2024

Navigating Whiteness: A Critical Autoethnography of the Lived Experience of a Black Female Administrator in the Predominantly White Spaces of Higher Education

Sheila Miranda Russell

NAVIGATING WHITENESS: A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF A BLACK FEMALE ADMINISTRATOR IN THE PREDOMINANTLY WHITE SPACES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

A Dissertation Submitted to Molloy University
The School of Education and Human Services
Ed.D. in Educational Leadership for Diverse Learning Environments

---

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

---

by

SHEILA MIRANDA RUSSELL
Warren Whitaker, PhD, Dissertation Chairperson

MAY 2024

MOLLOY UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES

The dissertation of **Sheila Miranda Russell** entitled: *Navigating Whiteness: A Critical Autoethnography of the Lived Experience in the Predominantly White Spaces of Higher Education,* in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the School of Education and Human Services has been read and approved by the Committee:

Dr. Warren Whitaker
Assistant Professor, School of Education and Human Services
Molloy University

Dr. Christine Barrow
Associate Professor, Criminal Justice and Legal Studies
Molloy University

Dr. Adriel Hilton
Director of Programs, Transition, and Youth Success Planning
Washington Department of Children, Youth, and Families

Joanne O'Brien, Ed.D.
Dean, School of Education and Human Services
Molloy University

Date: April 15, 2024

ABSTRACT

This critical autoethnographic study explored my multifaceted journey of being Black and female in administration within a predominantly white higher education institution. I drew upon personal narratives and reflections from 25 years of experience in higher education. This study explored the intricate intersections of race, gender, and power dynamics that have shaped my navigation of self and belonging. Furthermore, the study is framed in a Black feminist theoretical approach, acknowledging how the interconnectedness of being Black and female can intersect to shape individual experiences within systems of power and privilege. I used a six-step thematic analysis combined with a systematic and reflexive approach to explain how my encounters with systemic racism, microaggressions, and institutional biases impacted my personal and professional sense of self and belonging. A key theme was my identity formation, and marginalization experienced through structural inequities embedded in higher education, cultivating the resilience and active resistance growth needed to be my whole, authentic self. Through analysis of this theme, this study highlighted the complexities of navigating predominantly white spaces as a black female administrator, shedding light on the everyday struggles, triumphs, and moments of empowerment that shaped the researcher's identity and agency within the institution's cultural context. This autoethnographic study contributes to a deeper understanding of my experiences and many other black women in higher education administration. It underscores the importance of centering marginalized voices in diversity, equity, and inclusion discussions. The intended impact of this research is to initiate meaningful and purposeful dialogue that leads to individual and collective actions that create more equitable opportunities and spaces for Black women in higher education spaces.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Microaggression, Identity, Black Feminism, Belonging.

DEDICATION

To the three men in my life: my husband, Kevin, and my sons, Kevin II and Kyle. You are my blessing, joy, hope, light, and reason, and I thank God for placing you in my life. My love for each of you is boundless!

To my "mommy," your strength is my inspiration. I love you with all my heart!

"My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style" – Maya Angelou.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank my Dissertation Committee, Dr. Warren Whitaker (Chair), for helping me find my voice when I didn't think it mattered and keeping it all in perspective. Your encouragement and belief in me were paramount throughout this journey. Dr. Adriel Hilton and Dr. Christine Barrow (members), your input and representation of Black Scholars made all the difference; I drew strength from your exemplary dedication to supporting those who would come after you. To the School of Education Doctoral program faculty, administration, and staff, thank you for providing a platform where authenticity in research is welcomed and celebrated. The many lessons I learned have made me a better educator and person. Thank you all for believing in me. My family, thank you for your unwavering love, support, patience, and encouragement; you believed in me when I doubted myself; my friends and colleagues, thank you for your constant motivation. To those who would be here if heaven were not so far away. I love you! My bonus sisters, Leonora and Michele, thank you for making me laugh and letting me cry when I needed it the most. You all inspired me to reach for the stars and say goodbye to my comfort zone. My nieces, especially Tameka and Tiana, who make me stronger, always know your beauty and strength because you do and will forever matter! *Black Girls Drs. To Be (Nicolle, Betyne, and our dear Sandra in heaven),* you lift me up; your endearing words, strength, and beauty guided me through the difficult days. We are sisters forever ("we got this")! To Cohort 7, walking this road with you was an honor and a pleasure. We are #Cohort7Strong; not even a pandemic could stop us. All the educators and leaders who never stop reaching for the equity of our students, especially those who are marginalized! A special acknowledgment to Dr. Sandy Schwartz, Dr. Victoria Shoaf, Dr. Niall Hegarty, Dr. Gina Kilian, Dr. Glenda Lander Lugo, Dr. Adrian Fitzsimons, and my team; your belief in me was instrumental and met the world to me. I

appreciate everyone who took a moment of their day to say a kind word! I pay homage to all the beautiful Black women who paved the way; it was your resilience on which I leaned. To all the beautiful Black women present and future, especially Alexandra and Kyra, always know your worth, beauty, and purpose. Be true to who you are because you are extraordinary!

My dissertation journey anthem, Unwritten, by Natasha Bedingfield, will play in my heart forever…take a listen and then smile.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT iv

LIST OF TABLES xii

LIST OF FIGURES xiii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 1

Researcher Positionality and Passion 2

Problem Statement 6

Purpose 7

Research Questions 8

Conceptual Framework 9

Literature Review 10

Research Methods and Design 11

Setting and Participants 11

Data Collection 12

Analysis 13

Assumptions 14

Trustworthiness 14

Definition of Terms 15

Conclusion 16

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW 18

Literature Search Strategy 21

Conceptual Framework 22

The Central Tenets of Black Feminist Theory 23

Self-Definition and Self-Valuation 23

The Interlocking Nature of Oppression 24

The Importance of Black Women's Culture 27
The Applicability of Black Feminist Theory as a Conceptual Framework 28
Rationalization for Choosing Black Feminist Theory as a Conceptual Framework 30
Literature Review 32
Professional Identity Formation 33
Social Justice 35
Social Justice Disposition 36
Restorative Justice 37
Inclusion and Diversity 39
Black Female Administrators in Higher Education 43
Statistics 43
Experiences of Black Female Administrators in Higher Education 44
Double Minority Status 46
Lack of Representation in Leadership Positions 47
Stereotyping 48
Microaggressions and Discrimination 50
Work-Life Balance Challenges 52
Resistance to Change and Advocacy 53
Invisibility and Hypervisibility 54
Isolation and Loneliness 55
Mental and Emotional Toll 56
Sense of Belonging 58
Overcoming Adversity 60
Summary 61
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY 64

Problem 65
Research Questions 67
Research Design 67
Autoethnography 68
Research Procedures 70
Population/Sample 71
Role of the Researcher 72
Worldview 75
Sources of Data 76
Personal Journaling 77
Self-Reflection Interview 77
Artifact Collection 79
Data Collection 79
Data Analysis 81
Trustworthiness 87
Credibility 88
Transferability 88
Dependability 88
Confirmability 89
Ethical Considerations 89
Summary 90
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS 92
Overview of the Chapter 93
Data Analysis 94
Summary of the Findings 95

Research Question One Results 95
Theme 1: Me versus Perceived Me. 95
Theme 2: My Journey Toward Racial Reckoning. 97
Research Question Two Results 103
Theme 3: Fighting for Black Authenticity in White Spaces. 104
Theme 4: Black and Female By Any Means Necessary. 106
Theme 5: Being Me Anytime And Anywhere. 109
Chapter Summary 111
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION 113
Introduction 113
Interpretation of the Findings 115
Theme 1-Me Versus Perceived Me 115
Theme 2-My Journey Toward Racial Reckoning 117
Theme 3-Fighting for Black Authenticity in their white Spaces 120
Theme 4-Black and Female by Any Means Necessary 122
Theme 5- Being Me Anytime and Anywhere 124
Policy Implications 125
Practice Implications 126
Limitations 129
Recommendations for Future Research 130
Conclusion 132
REFERENCES 135
APPENDIX A: APPROVED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS 153
APPENDIX B: LIST OF CODES AND THEMES 156
APPENDIX C: IRB APPROVAL 160

LIST OF TABLES

Table Page

Table 1: Examples of Codes 81

Table 2: Preliminary Themes to Themes 84

Table 3: Final Themes 86

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

Figure 1: Example of Theme Hierarchy in NVivo..... 83

Figure 2: An Example of a Theme as Seen in NVivo 14 85

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."

—Maya Angelou

Deciding to tell one's story is a difficult choice—one that will take the individual to internal depths, resurfacing various pain levels and uncovering scares thought to be healed. However, healing can only occur when one has reached peace and a place of self-acceptance by processing the pain of such experiences. Healing does not come through suppression but only through speaking one's authentic truth to allow for self-liberation of the heart. Giving one permission to heal and expose one's truth can provide encouragement and power to others who share that identity or experience. Specifically for me, I aimed to give myself permission to heal and tell my truth to build a community for other Black female administrators. I wanted to provide leadership with insight that may impact practices and policies in predominantly white higher education spaces that can address inequities faced by Black female administrators to provide support and community.

In a broader sense, representation and visibility of Black female administrators are critical issues. Although diversity in leadership positively influences campus climate and decision-making, Black women remain underrepresented in administrative positions (Chance, 2022; Mitchell, 2021; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022; West, 2020). This scarcity of representation hinders the potential for equitable policies and practices (Chance, 2022; Mitchell, 2021).

Black female administrators in higher education navigate a complex intersection of identities, facing challenges rooted in race and gender (West, 2020). Such administrators encounter distinct forms of discrimination and marginalization because of the intertwined nature

of these factors (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Corbin et al., 2018; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Young & Anderson, 2021). Despite challenges, Black female administrators bring unique perspectives and strengths to leadership roles (West, 2020). However, barriers to advancement for Black female administrators persist.

Barriers manifest as significant challenges that must be overcome. Many barriers arise at the intersection of Black and female identity, both of which may individually create challenges to a sense of belonging in academic leadership (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Indeed, there may be a degree of internal identity struggle between the seemingly opposed identities of being a Black woman and an administrator, the expectations for which are shaped by white men. Black female administrators face obstacles in career progression, including limited access to networks, unequal compensation, and lack of mentorship opportunities (Chance, 2022; Mitchell, 2021; Williams, 2019). These barriers can hinder their professional growth and perpetuate systemic inequities (Chance, 2022).

Researcher Positionality and Passion

"I come as one, I stand as ten thousand."

—Maya Angelou

I must share who I am as a woman and, most importantly, my identity as a Black woman to explain my passion for choosing to write a critical autoethnography of my experience as a Black female administrator within the cultural context of identity navigation in predominantly white higher education spaces. I am so much more than the melanin of my skin. I am a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, a friend, a family member, a community member, and a professional. I seek that which is just, and I give from my heart. A heart that is unprivileged is faced with

inequities and breaks because of those who see me as different and define that difference as a weakness.

My individual experiences as a woman with intersecting identities sparked my interest in the underlying reasons Black women with numerous identities walk a fine line in finding their actual places within predominantly white spaces, specifically higher education this study. My life experiences have shaped who I am today; without them, I would not have reached this point of self-acceptance and success. I finally know that I am not just a woman, nor am I just Black, but I am a Black woman. The intersection of my race and gender matters in the way I am treated, seen, and heard. This dissertation provided many opportunities for me to move from my internal experience to outward expression as I worked to take the readers inside themselves and out again (see Leal-Covey, 2015). The test of autoethnography is to evoke the feeling that the shared experiences are authentic, believable, and possible in readers (Denzin, 2013; Leal-Covey, 2015).

As I delved into my thoughts and started to reflect on my identity, I often paused because the pain felt so real. The feelings were overwhelming at times, and the hurt remained so fresh. One day, as I sat to reflect, I thought of a quote from David Rossi, a character on *Criminal Minds*: “Scars remind us of where we’ve been. They don’t have to dictate where we’re going” (Davis et al., 2015). I took a deep breath, prayed, and promised not to become a victim of those who harvest ignorance, privilege, and entitlement. I wanted to offer my story because I wished I had someone’s story to help me know I was not alone, nothing was wrong with me, and shame did not have to keep me silent. I am what I am and who I am—Why was it necessary to act extraordinarily only to be seen as ordinary by those who held not even a fraction of my character and strength?

Although this work represents my experience navigating identity as a Black female administrator in a predominantly white higher education space, I dare to say that I am not alone; I have never been alone. I was never given community in these spaces to find comfort and belonging. I feel that the fear of unity in Blackness impedes those who have empowered themselves to think that they are better than someone like me just because of their whiteness.

For the last 25 years, I spent so many moments questioning myself, my worth, and my ability as a Black female administrator in the white academic spaces I occupied. I took onto myself the shortcomings of those who could not see me as a leader or equal. I watched white people approach me with caution because they were uncomfortable. I made it easier for them by losing who I was and becoming who they needed me to be. In my mind, I gave the excuse that it was just easier and they were not worth the fight. However, I was unsure how to fight and how to let my true self shine. It worked for a time, but the cost of relationships with others like me was never worth it. I played the chameleon game, code-switched, and presented a person that made them comfortable. Nevertheless, the only person uncomfortable was me.

I did not identify with this colorless, soulless person I had become, and I struggled with that. I started to resent myself for allowing others to use the power that I gave them over me. I was not angry with them; I was angry with myself. I needed to find a way to be authentic in this space. I questioned how I could regain my identity and how did I lose it. I decided to embrace it, and when I started teaching about social justice and topics of racism, it was not just my students learning; it was also me.

Empowering my students to shine, be authentic, and tell their truths gave me that same power, and I jumped at the chance. Once I left the workplace, I was free to be myself, and I was proud and surrounded by pride. Thus, I became ashamed of how I denounced that pride just for

the sake of compliance in predominantly white higher education spaces. I had not realized how racism, microaggressions, and discrimination had caused so much hurt. I needed to find my identity, and knowing that it was never too late, I soul-searched to become the leader and the voice no longer silenced that I had from view.

I was now ready; I would make it happen. I would no longer care to make those around me comfortable, and their comfort was not my concern or responsibility. My concern was being the best I could be, and it meant nothing more than accepting who I was and not caring if others did not. The chapters to follow present my ability to heal, my voice to no longer be silenced, my scars to be replaced by badges of courage and strength, and my testament to the power of authentic truth in self. As a Black female, my experiences in the predominantly white higher education spaces as an administrator caused great internal conflict; I struggled with my sense of identity and belonging within those white spaces of academia, but I promised no more I did not have to change who I was instead I had to hold people accountable for seeing it.

Black women have been at the forefront of education, including higher education. Mosley (1980) referred to Black women in higher education as endangered when she referenced Catherine Ferguson. Ferguson was an enslaved woman who purchased her freedom in 1793 and opened Kathy Ferguson's School for the Poor in New York City, becoming the first known Black female teacher and administrator. Mosley noted that Black women were pioneers in education, even though historical references reflected little about their roles. In the late 1960s, leadership added affirmative action to the Civil Rights Act, giving momentum to higher education to recruit Black faculty and administrators. According to Mosley, Black educators in white academia remained pathetically small despite these nudges.

Chapter 1 introduces an overview of the study, presents the problem statement, purpose, and significance of the study, followed by the research questions that guided this study. Next, the chapter includes the conceptual framework and a brief preview of the current literature. In addition, the research and methods design offers a preliminary look at key methodological components, including the study's setting, participants, data collection, data analysis, and ethical and trustworthiness. The definitions of key terms are provided. A conclusion summarizes vital points and sets the stage for what the reader can expect in the remaining chapters.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in the present study was the identity struggles of Black female administrators in predominantly white higher education spaces. In higher education, women of Black ethnicity in administrative positions navigate a multifaceted crossroads of identities, confronting obstacles that stem from their racial backgrounds and genders (West, 2020). These individuals experience bias and exclusion because of their positions at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Young & Anderson, 2021). Perhaps the most foundational challenge faced by Black women in this context is underrepresentation relative to their representation in the general population and student body (NCES, 2022; West, 2020). As a result of this underrepresentation, Black women face stereotyping based on race or gender (Chance, 2022; Commodore et al., 2020). They may also experience more limited access to key professional networks (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Young & Anderson, 2021) that would give them a sense of community and belonging.

The intersection of race and gender gives rise to other issues less related to representation; these issues create significant challenges, may shape professional experiences,

and influence one's identity and sense of belonging. Foremost among these is discrimination (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Young & Anderson, 2021). As a result of both race and gender, especially gender, Black women often need to deal with pay inequality (Williams, 2019) and a lack of equitable promotion opportunities (Chance, 2021; Mitchell, 2021). Conversely, because of race, Black women must contend with persistent issues of resistance to change advocacy, invisibility, and hypervisibility (Beatty et al., 2020; Lloyd-Jones, 2009; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Mitchell, 2021). Such hypervisibility can create challenges to their ability to feel like they belong.

Constantly dealing with these myriad issues creates an inevitable mental and emotional toll (Cox & Ward, 2019; Townsend, 2021), along with a lack of belonging (Cooke & Odejimi, 2021; Wright-Mair, 2020). Therefore, further research is needed to explore the effects of intersectionality on Black women's leadership careers over time (Nichols & Stahl, 2019; Smith et al., 2019). Research is also needed to explore the experiences of Black women in leadership positions at nonhistorically Black colleges and universities (Chance, 2022), especially qualitative research (Njoku & Evans, 2022).

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative critical autoethnography was to explore my struggle with identity as a Black female administrator in predominantly white higher education spaces of a large private university set in one of the most diverse urban areas in the world. The central research phenomenon for the present study was the navigation of identity and sense of belonging by Black female administrators and their experiences in predominantly white higher education spaces. Without understanding and sharing the lived experience of a Black female administrator, implementing a platform for change would be impossible.

