that mean? Why do they have me wait so long to see my son? A million thoughts were running through my head when suddenly, the double doors swung open, and the chaplain walked through what looked like a cloud of smoke towards us to regretfully inform us that my Braelen did not survive his wounds before turning and walking away. I fainted, and when I came to, I asked, "Is this how they treat all families or just Black families? (Eyerman, 2004)"* Oscar looked at me with disappointment in his eyes, saying, "Kita, stop it! I know you're hurting, we all are, but this isn't about race." I thought to myself, "oh really?" I said to him, "then tell me why when we arrived at the scene and told the officer stopping us from crossing the line of the crime scene that we were Braelen's parents, was it not important for them to take our names and information." I thought, *was this the crime scene of a person who had been fatally shot or the scene of just another nigger gone? How did they see my son when they arrived on the scene? Who did they expect, or did they expect someone to show up? What kind of person did they think they would have to deal? Who and what did they see when we told them who we were (Eyerman, 2004)? Why would the officer lie to us, sending us on a wild goose chase to Tampa General when Braelen's body was still at the scene?* Again, is this how they treat everyone or just how they treated us and why?

The experiences shaping my thought process and formulating the questions running through my head were those of other Black fatal shooting victims reported by the news media. For years, I experienced reading the newspaper and watching the news with feelings of disgust and offense at how Black men and women were portrayed in crimes and death. In addition, white and other protestors of non-color are always reported as having a worthy cause when marching

the streets for change. Yet, when a group of Black people gets together, regardless of group size or the cause, they are reported as angry, dangerous mobs with racist views or looking for trouble.

In mass shootings, it is almost always asserted through media reporting that surviving shooters had underlying mental health disorders. Causing society to extend some form of empathy and support to the person who, for no reason other than hate, entered a school, store, or community and opened fire, killing innocent people they have never met. The media wants us to think that they are not hard criminals but criminals suffering from mental disorders. It is rare for a Black person to survive simple encounters with citizens and the police and forget about a Black person possessing any weapon. Even Black youth walking down the street holding candy bars or cellphones are deemed a threat and seldom make it out of those situations alive. Regardless of whether the situation outcome results in life or death, Blacks are often referred to as thugs and dangerous criminals. This kind of media reporting makes fatal shooting victims responsible for their own demise by asserting their guilt long before they are tried and facilitating fear of interaction with people of this culture.

Drowning in a sea of emotions, we returned home from the hospital around 7:30 that morning. Trying to settle my mind noise, I turned on the television only to see a mug shot of Braelen plastered on the screen as they reported, “A Seffner man was fatally shot in the early hours of the morning at the Play Pen after-hours club in Tampa. It said that the victim is 23-year-old Braelen Adams, and the shooting resulted from an altercation inside the club.

Reflection: Media Reporting. I spent the next few days monitoring the news to see how they reported my son’s death and hopefully learn more about the case. On day two, I thought, “*Here we go again!*” I was tired of seeing our young Black boys and girls unjustly criminalized through media reporting and ultimately made responsible for their deaths (Dow, 2016). Braelen

had been in trouble once before, although nothing in his criminal record referenced him being violent. However, smoking marijuana and other poor decisions are things a person does and do not necessarily reflect who they are as individuals. The media reporting Braelen's death presented him to viewers and readers as an angry and confrontational criminal and drug dealer.

Braelen was none of those things. But that was not how society saw him, and thanks to media reporting, that was exactly how the detectives and others involved with his murder case would see him. This kind of reporting has major influence and shapes the way society thinks, hears, and sees. And as a Black mother, I found myself again staring in the face of situations where fear and anger resulted in trauma, sadness, and grief.

Grief

Grief is an uncontrollable natural, mental, and physical response to losing someone or something. Each of our experiences with this very real and sometimes debilitating sea of emotions is different regardless of the cause of our grief.

Waiting in the patient consult room at Tampa General Hospital, a set of double doors leading to the patient treatment area opened as the chaplain exited and walked toward us. He entered the room, asking if we were the parents and family of Braelen Adams. After receiving confirmation, he stepped back and said, "I regret to inform you that your son was severely wounded and did not survive his injuries. My condolences to your family. You all can remain in this room for a while if you'd like", then he turned around and walked away as if he had performed this task too many times before. Upon receiving the news, I fainted. Outraged when I came to, I punched the window screaming "*why*."

Reflection: Grief and Loss. Some might say the early morning phone call informing us Braelen had been shot or the chaplain telling us Braelen was deceased was the start of my grief

journey, but in retrospect, my journey began while Braelen was still in the womb and long before he took his last breath. Parenting boys as a Black mother, I lived with the same trauma and fears for my son's lives as my ancestors did in the cotton fields of slavery. I dwelled in a constant unconscious state of grief, parenting my children caused by the ever-present fears and concerns for their health and safety (DeGruy, 2017; Eyerman, 2004). As a Black mother, I navigated through situations and experiences of fear for so long that it became an expected and normal part of my life's experience.

There was something very different about my grief experience in the fatal shooting of my son. This time, my greatest fears had become reality. This loss was not only great but sudden, unexpected, and tragic. This journey of grief was void of the standard five-stage path theorized by Kubler-Ross & Kessler (2005). My grief journey, like the journey of so many other grieving Black mothers, was complicated and constantly disrupted by false media reporting, race, and the judicial system.

Reflection: Media Reporting. Hearing the media report on Braelen's death in a way that cast a shadow of criminality that would somehow make him responsible for what happened angered me beyond expression. At that moment, I felt the same rage, determination, and responsibility to protect him as I did when the police pulled him over in 2013. In less than forty-eight hours after my son's passing, the media-related character assassination experienced through news reporting took away my right and opportunity to grieve my loss. I realized from the articles I read and other news reports I did not have time to grieve. Instead, I had to fight for my son. If I had not chosen to fight not only to restore his character, but the detectives may also not have chosen to work as hard as they did to find his killer, and our entire family's hope regarding the outcome of the trial may have been disappointingly void of justice.