Black female administrators face challenges related to both race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989; West, 2020). These challenges contribute to feelings of isolation and loneliness among Black female administrators who work in predominantly white institutions (Arjun, 2019), mainly when they are the lone representative of their race and gender (Mitchell, 2021). The results of the present study may help inform a better understanding of Black female administrators' identities and how those identities are shaped. This knowledge, in turn, may help institution leaders and educators to support better Black female administrators.

Research Questions

I used critical autoethnography to explore my experiences within predominantly white higher education spaces I occupied. By exploring my experiences within the cultural settings of predominantly white institutions (PWI), I showed how my unique identity must be considered within my white-space experiences as they would differ from other women. As noted by the Black feminist theory work of Becks-Moody (2004), Collins (2000), and Muldrow (2016), Black feminist theory gives voice to marginalized Black women.

This critical autoethnography was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways did my personal experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces shape my identity and sense of belonging in these spaces?

RQ2: How does the intersection of my race and gender contribute to my professional experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces?

RQ2a: What unique challenges arise from this intersection?

RQ2b: How are these challenges successfully managed?

Conceptual Framework

This study was grounded in the conceptual framework of the Black feminist theory. The Black feminist theory represents a conceptual perspective aimed at addressing the unique issues facing Black women (Collins, 2000). Guy-Sheftall (1995), one of the founders of Black feminist theory, addressed the concept extensively. Guy-Sheftall's work was not only highly influential on its own, but it also represented a codification of a larger body of literature, helping it to coalesce into a coherent whole. Guy-Sheftall also worked to build an interface with philosophical traditions, such as continental philosophy, to give Black feminist theory a solid theoretical foundation (Guy-Sheftall & Yancy, 2010). Black feminist theory lies within the larger landscape of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectionality represents a perspective that a researcher may use to understand individuals' unique problems when sitting at the intersection or two or more marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 1989). The Black feminist theory, more broadly intersectionality, posits that Black women face unique problems that go beyond the union of problems faced by Black people and the problems faced by women (Collins, 2000). Moreover, many resources intended to address such problems are directed at only one group. In formulating the Black feminist theory, Collins (2000) observed that traditional feminism tends to focus on the issues and concerns of white women. Conversely, the Civil Rights Movement and Black movements tend to focus on the problems faced by Black men foremost. Therefore, Black women's problems were inadequately addressed either from a Black perspective or a feminist one.

As a Black woman, my experiences in predominantly white higher education spaces were shaped by the intersection of my various identities, especially the intersection of being Black and female. Adopting a critical autoethnographic approach through the lens of the Black feminist

theory added value to the depth of my journey as a Black woman who had encountered issues of power, discrimination, and stereotypes in predominantly white higher education spaces. Thus, I used the Black feminist lens to share my experiences with racism, sexism, and classism as inseparable and different from those of white women.

Additionally, I used a Black feminist perspective as a framework to not only explore the intersections of my identity but also to present my experiences through my whole self. Through sharing my own experiences based on the intersectionalities of my being, there was a chance for me to affect positive change by highlighting systems of stagnation. These systems caused Black women to feel devalued in predominantly white higher education spaces.

Literature Review

The current body of literature on diversity in higher education focuses on student diversity, with less being known about the contributions of a diverse faculty, staff, and leadership (Espinosa et al., 2019; Wright-Mair, 2020). Much research on faculty, staff, and leadership diversity focuses on the diverse college communities' effects on students (Espinosa et al., 2019; Kaplan et al., 2018; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Research related to Black female administrators in higher education is relatively infrequent but delves into the multifaceted experiences, challenges, and contributions of these professionals regarding predominantly white institutions. Further research is needed on intersectionality in Black women's leadership careers (Nichols & Stahl, 2019; Smith et al., 2019) and experiences of Black women in leadership positions at nonhistorically Black colleges and universities (Chance, 2022; Njoku & Evans, 2022).

In addition, the literature shows that navigating predominantly white institutional cultures requires a delicate balance. Black female administrators must manage their cultural authenticity while fitting into established narrative norms (Arjun, 2019; West, 2019). Such administrators

often develop strategies to address discrimination, advocate for change, and foster inclusivity while avoiding potential backlash (West, 2019). Despite facing systemic challenges, many Black female administrators demonstrate resilience and a commitment to positive change (Arjun, 2019; Burton et al., 2020). Such administrators leverage their positions to advocate for campus equity, diversity, and inclusion. Advocacy and activism are integral to their roles.

Black female administrators often leverage their positions to advocate for policy changes, engage in dialogue about diversity, and drive institutional reforms. Their efforts contribute to a more equitable higher education environment. Therefore, there is a need to understand better how walking this narrow path and maintaining a careful balance affects the identity of Black female administrators in higher education.

Research Methods and Design

A critical autoethnographic study was used to explore my identity as a Black female administrator in predominantly white higher education spaces of a large private university in one of the most diverse urban areas in the world. By evaluating my experiences with microaggression, race, class, and privilege through a critical lens, I detailed how I navigated these academic spaces and how the intersections of my identity influenced my sense of belonging. These areas were examined based on existing literature. I wrote this dissertation to acknowledge the challenges faced by Black female administrators. I explored the culture surrounding higher education based on its claims of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice to its restorative justice practices.

Setting and Participants

This study encompassed my journey of 25 years in a large private, predominantly white university in the suburban area of Queens, New York, also known as one of the most diverse

boroughs in the world. Queens is considered a diverse area regarding ethnicity and culture. Therefore, I used this university as an example of how ethnic and cultural diversity did not transcend to representation within administrative roles for Black females.

Unlike most qualitative research methods, according to Chang (2016), a researcher searches for an understanding of others (culture/society) through self in autoethnography. In describing the researcher's role as a participant in autoethnography, Chang's (2016) and Duckart's (2005) research more closely related to my vision when noting the self as a subject to investigate and a lens to consider understanding a societal culture. The societal culture in my research was that of predominantly white higher education spaces. The lens was the Black feminist view through my experiences as a Black woman. Here, the role of the self as the researcher and participant was to share and allow the reader to understand the experiences and show how those experiences shaped identity and a sense of belonging in predominantly white spaces as a Black woman.

Data Collection

After receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval from the university to conduct this autoethnography, I employed multiple forms of data to ensure authenticity, as Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested. Autoethnography does not differ significantly from the same principles practiced in data collection for ethnography, except for the open acknowledgment of the individual as the primary source of information (Chang, 2016). I used some of the following data collection sources:

1. *Personal journaling* to record personal experiences, reflections, and emotions regularly.

2. *Self-reflective interview data* resulting from introspective self-analysis and self-evaluation of who I am based on field notes of my thoughts or relevant experiences made by observing and recording personal experiences in real-time.
3. *Artifacts*, including a review of public documents, policies, program materials, and books.

I used these data collection methods to adapt my approach as unique to my personal experiences and research questions. As suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018), the idea behind qualitative research is to select sites, documents, and visual material purposefully to best aid the researcher in understanding the problem and research question. In my study, the data were collected over 6 months. During this time, I sought to describe my experience as a Black woman struggling with identity through the healing process of restorative justice in a predominantly white institution.

Analysis

In this autoethnographic study, I drew on several forms of data analysis consistent with other qualitative research studies. Basic qualitative research was focused on as it was not tied to major traditions, such as grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). Basic qualitative data analysis was more applicable and beneficial to an autoethnographic study because of having a descriptive focus, exploring human experiences, and acknowledging subjective meaning making. According to Saldana (2018), I incorporated these characteristics in autoethnographic analysis using qualitative coding methods. These methods included descriptive, in vivo, emotional, and initial (open) coding (for definitions of coding methods, see Appendix I). Overall, the data analysis involved Clarke et al.'s (2015) six-step qualitative data analysis approach: thematic analysis.

Assumptions

Like any research method, this autoethnographic study was subject to assumptions and limitations that shaped its scope and reliability. One primary assumption lied in my belief that personal experiences and reflections could offer valuable insights into broader cultural phenomena. I assumed that my subjectivity was a valid and illuminating lens to explore cultural dynamics. However, this assumption opened the study to potential biases and challenges related to my perspectives, memories, and interpretations. Another assumption was that I accurately represented my experiences comprehensibly to an audience.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of an autoethnographic study hinged on my transparency, reflexivity, and rigor throughout the process. Establishing trust began with me openly acknowledging my subjectivity and position within the study while clarifying how personal experiences shaped interpretations. A critical factor in trustworthiness was reflexivity, wherein I consistently reflected on my biases, motivations, and developing perspectives. Through this self-awareness, I enhanced the credibility of the findings.

Additionally, I provided detailed, contextually rich narratives and vivid descriptions to contribute to the study's dependability and allow readers to engage with the experiences more deeply than before. However, trustworthiness was contingent on my commitment to ethical considerations, such as maintaining confidentiality when necessary and navigating potential power dynamics inherent to autoethnographic narratives. Overall, the trustworthiness of this autoethnographic study relied on my ability to balance transparency, reflexibility, and ethical considerations, fostering confidence in the authenticity and reliability of the findings.

Definition of Terms

This section contains terms and definitions used throughout this research.

Belonging: Belonging is the inclusion and affirming experience of individuals within a community or society. It involves acceptance, connection, and being valued for one's authentic self, irrespective of social identity. It fosters environments where individuals from all backgrounds feel seen, heard, and respected (Frazer, 1997).

Black Female Administrator: Black Female Administrator refers to a Black female of African or African diasporic descent who holds a position of authority, leadership, or management within an organization, institution, or educational setting.

Black Feminism: According to the Combahee River Collection (1977), Black Feminism is a social and political movement that centers on Black women's experiences, struggles, and empowerment while addressing the intersecting oppressions they face because of race and gender.

Identity: Identity is the complex interplay of personal and social attributes that shape an individual's positionality within societal structures. It involves recognizing and understanding the various social categories, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and more (Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectionality: Intersectionality highlights the interconnected nature of various social categories and systems of oppression. It emphasizes the need to consider overlapping identities to understand an individual's privilege or marginalization experiences fully (Crenshaw, 1989).

Microaggression: Microaggression is the subtle, often unintentional, and sometimes direct verbal or behavioral expressions of bias, discrimination, or prejudice that communicate negative messages to individuals based on their marginalized social identities (Sue et al., 2007).

Restorative Justice: Restorative justice is an approach to addressing harm and resolving conflicts that focuses on repairing relationships, promoting accountability, and facilitating healing rather than solely punishing offenders. The aim is to restore community balance and justice (Zehr, 2002).

Conclusion

In summary, the problem addressed in the present study was the identity struggles of Black female administrators in predominantly white higher education spaces. To address this problem, the purpose of the present qualitative critical autoethnography was to explore my struggle with identity as a Black female administrator in predominantly white higher education spaces of a large private university in one of the most diverse urban areas in the world. The research purpose was addressed through the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways did my personal experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces shape my identity and sense of belonging in these spaces?

RQ2: How does the intersection of my race and gender contribute to my professional experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces?

RQ2a: What unique challenges arise from this intersection?

RQ2b: How are these challenges successfully managed?

This autoethnographic exploration into my lived experience as a Black woman navigating predominantly white spaces within higher education was viewed through Black feminism, which underscored the intricate tapestry of identity, power, and resilience. The narratives shared in this study showed the nuanced ways systemic inequalities interest with personal stories. By employing a Black feminist framework, I unveiled layers of oppression and resistance while acknowledging the importance of amplifying marginalized voices. The lived experiences

recounted in this study showed the ongoing challenges faced by Black women in academia while emphasizing the urgent need for inclusive practices and systemic change. I believe fostering environments that embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion is not merely theoretical but also a practical imperative for dismantling persisting barriers. Therefore, this research served as a tribute to the strength and wisdom of Black women, affirming their rightful place in the academic landscape to inspire collective efforts toward a more just and equitable future within higher education.

Chapter 1 introduced the topic and related information on the Black feminist theory and identity as a Black female administrator. The statement of the problem and significance of the study were identified. An overview of the research method and design was made, along with the introduction of the research questions. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on Black female administrators and explores the connection with identity and struggles resulting from marginalization within predominantly white higher education institutions. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and research design for the autoethnographic study. Chapter 3 also includes the role of the researcher, site selection, and the data collection and analysis phase of the study to ensure validity, reliability, and transferability are included, along with anticipated ethical considerations.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The current body of literature on diversity in higher education focuses on student diversity, with less being known about the contributions of Black female administrators (Espinosa et al., 2019; Wright-Mair, 2020). Much research on faculty, staff, and leadership diversity focuses on a diverse college community's effect on students (Espinosa et al., 2019; Kaplan et al., 2018; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). The limited research available related to Black female administrators in higher education delves into the multifaceted experiences, challenges, and contributions of these professionals regarding predominantly white institutions. The following synopsis captures the essential findings and insights from this body of research.

Representation and visibility of Black female administrators are critical issues. Although diversity among leadership positively influences campus climate and decision-making, Black women remain underrepresented in administrative positions (Chance, 2022; Mitchell, 2021; NCES, 2022; West, 2020). This scarcity of representation hinders the potential for equitable policies and practices (Chance, 2022; Mitchell, 2021).

In higher education, women of Black ethnicity who hold administrative positions navigate a multifaceted crossroads of identities, confronting obstacles from their racial backgrounds and genders (West, 2020). These individuals experience bias and exclusion because of the interconnectedness of these elements (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Corbin et al., 2018; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Young & Anderson, 2021). Among these challenges are underrepresentation (NCES, 2022; West, 2020), stereotypes (Chance, 2022; Commodore et al., 2020; Corbin et al., 2018), limited access to networks, microaggression and discrimination (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Corbin et al., 2018; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Young & Anderson, 2021), unequal pay and compensation (Williams, 2019), work-life imbalance

(Arjun, 2019), lack of representation in leadership roles (Chance, 2021; Mitchell, 2021), resistance to change advocacy, invisibility and hypervisibility (Beatty et al., 2020; Lloyd-Jones, 2009; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Mitchell, 2021), isolation and loneliness (Arjun, 2019), mental and emotional toll (Cox & Ward, 2019; Townsend, 2021), and a sense of not belonging (Cooke & Odejimi, 2021; Kelly et al., 2019; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Wright-Mair, 2020). Black female administrators also encounter distinct forms of discrimination and marginalization due to the intertwined nature of their identities (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Corbin et al., 2018; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Young & Anderson, 2021). For example, Black female administrators in a study by DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2020) experienced microaggressions in the form of ascription of intelligence, criminality assumptions, and pathologized cultural values and communication styles.

Barriers to advancement for Black female administrators persist. Black female administrators face obstacles in career progression, including limited access to networks, unequal compensation, and lack of mentorship opportunities (Chance, 2022; Mitchell, 2021; Williams, 2019). On average, Black female administrators earn US$.85 for every US$1.00 earned by white male administrators (McChesney, 2018). The underrepresentation of Black women in prominent administrative positions can result in a shortage of role models, contributing to the perpetuation of the underrepresentation cycle (Mitchell, 2021). These barriers can hinder their professional growth and perpetuate systemic inequities (Chance, 2022).

Navigating predominantly white institutional cultures requires a delicate balance. Black female administrators must manage their authenticity while fitting into established norms (Arjun, 2019; West, 2019). They often develop strategies to address discrimination, advocate for change, and foster inclusivity while avoiding potential backlash (West, 2019). These strategies include

practicing hypervigilance (Corbin et al., 2018), networking (Angelle & Torrance, 2019; Arjun, 2019; Burton et al., 2020; Cupid, 2020; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Simms, 2018), and engaging in advocacy roles (Angelle & Torrance, 2019; Burton et al., 2020). For example, networking involves establishing an inner circle of colleagues and friends with whom Black female educators have formed supportive relationships (Buchanan, 2020; Simms, 2018). Members of these mutually beneficial relationships are not only able to express their frustrations to a trusted colleague regarding the challenges they encounter working in a predominantly white environment (Cupid, 2020; West, 2019), but they have also acted as advocates for one another in the other's absence (Simms, 2018). Thus, cultivating and maintaining professional relationships are contributing factors to the success of Black female administrators in their ability to influence change within a predominantly white organization (Angelle & Torrance, 2019).

Mentorship and support are crucial for Black female administrators in predominantly white institutions as they ascend to senior administrative roles. Access to mentors who understand their unique experiences can significantly influence Black female administrators' career trajectories (West, 2019). Effective mentorship provides guidance, advocacy, and opportunities for skill development and advancement (West, 2019). For example, Chance (2022) recounted that having the right mentor helped Black women overcome imposter syndrome and see failures as learning experiences while providing them with career advice.

Despite facing systemic challenges, many Black female administrators demonstrate resilience and a commitment to positive change (Arjun, 2019; Burton et al., 2020; Simms, 2018). Furthermore, advocacy and activism are integral to a Black female administrator's role. Racial, gendered, ethnic, and homophobic biases of faculty, students, administrators, and institutions create an oppressive environment for students and faculty of color (Harris & Lee, 2019). As

advocate–mentors, Black female administrators play a crucial role in not only protecting the intellectual prowess of minority students but also in validating their research interests, affirming their significance within the department, and actively championing opportunities that can enhance the career progression of those they mentor (Harris & Lee, 2019). Black female administrators often leverage their positions to advocate for policy changes, engage in dialogue about diversity, and drive institutional reforms that contribute to a more equitable higher education environment.

In conclusion, the current literature shows the significance of Black female administrators in higher education as agents of change. Their experiences reveal the intersections of race and gender, and their leadership contributes to more inclusive and equitable institutions (Kaplan et al., 2018). Addressing barriers, promoting representation, and valuing Black female administrators' unique contributions are essential for fostering diverse and enriched campus environments (West, 2019).

Chapter 2 begins with a description of the literature search strategy. Next, the central tenets of the Black feminist theory (the conceptual framework underpinning this study) and the rationale for its selection are presented. A discussion of the current literature relating to Black female administrators is provided. The literature review begins with the broad concepts of social justice, restorative justice, inclusion, and diversity. The review then narrows to the experiences of Black female administrators in predominantly white academic institutions, culminating with their sense of belonging.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature review encompassed a comprehensive search across databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, ResearchGate, and JSTOR. The following key terms were used in the

search: *Black feminist theory*, *social justice*, *restorative justice*, *inclusion*, *diversity*, *historically white colleges and universities*, *higher education*, *administrators*, *administration*, *Black*, *African American*, *minority*, *female*, *Black feminist theory*, *intersectionality*, *racism*, *microaggression*, *promotion*, *belongingness*, *acceptance*, *tokenism*, *discrimination*, *bias*, *stereotypes*, *exclusion*, and *mentorship*. These terms were employed individually and in logical combinations to refine the search.

The inclusion criteria included scholarly materials, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, published dissertations, and reputable government or professional organization websites. I focused on English-language publications to ensure precise comprehension. I excluded sources in languages other than English or non-peer-reviewed journal articles. A noteworthy aspect was the emphasis on recent research. Over 85% of the selected articles were published after 2018, ensuring that I presented the most contemporary insights on the identified issue. I aimed to provide an up-to-date understanding of the ongoing discourse surrounding Black female administrators in higher education and their experiences.

In total, 162 publications were considered for inclusion. Eighty-seven publications were included in the literature review after employing inclusion and exclusion criteria. Seventy-nine of the 87 publications were published in 2018 to the present day, making the final representation of contemporary literature included in the literature review 90.8%.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this autoethnographic study was the Black feminist theory. I used this theoretical framework to offer a sociocultural perspective that developed perspectives and constructed theories to illuminate Black women's identities and living realities (e.g., Collins, 2000). I used the lens of Black feminist theory to provide a comprehensive understanding of the

experiences encountered by Black female administrators within predominantly white higher education environments.

The Black feminist theory, often associated with intersectional feminism, is a branch of feminist thought focusing on the experiences and perspectives of Black women (Clemons, 2019; Collins, 2020; Crenshaw, 2017; Offermann et al., 2020). Black feminism emerged as a response to the limitations of mainstream feminism, which often overlooked the unique challenges and forms of oppression Black women face because of their intersecting identities of race, gender, and class (Collins, 2020; Offermann et al., 2020). The Black feminist theory provided a crucial framework for understanding the complexities of oppression and advocating for more inclusive and equitable societies than before.

The Central Tenets of Black Feminist Theory

The Black feminist theory illuminates the significance of journeys undertaken by Black women through their encountered challenges (Collins, 2000). The synergy between Black feminist thought and qualitative research is guided by a profound intention: to delve into the historical tapestries of Black women, intricately woven at the crossroads of race, gender, sexuality, and class (Clemons, 2019). Collins (1986) identified three themes likely to be experienced and articulated differently with diverse subsets of Black women. These overarching themes encompass the processes of self-definition and self-valuation, the interlocking nature of oppression, and the profound role that the cultural heritage of Black women plays (Collins, 1986).

Self-Definition and Self-Valuation

Stereotypes of Black women have a complex history from a combination of historical, social, cultural, and media influences (Spates et al., 2020). These stereotypes often perpetuate

harmful and inaccurate generalizations about Black women's characteristics, behaviors, and societal roles (Spates et al., 2020). However, one should recognize that these stereotypes do not accurately represent self-definition, which encompasses questioning and dispelling these stereotypes (Collins, 1986; West, 2019).

Self-valuation pertains to the substance of self-definition. Collins (1986) argued that when the fundamental notions employed to exert control over marginalized groups were subjected to scrutiny, stereotypical depictions of Black women came to be regarded as integral facets of Black womanhood. However, the authentic portrayal of Black women, as articulated by Black women themselves, exhibits layers of complexity and empowerment (Harris, 2021).

Recent scholarship proposes that the processes of self-definition, self-valuation, and the freedom to express one's authentic self may influence Black women's coping mechanisms and shape their overall mental well-being (Spates et al., 2020). The interconnectedness of these factors underscores the significance of recognizing and encouraging self-definition and self-valuation among Black women. These elements can significantly contribute to Black women's holistic health and resilience.

The Interlocking Nature of Oppression

Collins (1986) highlighted the interlocking nature of oppression, revealing that instances of discrimination were far from isolated incidents. Instead, these issues intricately weave together, forming a complex web. This idea emphasizes that an individual's experience of societal prejudice is not defined solely by one factor like gender, race, or class. However, converging these aspects creates multifaceted barriers (Collins, 1986). In the realm of feminist theory, women's experiences are shaped by various interconnected systems of oppression

(Carastathis, 2014). Crenshaw (1989) explored this perspective to show oppression as a complex interplay of multiple intersecting factors rather than a singular or binary phenomenon.

Crenshaw (1989) analyzed three discrimination suits brought against corporate employers by Black women plaintiffs. The author demonstrated that antidiscrimination laws protected Black women only to the extent that their experiences of discrimination aligned with those of Black men or with those of white women. Crenshaw (1989) illuminated how single-faceted definitions of discrimination, which treat sex and race as distinct and separate categories, could lead to the concealment of experiences involving gendered racism and the dismissal of legal claims regarding compound discrimination. Crenshaw (1989, 2017) worked on intersectionality to show how these interconnected barriers synergistically contributed to varying levels of disadvantage and bias, painting a comprehensive picture of many Black women's challenges.

Guy-Sheftall (1995) represented another pivotal scholar in the field of Black feminism. As a scholar, Guy-Sheftall wrote extensively on issues related to Black feminism, intersectionality, and the experiences of Black women. Guy-Sheftall shaped discussions around the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality by challenging traditional feminist perspectives that often overlooked or marginalized the experiences of Black women. Guy-Sheftall significantly contributed to the Black feminist theory by working, advocating, and authoring research. Although the Black feminist theory encompasses a wide range of perspectives, Guy-Sheftall's contributions were particularly influential in several key areas:

- Guy-Sheftall (1995) edited *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, a collection combining essential writings from Black feminist thinkers throughout history. This anthology represented a comprehensive resource

showing the diversity and richness of Black feminist thought while highlighting the voices of Black women who were marginalized in mainstream feminist discourse.

- Guy-Sheftall (1995) provided extensive educational leadership. As a professor and academic leader, Guy-Sheftall mentored and inspired numerous students, contributing to developing a new generation of scholars and activists engaged in the Black feminist theory and intersectional studies. Guy-Sheftall's contributions significantly enriched the landscape of Black feminist theory by amplifying Black women's voices, challenging exclusionary practices within feminism, and fostering a more intersectional understanding of the complexities of identity and oppression than prior.
- Guy-Sheftall (1995) represented a true advocate for inclusivity and intersectionality. Throughout her career, Guy-Sheftall was a vocal advocate for including diverse voices within feminist discourse. This researcher emphasized the importance of recognizing and addressing the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality to create a more inclusive and effective feminist movement than before.

In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought,* Guy-Sheftall (1995) noted that although Black feminism was not a monolithic, static ideology, with considerable diversity among African American feminists, certain premises remained constant:

1. Black women experience a special kind of oppression and suffering in this country, which is racist, sexist, and classist because of their dual racial and gender identity.
2. This "triple jeopardy" has meant that the problems, concerns, and needs of Black women are different in many ways from those of white women and Black men.
3. Black women must struggle for Black liberation, which is profoundly rooted in their lived experience. (p. 2)

Crenshaw's (1989) and Guy-Sheftall's (1995) groundbreaking work on intersectionality theory showed that Black women could face harm from gender-based discrimination, racial discrimination, or the intricate interplay of both. This acknowledgment showed the intricate nature of Black women's experiences as they confronted separate origins of oppression that could intersect, giving rise to distinct and multifaceted challenges. Crenshaw (1989) showed the layered dynamics shaping Black female administrators' lives, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their journeys.

The recognition of the interlocking nature of oppression assumes particular significance within the Black feminist theory (Carastathis, 2014; Clemons, 2019). The recognition of the interlocking nature of oppression prompts a shift in focus from solely identifying aspects associated with race, gender, or class-based discrimination to broadly exploring the connections among various systems of oppression (Carastathis, 2014; Clemons, 2019). By examining these links, as noted by Collins (1986), the Black feminist theory showed the complex interactions between different forms of discrimination while offering a more comprehensive understanding of how these forces collectively shape the experiences of Black women within society.

The Importance of Black Women's Culture

Within the framework of the Black feminist theory, redefining and elucidating the culture of Black women holds significant importance because of its role in unearthing previously unexplored dimensions of the Black female experience (Collins, 1986). This process of redefinition has led scholars to uncover previously overlooked aspects of the lives of Black women, showing areas of social interactions where Black women construct and transmit self-definitions and self-valuations integral to their coping mechanisms when confronted with the complex interplay of various forms of oppression (Spates et al., 2020; West, 2019). In parallel,

modern theorists have explored the notion of professional counter spaces intricately designed to safeguard the psychological well-being of individuals from marginalized backgrounds who operate within oppressive contexts (West, 2019). Professional counter spaces are viewed as purposeful, culturally validating environments for fostering professional growth. These spaces acknowledge the significance of personal and career advancement and actively contribute to empowering and developing individuals belonging to underrepresented cultural groups (West, 2019).

This expansion of research not only revisits Black women's cultural identities but also extends to explore spaces and interactions that enable Black women to redefine their experiences and develop strategies for resilience (Cupid, 2020). By examining the multifaceted aspects of culture and innovative frameworks like professional counter spaces, the Black feminist theory enriches the understanding of Black women's lives and empowers them to navigate and challenge the complexities of encountered oppression and bias (Collins, 1986).

The Applicability of Black Feminist Theory as a Conceptual Framework

The Black feminist theory has been incorporated in many facets of research. Hardaway et al. (2019) applied Black feminist thought to scrutinize how institutional legal and policy dialogues shaped responses to campus violence against Black undergraduate women. This analysis revealed a disturbing pattern where Black girls in educational environments were often misconstrued as adult Black women burdened with anger, leading to harsh disciplinary measures, unlike the patience extended to white counterparts.

Furthermore, Williams and Lewis (2021) harnessed the Black feminist theory to understand the intricate interplay of race, gender, and sociocultural factors that shaped Black women's lives. This perspective showed the distinct phases of their gendered racial identity

development, specifically hyperawareness, reflection, rejection, and navigation—each of which was influenced by the unique elements of Black women's intersectional experiences. Williams and Lewis also exposed the gendered racial ideologies Black women adopted in response to their experiences, including assimilation, humanist, defiance, strength, pride, and empowerment, representing protection from gendered racism and intersectional oppression.

Lastly, Bell et al. (2021) showcased how the Black feminist theory offered insights into confronting anti-Blackness and white supremacy within academia. Bell et al. delved into the historical activism of Black women scholars and recognized the roles of non-Black allies. Therefore, the researchers emphasized the need for collective action against these oppressive forces, emphasizing how the Black feminist theory was crucial for unpacking the complex interactions of race, gender, activism, and institutional change.

These studies shared commonalities in using Black feminist thought and theory to examine various facets of Black women's experiences within educational institutions. Each study recognized the importance of intersectionality by acknowledging the interplay of race, gender, and other sociocultural factors in shaping the experiences of Black women. Although these studies shared a common foundation in Black feminist thought, the researchers diverged in their research emphases, methodologies, and resulting findings, providing a comprehensive perspective on the multifaceted experiences of Black women in educational contexts. The examples collectively demonstrated that the Black feminist theory was a robust conceptual framework, enabling nuanced analyses of power dynamics, identity development, and activism across diverse contexts.

Rationalization for Choosing Black Feminist Theory as a Conceptual Framework

I embraced the Black feminist theory as the conceptual cornerstone of this autoethnographic study to investigate my experiences as a Black female administrator within a predominantly white Catholic institution of higher education. This theory added profound depth and relevance to the exploration. By employing this theoretical framework, I gained the capacity to delve into the intricate intersections of my identity, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the pervasive issue of gender and racial inequality (e.g., West et al., 2021). This lens allowed for the simultaneous examination of racism, sexism, and classism as interconnected forces, departing from conventional narratives that tended to isolate these issues (Chance, 2021).

Several studies demonstrate the benefit of using the Black feminist theory as a tool to understand the experiences of Black female administrators. For example, Chance (2021) applied the Black feminist theory to identify how Black women in higher education leadership navigated the adverse challenges of intersectionality, stereotype threat, and tokenism. The findings indicated that Black women in leadership roles in higher education encountered and successfully navigated challenges, demonstrating a link between adversity and their acquisition of essential leadership skills for career advancement. Participants viewed their hardships as motivational, empowering them to cultivate the skills needed for leadership positions. This resilience stemmed from family, relationships, mentors, community support, and a strong connection to cultural identity and diversity. Thus, the Black feminist theory is useful in identifying how Black women administrators in academia overcome challenges to ascend to leadership roles.

Similarly, West et al. (2021) employed collective autoethnography grounded in Black feminist theory to describe the academic and professional experiences and aspirations of Black women enrolled and employed at predominantly white academic institutions. The findings

revealed how the women embodied the legacies of their predecessors while remaining authentic to their identities. These women actively countered imposter syndrome, believed as particularly challenging for Black women, by reframing fear, pain, and the notion of impossibility. The women crafted their own support systems and were aware that shared racial identities did not guarantee solidarity. Additionally, the women stressed the significance of maintaining a positive perspective, forming connections with fellow trailblazers, and constructing bridges to replace precarious tightropes. In West et al.'s (2021) study, the application of the Black feminist theory as a framework helped uncover subtle aspects of their experiences. This revelation enabled The researchers to recognize that their participants had transformed challenges into a means of overcoming oppression.

Coker et al. (2018) also conducted an autoethnographic study grounded in Black feminist thought. Coker et al. identified the factors that influenced the researchers' success within academia despite many societal, cultural, and personal challenges. The researchers identified the following five themes: (a) family expectations and support; (b) self-efficacy; (c) importance of role models; (d) resilience in dealing with stereotypes; and (e) multiple responsibilities that included self, family, and community (Coker et al., 2018). Parallel to West et al.'s (2021) study, Coker et al. (2018) used the Black feminist theory to show the factors that influenced Black women's persistence when facing challenges related to navigating predominantly white academic institutions.

All three studies, Chance (2021), West et al. (2021), and Coker et al. (2018), used Black feminist theory as a foundational framework to explore the experiences of Black women in academic and leadership roles. Chance (2021), West et al. (2021), and Coker et al. (2018) recognized the significance of this theoretical framework in showing the challenges faced by

Black women in predominantly white academic institutions and how these challenges were navigated. Chance (2021) focused on the leadership experiences of Black women in higher education, emphasizing how they successfully navigated adversity and used their challenges as motivation to acquire leadership skills. West et al. (2021) explored the experiences and aspirations of Black women in academia, highlighting their ability to counter imposter syndrome and reframe obstacles positively. Coker et al. (2018) also examined their academic successes while drawing attention to family support, self-efficacy, role models, resilience against stereotypes, and multiple responsibilities. In summary, these researchers applied Black feminist theory to highlight the resilience and strategies employed by Black women to overcome challenges in academia; however, the researchers focused on slightly different aspects of their experiences. These examples have shown that the Black feminist theory is a beneficial tool in identifying and elucidating factors that have influenced how Black women can successfully navigate predominantly white environments despite numerous challenges.

Literature Review

Central to the problem addressed by this study was the culture surrounding higher education, including diversity and inclusion programs, social justice policies, and restorative justice practices. This literature review examines Black female administrators' experiences within this culture and the influence the culture has on their sense of belonging. The literature review begins by describing the broad concepts that make up the culture within academia, including social and restorative justice practices and inclusion and diversity policies. The literature review then narrows to describe the related material specific to Black female administrators working in higher education by presenting statistics, their lived experiences, their sense of belonging, and how they overcome adversity.

Professional Identity Formation

The concept of professional identity formation has its roots in psychology, sociology, and education. Educational scholars and researchers have delved into the multifaceted aspects of professional identity, showing how educators, particularly aspiring leaders, perceive themselves within the educational landscape (Heled & Davidovitch, 2021). Professional identity theories emerged as a response to the need for a better understanding of how individuals develop their professional selves, adapt to their roles, and integrate their work into their broader identities (Maree, 2021).

Erikson's (1959) psychosocial theory is a foundational framework for understanding professional identity development (Maree, 2021). According to Erikson (1959), individuals go through stages of psychosocial development; each stage presents specific challenges and conflicts. These stages influence the development of one's professional identity, with issues related to role confusion and identity formation being particularly relevant (Erikson, 1959). Black female administrators often navigate complex psychosocial challenges related to their racial and gender identities (West, 2020). They may face identity conflicts as they try to establish themselves in leadership roles within predominantly white institutions (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021). Psychosocial theory ameliorates understanding of how these administrators cope with identity crises, build resilience, and develop a strong sense of self.

Researchers have used the social identity theory to explore how individuals define themselves based on their group affiliations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the context of professional identity, the social identity theory suggests that people derive their professional identities from their social groups in their occupations, workplaces, or professional associations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Tajfel and Turner (1979) emphasized the role of social categorization,

identification, and comparison in shaping one's professional identity. Black female administrators must manage multiple social identities, including race, gender, and professional status (Young & Anderson, 2021). They often encounter bias, stereotyping, and microaggressions in predominantly white settings (Gause, 2021; Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2022; Mitchell, 2021). Therefore, the social identity theory helps identify the influence of social categorization and provides insights into strategies for affirming identity and coping with discrimination.