That twenty-three-year-old Black male fatally shot on December 23rd was not just another Black male presumed to be of no value. He was my son, and I was determined to ensure his murder case was not treated the same as the case of Treyvon Martin and countless other Black males. Like those mother's sons, my son's life mattered too, and I knew I had to fight for him. *I knew Braelen's narrative had to be changed* (Miller et al., 2020). Although no definitive information had been shared regarding what caused the shooting, we were informed by detectives that he was minding his own business attempting to start his car and leave the nightclub when he was shot. As a mother, I felt and still feel his life had and still has just as much value as the person's life who shot him, regardless of color, and I was not going to allow anyone involved to lose sight of that. Society needed to know who he was and what he was to our family and the community.

Reflection: Judicial System. Time and time again, so many Black mothers of fatally shot children are forced to decide between grieving the loss of their child, which is a vital part of the healing process. They have fought to restore their slain child's character and have that child's life valued, and justice served. In the early 90s, I worked for the court system and observed how court clerks interacted with respondents they did not share an identity with. Therefore, I had to make sure everyone assigned to Braelen's case knew who he was as a person.

Less than a month after the murder, leading up to the arraignment, signs of privilege began to emerge in the gentle handling of Braelen's killer because he was easily identifiable. At that point, the importance of the prosecutors and detectives knowing who Braelen was had been confirmed if justice was to be served on Braelen's behalf. I started my initial meeting with the lead prosecutor, providing her with a large packet of documents chronicling Braelen's life from birth to death.

Reluctantly she took receipt of the packet containing his birth certificate, report cards, baptism certificate, high school diploma, awards and recognitions, family photos, his daughters' birth certificate, arrest record, and book sections detailing our family's history in Tampa. As she slid the large packet towards her, she asked, "what is this, and what am I to do with it?" I paused and said, "you were robbed of the opportunity to meet my Braelen, so I'm helping you get to know him because, as people, we fight our hardest and best for those we know and with whom we can identify. I wish you could have met my Braelen because if you had, your life would be forever changed by just one encounter. Please, take the time to not just look at what I gave you, but read and study it so you can get to know the person you will be fighting for in the courtroom. We will win the case if you take the time to do this!"

I saw my son's killer for the first time in January 2015. I left the courtroom that morning barely able to walk without assistance because trembling legs, chest pains, and shortness of breath, only to spend the next twenty-six months reliving my trauma each month as I watched him enter and exit the courtroom. During the two and a half years it took for the case to go to trial, I experienced privilege on display in every direction I turned. Further exacerbating my experience with trauma and prolonging my ability to grieve.

Finally, on February 21, 2017, there was a pre-trial conference. I remember waking up that morning with a glimmer of hope that justice would prevail on Braelen's behalf, only to be further disappointed. Witnesses for the prosecution refused to show up for the trial and testify, citing fear for their life. I looked at Oscar in disbelief and wondered if that nightmare would ever end and if our child would ever receive justice.

For more reasons than I can articulate, I needed to hear expert testimony, see the video footage, and see pictures of Braelen on that slab. For over two years, I had been tormented with

thoughts of my son suffering and calling for me as his mother and not having me there to rescue him. As I reflect on this time, I now know I did not just experience grief because of my loss. I also experienced grief through feelings of failure and thoughts of him dying an agonizing death. Prior to this reflection, I would not have known it was possible to experience grief because of a lack of knowledge (not knowing). As a mother, Braelen's mother, I needed to hear that he did not suffer. I needed to see the video to know he was caught by surprise and did not know the threat of being shot. I needed to see pictures of him that displayed a peaceful look. For two years I had lived with the agonizing thoughts of my child suffering and dying alone. For years I lived with the mental torment of that possibility. For years I could not grieve my loss for grieving my failures and fighting to ensure justice was rendered on Braelen's behalf.

On day two of the trial, the lead prosecutor entered the courtroom very differently from the first day of opening arguments. I looked at how she stood to address the court and knew she had read Braelen's story and gotten to know him. That day, I observed her fighting to win our case as if she were fighting for her child, turning what was deemed a two-week trial into a two-day trial with a unanimous guilty verdict. *Yes! We were blessed to receive justice!* The sentencing hearing took place on April 7, 2017, when the prosecuting attorney provided the presiding judge the file chronicling Braelen's life, I had previously provided to her. As I watched the judge's countenance begin to change as I watched her look through the pages of Braelen's life, I realized the power of counter-stories and counter-narratives in rendering life sentences on all counts. As I capture this part of my lived experience, I am saddened by the reality that justice is not the experienced outcome for many grieving Black mothers and families. However, I am blessed to have justice as part of my story and stand even more convinced that stories matter.

Reflection: Purpose and Healing. At the time of his death, Braelen left behind a three-year-old daughter who was and is the spitting image of him. She and I had a special and unexplainable bond that grew closer in his passing. Once the trial was over, I had no more purpose, and she became my new focus and reason for pushing through (Armour et al, 2003; Redmond, 1996; Sharpe, 2011). Time passed, she started growing up, and once again, I needed to find purpose. Finding too much time to think and needing to busy myself with something yielding a positive outcome, I learned of the EdD program in Education Innovation and thought, why not.

I never imagined my acceptance into this program would establish structure and discipline in my life, provide increased knowledge of myself, and help me identify a lasting and meaningful purpose. Opportunities for telling my story along this journey facilitated the rediscovery of my voice that had been stripped away. Regaining my voice through various art forms of research served as therapy and helped promote my healing. In addition, art therapy provided a platform of communication for me to express emotions I could not put into words.

Leavy (2015) suggests that “poems push feelings to the forefront, capturing heightened moments of social reality as if under a magnifying glass” (Leavy, 2015). This view resonated with me and inspired me to capture my days and emotions through poetic expression in a journal and catapulted my healing through poetry, drawing, and music. Ultimately revealing the healing power of art in my grief journey, how art has been more effective in my healing process than participating in grief counseling, and facilitated self-learning through providing a safe platform for communication

This picture below reflects my life and grief process as I saw it in 2019, some five years after the loss of my youngest son and captures themes expressed through poetic inquiry and the

retelling of my story through narrative writing in this autoethnographic work. Thus, allowing me to share my truth with others while maintaining the true essence and reality of my lived experiences in engaging the readers of my data (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Dear Braelen.