Research in education has made significant strides in exploring professional identity, particularly concerning its formation and evolution, as well as the various elements that facilitate or impede the progression toward school leadership roles (Cruz-González et al., 2021). For example, Offermann et al. (2020) examined the career trajectories of 101 women college leaders over a 28-year period. The key finding of the study was that women's orientations toward leadership and competition during their college years were the best predictors of their later-life outcomes (Offermann et al., 2020). Those who had higher leadership orientations during college were more likely to achieve senior leadership positions in their careers. For Black women in leadership positions at institutions of higher education, professional identity formation and turnover intentions were influenced by microaggressions and the inability to present their authentic selves at work (Townsend, 2021). Other studies have shown the critical role of self-reflection and introspection in constructing professional identity while emphasizing the need for educators to contemplate their values, beliefs, and teaching philosophies. For example, Gümüş et al. (2021) found school leaders grounded in social justice were successful in fostering inclusive environments where students of all backgrounds were granted equal opportunities to access and engage in high-quality education. Through the process of self-reflection, educators gain clarity about their roles in education and their aspirations for leadership positions.

Furthermore, research in this field has shown the influential role of mentorship and guidance in the development of professional identity (West, 2019). Wenger (1998) theorized that individuals became part of professional communities and developed their professional identities within groups. The scholar emphasized the role of participation, shared practices, and the sense of belonging in forming professional identities (Wenger, 1998). Aspiring school leaders benefit greatly from interactions with experienced mentors who provide insights, share experiences, and offer support in navigating the challenges associated with leadership roles (West, 2019).

Social Justice

Social justice is a fundamental concept centered on distributing a society's resources and opportunities while ensuring equitable access for all members (Gümüş et al., 2021). Social justice involves confronting the inequitable results arising from both societal procedures and institutional decision-making (Hopkins, 2021). Within the educational sphere, social justice advocates aim to foster an inclusive environment wherein each student, irrespective of their background, is granted equal opportunities to access and engage in a high-quality education (Gümüş et al., 2021; Ocampo-González & Collins, 2019). Social justice advocates seek to level the playing field and dismantle barriers that hinder equitable learning experiences (Gümüş et al., 2021; Ocampo-González & Collins, 2019).

Researchers have explored the qualities and methodologies embraced by effective leaders who champion social justice causes (Gümüş et al., 2021). Particularly within the sphere of education, leaders with a solid commitment to social justice tend to exhibit certain consistent practices (Angelle & Torrance, 2019). These practices focus on fostering influential teaching approaches, cultivating supportive relationships among faculty, forging partnerships with local communities, and creating environments conducive to ensuring equitable opportunities for

marginalized students (Angelle & Torrance, 2019). For example, Shields and Hesbol (2020) described a school in which the principle prioritized social justice education with transparency and communication through language and visuals. Leaders displayed positive, inclusive messages prominently throughout the school to communicate that everyone was welcome regardless of race, gender, social class, or sexual orientation (Shields & Hesbol, 2020).

Social Justice Disposition

Regarding a social justice disposition, leaders generally display a deep understanding of marginalization and are critically reflective and reflexive while guided by the moral use of power (Bogotch, 2002; Shields & Hesbol, 2020). These characteristics and practices typify an idealized educational leader who pays attention to the social justice perspective of their work (Arar et al., 2019; Shields & Hesbol, 2020). Additionally, social justice activists develop particular sensitivity to moral issues, especially in environments where social groups such as immigrants, refugees, or ethnic and religious minorities are marginalized and encounter various challenges (Arar et al., 2019).

Researchers have also endeavored to elucidate the complexities confronting educational leaders who advance social justice within educational environments, as highlighted by Papa (2020) and Waite and Arar (2020). One notable challenge involves identifying and confronting unjust practices entrenched within educational systems (Gümüş et al., 2021). Educational leaders who aspire to foster social justice encounter the intricate task of comprehending the influence of the cultural milieu of prevailing contexts, norms, and value systems in which they operate (Gümüş et al., 2021). The process of pinpointing and challenging inequitable political and societal norms necessitates a profound contextual understanding, knowledge, and awareness, as emphasized by Waite and Arar (2020).

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice is a comprehensive concept encompassing a flourishing social movement that establishes nonpunitive, relationship-centric methodologies (Fronius et al., 2019; Kohli et al., 2019). Originally developed by Barnett (as cited in Marshall, 1999) in the late 1970s as a mediation tool for use with victims and offenders, its purpose spans a spectrum of activities, from preventing and addressing harm to responding to legal and human rights' infringements and collectively resolving issues (Kohli et al., 2019). The four central tenets of restorative justice programs include the following: (a) including all influenced by the crime, particularly the offender(s), the victim(s), their families, and their communities; (b) using social context within which to frame the crime uniquely; (c) grounding the restorative process with a problem-solving orientation; and (d) remaining flexible throughout the process (Marshall, 1999).

Restorative justice has gained extensive application by redirecting individuals from conventional justice systems and functioning as a framework for those already under adult or juvenile justice systems (Fronius et al., 2019). Within educational settings, restorative justice operates as an alternative to conventional disciplinary measures, particularly those involving exclusionary actions such as suspension or expulsion (Fronius et al., 2019; Kohli et al., 2019; Taylor & Bailey, 2022). Many colleges and universities have adopted restorative justice programs to address conflict, behavior, and conduct on their campuses (Blas Pedreal, 2014).

Existing research indicates that endorsing stricter penalties for student offenders becomes more pronounced as the perceived gravity of the inflicted harm escalates (Taylor & Bailey, 2022). Nevertheless, the current scholarly focus has included punitive measures, with less attention directed toward exploring restorative forms of sanctions (Kohli et al., 2019). Furthermore, investigations have shown racial disparities in disciplinary actions, particularly in

elementary and secondary school contexts, revealing that Black students often face harsher sanctions than their white counterparts (Kohli et al., 2019). Strikingly, the domain of higher education remains unexplored, mainly regarding racial disparities in student conduct consequences.

Taylor and Bailey (2022) sought to address this gap by delving into the variations in support for various conduct sanctions—encompassing retributive, restorative, and no-consequence options—among college/university students, faculty/staff, and administrators. Taylor and Bailey explored whether the level of support for conduct sanctions diverged based on the student's racial background within the academic setting. The researchers found substantial differences in the endorsement of conduct sanctions. Notably, as the perceived severity of harm intensified, the support for restorative sanctions diminished, particularly in cases involving a Black student wrongdoer (Taylor & Bailey, 2022). Taylor and Bailey (2022) highlighted the complex interplay between perceptions of harm, restorative justice attitudes, and racial dynamics in higher education conduct sanctions.

Marder and Wexler (2020) suggested that incorporating restorative justice principles could help create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. This process could involve addressing academic misconduct, conflicts between students or faculty, and other disciplinary matters through restorative practices by prioritizing healing and learning over punitive measures (Marder & Wexler, 2020). However, those who advocate for restorative justice may find addressing unequal disciplinary practices in a PWI challenging (Romano & Arms Almengor, 2021).

Romano and Arms Almengor (2021) conducted a case study to delve into the experiences of Black female restorative justice coordinators. The study revealed that despite the challenges

involved, engaging in prolonged and consistent dialogues about racial inequality and its responses within urban schools led by predominantly white leadership was of utmost significance for restorative justice coordinators committed to racial justice (Romano & Arms Almengor, 2021). Both coordinators acknowledged their schools' genuine aspirations to curtail disproportionate disciplinary measures against minority students and cultivate an inclusivity culture. However, not all staff members remained willing or equipped to address racial matters openly, resulting in encounters with indifference, resistance, and trivialization (Romano & Arms Almengor, 2021). These coordinators, distinct from faculty who enjoyed increased job security afforded by tenure, could risk employment because of their contractual relationship with community-based agencies when advocating for increased racial awareness and discourse (Romano & Arms Almengor, 2021).

The mentioned studies collectively showed the connection between restorative justice and higher education settings, particularly regarding students and administrators. These studies demonstrated some challenges that Black female administrators who practiced restorative justice could face within higher education settings. Together, these studies revealed the intricate relationship between restorative justice, racial dynamics, and disciplinary practices in higher education, demonstrating the potential benefits and obstacles to implementing restorative justice principles.

Inclusion and Diversity

Diversity initiatives encompass a range of programs and policies designed to enhance fairness within organizations while fostering the inclusion, recruitment, retention, and advancement of underrepresented groups (Dover et al., 2020). Many university leaders have publicly declared their commitment to diversity and inclusion, often through statements featured

prominently on their official websites (Stark et al., 2021). For instance, Harvard University (n.d.) articulated its dedication to diversity by emphasizing its role in cultivating connections and bridges that would facilitate mutual growth and learning among all members of the community. These assertions of commitment to diversity were substantiated by the visible presence of Asian faculty members, who constituted the second-largest demographic among full-time tenured professors in U.S. higher education institutions (Bell et al., 2021; NCES, 2022). Despite such progress, the representation of Black faculty members in higher education continues to lag, underscoring the ongoing challenge of achieving full diversity and inclusivity in academia.

Discussions concerning diversity in higher education focus on student diversity, which can lead to the oversight of equally critical contributions made by diverse faculty, staff, and leadership (Espinosa et al., 2019; Wright-Mair, 2020). This prevailing focus underscores the necessity of acknowledging diversity's multifaceted nature. This aspect influences the student body while encompassing all who actively shape and enrich the educational milieu. In this context, recognizing the diverse tapestry of educators and administrators becomes integral to fostering a genuinely inclusive academic environment (Espinosa et al., 2019).

Prior research has established that colleges and universities with diverse and inclusive faculties are more effective in recruiting, educating, and maintaining a heterogeneous student body than other colleges (Kaplan et al., 2018). This goal is achieved using more extensive research, teaching, and exploration, as evidenced by Espinosa et al. (2019) and McCluney and Rabelo (2019). However, achieving diversity at the systemic level in higher education is not a certainty; influential factors promoting uniformity and social differentiation are just as prevalent within these systems, as Melo and Figueiredo (2020) stated.

Early inclusion and diversity initiatives in U.S. higher education emerged from the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2023). Although some inclusion and diversity programs successfully improved access to and the quality of education for minority students, others were ineffective at advancing changes (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2023). Fewer inclusion and diversity policies in higher education institutions promoted the diversity of faculty and administrative staff (Buenestado-Fernández et al., 2019).

A recent effort to promote inclusion and diversity is the creation of the chief diversity officer (Ash et al., 2020). The chief diversity officer is an administrative position typically created to lead an organization's formal inclusion and diversity initiatives (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2023). Chief diversity officers supervise diversity-related efforts, including programs and training, to enhance diversity within campus communities, ensure adherence to legal requirements, address systemic concerns, and promote the appreciation of differences (Ash et al., 2020). The chief diversity officer position varies in title, influence, and responsibility (Williams & Wade-Golden, 2023). These individuals encounter obstacles when attempting to bring about substantial changes, including uncertainties about their roles, inadequate backing from personnel and resources, and limited support, as pointed out by Ash et al. (2020).

Although declarations of diversity and inclusion in statements made by colleges and universities indicate adherence to legal regulations, they might not accurately represent undisclosed or implicit practices (Stark et al., 2021). The rationale underlying diversity and inclusion initiatives is often unquestioned (Stark et al., 2021). Stark et al. (2021) stated that race-conscious admission policies aimed at enhancing minoritized enrollment at predominantly white institutions primarily sought to expose majority group members to new perspectives presented by minoritized students. Higher education institutions' diversity and inclusion policies

predominantly concentrate on student body diversity, often neglecting the diversity of faculty and administrative staff (Buenestado-Fernández et al., 2019).

Some debate among the American public concerns whether race-based admissions policies influence the fairness of the admissions process. A recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (Gramlich, 2023) showed that half of U.S. adults disapproved of colleges and universities considering race or ethnicity when making admission decisions. Significant differences in opinion existed among racial and political divisions: 57% of white Americans and 74% of Republicans disapproved of race-based admissions policies compared to 29% of Black Americans and 29% of Democrats (Gramlich, 2023). In comparison, 61% of U.S. adults favored affirmative action programs only 2 years earlier (Gramlich, 2023). The marked shift in public opinion regarding these programs is reflected in recent changes to federal laws.

In June 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against race-based admissions policies under the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment (Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2023). Chief Justice Roberts, in his majority opinion, elucidated that the race-based admission processes used by Harvard College and the University of North Carolina conflicted with two principles of the Equal Protection Clause: that race should not be employed negatively and should not operate as a stereotype (Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2023). The dissenting perspective, articulated by Justice Sotomayor, supports admissions programs, asserting that the 14th Amendment allows state actors to address the ramifications of societal discrimination through explicitly race-based measures. The influence of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on the racial diversity of college admissions remains uncertain.

Black Female Administrators in Higher Education

Black females have held administrative leadership positions since the 1920s. For example, Lucy Diggs Slowe was the Dean of Women at Howard University in 1922 (West, 2020). Over 100 years later, Claudine Gay became the first Black person named president of Harvard University (Reuters, 2022). The journey toward commanding positions in higher education administration is a testament to the resolute commitment of numerous African American women. Jones et al. (2023) underscored that this progression was not just about individual accomplishment but a profound aspiration to catalyze change and give back to communities. The resolve and ambition displayed by these remarkable women reflected their dedication to forging paths for others, breaking down barriers, and fostering inclusive academic environments that reflected the rich diversity of society's perspectives and talents.

Statistics

Distinctive trends are observed among different demographic groups in administrative positions in higher education. For example, Black women have outpaced Black men and other historically marginalized groups in securing administrative roles within higher education (West, 2020). However, the broader landscape remains marked by significant underrepresentation of men and women from all minoritized backgrounds in administrative roles (NCES, 2022; Tevis et al., 2020; Townsend, 2021). An example in higher education is managerial positions, where Black women make up less than 7% of all managers in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, contrasting the dominant presence of white men and women, who collectively occupy over 60% of managerial roles (NCES, 2022).

This disparity in representation permeates even the highest echelons of higher education's organizational structure. In 2016, the upper tiers of the employment hierarchy were skewed, with

83.2% of college presidents being of white ethnicity (Espinosa et al., 2019). The situation becomes more pronounced when considering gender diversity within leadership positions. Although 38% of chief academic officers or provosts are women, a mere 3% of these roles are held by women of color (Espinosa et al., 2019).

A notable divergence in racial and ethnic diversity emerges when examining specific departments. Student and academic affairs staff demonstrate comparatively greater racial diversity than other departments, reflecting a more inclusive environment (Espinosa et al., 2019). In tandem with this finding, the role of chief diversity officer has gained prominence, with 56% of these positions being occupied by women, further highlighting a drive toward diversity at the executive level (Ash et al., 2020; Pasque & Nicholson, 2023). Although progress has been achieved, the highest concentration of professionals hailing from underrepresented backgrounds is predominantly observed within service and maintenance staff positions, unveiling a multifaceted spectrum of diversity permeating various aspects of higher education (Espinosa et al., 2019).

Black female administrators find themselves in environments where they are underrepresented because of their gender and race/ethnicity (NCES, 2022; Njoku & Evans, 2022; West, 2020). Women of color represent 9% of the higher education workforce (McChesney, 2018). The underrepresentation of Black female administrators often results from predominantly white institutions' cultures. Underrepresentation may lead to attributional ambiguity, a situation in which the underrepresented individual cannot determine whether positive or negative interactions have occurred because of their minority status (Brower et al., 2019).

Experiences of Black Female Administrators in Higher Education

The established conventions of higher education institutions significantly influence the ongoing instances of racially charged and violent experiences faced by staff from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds (Arday & Mirza, 2022). These ingrained cultures enable racial harassment and psychological mistreatment. In the realm of higher education, Black women in administrative roles face a complex intersection of identities, contending with challenges rooted in their race and gender (West, 2020). These individuals encounter biases and instances of exclusion stemming from the intertwined nature of these factors (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Corbin et al., 2018; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Young & Anderson, 2021).

Gender and racial pay gaps persist in higher education, influencing Black women's earning potential compared to their peers (McChesney, 2018; Williams, 2019). The most apparent manifestation of this inequality is median pay, which remains notably low for women of color. Women of color earn US$.67 for every US$1.00 earned by white men (McChesney, 2018). This comparison is somewhat better, although still unequal, with female administrators of color earning US$.85 for every US$1.00 earned by white men (McChesney, 2018).

Two factors may play a role in this phenomenon. Initially, women of color find themselves disproportionately concentrated in lower-paid roles while lacking proportional representation in higher-paying positions (McChesney, 2018). Secondly, the issue of pay parity continues for women of color across various job categories (McChesney, 2018; Williams, 2019). Even in more advanced positions, compensation for women of color falls significantly short compared to white men (McChesney, 2018). Although this issue affects white women, it does not extend to men of color, highlighting gender as the primary factor in pay equality (McChesney, 2018). Consequently, women of color contend with the intersection of these two obstacles—one

stemming from their gender and the other from their racial or ethnic identity, signaling systemic inequalities within the field (McChesney, 2018; Williams, 2019).

Double Minority Status

Black women hold a double minority status, which means they face gender and racial discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989; Fay et al., 2021; Moorosi et al., 2018). This status can result in unique challenges that intersect and compound, making it harder to combat prejudice effectively (Crenshaw, 1989). The intersectionality of these challenges underscores the intricate landscape these women navigate, as they must simultaneously contend with biases based on both race and gender, impacting their experiences in ways that are distinct from those of either white women or Black men (McChesney, 2018).

Researchers have recognized the demands of mental and emotional labor faced by Black women in leadership roles while preserving their genuine racial and sexual identities as profoundly draining (Erskine et al., 2020). Researchers have shown the detrimental impact of the convergence of racism and sexism within the workplace (McChesney, 2018; Moorosi et al., 2018). The convergence of racism and sexism within the workplace can lead to biased perceptions that distort the evaluation of Black women's capabilities, ultimately constraining their opportunities to advance into leadership positions (Moorosi et al., 2018).

The double minority status of Black women exposes them to a unique set of challenges rooted in gender and racial discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989; Fay et al., 2021; Moorosi et al., 2018). These challenges intersect and compound, leading to a complex and often exhausting struggle against prejudice (Crenshaw, 1989; Erskine et al., 2020). Understanding and addressing the complex interplay of these factors are crucial for fostering inclusivity, equality, and opportunities for Black women to thrive and lead in various professional settings.

Lack of Representation in Leadership Positions

Researchers have documented the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership positions within higher education (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021). white privilege remains the determining factor in selecting community college leaders (Gause, 2021). This factor means that even underrepresented women who follow a conventional path similar to white males and females still face difficulties, barriers, and overt bias (Gause, 2021).

The scarcity of Black women in top administrative positions can create a lack of role models for aspiring Black female administrators and students of color (Mitchell, 2021). A lack of role models who resemble students' races, ethnicities, and genders perpetuates the cycle of underrepresentation (Mitchell, 2021). Chance (2021) referred to the barrier prohibiting Black women from advancing to leadership positions as the concrete ceiling. The concrete ceiling represents a distinct and challenging barrier that specifically influences Black and other minority women by impeding their progress into leadership roles within the business and academic realms (Chance, 2021). This concept serves as a symbolic representation of the obstacles that hinder upward career advancement while obstructing the ability of Black women to integrate and thrive within organizational structures effectively (Chance, 2021). The concrete ceiling shows that Black women encounter underrepresentation and significant challenges when aspiring to or occupying senior leadership positions within higher education and other sectors (Chance, 2021).

Although similar, the concrete ceiling differs from the more widely recognized *glass ceiling* that women have confronted over the years (Chance, 2021). The glass ceiling metaphor implies that women can at least discern the barriers inhibiting their progress and retain the potential to perceive, break, and overcome those barriers as if shattering glass (Chance, 2021). In contrast, the concept of the concrete ceiling suggests a far more formidable obstacle faced by

historically minoritized women. Concrete impedes visibility and is exceedingly resistant to penetration, signifying the substantial difficulty that Black and minority women encounter in pursuing leadership roles (Chance, 2021).

Manongsong and Ghosh (2021) identified the imposter phenomenon as a critical barrier to advancement for women of color. Imposter syndrome is the belief that skills, intelligence, and success are not deserved or overestimated (Edwards, 2019; Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021). Individuals experiencing imposter syndrome, particularly women of color, struggle to accept the praise they receive for their academic or professional accomplishments (Edwards, 2019). Instead of recognizing their achievements as well-deserved and earned, they tend to view them as overestimations of their abilities (Edwards, 2019). Contextual factors are significant in this syndrome, as women tend to look to others as benchmarks for what constitutes genuine competence in academia or their profession (Edwards, 2019). When they compare themselves to those whom they consider authentic experts, women with imposter syndrome notice differences and begin to feel like impostors (Edwards, 2019). This issue triggers a harmful cycle in which women try to anticipate how others perceive them and then modify behaviors based on these assumed perceptions (Edwards, 2019; Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021). Manongsong and Ghosh (2021) contended that multiple diversified developmental relationships were necessary to help minoritized women address the imposter phenomenon and develop positive leadership identities.

Stereotyping

Stereotypes are widely held, simplified, and generalized beliefs or assumptions about a particular group of people, often based on race, gender, age, religion, or nationality (Ward & Grower, 2020). These beliefs can be positive, negative, or neutral, but they typically oversimplify

and categorize individuals, potentially leading to unfair judgments or biases (Cox & Ward, 2019). Stereotypes can be cultural and individual; stereotypes may not accurately reflect the diversity and complexity of the individuals within the group being stereotyped (Cox & Ward, 2019; Ward & Grower, 2020).

Emerging research has shown how racial prototypes, particularly those concerning Black and white individuals, can be intricately intertwined with gender lines (Coles & Pasek, 2020). This issue leads to categorizing Black women as sharing more traits with Black men than with the conventional female ideal (Coles & Pasek, 2020). A prevalent stereotype, *the angry Black woman*, is prominent in media depictions, spanning scripted and reality television and various media forms (Cox & Ward, 2019; Ward & Grower, 2020). Coker et al. (2018) reported that Black female administrators were vigilant in avoiding behaviors associated with the angry Black woman. These behaviors may include being verbally loud, combative, or unintelligent.

Another Black female stereotype called the *sapphire* deviates from conventional white female gender norms, stripping a Black woman of traditionally feminine attributes (Harris, 2021). This stereotype's perpetuation contributes to Black women's marginalization by stifling their voices and promoting negative characterizations. Consequently, many Black women actively distance themselves from reinforcing this stereotype, consciously trying to counter its detrimental implications (Kilgore et al., 2020). Stereotypes and biases lead to misconceptions about Black female administrators' capabilities, potentially hindering their opportunities for advancement (Chance, 2022).

Stereotype threat is a psychological phenomenon that entails the potential for self-fulfilling negative convictions or stereotypes related to one's racial, ethnic, gender, or cultural background (Chance, 2022). This threat hinders the professional progress of Black women

within and beyond academic leadership roles (Chance, 2022). Black women in predominantly white institutions practice hypervigilance, a self-policing behavior intended to counter media-perpetuated characterizations of the angry Black woman (Corbin et al., 2018). In a study by Coker et al. (2018), participants were highly vigilant about not reproducing any stereotypes that might be negatively interpreted by their white subordinates, peers, or superiors.

Even among Black women who have achieved the esteemed position of president at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), the challenge of countering disparaging portrayals persists, as highlighted in public discourse (Commodore et al., 2020). The media's depictions of Black women in leadership roles at HBCUs, along with the narrative framing of their experiences, set the stage for public evaluations that reinforce these presidents' identities based on preconceived stereotypes and perceptions, often termed *controlling images* (Commodore et al., 2020). This issue amplifies the complexity of Black women's roles as they not only navigate the responsibilities of their positions but also grapple with the weight of prevailing stereotypes that influence the wider public's perceptions and assertions (Commodore et al., 2020).

Microaggressions and Discrimination

Black women administrators frequently experience microaggressions, subtle but harmful behaviors that can contribute to a hostile work environment (Gause, 2021; Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2022; Mitchell, 2021). Microaggressions stem from racial biases that can manifest as subtle or overt forms of discrimination (Corbin et al., 2018). The weight of such discriminatory experiences and the distress of actual or perceived threats can cause symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). This cumulative toll, exacerbated by the persistent nature of racial microaggressions, is known as *racial battle fatigue*—the social,

psychological, and physiological burden incurred by the constant vigilance required to navigate and combat racist behaviors (Corbin et al., 2018).

Racial microaggressions represent a pervasive issue when examining the experiences of Black women administrators across various higher education contexts (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Gause, 2021). Irrespective of whether Black women work in predominantly white institutions or HBCUs, these administrators frequently encounter racial microaggressions. For example, in a study conducted by Gause (2021), one of the participants recounted experiences where she was presumed to be an assistant rather than a leader and faced inquiries about her work despite having professional qualifications that equaled or exceeded others. This participant encountered instances of being demeaned during meetings in the presence of others. The data suggest that microinsults, such as ascriptions of intelligence, criminality assumptions, and pathologizing cultural values, are the primary forms of microaggressions experienced by Black women (Sue et al., 2007). Administrators employ adaptive coping strategies (e.g., open communication, establishing support networks, and self-care) and maladaptive (e.g., avoidance and overworking; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020) to navigate the resulting stress.

Young and Anderson (2021) revealed the intricate interplay between macro-level experiences of racism and sexism and their manifestation as hierarchical microaggressive intersectionalities in higher education. Drawing on the narratives of faculty and administrators, Young and Anderson found that microaggressions related to race and gender were experienced in higher education institutional positions. The narratives showed notions of de-professionalization, invisibility, and fatigue. These findings indicate the broader societal stereotypes and norms that negatively influence the campus climate for those experiencing hierarchical microaggressive intersectionalities (Young & Anderson, 2021).

The influence of workplace discrimination on Black women administrators within higher education is profound, extending to their career advancement and well-being (Mitchell, 2021; Njoku & Evans, 2022). Overt forms of discrimination can adversely influence morale and trajectory (Mitchell, 2021; Njoku & Evans, 2022). Additionally, microaggressions can significantly contribute to administrators' decisions about staying or leaving their positions (Townsend, 2021).

Work-Life Balance Challenges

Balancing work responsibilities alongside personal and family commitments presents a distinct challenge for Black women in administrative roles. These challenges arise from societal norms and inadequate support systems (Arjun, 2019; Townsend, 2019, 2021). Black women in midlevel administration positions find that their aspirations may act as obstacles to their advancement goals by hindering their capacity to establish a sense of balance between their personal and professional identities (Arjun, 2019).

Arjun (2019) further explored the experiences of Black women occupying midlevel administrative roles within predominantly white institutions. Intricate and ongoing negotiations mark these experiences as these women strive to balance an additional workload with which their white counterparts do not have to contend (Arjun, 2019; Butler, 2021; Townsend, 2019, 2021). The additional workload experienced by Black female administrators in predominantly white institutions, sometimes referred to as *other mothering* (Collins, 2000), consists of providing mentorships, guidance, and emotional support to Black students in ways that go beyond the usual expectations (Butler, 2021).

Other mothering is closely related to the concept of the *Black tax*. Townsend (2021) discussed the Black tax, where participants emphasized the burdens of being overworked. This

notion encompasses engaging in student events, offering extended listening, participating in informal counseling sessions, and advocating for Black students in various capacities (Townsend, 2019). Townsend (2021) noted that these additional obligations were unique to Black faculty and staff as they aimed to provide safe spaces for their Black students.

Resistance to Change and Advocacy

Educators promoting change, fostering diversity, and embracing inclusivity can encounter resistance from colleagues or superiors who may not fully grasp the unique challenges that Black women administrators confront, as discussed by Iheduru-Anderson et al. (2022) and Williams and Lewis (2021). In settings primarily composed of white individuals, Black professionals encounter baseless criticism and antagonism of their actions, contributions, and presence, indicating that their presence may be unsettling the comfort of white peers (Williams & Lewis, 2021). To illustrate, Black female academic nurse administrators interviewed by Iheduru-Anderson et al. (2022) reported feeling apprehensive about promoting racial equity because they felt at high risk for backlash and alienation.

Black individuals striving for equitable racial representation may encounter apathy or adverse reactions (Williams & Lewis, 2021). Black female academic nurse administrators found that their department heads or deans avoided discussions about race; when confronted with the issue, these leaders typically rejected the existence of racism, citing color blindness or similar tropes (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2022). This phenomenon can show *white fragility*, signifying the fracturing of established social norms within the institutions of these Black female administrators (Williams & Lewis, 2021).

Institutional fragility often gives rise to deliberate and well-orchestrated strategies aimed at quelling any opposition, further entrenching the supremacy of whiteness (Williams & Lewis,

2021). As elucidated by Ash et al. (2020), many diversity initiatives, especially about race, tend to overlook systemic issues while unfairly placing blame on individuals of color. This failure shows a fundamental flaw in diversity initiatives rooted in prevailing white ideologies (Ash et al., 2020). Leaders should recognize that authentic progress requires confronting and rectifying the structural and cultural underpinnings that perpetuate inequities (Ash et al., 2020).

Invisibility and Hypervisibility

Although the contrasting experiences of being unnoticed and excessively scrutinized influence women in social contexts, these phenomena significantly influence Black women in leadership roles (Dickens et al., 2019; Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2022). Invisibility emerges as a struggle, where the contributions and achievements of Black women administrators can be overshadowed or unrecognized within the broader institutional context (Beatty et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021). Despite Black women's significant roles, the nuanced experiences and perspectives they bring to the table can sometimes be marginalized or overlooked (Beatty et al., 2020). This lack of visibility undermines their accomplishments and diminishes the potential for diverse viewpoints to shape decision-making processes and institutional policies, which may negatively influence career advancement (Mitchell, 2021).

Conversely, hypervisibility is an equally intricate facet of Black female administrators' experiences. Black female administrators can find themselves hyper-scrutinized and closely monitored because of their minority status within predominantly white settings (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Mitchell, 2021). This issue can lead to feeling tokenized or held to different standards than their counterparts (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Their intense scrutiny often stems from their distinct identities, making their actions and decisions subject to heightened examination, often with implications beyond their roles (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019).

When Black women embrace their genuine selves by expressing their unique gender and racial identities, they can enhance their well-being (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Knowing one's genuine self can also lead to heightened scrutiny and the risk of being typecast because of the heightened visibility of these identities (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Mitchell, 2021). A high-ranking African-American female administrator employed at a predominantly white research university in the southwest United States reported feeling highly visible and scrutinized by subordinates, peers, and superiors (Lloyd-Jones, 2009). Similarly, Iheduru-Anderson et al. (2022) found that Black female academic administrators felt hyper-visible and highly scrutinized from experiencing pressure to be inauthentic. Conforming to the dominant group's norms might smooth the path to career advancement, but it could inadvertently bolster prevailing models of leadership centered on white males in power (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019).

These dual experiences, often intertwined, can create a challenging environment for Black female administrators (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Mitchell, 2021). Striking a balance between being recognized for their contributions and not being singled out for their identity requires navigating a delicate path (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2022). Addressing invisibility and hypervisibility is essential for cultivating an inclusive environment where leaders value the full spectrum of talents, perspectives, and leadership that Black women administrators bring to higher education institutions (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2022). By acknowledging and actively addressing these experiences, institution leaders and staff can work toward creating a more equitable and supportive space for all administrative team members (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2022).

Isolation and Loneliness

Black women administrators working within predominantly white institutions often find themselves immersed in environments characterized by a lack of hospitality, insensitivity, and an overarching sense of isolation (Arjun, 2019). This isolating dynamic is exemplified in various instances that have been well documented. For example, Arms Almengor (2020), a restorative justice coordinator of color functioning within a predominantly white school, expressed feeling detached when challenging punitive justice practices. Similarly, findings from a study conducted by Iheduru-Anderson et al. (2022) showed accounts of individuals being lone voices when addressing race-related matters.

Personal narratives also show the isolation experienced by Black women administrators. Grooms (2022), in an autoethnographic exploration of her experiences, recounted being physically relocated from her office to a different floor, effectively separated from her colleagues in the student-services division. The reasoning behind this move was to provide her, a Black female student affairs administrator, with the environment necessary for effective job performance (Grooms, 2022). The timing of this move was notable, occurring shortly after Grooms (2022) overheard comments from her white peers that perpetuated stereotypes about the volume of conversation between her and her Black students and the need for a quiet environment. This sense of isolation, stemming from the absence of peers who share similar experiences, can significantly influence job satisfaction and overall well-being (Chance, 2022). The emotional toll of being isolated within one's workplace can erode morale, hinder professional growth, and create an environment of discomfort and disengagement (Arms Almengor, 2020; Chance, 2022; Grooms, 2022).

Mental and Emotional Toll

The journey of Black female administrators within predominantly white institutions can be riddled with obstacles. This demanding path can significantly affect their mental and emotional well-being. The repercussions of these challenges are far-reaching, influencing their overall job satisfaction and the sustainability of their roles over time (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2022). Within this context, as documented by Burton et al. (2020), the costs or tolls endured by these administrators are extensive and impactful. These include internalizing gendered racism, self-doubt regarding leadership abilities and competence, frustration at navigating a gendered racist environment, and a sense of resignation in the face of these adversities.

For Black female academic nurse administrators, the situation can be particularly draining. Iheduru-Anderson et al. (2022) noted that many Black female academic nurse administrators found themselves emotionally and physically exhausted because of the barrage of encountered racial assaults and microaggressions. They needed time and space to recuperate and restore their emotional equilibrium (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2022).

Grooms (2022) recounted her experiences as a student affairs administrator in a predominantly white institution. She described feeling suffocated and constricted because of intimidation, white colleagues' complicit behaviors, and a constant barrage of microaggressions (Grooms, 2022). This emotional strain became particularly pronounced in her final two years of employment (Grooms, 2022).

Recognizing the gendered racism that Black female school leaders confront and the immense energy they must expend to navigate it, prior research emphasizes the urgency of addressing this issue within educational leadership and professional development programs (Burton et al., 2020). Furthermore, these findings show the significance of active involvement by white allies in implementing anti-racist practices (Grooms, 2022). Shifting the burden of

addressing gendered racism onto white allies becomes crucial in disrupting the perpetuation of practices that favor whiteness within educational leadership (Burton et al., 2020).

The toll of navigating the complex intersectionality of race and gender on Black female administrators within predominantly white institutions cannot be underestimated, as shown by Burton et al. (2020), Grooms (2022), and Iheduru-Anderson et al. (2022). This research showed the substantial and multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by these administrators. It is crucial to recognize and acknowledge these challenges and take proactive steps to deconstruct the systemic structures perpetuating such inequities to create a truly equitable, inclusive, and supportive environment for all administrators, regardless of their backgrounds (Burton et al., 2020).