In closing, this body of work not only helps to promote my healing by allowing me to understand my grief process. In addition, this doctoral journey and body of research have been instrumental in giving me the strength and courage to give life to The Braelen Foundation (Armour et al., 2003; Redmond, 1996; Sharpe, 2011). The Braelen Foundation is a nonprofit organization with a focus centered on providing emotional and social support to individuals who have lost a loved one to a fatal shooting and informing knowledge through education that transforms society's response to gun violence.

This foundation was created in loving memory of my late son Braelen to pragmatically meet the unrealized and unmet needs of those affected by gun violence, specifically grieving Black mothers. Through this foundation, I endeavor to combat gun violence, race, and cultural insensitivity by using my story to connect with other grieving mothers and empowering them, other grieving survivors, and communities of diverse backgrounds to share their personal and

powerful stories of tragedy and triumph to increase knowledge and awareness regarding the far-reaching devastation of gun violence (Armour et al., 2003; Redmond, 1996; Sharpe, 2011).

The data and knowledge gained from this body of work will be instrumental in helping me develop alternate forms of mediation in our local public schools to eliminate school policing. This data will serve as the primary innovative instrument of the Braelen Foundation in educating others through informing knowledge that facilitates awareness for support of other black mothers grieving the tragic loss of a child. Lastly, this data will be used to help promote healing, begin the work of dismantling racial structures, and connect with other grieving Black mothers empowering all who engage with knowledge as power (Armour et al., 2003; Redmond, 1996; Sharpe, 2011).

Chapter Five

Discussion of Findings

This chapter outlines the findings of this autoethnographic exploration with a non-traditional approach. First, research questions used to guide the exploration of my grief journey as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim are outlined in this chapter, along with emerging themes. Subsequently, I present a reflective view of my research findings through vignettes as a synthesis of the research.

Purpose of Research Questions

The purpose of this autoethnographic research was to facilitate the exploration of the experiences of my grief journey as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim in this Country. The following questions were used to guide my research that follows:

1. How can I learn about my grief process using personal narrative and storytelling to explore, write, and analyze my experience?
2. How can I use my experiences to inform knowledge, be of service to, and support other grieving Black mothers of fatal shooting victims?

Epilogue: Writing Reflection

Luke chapter 12, verse 48 of the Bible says, “For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required (NKJ, 2022).” This biblical parable references our faithfulness and commitment to things and the opportunities we are given. In November of 1989, the Lord saw fit to provide me with the greatest gift in the world, the gift of motherhood with my first child, and

the parenting journey that followed was certainly not easy but rich in reward. It is important to note, that this parable also to other things in life, including my work on this research project.

Finishing Chapter four of my dissertation was the most difficult writing attempted thus far. Although I broached this autoethnographic task with knowledge of its' complexity regarding the emotions attached to reliving life's most harrowing moments, the un-lived knowledge of this journey was inadequate in preparing me for what was ahead (Mendez, 2013). The emotional overload experienced in this type of writing was exhausting and, at times, mentally and physically paralytic. However, while each vignette drained me, the analysis gained from the process of reflection through writing felt cathartic. The process of autoethnography is certainly not for all who have suffered a tragedy, but it has proven to be a blessing for me. The writing required for this body of work helped me to work through struggles that may have remained unaddressed, it helped me identify purpose in my pain, and the need to continue forging ahead with my life instead of giving up.

Defending my research proposal, I became overwhelmed with emotions of excitement and nervousness as I cried several times during my presentation. Upon receiving my committee's feedback for edits to my proposal, I spent the next two semesters unable to write as I was wiped out from the emotional trauma relived in the proposal defense process. This trauma, to no fault of my committee, was facilitated by reliving my tragedy in moments of reflection to answer committee questions. I was excited about the possibility of graduating but dreading Chapter Four's reflection and writing process, so I drug my feet. Day after day and month after month, I found something more pressing to do with my time to avoid the inevitable. In retrospect, my proposal defense should have increased my awareness of the difficulty I would face writing Chapter Four.

As I began writing Chapter Four, I experienced hours, days, and weeks of brain fog and the inability to write. I prayed daily for the strength and fortitude needed to accomplish the writing of this work. Some days I could write a few sentences or paragraphs; and others, I would sit staring at the computer for hours before giving up as paralysis consumed my heart and mind. Procrastination is not indicative of my character nor was the inability to write a common experience for me, but they were ever present hurdles to overcome throughout my dissertation journey. Sharing stories through narrative writing helps us make sense of our lives by understanding the cultural, social, and emotional meaning of our experiences (Hill & Knox, 2021), but I found writing about painful experiences to be very difficult through this process.

Daily I cried while writing, often stepping away from the computer to walk around the house or step out on the lanai to gaze at the sky, attempting to clear my head of the fog and settle my heart of emotions hindering my ability to write. The pain and emotions experienced often took my breath, caused chest pain, and tingling in my left arm, at times causing me to question if I was having a heart attack. Pain so intense that I questioned on several occasions whether continuing to pursue this degree was worth it. Often asking myself, *“what good will having a degree do if I am not alive or in my right mind to benefit from it?”* Then I thought, *choosing not to continue so I could avoid the pain of reflection and writing would only bring temporary relief and void finding and fulfilling my purpose.* Lived reality for me is every time I see or hear reports of a mother losing her child to a fatal shooting, I relive my tragedy all over again, each time as if it were my first.