Sense of Belonging

The sense of belonging for Black female administrators within higher education is influenced by various obstacles with far-reaching implications for their success, well-being, and retention in academia (Cooke & Odejimi, 2021; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). These administrators may lack the agency to control their unique qualities and feelings of belonging within their workplaces (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). This predicament further exacerbates their struggles to cultivate a genuine sense of place and inclusion (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019).

The struggle for Black female administrators to cultivate a sense of belonging is pronounced within prominent research-intensive institutions and predominantly white institutions, such as the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Kentucky (Kelly et al., 2019). These institutions have garnered attention for fostering environments where individuals from racial minority backgrounds, especially women, encounter substantial challenges concerning their sense of belonging and ability to achieve success (Kelly et al., 2019). This issue

suggests that barriers to belonging are not only individual but also systemic, remaining deeply ingrained within the organizational culture of these institutions and others like them (Kelly et al., 2019).

McCluney and Rabelo (2019) explored the intricate relationship between belongingness and distinctiveness for Black women administrators. Regardless of whether the sense of belonging is high or low, these dimensions interweave to create circumstances of visibility that significantly shape perceptions, evaluations, and interactions directed toward Black women in professional settings (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). These instances of visibility are not neutral; they carry a gendered and racialized undertone perpetuated by hierarchical structures that intentionally establish whiteness and masculinity as the standard within organizations (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019).

Wright-Mair (2020) took a closer look at the role of mentoring relationships in nurturing a sense of belonging for racially minoritized faculty members within predominantly white colleges and universities. The study's findings show a robust network of mentoring connections that offer racially minoritized faculty a pathway to fostering belonging (Wright-Mair, 2020). These relationships span from holistic and critically conscious colleague mentoring to supportive peer mentorship, student mentorship, and community-based mentorship connections (Wright-Mair, 2020). Wright-Mair (2020) indicated the significance of mentorship for professional growth by creating a supportive community that combats the isolation many racially minoritized faculty members experience within predominantly white institutions.

These studies collectively showed the complex dynamics that shaped the sense of belonging for Black female administrators within higher education. From systemic challenges to individual struggles, the barriers to belonging have influenced administrators' well-being,

academic success, and retention (Cooke & Odejimi, 2021; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). The assertion that these issues carry a gendered and racialized nature serves as a reminder of the ongoing need for systemic change. As highlighted by Wright-Mair (2020), mentorship emerges as a critical avenue for nurturing belonging and creating a sense of community within the often-isolating landscape of predominantly white institutions.

Overcoming Adversity

Black female administrators within higher education have demonstrated an inspiring ability to overcome a range of challenges (Burton et al., 2020; Chance, 2021; Simms, 2018; Williams, 2019). Scholars have noted that the challenges faced by Black female administrators have fueled the development of essential leadership skills (Chance, 2021). Through their resilience, these administrators transform adversity into a catalyst for personal and professional growth, drawing strength from motivations such as family, mentors, community support, and cultural identity (Chance, 2021).

Simms (2018) offered valuable insights into Black women's strategies to ascend to senior leadership roles. Themes like self-confidence, support networks, risk-taking, and building relationships showed the multifaceted nature of Black female administrators' journeys (Simms, 2018). In a parallel study, Njoku and Evans (2022) recommended that Black female administrators employ strategies to address the unique challenges that they face. These strategies may include practicing self-care, blocking time away from work for rejuvenation, connecting with an inner circle of peers or friends, and committing time for professional development.

Burton et al. (2020) explored the coping mechanisms used by Black women administrators to persevere through their leadership roles. Adaptive strategies, such as leveraging faith, professional networks, and advocacy, play pivotal roles in addressing gendered racism

(Burton et al., 2020). Although less constructive, maladaptive strategies also serve as mechanisms for managing experiences of adversity (Burton et al., 2020). Burton et al. (2020) discussed the complex balancing act these administrators undertake to overcome challenges. These women emphasize the significance of pushing for transformative change while serving as inspirational figures for students aiming high (Simms, 2018). Their experiences further illuminate their transformative influence on their institutions and broader communities (Simms, 2018).

Black women in higher education may pursue other employment instead of navigating institutional betrayal, inequities, and toxic workplace dynamics (Williams, 2019). The decision to opt out of these environments shows the resilience required to confront such adversity (Williams, 2019). Williams' (2019) findings echo the overarching theme of resilience and determination evident in the previous studies, as Black women administrators grapple with external challenges and internal struggles related to well-being and identity.

In weaving together these studies, a comprehensive picture emerges of how Black women administrators in higher education triumph over adversity. Their resilience, strategies, and support networks form the bedrock of their success (Burton et al., 2020; Chance, 2021; Simms, 2018; Williams, 2019). These women surmount challenges and transform them into opportunities for growth, empowerment, and systemic change (Burton et al., 2020; Chance, 2021; Simms, 2018; Williams, 2019). Their ability to navigate adversity shows their crucial roles as leaders and change agents within their institutions and beyond.

Summary

This literature review focused on diversity and inclusion programs, social justice policies, and restorative justice practices in higher education by examining the experiences of Black

female administrators and the impact on their sense of belonging. The review highlighted the importance of social justice in education and effective leadership practices. Restorative justice seeks nonpunitive approaches to address harm, particularly in education; however, racial disparities in disciplinary actions can still pose challenges.

Although much of the diversity literature focuses on student diversity, recognizing the contributions of diverse faculty, staff, and leadership remains crucial. Chief diversity officers play a role in promoting inclusion and diversity but face challenges in bringing about substantial change. The representation of Black female administrators in higher education remains inadequate, hindering equitable policies and affecting campus climate and decision-making. Intersectional challenges related to race and gender result in unique forms of discrimination and marginalization. Despite these challenges, Black female administrators contribute valuable perspectives and strengths to leadership roles.

Persistent barriers to career advancement for Black female administrators include limited access to networks, unequal compensation, and inadequate mentorship opportunities. Black women face the challenge of authentically expressing themselves while adhering to established norms. Mentorship is vital for their career development; despite systemic challenges, many exhibit resilience and a commitment to positive change. Black women may advocate for campus equity, diversity, and inclusion by using their positions to drive policy changes and foster institutional reforms.

Black female administrators demonstrate resilience in overcoming challenges and transforming adversity into growth opportunities. Some may leave toxic environments, but their resilience underpins their success by shaping them as leaders and catalysts for change. In conclusion, the literature showed the pivotal role of Black female administrators in higher

education as agents of transformative change. The review showed the importance of addressing barriers, promoting representation, and recognizing Black women's distinct contributions to cultivating diverse and enriched campus environments.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

To recall, the purpose of this qualitative critical ethnography was to explore my struggle with identity as a Black female administrator in predominantly white higher education spaces of a large private catholic university in one of the most diverse urban areas in the world. By evaluating my experiences with microaggression, race, class, and privilege using a critical lens, I detailed how I navigated these academic spaces and how the intersections of my identity influenced my sense of mattering and belonging. Chapter 2 presented an in-depth review of the literature regarding the present study. Chapter 3 outlines the rationale and methods taken to carry out an autoethnographic study of my journey navigating predominantly white spaces of higher education as a Black female administrator. My choice of an autoethnographic method was best described in this quote by the great Dr. Maya Angelou: "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you."

This chapter describes the methods and rationale used to conduct an autoethnographic study of my journey through the predominantly white spaces of higher education as a Black woman. The chapter begins with a reiteration of the research problem and research questions. Next, the research methodology and design for the present study are presented, followed by an overview of the research procedures. Next, the population and sample are discussed, along with the role of the researcher. Following the role of the researcher is a discussion of the sources of data for the present study. Next, the techniques for data collection and data analysis are presented, along with the trustworthiness of the study. Chapter 3 concludes with ethical considerations and a summary of key points.

Problem

The problem addressed in the present study was the identity struggles of Black female administrators in predominantly white higher education spaces. Black women have been at the forefront of education, including higher education. Mosley (1980) referred to Black women in higher education as endangered when she referenced Catherine Ferguson, an enslaved woman who purchased her freedom in 1793 and opened Kathy Ferguson's School for the Poor in New York City, becoming the first known Black female teacher and administrator. Mosley noted that Black women have been pioneers in education, even though historical references reflected little about their roles. In the late 1960s, affirmative action was added to the Civil Rights Act, giving momentum to higher education to recruit Black faculty and administrators. According to Mosley, Black educators in white academia remained pathetically small despite these nudges in public policy.

The alienation of Black female administrators continues in predominantly white spaces of higher education as Black women struggle to find their identities. Using the framework of intersectionality and Black feminist theories, as Howard-Vital (1989) suggested, I took an aggressive, unrelenting lead in identifying myself to dismantle the distortions and perspectives others created. Howard-Vital (1989) cited Washington (1975), who stated, "People other than the Black woman herself try to define who she is and what she is supposed to look, act, and sound like. And most of these creations bear very little resemblance to real, live Black women" (p. 190). With this spirit of a lived experience as a Black woman in the white spaces of higher education, I used this autoethnography to authenticate my story.

As noted in Chapter 1, I was nervous about offering an autoethnography as my dissertation research. I prepared literature reviews and read the works of many accomplished

scholars throughout my doctoral program. However, I only partially heard the author's voice. When I read my first autoethnography, I was immediately engaged and realized it was my voice that I wanted to be heard. I wanted to share my experience within the cultural context of identity navigation in predominantly white higher education spaces. Having avidly journaled for many years, I often reflected on my experience within a circumstance and how it made me feel. I often blamed myself for my lack of understanding. However, I now know that although I was responsible for my reactions, the predominantly white higher education spaces that I occupied as a Black female administrator were never meant to include me from the start. As I thought about it, I realized I had collected data for the last 25 years as I struggled to find my identity in these white halls of academia. I already prepared for this moment, truth, and time.

I decided to share my most recent professional experience as a Black female administrator within predominantly white higher education spaces. Having come to higher education from corporate America, where I worked from the 1980s through the late 1990s in diversity, equity, and inclusion before it became a catch term. I came to my new career in academia with expectations of being surrounded by scholars who saw the world more broadly than society and from a perspective that would be diverse, equitable, and inclusive by nature. My heart breaks at the naivety of that thought. It was actually for the first time that I encountered experiences of extreme microaggression, privilege, classism, and racial discrimination.

I found some of the narrowest minds I had ever encountered among researchers, the published, and educators. These minds refused to see another point of view. These minds were closed to common empathy for another person's plight. These minds pushed private agendas with no regard for others and consequences. Of course, this issue was not in everyone I encountered, but it was enough to give a well-blended soup a bit of a bitter taste. I questioned, “How was this

allowed, and why did no one care? Did they not see it, or did they not see it as their problem?" Then, I decided it would be my choice; I could make a difference and, at minimum, provide a community for other Black female administrators. I had a right to be different, heard, and sit at the table. I would not be defined by others; I would create my own definition. One that represented who I was as a person and professional.

Research Questions

The research questions were developed to correspond to my theoretical framework. My unique identity must be considered within my experiences in white spaces as my experiences may differ from other women and Blacks (most notably, Black men). My research questions were developed in accordance with insight from the Black feminist framework (Becks-Moody, 2004; Collins, 2000; Muldrow, 2016), which gave a voice to marginalized Black women. In this critical autoethnography, I created the following research questions to guide my study:

RQ1: In what ways did my personal experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces shape my identity and sense of belonging in these spaces?

RQ2: How does the intersection of my race and gender contribute to my professional experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces?

RQ2a: What unique challenges arise from this intersection?

RQ2b: How are these challenges successfully managed?

Research Design

The research methodology for the present study was qualitative research. Qualitative research is an open-ended approach to research used to explore broad ideas (Liamputtong, 2020). A qualitative researcher does not address specific variables but identifies and explores a broad, open-ended central research phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research is

descriptive in addition to being exploratory, making it ideal for long-form descriptions of the subjective experiences of the study participants (Liamputtong, 2020). The qualitative approach involves collecting long-form and in-depth data from a small number of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative inquiry is also deeply contextual in nature. Rather than seeking to extract the research phenomenon from its context, the qualitative researcher studies the phenomenon *in situ* and gleans potentially valuable data regarding how the phenomenon is situated within its context and how that context shapes the manifestation of the phenomenon.

A qualitative methodology was appropriate to the present study for several reasons. First, I was concerned with a central phenomenon, namely the navigation of identity by Black female administrators in predominantly white higher education spaces. Second, the study was exploratory in nature. The research purpose was to explore, and the research questions were open-ended qualitative questions. Third, the phenomenon of the navigation of identity by Black female administrators in predominantly white higher education spaces was inherently contextual, given the focus on spaces. Indeed, the specific context of a given higher educational institution likely had a great bearing on the navigation of identity by Black female administrators. Therefore, the qualitative methodology was well aligned with all the major aspects of the present study, making the qualitative approach ideal.

Autoethnography

There are many different qualitative research designs. Of these designs, I used an autoethnography qualitative research design that was descriptive and embodied my experiences. According to Cooper and Lilyea (2022), autoethnography fills a gap in traditional research where a researcher's voice is not overtly included as part of the research. This type of narrative research connects personal experiences to cultural concerns in the larger world. As noted by Cooper and

Lilyea (2022), an autoethnography research design focuses on a person's unique storytelling, paying careful attention to what is being told and the telling of the story. Cooper and Lilyea (2022) also noted that the researcher must "honor your voice and what you seek to convey" (p. 202). As discussed in the introduction, I used autoethnography to provide my truths as a Black woman based on the many intersections of my life. As Crenshaw (1989, 1991) noted, these intersections were unique to me and cannot be minimized based on any one group's identity (i.e., as a woman). Per Poulos (20221), although the charge of autoethnography is just one person's perspective, it can be powerful, moving, and transformative—"ultimately, we all work from our perspective" (p. 77).

Within the broader ethnographic paradigm, the specific sub-design of critical autoethnography has certain characteristics. In particular, critical autoethnography entails an especially reflexive version of autoethnography that focuses on seeking to understand positionality (Holman-Jones, 2016). A recent version of the design, critical autoethnography, is intended to enable in-depth exploration of a researcher's relationship to structures of power, norms, and the extent to which structural factors such as race, gender, and the intersections thereof have shaped their experiences (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020). In this regard, critical autoethnography is well suited to the exploration of race, gender, and identity (Holman-Jones, 2016).

A critical autoethnographic research design was appropriate to the present study for several reasons. Foremost, I used an autoethnographic design to use the most complete resource available to me to answer the questions at the core of the study. Because my own experiences were deeply relevant to the study content, failing to use them meant needing to rely on the less complete experiences of others on a topic I knew intimately well. Moreover, by examining my

own experiences first, I made my future research on this topic more reflexive because a critical examination of my own experiences in this study made me more aware of them in the future.

In addition, I used the research design to address the research questions more authentically. Although the meaning was unique to me, it represented the culture of the white higher education spaces for others like me. In writing my story as a woman of color, I provided my perspective of the world as a student, administrator, and adjunct faculty member by traveling one of the many roads to multiple destinations in higher education (Eisner, 2008, p. 22). As suggested by Eisner (1997), I used my story to expand the circle of communication and forward human understanding.

Overall, critical autoethnography was aligned because I intended to provide personal insight from firsthand experiences that could be shared through an accessible medium and used to reflect on current institutional practices as an instrument for change. In addition, the more specific sub-design of critical autoethnography was appropriate because the experiences I sought to document and reflect on were experiences defined along racial and gender lines. I used a critical autoethnography design with tools to analyze how these factors and the structural ideas attached to them served to affect my identity and shape the experiences presented in this study.

Research Procedures

The research procedures for this critical autoethnography were relatively straightforward. I was the only participant in the research, as implied by the use of a critical autoethnography research design. Throughout my journey, I reflected on and compiled data relating to my personal lived experiences as a Black female administrator at a predominantly white university. The data sources included reflective journaling, field notes, personal reflections, and artifacts.

The data were analyzed using a qualitative thematic analysis approach. The following subsections address the specifics of how the research procedures are conducted.

Population/Sample

The overall population was the largest group under study in a given study (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010). In this study, the population was all Black female administrators in higher education. Within the population, the target population was the subset from which the sample was recruited (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010). In this study, the target population was Black female administrators in higher education who worked at predominantly white institutions. This target population was chosen to allow focus on the central research phenomenon, namely the navigation of identity by Black female administrators in predominantly white higher education spaces. There were no specific inclusion or exclusion criteria for the present study because of its autoethnographic nature and focus on my individual experiences. This study occurred from a reflexive review of my experiences as I journeyed through a large private, predominantly white university in the suburban area of Queens. New York City was one of the most diverse cities in the world; of its boroughs, Queens was widely considered particularly rich in diversity. Yet that same diversity wasn't reflected in the campus culture, especially in the administrative roles and especially for Black women.

I presented a subjective personal interpretation of my research in the predominantly white higher education spaces to allow data and the research design to emerge as I participated and described myself as a member of a subculture. In this research design, the subculture consisted of a large private university. Given that autoethnography comprises a study of the self, the sample was only me as the researcher; no other participants were recruited. However, the sample included the full range of my experiences of the central research phenomenon, and I explored

those experiences in a much greater reflexive depth than I could the experiences of others. Therefore, the self was the necessary sample and a sufficient sample for collecting rich, in-depth, and meaningful data.

Role of the Researcher

According to Chang (2016), unlike the role of a researcher in most qualitative research methods, specifically ethnography, the researcher searches for an understanding of others (culture/society) through self in autoethnography. In describing the researcher's role in autoethnography, Chang (2016) and Duckart (2005) stated that the self is a subject to investigate and a lens to look through to understand a societal culture. The societal culture in my research was that of the predominantly white higher education spaces. The lens was the Black feminist view to show my experiences as a woman of color. Here, the role of the self as the researcher was to share my stories and allow the reader to understand those experiences. I aimed to show how such experiences shaped my identity, sense of belonging, and mattering in particular spaces as a Black woman.

In a review of *Autoethnography; Understanding Qualitative Research*, Adams et al. (2015) noted that the history of autoethnography dates back to 1975 when Karl Heider used the term "auto-ethnography" to describe a study in which cultural members gave accounts about their culture. Through the 1980s, autoethnography became more aligned with sociology and anthropology researchers as the study of women and gender writing advocated for personal narrative, subjectivity, and reflexivity in research (Adams et al., 2015). As the use of autoethnography continued to morph through the next few decades, today, "autoethnography acknowledges how and why identities matter and includes and interrogates experiences tied to cultural differences" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 19).

For me, identity was an essential aspect of autoethnography because it gave me, as a researcher, a voice in both my experience and the larger culture within higher education. In this autoethnography, my voice gave awareness and intended purpose to my experience to teach others. The outcome of autoethnography, as so eloquently noted by Adams et al. (2015), is to "form the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into an idea, then into a more tangible action" (p. 20).

As Chang (2016) noted, researchers have used autoethnography to explore virtually any aspect of one's life as a research focus. Chang (2016) also noted that researchers could use broad scopes of their lives, "growing up Korean" to more specific topics in their lives, "the Korean female identity" (p. 20). As autoethnography tells a story, it can range from emotive to informative in scope, putting the researcher in the story as a participant. The outcome of autoethnographic research allows a researcher to understand themselves better and their experiences within the culture in which they exist. Autoethnography can be seen as a tool that gives perspective and understanding to the reader about how cultures can be experienced based on individual differences. This process, in turn, provides a platform for change in cultural systems that may not be seen as equitable for all. Chang (2016) noted that autoethnography engages in the type of self-transformation that provides healing from possible past emotional scars.

Although autoethnography has become more popular as a research method, it has advantages and disadvantages like any other form of research. Chang (2016) provided a synopsis of the challenges and benefits faced when using autoethnography. The strengths include the following:

1. Offers a research method friendly to researchers and readers

2. Enhances cultural understanding of self and others
3. May transform self and others to motivate them to work toward cross-cultural coalition building

The weaknesses include the following:

1. Excessive focus on self in isolation from others
2. Overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation
3. Exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source
4. Negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives
5. Inappropriate application of the autoethnography label

Knowing the strengths and weaknesses ahead of time helped the autoethnography remain authentic in its narrative. The passion of my story drove the research toward truth as it called for a form of restorative justice, either culturally or personally.

Within this study, I was the sole researcher and participant of this critical autoethnography. As the researcher, my goal was to collate and write about a personally relevant lived experience as a Black female administrator and situate that experience within the context of predominantly white higher education spaces of a large private catholic university set in one of the most diverse urban areas in the world. The entire data collection, analysis, and interpretation process centered on a rigorous reflective process.

To mitigate my possible biases, I did not rely on one but three sources of data to be able to triangulate the perceptions. I also enlisted the help of a proxy to interview me and check my transcript to ensure accuracy. I described in the interview with artifacts and my insights about the artifacts. Thus, I could share my story through the lens of my unique experiences as an intersection of a Black female administrator, among other roles, while maintaining credibility

through the evidence presented by the artifacts. The artifacts were mementos of my experiences within the social context of the study setting. My insights about the artifacts added to the richness of the data as I used my journals to create comparisons and contrasts between the interview data and artifacts.

Worldview

The worldview that drove my passion for critical autoethnographic research was transformative. As a Black woman, my experiences in predominantly white higher education spaces were shaped by the intersection of my various identities. In this autoethnography, I explored the unique challenges I faced when finding my place in these academic settings and how my experiences could help inform and improve the experiences of other Black women. Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that this philosophical worldview focuses on the needs of individuals in our society who may be marginalized and disenfranchised. Poulos (2021) referred to critical autoethnography as an approach to culture that interrogates the ideology, power, and structural constraints of one in a cultural system into direct conversation with audiences. Creswell and Creswell (2018) referenced Mertens (2010) when suggesting that a transformative worldview holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression at whatever level it occurs.

The transformative worldview is newer to the field of research developing in the 1980s and 1990s, as noted in Creswell and Creswell (2018). Although no single body of literature defines this worldview, transformative writers draw from the works of Marx, Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas, and Freire (Neuman, 2009, as cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For me, autoethnography was used to personalize and humanize researchers' experiences to provide a greater in-depth understanding of and steps toward belonging, mattering, and restorative justice.

Offering this worldview through the lens of Black feminist theory added value to the depth of my journey as a woman of color when encountering issues of power, discrimination, and stereotyping in the predominantly white higher education spaces I navigated. The Black feminist lens allowed my experiences with racism, sexism, and classism to be seen as inseparable and different from those of white women, as they were simultaneously addressed. The Black feminist view is often seen through the eyes of well-known fearless Black female leaders, such as Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, and countless others. However, the everyday woman of color also struggles through the white spaces they enter, telling the larger story of cultural systems that have yet to evolve.

As noted earlier, using a Black feminist perspective as a framework allowed me to explore the intersections of my identity; it also allowed me to present my experiences through my whole self. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) set the foundational work for using intersectionality as an analytical tool to deconstruct interlocking systems of oppression and as a scholarly framework that highlights the lived experiences of historically marginalized people (Cloras et al., 2017; Dhamon, 2011). As Cloras et al. (2017) noted, intersectionality allows researchers to consider the structures and systems that intersect, highlighting differences in lived experiences based on the multiple identities of individuals and how these differences present in group disparities. By sharing my own experiences based on the intersectionalities of my being, I may cause positive change by showing systems of stagnation that have caused Black women to feel devalued in predominantly white higher education spaces.

Sources of Data

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested that multiple forms of data should be used to ensure authenticity. Autoethnography does not differ significantly from the same principles

practiced in data collection for ethnography, except for the open acknowledgment of the individual as the primary source of information in the research (Chang, 2016). The idea motivating qualitative data collection is to select sites, documents, and visual material purposefully that will best aid a researcher in understanding the problem and research question (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I used the following data collection methods to adapt my approach as unique to my personal experiences and research questions.

Personal Journaling

The first source of data was personal journaling. Reflective journaling as a data collection strategy afforded a strong way to access the experiences and long-term feelings of participants (Hubbs & Brand, 2005). Because journaling occurred beyond a single point in time and as a continuous process, it was ideal to examine the evolution of a person's thoughts on the topic over time (Ortlipp, 2008). In addition, journaling created a comprehensive record of my experiences in the sense that as I journaled over time, different facets of my experiences and recollections were recorded. Piecing together these different accounts of the same experiences helped to create a more holistic understanding of the underlying subjective reality I represented. Furthermore, the use of reflective journaling on a frequent basis kept the study topic fresh in my mind throughout the research process, thereby enhancing the efficacy of the second source of data detailed below. Therefore, keeping a reflective journal and making entries over time served as the first and primary method of data collection for the present study.

Self-Reflection Interview

The second source of data was an interview, which helped me focus on self-reflection. In a practical sense, self-reflection entailed the real-time documentation of relevant thoughts and experiences. To facilitate self-reflection, I endeavored to participate in an interview. Wanting to

respond authentically and provide another level of validity to addressing my studies' research questions, I decided to be interviewed as my primary research method.

I purposefully chose a Black female who was a practicing catholic, had spent time as an administrator in academia, specifically higher education, and had earned a doctoral degree. The individual was referred to as the interviewer. Making this choice and using the mentioned criteria when selecting an interviewer gave me someone who could relate to me and ask difficult questions while understanding the sensitive nature of self-reflection. Possibly having had some shared experiences based on their personality, I could find comfort and remain more authentic than using a white woman or a man of any race who might not be able to relate to my experiences from even a level of human empathy.

Using someone to ask me questions during the interview phase of my autoethnography offered several advantages. Firstly, it introduces objectivity into the process, allowing for a more balanced exploration of my experiences. Secondly, a skilled interviewer could delve deeper into specific aspects, providing richer data and a more comprehensive understanding. Thirdly, having an interviewer provided emotional support, creating a comfortable space for discussing sensitive topics. Additionally, it enhanced reflexivity by prompting new insights and perspectives. Moreover, using an external interviewer helped minimize bias and added methodological rigor to my study, enhancing the credibility of the findings. Overall, involving someone in the interview contributed significantly to the quality and depth of my autoethnographic study.

Additionally, I kept a dedicated notepad on hand whenever possible during the study period. Whenever relevant events occurred, or significant thoughts on the central phenomenon occurred, these were documented. Hence, the self-reflection included comprehensive field notes that resulted from observing and recording personal experiences in real-time. Although these

reflective notes could be used as a reference for journaling at the day's end, they were preserved individually as a separate source of data.

Artifact Collection

The final source of data was artifact collection. Physical or virtual copies of relevant artifacts were made to document their existence and influence on my experiences. Artifacts included public documents from the university, policies, meeting minutes, books, or pictures, in addition to others that arose throughout the research process. Artifacts served as a way to ground my autoethnographic experiences more deeply in physical reality.

Data Collection

Data collection proceeded as follows. Before commencing the research, IRB approval was sought and obtained. No site authorization was required as I was the only participant in the study. For this reason, IRB approval was expected to remain quick and straightforward. Once I achieved IRB approval, data collection commenced. The data were collected over 6 months. During this time, the previously noted data collection methods were used to describe my experience as a Black woman struggling with identity through the healing process of restorative justice. I engaged in continuous reflective journaling, an interview with periodic self-reflection, and artifact collection when possible.

Journaling entailed deliberately sitting down to write a journal entry using a physical journal. I first spent some time reflecting and then attempted to write at least a page in the journal regarding a relevant experience. The journaling occurred in a quiet and private location, with a closed door and no one to distract me from journaling. I attempted to complete a reflective journal entry every day during the study period. However, it was allowable that a day's entry was

skipped if I had no particularly relevant thoughts that day, so long as a more substantive entry was made at least once a week.

Additionally, participating in the interview allowed me to focus on my authentic feelings regarding themes central to this present research. To help inform my journaling and as a general source of data, I kept a dedicated research notebook on my person throughout the process. Whenever I had thoughts that offered relevant insights for the present study, I noted these thoughts in the research journal.

In addition, any daily experiences that in some way brought to mind the research topic were documented. Throughout the data collection, I remained on alert for potential artifacts to collect. Artifacts were collected if a physical or virtual version of them was available for me to collect and they had any significance to the topic of the present study. Reflection was conducted on an ongoing basis in addition to whenever I wrote a reflective journal. Notes from my reflections were kept in the research notebook. With respect to artifacts, their collection occurred whenever a relevant artifact was identified. I either took a physical copy of that artifact (such as a document) or took a picture of it using a phone camera.

I planned to help the reader understand my experiences with identity struggles within the context of my experience and from the stance of the larger social culture of the predominantly white spaces of higher education that I inhabited. I drew on the cultural competence for equity and inclusion (CCEI) framework of Goodman (2020) and Karp (2019). As Goodman (2020) noted, the more people can appreciate the many dimensions of an individual and how they interact, the greater the understanding and ability to appreciate them, and the less likelihood to rely on stereotypes to define them. Karp's (2019) work was first introduced to colleges and universities as a response to student misconduct. However, it has become used as a form of

healing through circle practices. Allowing my experiences to be shared through the understanding of my intersectionalities within the culture of my environment may give the reader a better understanding of my experiences and the impact on my identity and feelings toward mattering and belonging in these spaces.

Data Analysis

I used three data sources for this analysis: personal journals, a self-reflection interview, and artifact collection. These data sources were analyzed thematically following the six-step framework devised by Clarke et al. (2015). The six steps were as follows: (a) building familiarity with the data, (b) open coding, (c) developing themes, (d) verifying themes, (e) naming themes, and (f) compiling the report (Clarke et al., 2015). To aid in the storage, management, organization, and visualization of the data, I used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo version 14. This six-step process and the use of NVivo facilitated the reflexive thematic analysis process.

Building familiarity with the data was a rigorous step of documenting casual observations of trends in the data. I started with the self-reflection interview by listening to the interview recordings. The listening phase of data familiarization did not include notetaking. However, it focused on active listening, in which I centered on the primary areas of the interview, including the segments concerning my personal experience of identity in higher education and the issues of microaggression, race, and privilege. I observed that these two segments have a combined duration of 60 minutes. After listening to the recordings, I created a verbatim interview transcription. I then read the transcript multiple times while documenting my thoughts about the patterns in the data and my thoughts and feelings about the data. These thoughts were recorded in a reflexivity journal, which I used to increase the trustworthiness of the findings. I also evaluated

the data from the personal journals and artifacts similarly. I found trends in the data relevant to the research questions, specifically in the patterns of identity formation, marginalization, othering, power dynamics, structural inequality, resilience, and resistance.

Next, I coded the data, again starting with the interview and using the personal journals and artifacts for triangulation. I focused on pieces of data that were relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Coding occurred in two cycles: initial coding and focused coding. In the initial coding process, I identified as many codes as possible, labeling the pieces of data using descriptors that closely represent the explicit meaning of the data. In the second cycle of focused coding, I reviewed the repeated iterations of the codes to determine salient, recurring categories in the dataset. Focused coding contributed to the triangulation of the three data sources to increase the trustworthiness of this study. Examples of the initial codes with the number of recurrences, the focused codes, and quotes from the data are seen in Table 1. A complete list of the initial and focused codes is presented in Appendix A.

Table 1

Examples of Codes

Initial Codes	Recurrences of Initial Codes	Coded Data	Focused Codes
Became withdrawn	8	"I think it just makes me withdrawn."	blended in
Limited myself to be accepted into a predominantly white space	4	"I just created a safe space where I could come, do what I needed to do and leave and try to be as unrecognized as possible."	

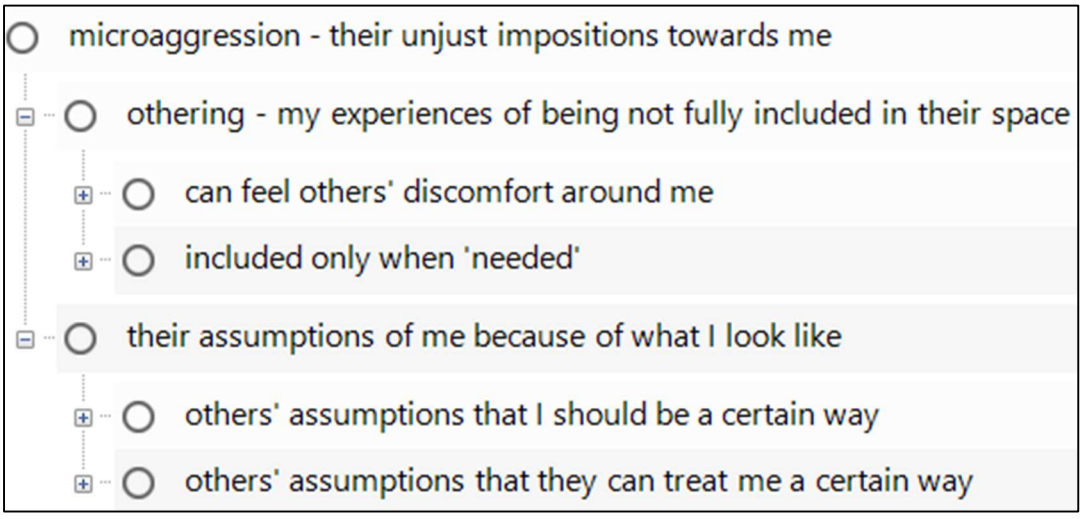
Initial Codes	Recurrences of Initial Codes	Coded Data	Focused Codes
Exhausted by switching identities	4	“It's an exhausting existence because I truly all day long navigate space and try to find my space in it.”	weighed down by not being able to be myself
Others are clueless on how to interact with me	3	“But I'm here, and now they're trying to figure out what to do with me.”	can feel others' discomfort around me
Others think I am a threat to their comfortable space	2	“I think that others see me as somewhat of a threat because they are uncomfortable with me in their space.”	

I then developed themes from the codes. Developing themes entailed the axial coding process, which focused on the patterns and the relationships among the codes (Clarke et al., 2015). This process involved re-organizing the data into broad categories. Clarke et al. (2015) recommended visual tools to aid the categorization process. Using NVivo, I had the advantage of visualizing the patterns and relationships of the codes into themes using the hierarchy feature. I provided an example of the hierarchy in NVivo in Figure 1. In the figure, the lowest level of the hierarchy is seen at the rightmost indent, and the highest level is at the leftmost indent. The rightmost indents represent the initial codes, focused codes, and preliminary themes. The initial codes “can feel others' discomfort around me” and “included only when needed” were grouped

into the focused code “othering” with the shared meaning of my experiences of being not fully included in their space. The initial codes “others' assumptions that I should be a certain way” and “others' assumptions that they can treat me a certain way” were clustered into the focused code “their assumptions of me because of what I look like” with common meanings about presuppositions about me originating from generalizations of people who I look like. Both focused codes are forms of microaggression because of the baselessness and indirect injustice directed toward me.