Each time I see a grieving mother sobbing with a broken heart, I am more convinced that experiencing, enduring, and living through the pain of writing to share my story is *much* required of me because *much was given* to me through the gift of parenting. If I had chosen not to write

and share my story, my healing process would not have made the progress it has, and there would remain an entire community of people needing help and empowerment whose needs would remain unmet. Sometimes, we as people get stuck in the grieving process, as the successful adaptation to change is not always possible, and the tragic death of Braelen was surely one of those instances prior to entering this doctoral program.

I experienced many challenges throughout my doctoral process, including the difficulty of my writing process. There were distractions all around me, from the lack of faculty commitment to research despite discomfort of the topic to the simplest of things pulling me away from writing and reliving the most painful memories of my life. Engaging in autoethnographic writing proved to be emotionally dangerous for me at times. However, it has been overall therapeutic and beneficial to my healing process. The writing process for this body of work has helped me transition from being stuck deep in my grief process to understanding my grief process and finding a purpose for my life that extends beyond myself. This body of work will serve as field notes for a future book about negotiating the many complexities of grief as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim, it will also serve as an innovative tool for connecting with other grieving mothers, and the development of pragmatic support service and therapeutic programs to be offered through the Braelen Foundation.

Findings

As I explored my experiences through writing as a Black mother, and Black mother of a fatal shooting victim, themes of posttraumatic slave syndrome (PTSS), cultural trauma, Black mothers, and Black grief emerged from the examination producing intersectional counter-narratives of power, privilege, and oppression. Being Black in America, specifically a Black mother and losing a child to a fatal shooting are intertwined in my narrative and thus, the

progression of this academic research. Reliving life experiences that shaped how I parented, parenting Black sons, and the pain of losing Braelen to generate data required for completing Chapter Four, I found myself in a place of sheer existence for about two weeks. Because of the trauma and grief associated with those experiences I could not sleep, was unable to eat, and the simplest of questions or dialogue would bring me to tears regardless of the content (Alexander, 2004; Armstrong & Carlson, 2019; Eyerman, 2004). I was a complete mess and needed to transition into writing Chapter Five with no time to spare.

Complicating things even further was the increase of gun violence and fatal shooting incidents being reported in the daily news. The frequency of fatal shooting reports and seeing mothers sobbing with broken hearts over losing their children made it nearly impossible for me to maintain the analytical frame of mind needed to timely and coherently complete my writing as required to solidify this work. As a grieving mother, specifically Black mother, I am drawn back into my pain and trauma experiences every time I see another mother grieving over the loss of their child regardless of color. My heart aches for those mothers and I relive my loss each time as if it were the first (Armstrong & Carlson, 2019).

I experienced many fruitless writing days after completing Chapter Four and I had just over a week to complete Chapter Five if I am to defend and graduate this semester. To accomplish this task, I designated eight hours a day for writing. Complicating matters further, is me trying to navigate through continuous feelings of anxiety caused by the pressure of meeting the deadlines for final defense and graduation within a short window of time (Kleber, 2019). I feel defeated most days, only able to accomplish writing one or two pages and feeling unsure of my ability to meet the deadlines before me, but I continue moving forward. Oddly enough, I

have found revisiting the pain, disappointment, and trauma of Chapter Four propels me to finish this work.

Reading Chapter Four illuminated hurdles and traumas I experienced in parenting, my educational pursuits, and the loss of my son as expected when I began writing this autoethnographic work, however I was not prepared for the trauma and emotions that followed. Reflecting upon my experiences as a Black mother, and grieving Black mother, uncovered voids of support in each of those journeys that further complicated the traumas and grief I have navigated through. Using the interpretive lens of CRT in the analysis process of this autoethnographic work revealed findings spanning beyond my lived experiences, to the unmet needs of other Black mothers, specifically those who are grieving. Consequently, parallel to these deficiencies is the need for innovative social support programs that promote valuing Black lives and a normalized grief process for Black mothers.

Completing this dissertation was one of many steps in my understanding self, informing knowledge, and finding purpose. And the Braelen Foundation serves as one of those steps in fulfilling my purpose, connecting with other grieving mothers, creating an innovation to counter the phenomenon of gun violence and trauma through education, and to promote positive social change.

Doctoral Journey

As previously mentioned, themes of PTSS, cultural trauma, Black mothers, and Black grief were emersed in the vignettes of my experiences used to provide the data for this work. Another consistent presence in my experiences was race. Exploring what caused race to be noticeably visible in my data, I once again turned to CRT for understanding. In further researching the perceived pros and cons of this theory, I happened upon an article from last year

regarding the political pushback of CRT. I was drawn to article's assertion of the political pushback being a result of fear in CRT uncovering America's racist past and how deeply embedded racism is in the laws, systems and processes governing this country (Gibbons & Ray, 2022). Because CRT promotes understanding of what racism is and the hidden characteristics of how it functions in our society, politicians fear American citizens gaining this knowledge will result in the loss of control over the population of people this country seems to fear more than terrorist, Blacks (Ladson-Billings, 1995). *Now I understand the problem. CRT liberates the oppressed through informed knowledge and knowledge is power that minimizes the control of others.* For this country and its citizens to move forward from the disappointments, struggles, hurt, pain, and wrongful acts of the past; this country's past despite its ugliness, must be acknowledged and dealt with in order for healing to take place.

For the most part, it is human nature to respond to what we fear most by eliminating the threat or setting structures in place that control its access and impact. Historically, this has been accomplished in the U.S. by the continued employment of race as an identifier to establish guidelines to control, oppress, and monitor the movement, freedom, and access of Blacks through racially structured laws, processes, and social systems (Parker & McCall, 1997). Through reflection and review of the literature researched for this dissertation, I found education to be one of this country's social institutions that remains laced with racism embedded in the foundation of its regulations, rules, and procedures often leading to different and disparate outcomes for students of color, specifically Black students (Togut, 2011).

CRT helped me to understand the presence of race in my life's experiences was not solely a result of hatred and bias; the presence of race in my experience was driven by fear to promote the fear required to sustain control of others through restrictions as established hundreds

of years ago with the Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws (History.com, Black Codes-Definition, Dates & Jim Crow Laws, 2010). As such, my personal journey to becoming a doctoral student at this university was of a nontraditional path because of race based rules, regulations, and procedures. Consequently, as I write to discuss my findings, I sit amazed of the fact, I am a doctoral candidate completing dissertation work required to earn a terminal degree from one of the most prestigious predominately white universities in Florida. The same institution that deemed me ineligible as a student to pursue my undergraduate degree, is now preparing to award my doctorate degree (Boston & Warren, 2017) *all because I slid in the back door and proved myself capable.*

My journey as a doctoral student was not easy and I experienced some hurdles as a Black student and researcher along the way. The sensitivity of my research and the racial underpinnings of our Country's history at times prevented me from being seen as a researcher by my professors, resulting in the rejection of some research assignments because of their inability to see me as anything other than an angry, entitled, Black woman who does not like White people (Eyerman, 2004). And that perception could not be farther from the truth.

At the end of my second semester in the program. I sat quietly in one of my professor's offices to discuss the grade received for my final assignment as she preceded to say "*I see much of your research is on slavery. Let's face it, it is no secret that slavery was not nice to Blacks.*" Although we discussed other elements of my final research paper, it was her quick, insensitive, and troublesome disregard for any emotions I may have had as a Black woman and researcher that sealed the coffin for me. *I felt as though she was telling me "OK, now you've got it all out so just get over it and move on."* That moment, I was reminded by the influence of that regardless of my intellect or the research I conduct, when I submit or present research, I will always be seen

as a Black woman (Boston & Warren, 2017). *Was offense and a lack of sensitivity and caring the professor's intent or was it a deep-seeded fear that acknowledging this country's past would somehow make her responsible for things she did not do?*

We talked for over two hours, and during that time I learned how powerful, and persuasive the construct of race was as I shared my family's background with this professor, countering her narrative of slavery centered on race with a narrative centered on gender and misogyny. When this professor learned I was a mother of bi-racial children and heard my narrative of how degrading and disrespectful slavery was to women as a whole including the White wives of plantation owners (McIntosh, 2001), I began to see a shift in her countenance and her ability to see me as something other than an angry and entitled Black woman. *I was successful in applying whiteness as property to the discussion of my research and I experienced its benefits as a Black woman. Did the benefit really apply to me or did learning of my bi-racial children somehow ease her fears by the perception of having whiteness in common even if it was through my children?* Shaken by this experience, I treaded lightly with future research assignments dealing with race and the enslaved. In fact, the very next semester, I received criticism from one of my professors who was a White Englishman for watering down how race negatively impacts the academic success of Black students in K-12 education (Togut, 2011).

Discouraged but not defeated, I continued pressing towards the mark of earning my doctorate degree void of acknowledging how race was shaping even this journey until being introduced to Critical Race Theory in Education (CRT). Unbeknownst to me, CRT would become the lens needed to begin understanding life's experiences that led to this journey, and the lens I would use to shape my research regarding gun violence and fatal shootings, laying the foundation for this body of work. CRT helps us to understand what racism is, as well as hidden

characteristics of how it functions in our society, the emotional and psychological experiences of being subjected to racism, and the factors that contribute to the manifestation of racism (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Limitations

Completing this autoethnographic work presented challenges requiring modification to the original way data was to be collected. Originally, as I sought to construct knowledge to understand my grief process as a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim, the data collection process included the use of critical friends. These critical friends were to assist in the data collection process by participating in structured conversations as a group of grieving Black mothers known as the motha circle for the purposes of this research. However, due to the sensitivity of topic for this research, and the freshness and depth of the trauma experiences of these mothers, when I reached the data collection stage of this work, I learned of the unwillingness of these mothers to participate for fear of the impact our conversations may have had on their healing process. As such, the direction of this autoethnographic work was modified from being a critical narrative to an explorative form of research.

Becoming both the researcher and participant in this explorative body of research, not only exposed me to experiencing moments of paralysis and the inability to think and focus while writing vignettes to capture data of my lived experiences, I believed it also limited the richness of the data collected. While the data collected informed understanding of self and informed knowledge of my grief process that would have otherwise remained unknown, it is absent of data that would have derived from other mothers connecting their experience and emotions to mine in conversation and possibly providing another lens for analysis. Additional limitations experienced were the short timeline selected for the completion of this work, and unanswered phone calls and

emails to news journalist who reported on Braelen's death for the release to use information and photographs captured in their articles. As artifacts provide an additional element of richness to the data and findings of autoethnographic works, I believe the inclusion of those artifacts would have enhanced the impact of my experiences shared in the narrative writing of this work. As a researcher, I will never know the impact of including those artifacts on the collection of data or my findings because of this missed opportunity in completing this work.

Discussion of Findings

Surviving the trauma experienced in completing the coursework of this program, I move forward with a firm appreciation for CRT and knowledge of the research design and method required for me to understand self and inform knowledge from my lived experiences to promote change. The most important characteristic of CRT for autoethnographic study is that it values storytelling as a valid form of data and respects the ability of stories to capture the nature of racial oppression, providing intersectional counter-narratives of how power, privilege, and oppression affect and shape the lives of Black Americans and other marginalized people. Thus, CRT's emphasis on story telling in qualitative research creates a wealth of awareness about how racism functions, inspiring social agency to create a more just society through the assertion that there are multiple truths and realities (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995). As a Black mother of a fatal shooting victim this understanding is not only vital to this body of work, but also to my healing process as a grieving mother.

The evaluation of data and analysis process of autoethnography constructed knowledge for me about losing Braelen to a fatal shooting that would have otherwise not been discovered as I sought to answer the research question:

1. *How can I learn about my grief process using personal narrative and storytelling to explore, write, and analyze my experience?*

The method of autoethnography and narrative writing in this body of work provided understanding to my grief experiences through open-ended questions asked of myself during reflection that allowed me to explore beyond *self* in my research to understand the human and social of my experiences. The interpretive style of this body of research allowed me to remain visible throughout this work as the researcher and participant which was vital to informing knowledge as an underrepresented and under valued member of society. This writing process provided a platform for me to communicate experiences of trauma too sensitive and deep to express through any form other than writing. Serving as the release valve of many pressures and stresses I have carried as a Black mother from parenting to my current grief process, I have better clarity of vision and thinking.

In this process, I employed interpretivism as a tenet of critical race theory in sharing my lived experiences through writing to help me to understand where the social construct of race intersected with components of my life as a Black mother, a grieving Black mother of a fatal shooting victim, and how these constructs provided different paths and experiences along my grief journey. In doing so, the writing process of this work facilitated the rediscovery of my voice that was stripped away with the fatal shooting of Braelen and provides a platform that aids in restoring elements of his character tarnished through racialized media reporting. It also increased my understanding of self, the process of my journey, and inform knowledge of self, concerning my experiences that was both liberating and empowering.

My exposure to “Art” as a form of research in an arts-based research course in my last semester of coursework aided in the creation of artifacts used to generate data in this

autoethnographic research study as I used my personal experiences in the completion of assignments. In this unconventional qualitative research course, I learned how to communicate emotions through writing, drawing and poetry that I encountered difficulty expressing prior to, further elevating my voice. Through Arts-based research, I learned the therapeutic power of the pen when writing, whether it be writing narrative, poetry, art, or music as I gained a platform for expressing emotions of pain and trauma that I could not put to words. Discovering that art was not only an innovative method of inquiry but was also an innovative method of communication and therapy during my grief process, I wrote poems to tell of my experiences. The use of poetry provided a safe and non-judgmental platform of communication allowing me to share experiences that would later serve to generate data for this work without feeling vulnerable or at-risk in my transparency.

Writing vignettes in this autoethnographic study was in itself, a method of inquiry. As the auto in this writing refers to the self as the participant, autoethnography in this study allows me to experience the becoming-self as the participant, and the becoming-other as the researcher. Because of the flexibility of this writing method, the different roles of self I experienced in this process were fluid and changing creating understanding of self and informing knowledge about my grief process that has aided the healing process of my grief journey. Without this writing process, I would have never gained this knowledge and therefore, would have remained in jeopardy of being stuck in grief.

In addition to the findings regarding ways of learning about my grief process through autoethnographic writing, the reflective analytical process of this work also informed the following knowledge of self and other grieving mothers:

1. *Grief inspired activism was significant to my healing process.*

2. *Making meaning of the traumatic loss of a child is central to the grieving process for mothers, specifically, Black mothers.*
3. *My activism is centered on constructing meaning, finding answers, and purpose through serving others.*

Completing this research study, helped me realize that this country's fear of CRT is analogous to the 17th-century fear to slave rebellion because the power contained in knowledge gained through CRT is liberating and minimizes supreme control others have operated with for more than 400 years. CRT does more than inform knowledge, it also manifests accountability, forcing the accountability of readers for what we know and how we move forward after knowledge has been informed. Digging deep into challenging areas can foster conversations that lead to more Americans humanizing Black Americans, more sensitized responses to trauma, and a more normalized grief process for grieving Black mothers.

As I sought to answer the research question of:

2. *How can I use my experiences to inform knowledge, be of service to, and support other grieving Black mothers of fatal shooting victims?*

further evaluation of the data collected through this autoethnographic writing revealed trends of PTSS, cultural trauma, Black mothers, and Black grief as shared connections with other grieving mothers.

Cultural Trauma

As we observe Black youth often reflecting or reminding us of our children being denigrated, criminalized, and depicted as animals and savage beasts in the media, the concern for our children's safety increases as do the frequency of race talks with our children in efforts to

preserve their lives. Generating data for this autoethnographic study required me to travel to very emotional places in my life, reliving nights I paced the floor until my children came home, my heart dropping each time the phone rang past 10:00PM, and other experiences of trauma spawning many sleepless nights after concluding my writing for each section (Kleber, 2019). However, I was inspired to press forward each time I saw a mother, regardless of color, weeping over the loss of her child to a fatal shooting.

There's an innate emotion shared by mothers who lose a child that transcends far beyond the color lines of race. The emotion of grief in the form of a *broken heart* can be a shared connection that bridges hurting mothers together regardless of racial, social, cultural, and other societal norms, and specifically for Black mothers. This process revealed my grief needs and experiences were like those of other grieving Black mothers however, there does not exist a peer support group in which grieving Black mothers can come together and promote their healing.

Posttraumatic Slave Syndrome

Black mothers in the United States have been required to be some of the most versatile creative, and strategic people on planet earth. These qualities were mandated as a means of survival and preservation of life for children of the enslaved and was born of the fear based racial construct of race by Jamestown colonists. Jamestown colonists perceiving themselves to be pure and reminiscent of God's image, sought to distinguish themselves from Indigenous people in the U.S. Their failure to seek understanding of others with different skin tones continued to produce fear; later manifesting through the need to feel superior, to dominate, and oppress individuals because of race, and used to justify the enslavement of oppressed people.

Since the days of slavery, African Americans in this country have suffered physical and emotional trauma that has shaped the movement, cognition, and response of this culture.

Adopting behaviors and characteristics of enslaved mothers of the cotton fields who strategically described their children as dumb, humble, and weak to minimize the chance of their children being sold off and punitively punished, today's Black mothers too are traumatized by the thought of losing their children. As race determines the lifestyle and lifespan of African Americans through lack of access to legitimate means for survival and violence, Black males are quickly moving towards becoming extinct, forcing more Black mothers to become grieving Black mothers who lose children to fatal shootings.

Over the years, countless Black mothers have been left to grieve the senseless and tragic loss of their children to fatal shootings and this community of mothers seems to be increasing daily according to news reports. As a Black mother, I spend most of my parenting experience in fear for my children's safety and lives as I see and hear almost daily of other unarmed Black youth being fatally shot in America. Feeling just as helpless as enslaved mothers in the cotton fields, I too teach my children to dumb down in certain situations and act the part in society as one of many life saving techniques.

Because fear fuels race and is the root cause of racism, I spent a lot of time teaching my children how to dress and interact with people of non-color in hopes my Black sons would be seen as less of a threat as the fear of how others saw and responded to them tormented my thoughts regarding their interactions with their teachers and the police. Navigating and teaching my children how to navigate through a racist world of unbelonging manifested unimaginable stressors for me as a Black mother. Concerns of interactions with educators and the police were compounded by genetic stressors generationally modeled in how we were parented shaped my parenting path and responses in ways I would not have realized prior to this research study. To assist in easing parental concerns of punitive punishment and policing, and to minimize

traumatic experiences of Black K-12 students, there needs to be a mediation or intervention program developed to promote cultural awareness and valuing Black lives.

Black Mothers

As a parent of biracial (Black and White) children and Black (monoracial children), I had to develop parenting strategies that supported each identity of my children as I endeavored to holistically parent. In seeking to dispel race and racism within our family's foundation, I remained committed to cause no harm to them individually and collectively as I struggled to ensure none of them felt more, or less supported than the others at any time. It is important for parents, of blended families and multiracial children to take time to learn your children; how they think, feel, act, and process to appropriately guide them.

My introduction to CRT on this doctoral journey helped me accomplish this arduous task by learning to identify race-based structures intentionally and unintentionally negatively impacting my children. CRT provided the necessary tools for me to dig into areas as a parent that were challenging, identify structures and systems, and communicate this information to my now adult children along with instructions to navigate around and through successfully. All success I have garnered has been because of my ability to see myself in my children, including my biracial children and my willingness to be flexible, transparent, and vulnerable with them even when feeling threatened by racist systems of education, courts, etc.

Reflecting upon my experiences, I learned that my perspectives as a grieving Black mother of a fatal shooting victim were shaped by traumas of my parenting experiences. Navigating parenting traumas alone with no one to talk to who could identify with my challenges and concerns intensified my emotions as I often felt I was alone and that my parenting experiences were unique and reserved for me. I needed peer support services that could help deal

with the cultural traumas of parenting long before the fatal shooting of Braelen. Black mothers I have interacted with since losing Braelen also express difficulty navigating the traumas of parenting and keeping their children safe. As such, there is a community of Black mothers who have not yet lost a child to violence, that desire a safe space to connect with other mothers with similar parenting experiences to engage in dialogue that could encourage, enlighten, equip, and empower them with tools and information to minimize parenting traumas. Consequently, I realize there is a need for parenting support groups for Black mothers, support groups of this kind are non-existent in the Tampa Bay Area.

Black Grief

As previously mentioned, the cause and effect of grief disproportionately differs from other cultures and races as it is also compounded by historic trauma, continuous loss, and inequities. Within Black communities, historical trauma compounded by economic challenges; substance misuse; incarceration of family members; and the fear and anxiety of whether your loved one will return home or not when they leave, make it even more difficult for Blacks to cope with loss and trauma, especially fatal shootings. For me, the trauma caused by living with the daily fear for my son's life, the possibility of drug and alcohol influence in his life, incarceration, and my family's history of premature and violent death among the men on my father's side caused me to start grieving as a Black mother long before ever losing my son to a fatal shooting. Unfortunately, this is a lived reality for many Black mothers as we see and read weekly about the fatal shootings and loss of life from police brutality Black men and women. As we watch with heavy hearts, for the other grieving parents, we to begin the grieving process for our children while we hope daily that today will not be the day, we receive that phone call.

Reflecting upon my lived experience there were dynamics of my grief journey and survivor needs that spanned far beyond myself, complicating my grief process further because of an inability to properly respond to and meet the needs of my loved ones who were also hurting. My family and I needed emotional support services that were either limited or non-existent despite our having the financial and insurance resources to cover the expense. Although there exists an extensive list of grief therapy groups, none are equipped to provide the specialized support needed for Black mothers of fatal shooting victims. As a result, many Black mothers, especially those with limited resources are forced to navigate their grief process void of these needs being unmet.

Areas of Future Research

Further analysis of my lived experiences as reflected in the vignettes revealed several unanswered questions regarding the phenomenon of gun violence and using myself as the participant for this research in this autoethnographic work. Questions I will seek to answer in furthering research of this phenomenon, identifying what causes race to impact the grief process, and best practices for providing support to Black mothers of fatal shooting victims are as follows:

- 1. How would this autoethnographic inquiry turn out if I were not the only participant?*
- 2. What other issues surrounding race impact the grief and healing process for Black mothers of fatal shooting victims?*
- 3. Aside from cultural differences, what causes race to impact the grief and healing process for Black mothers?*
- 4. How best can mental health professionals utilize this information to support Black mothers through the grief process?*

The Disruption

This autoethnographic work is centered on details from events, experiences, and emotions that occurred after the fatal shooting of my son and during my grief process as a Black mother. Reflecting upon this writing process as I shared stories of significant life experiences regarding the fatal shooting of my son Braelen, I am now able to see his death as more than a tragic loss. My grief journey, this doctoral process, and completing this autoethnographic study has produced the idea that although Braelen's death was tragic and filled our lives with trauma, his death was my life's disruption that led to establishing the Braelen Foundation as a response to the unmet needs and voids experienced due to this loss.

The Innovation

The Braelen Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization dedicated to educating young people and the community on the value of life, the possibility of peace and assisting survivors of fatal shooting victims with crisis management services and support. This organization was established in February 2017 in memory of my late son Braelen Adams with goal of supporting individuals affected by gun violence to reach their healthy place after experiencing loss. However, this vision and endeavor was void of services and programs required for the positive impact needed prior to completing this research study.

The main goals of the foundation are to inform knowledge and increase awareness about 1) the far-reaching devastation of gun violence; 2) provide strategies for keeping loved ones safe; 3) strengthen communities, transform society's response to gun violence; and 4) bring an end to this phenomenon. To accomplish these goals, I will share my experiences to connect with grieving mothers, survivors, and communities of diverse backgrounds to educate, encourage, and empower others. I will also engage in partnerships to reframe responses of law enforcement, and

to find and provide innovative solutions for ending gun violence and the trauma it leaves behind.

The Braelen Foundation will provide a specialized survivor-based approach for crisis management and support services to survivors of homicide victims in the aftermath of a fatal shooting. Survivor support and educational services of this organization will employ innovative programs centered on servicing the total person, mind, body, and spirit as follows:

Education

Pod Cast

The Pod Cast offered through the Braelen Foundation will serve as a communication platform where my lived experiences and research can be used to inform the knowledge of survivors of fatal shooting victims, and communities at large by sharing my story through conversation to educate others on the impact of gun violence and fatal shootings. Using a podcast provides access to a wider audience of people, furthers healing processes, increases awareness of the devastation caused by gun violence, and promotes more equitable and sensitized victim responses. This will be accomplished through 1). Educating, encouraging, and empowering grieving survivors and communities of diverse backgrounds, and informing knowledge and increasing awareness through shared stories. 2). Providing strategies for safety, strengthening communities, transforming societal responses to trauma, and promoting positive societal change.

Job Readiness

Often times family dynamics are shifted by the loss of a loved one requiring survivors with limited to no skillset to enter the workforce as a means to sustain their families. To assist survivors in navigating their grief journey without the compounding worry of meeting their family's needs, the Braelen Foundation will provide training workshops for individuals who lack job readiness skills and who need resume building assistance to help prepare them for entering

the workforce. In these workshops, participants will learn: 1). How to build an impressive resume and how to customize your resume to the job you are applying for. 2). How to create a cover letter that captures interest. 3). Appropriate interview attire and etiquette. 4). How to command your interview, responses employers look for, and questions to ask employers during the interview process.

Financial Planning and Management.

Financial Planning and Management workshops have been developed to educate fatal shooting survivors and program participants on how to maximize their finances. The Braelen Foundation will partner with Credit Crisis Clinic to provide credit repair, counseling services, and financial planning and management training to survivors who need help providing for their families and planning for their financial future after experiencing the trauma of a fatal shooting. Workshops offered will provide participants with the following knowledge and skills: 1) The importance of banking and how to manage your banking account. 2) The importance of saving, how to establish, how to grow a savings account, and how to make and manage small investments. 3) The importance of credit, how to repair damaged credit, and how to build and maintain good credit. Arming participants with tools required to successfully provide for their families and to plan and prepare for their family's future.

Reform

Mother Mediators

A community of mother volunteers at local inner-city schools serving as mediators in situations of discipline for Black students to assist with reducing the threat and intimidation our children face in school due to cultural differences is alternative behavioral intervention. Mother Mediators will partner with local K-12 school districts to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline

using the innovation of mediation to disrupt and replace punitive punishment, reduce fearful and negative interactions with law enforcement, and promote cultural awareness and sensitivity through education, mentoring, mediation. This will be accomplished through 1. Replacing negative law enforcement encounters with mothers engaging with students and educators to mediate cultural differences, increase understanding, and promote cultural sensitivity. 2. Use mentoring and mediation to promote cultural awareness and the valuing of Black lives by facilitating local and national dialogue and facilitating community partnership empowering mothers to become transformative change agents.

Sistas

A peer support group of Black mothers connecting in conversation through shared stories as an innovative way to normalize the grief process for Black mothers. Sistas is centered on conversations of parenting struggles and triumphs between Black mothers who have not lost children. This will be accomplished through 1. Bringing together a local community of women and mothers as natural stakeholders to engage in simplified and strategic planning sessions to prevent the violent deaths of Black youth in our communities and heighten awareness on the community and societal impact of gun violence. 2. Sharing tips on how and when to have race talk conversations with your children, and strategies of navigation for surviving hostile and threatening interactions and situations.

Grief Support

Circle of Mothers

The Circle of Mothers is a peer support group designed to connect mothers who have lost children or family members to fatal shootings for the purpose of informing knowledge, promoting healing, empowerment, and fellowship towards building community and transforming

society's response to gun violence. This will be accomplished through 1. Creating opportunity for mothers who have lost children to fatal shootings to engage in restorative peer and experiential conversations that provide tools and strategies to self-manage their grief and healing process. 2. Bringing together a local and nationwide community of women and mothers as natural stakeholders to engage in simplified and strategic planning sessions to prevent violent deaths in communities and heighten awareness on the community and societal impact of gun violence.

Art Therapy.

Art therapy is an innovative way of providing a communication platform to individuals who have experienced trauma. The Braelen Foundation will offer art, drama, dance, and poetry sessions to assist individuals grieving the loss of a loved one to a fatal shooting with breaking the silence, expressing oneself, reducing stress, eliminating barriers, and to identify specific individual needs. At the heart of art therapy rests the healing power of the creative process and the special communication that takes place between the survivor and the artwork. Although the art expresses suffering, it also calls to the creative and healthy part of survivors, enabling an authentic, non-threatening expression, opening new possibilities for change and growth. Utilizing different forms of art as therapy such as drawing, role play (drama), or dance helps to reduce mental and physical stress while serving as a voice of expression for survivors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have identified through this writing process, unmet needs of Black mothers and developed innovative solutions in hopes of meeting these needs by addressing the valuing of Black lives, facilitating equitable and sensitized victim responses, and promoting a normalized grief process for Black mothers. The trauma and devastation caused by homicide

leaves very deep and painful scars with the surviving family and friends of its victims. The devastation to the family unit caused by such tragic loss often leaves families financially unstable and incapable of surviving without the assistance of various social and support services. As a result of this research study, it has become the goal of the Braelen Foundation to offer innovative programs and services that allow participants to gain a more positive view of their lives and their community after experiencing trauma cause by fatal shootings. As such, the Braelen Foundation endeavors for participants to regain control of their lives and emotions through better understanding the trauma they experienced by providing opportunity for connection and programs that foster compassion, confidence, and the hope of overcoming.

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