Figure 1

Example of Theme Hierarchy in NVivo



A total of 11 preliminary themes emerged in the third step of the analysis (see Appendix A). I verified these themes in the fourth step. Theme verification involved evaluating whether the themes functioned well in congruence with the other themes relating to the research questions and completing the narrative of identity and sense of belonging by Black female administrators and their experiences in predominantly white higher education spaces coming from my lived experiences. From the 11 preliminary themes, I narrowed down the data into five themes by

reflecting on the sufficiency of the themes in answering the research questions. The preliminary themes and themes are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

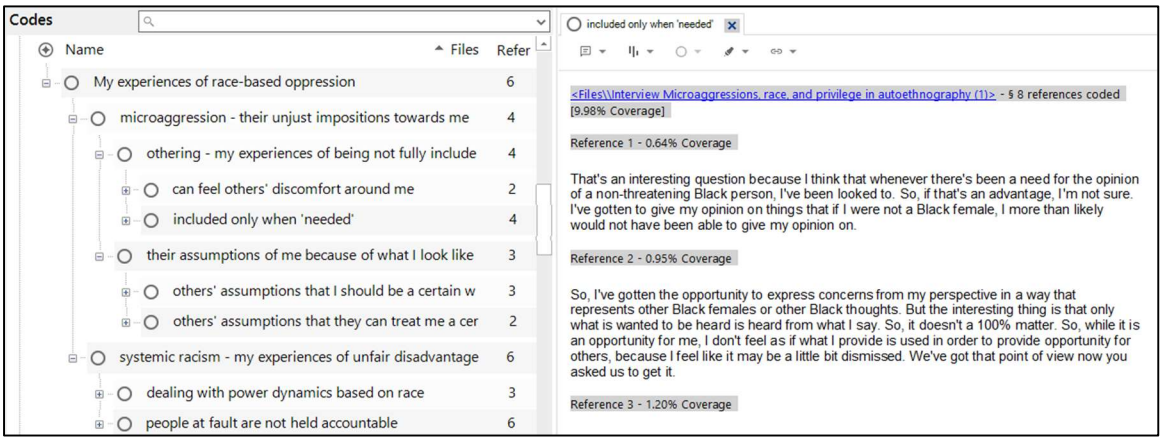
Preliminary Themes to Themes

Preliminary Themes	Themes
Hiding my true self	Me versus perceived me
Navigating their space	
Feeling the emotional toll of fitting into their space	My journey toward racial reckoning
Struggling to find my space	
Microaggression - their unjust impositions towards me	Fighting for Black authenticity in white spaces
Systemic racism - my experiences of unfair disadvantages	
Finding my space	Black and female by any means necessary
My foundations of identity formation	
Self-acceptance	
Establishing my self-advocacy to teach and empower	Being me anytime and anywhere
Stopped giving power to my oppressors	

Step five, naming the themes, occurred through determining the scope and distinctness of each theme. This process involved a review of the underlying data that supported each theme. With NVivo, I had a visual representation of the themes and the supporting codes and coded texts, which aided in the evaluation of the sufficiency of each theme. An example of the visual representation of the themes is seen in Figure 2. The left panel shows the hierarchy of codes and themes to represent the codes supporting the themes and the aggregated number of recurrences. The right panel shows the sources of data and the coded texts that supported the selected code or theme, which, in this example, was the initial code "included only when needed" supporting the focused code "othering," the preliminary theme "microaggression," and the final theme "my experiences of race-based oppression."

Figure 2

An Example of a Theme as Seen in NVivo 14



The last step of the analysis was to compile the report. In this step, I determined the order in which the themes appeared in the report. I organized the themes according to the research questions and sub-questions, which was logical as they guided this study and the analysis process. Under each research question and sub-question, I first reported the most recurring theme, as the analysis also entailed an account of repeated iterations. This decision was made to

minimize the influences of my feelings about my experiences. An overview of the themes with the aggregated number of recurrences is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Final Themes

RQ Alignment	Themes	No. of Recurrences
RQ1	Me versus perceived me	23
RQ2a	My journey toward racial reckoning	66
	Fighting for black authenticity in their white spaces	31
RQ2b	Black and female by any means necessary	29
	Being me anytime and anywhere	28

Trustworthiness

One crucial step in any research method was to ensure the study's trustworthiness was viewed as credible. As a research methodology, autoethnography involves using personal experience to understand better and interpret cultural phenomena. As a result, ensuring the trustworthiness of data in autoethnography was challenging because I was also the subject. According to Poulos (2021), trustworthiness in autoethnography is often driven by the author's ethos, who shows themselves in the manuscript in ways that reveal credibility and build identification between a reader and the author. There are four key aspects of trustworthiness, which are discussed herein.

Credibility

Credibility is the extent to which the research addresses the research questions and research problem, plus its internal coherence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The first key strategy for building credibility was to ensure that the key components of the study were aligned from start to finish. This alignment started with the problem and then ran through the purpose, research questions, and data collection for the study. To ensure the credibility of my work further, I drew on reflexivity, triangulation, and transparency to provide the essence of my experience in an authentic way that gave it a place within the cultural and social context intended. Using these strategies aided in strengthening the data to ensure more trustworthy and credible findings.

Transferability

Transferability refers to how well the results apply in other contexts. Because the work focused on personal experiences rather than objective measurements or statistical analysis, qualitative research did not have automatic generality (Liamputtong, 2020). This lack of generality could make it challenging to apply to the broader population. However, it did not invalidate the study's ability to represent a broader population, with members who shared the similarity of being a Black woman. Instead, transferability entailed documenting the research methods and processes in sufficient detail to ensure that those reading the study would determine if the results should transfer (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Dependability

Dependability reflects the extent to which the research is replicable (Liamputtong, 2020). Given the autoethnographic nature of the study, it would be impossible for any other researcher to obtain the same results. Instead, a more useful sense of dependability was how well the analysis could be replicated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, the data analysis process was

conducted according to the in-depth analysis strategy described above. This analysis also contained steps to ensure the analysis remains accurate to the data.

Confirmability

Confirmability reflects the objectivity of the results (Liamputtong, 2020). Potential bias could limit the reliability and validity of the research. The need to remain faithful to the experience within the social and cultural context through storytelling was paramount to adding value to the scholarship in this area. Given that I addressed my experiences as a researcher, there should be no question as to whether I accurately assessed the meaning of my ideas. Instead, the key to establishing confirmability was to demonstrate my credibility as a source of data through a serious-minded presentation of the data, using as much detail in my accounts as feasible to demonstrate their veracity.

Ethical Considerations

As with any qualitative research, Poulos (2021) suggested a researcher must be driven by the ethical impulse to "not harm" (p. 20). As also noted by Poulos (2021), commentators on the ethics of autoethnography urge that a relational ethic of care and compassion drive the work when either oneself or other humans are included or mentioned. As discussed in the literature review, autoethnography research involves interpreting the researcher's personal experiences concerning cultural and social issues.

The following are some of the anticipated ethical problems more specific to autoethnography. First, as a participant, I must consider the potential impact of sharing personal experiences. Second, I must seek to maintain the confidentiality of those around me. This process included strategies such as assigning other pseudonyms. Similarly, issues of potential harm could have arisen from sharing my and others' experiences in the research. This process included

emotional or psychological injury, reputational damage, or legal repercussions. I meticulously worked to avoid this issue by focusing on situations and not personal interactions. As Cooper and Lilyea (2022) suggested, using a pseudonym, composite figure, or obscured identity might effectively protect the identity of people in the study. As often as possible, I sought to use public data when sharing information, as it had already been made public. I also sought to focus on my feelings and experiences to avoid the characterizations of others.

Another ethical concern was my mental health. Given the structural and potentially harmful effects of the issues under study, focusing on them for an extended period might have caused mental distress. I engaged in several strategies to mitigate this distress. The first strategy was to not force myself to work on the research every day. As noted, I only required myself to complete an in-depth journal entry once a week, although I endeavored to do so more often. A second mitigation strategy was to focus on the potential benefits of the research when confronting the issues in the study. Finally, I relied on social support from friends and colleagues to manage any mental strain resulting from the research.

Summary

In summary, the purpose of the present qualitative critical ethnography was to explore my struggle with identity as a Black female administrator in predominantly white higher education spaces of a large private catholic university in one of the most diverse urban areas in the world. This chapter outlined the methods and research design used in this autoethnographic study. The research method was qualitative, and the research design was critical autoethnography. The population was all Black female administrators in higher education. The target population was Black female administrators in higher education who worked at predominantly white institutions. I was the only participant.

Through a reflexive and introspective approach, I explored my experiences and cultural context within the white spaces of higher education to better understand my identity as a Black female administrator as I journeyed to healing through restorative justice. I used various data sources, including personal journaling, self-reflection interviews, and artifact collection, to uncover insights and meanings that might have been difficult to capture using traditional research methods. Chapter 4 analyzes these data sources to show how they have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of my experiences in these predominantly white higher education spaces.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Black administrators in higher education face many multifaceted and interrelated challenges, including bias and exclusion because of their positions at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021; West, 2020; Young & Anderson, 2021). Black women are also historically underrepresentation, when compared to their representation in the general population and student body (NCES, 2022; West, 2020). As a result of this underrepresentation and marginalization, Black women face stereotyping based on race or gender (Chance, 2022; Commodore et al., 2020) and more limited access to key professional networks (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Young & Anderson, 2021)

This qualitative critical autoethnography aimed to explore my struggle with identity as a Black female administrator in predominantly white higher education spaces of a large private university set in one of the most diverse urban areas in the world. I investigated the central research phenomenon of navigating identity and sense of belonging by Black female administrators and their experiences in predominantly white higher education spaces. The results of this study will contribute to implementing a platform for inclusive practices and systemic change.

In this chapter, I delve into the pervasive phenomenon of identity and its impact on the experiences of Black females in predominantly white spaces of higher education. Drawing on the rich data collected through my autoethnographic research, I explore the subtle yet harmful ways racial biases manifest in everyday interactions, shaping perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors within the institutional context. Through the lens of black feminist theory and intersectionality, I examine the complex dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression that underlie the

phenomenon of identity, shedding light on how they perpetuate systemic inequalities and undermine the sense of belonging and agency among Black female administrators.

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter presents the results of this autoethnographic exploration. I describe the data and the process of developing codes and themes from the data. I also detail my role as the researcher of this study, particularly my self-reflection as both the sole participant and sole researcher of this qualitative critical ethnography. I specifically focus on the connections between my experiences as a Black female administrator and the intersections of my life with the cultural aspects of the world around me.

The three data sources I used were a self-reflection interview, artifact collection, and personal journals. In the self-reflection interview, I requested the help of a Black woman whom I had purposefully chosen. She has a doctoral degree and is knowledgeable in conducting interviews for qualitative studies. She is a practicing Catholic and has experience as a higher-education administrator. The artifacts I collected were publicly available documents supporting my interview narratives. The personal journals contained my perceptions about the connections of the artifacts to my experiences, as well as my thoughts and feelings about my experiences while I was collecting the data. I used Clarke et al.'s (2015) six-step thematic analysis strategy, as the researchers promoted reflexivity in the analysis process to minimize bias. The analysis resulted in the development of five themes, which are detailed in this chapter. The themes answered the following research questions:

> **RQ1:** In what ways did my personal experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces shape my identity and sense of belonging in these spaces?

RQ2: How does the intersection of my race and gender contribute to my professional experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces?

RQ2a: What unique challenges arise from this intersection?

RQ2b: How are these challenges successfully managed?

Data Analysis

Data analysis for the present study involved qualitative thematic analysis. The six-step thematic analysis strategy by Clarke et al. (2015) was applied to each dataset separately. A qualitative data software such as NVivo was used to help manage the data. As the first step, all data were transcribed into digital form. I used this form to help support the ease of managing and analyzing data.

The first step in thematic analysis was building familiarity (Clarke et al., 2015). In this critical autoethnography, I was already familiar with the data. Nonetheless, I read all data at least twice to re-establish clarity and familiarity regarding all data, including those from near the beginning of the study period. The second step was open coding (Clarke et al., 2015). Open coding involves identifying all concepts or ideas in the data that might be relevant. These ideas were formulated as labels called codes. Those codes were applied throughout the dataset to document each time a relevant idea appeared within the data. The third step was to develop themes (Clarke et al., 2015). Themes were the goal of the analysis and represented more complicated ideas that comprised two or more codes. Themes were identified by assessing the occurrence of codes and finding patterns in that occurrence, a process called axial coding. The themes must also represent answers to at least one of the research questions.

Once the themes were found, they must be verified in Step 4 (Clarke et al., 2015). This step involved locating one or more quotes within the data to support each theme. Themes that

could not be supported by the data were discarded. The quotes were then assembled into a table of evidence. The fifth step was naming themes (Clarke et al., 2015). In this step, themes were assessed for their completeness and uniqueness. Themes that were incomplete or had too much overlap with others were merged. Then, each remaining theme was assigned a descriptive name. The sixth and final step was compiling the report (Clarke et al., 2015). In this step, the results of the study were reported and discussed in the context of the literature from Chapter 2. This step entailed writing Chapters 4 and 5.

Summary of the Findings

Five final themes emerged from the analysis. The themes were: (a) Me versus perceived me, (b) my journey toward racial reckoning, (c) fighting for black authenticity in white spaces, (d) being black and female by any means necessary, and (e) being me anytime and anywhere. This section describes the themes and relevant excerpts from the data.

Research Question One Results

RQ1 was, "In what ways did my personal experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces shape my identity and sense of belonging?" The data pointed to my self-concept and how others, especially my white colleagues, perceived me. Their perceptions of me, based upon whiteness, differed from what I thought I was. Being Black and being a woman, while both parts of my identity, did not define me as an administrator in higher education. However, white perceptions of me combined with my personal conception of being Black and female resulted in this "me versus perceived me" experience during my tenure in higher education.

Theme 1: Me versus Perceived Me

My personal experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces shaped my identity and sense of belonging in these spaces. My self-concept encompassed my belief that I am more than just Black and more than just a female. I am at the intersection of many facets of my identity from my culture, upbringing, and experiences. However, in navigating this predominantly white higher education institution, I found that most of my white colleagues' perceptions of me differed from what I thought about myself. In terms of the observable attributes of the institution, it was evident that Black individuals were underrepresented in the institution, especially in leadership. This lack of Black representation in leadership and any leaders who look like me affected my sense of belonging. In the self-reflection interview, I shared, "I struggled as to where I fit because there were academics and then there were administrators, but there was no one at the administrator level that looked like me…there was no one for me to partner with."

I used to believe I could be my authentic self at the institution, but I also realized that authenticity was not the norm nor celebrated in that space. My reflections in the interview included, "I think I have always been authentic, but I think that the spaces that I have occupied, especially in higher education, have never allowed for that authenticity to be celebrated." I described myself as an introverted person, but with my experiences of lacking a sense of belonging at the institution, I became more withdrawn. I also reflected that I have much more capabilities than I used to show at the institution because I felt I had no place in their space. I reflected in the interview, "So, it has created a separation for me from my colleagues and from truly giving my all."

Social withdrawal was a conscious choice. I purposely chose to minimally socialize as I felt I could not be my authentic self around most of my colleagues. When interacting with my

colleagues, I had to restrain myself and be cautious of what I said and did. I described my relationship with my colleagues: "I give pieces of information, and then I watch reactions, and then I know how much further I could go. However, outside of that, I spend much time in very calculated relationships." To blend into their space, I tried not to draw attention. I stated:

> They looked at me as an object, impacting how I handled myself. I think I became reticent because I never wanted to draw attention to my appearance, so I tried to be as plain and vanilla as possible.

My perceptions included blending in by limiting myself to be accepted by them. One of my experiences was to blend in like a chameleon to avoid negative encounters, "I think I can be guilty of trying to be a chameleon where I just wanted to be in a space where there was less adversity. So, I did because it was just easier." I understood my culture as full of vigor, but I often held myself back at the institution to create a safe space for myself:

> Moreover, when I talk about my ethnicity and culture, my culture was very vibrant, so it was a counterculture that I created for myself. I just created a safe space where I could come, do what I needed to do, and leave, trying to be as unrecognized as possible.

The discrepancies in what I think of myself and what people at the institution think I should be affected my sense of belonging and how I present myself in the space. I could not be my genuine self and represent my cultural identity to my colleagues who look different from me. I could not relate to them and had to adjust to avoid their attention. I limited myself and blended into the space.

Theme 2: My Journey Toward Racial Reckoning

My experiences with the intersection of my race and gender within the context of the predominantly white higher education spaces presented unique challenges in race-based

oppression. I experienced two forms of race-based oppression: microaggression and systemic or institutionalized racism. Based on my experiences and reflections, I describe microaggression as subtle and indirect unjust impositions about me because of how I look. Other people have assumptions about how I should be and how they could treat me because of those beliefs. I reflected:

> I think that many times, when you have forms of microaggression, they are discriminatory. I think that because a person is utilizing their biases and how they treat you… So, I think that people look at me and determine that I am a sure thing, then it determines how they treat me. And then I often think it gives them the ability to say things to me that I do not think they would say if I presented differently.

I experienced people imposing that I was "lucky always to have a tan" when, as a Black individual, having pigmented skin is only a part of who I am.

Others imposed their beliefs about Black women as wives and mothers in general. My self-reflection interview included:

> So, I mean, I am not just a Black female, but I am a wife and a mother. Moreover, how I am treated as a Black female who is a wife and a mother is very different… So, it is like you do not think that a Black woman can be married or have children. Furthermore, if she does have children, she had to have them when she was ten, and her husband has to be of a certain race.

Specific to my role as an administrator, some of my white colleagues either excluded me or included me conditionally. I was included because I was "needed" to meet diversity standards. It felt like my presence was used primarily to illustrate that I was helping to meet some diversity standard, as long as I conformed to their standards of what "Black" should be. I perceived that

they accepted me because I suppressed myself as a Black woman and was compliant with their needs. My reflections included the following:

> If you are coming to me because I am the less threatening Black, because I am the individual who you feel you can take advantage of, and now I am a part of a team, now I am a part of a conversation that's not a privilege for me. That is a huge disadvantage for me. Moreover, it probably makes me feel sad and worse than anything that I could feel because now you are using me. Moreover, I am somehow supposed to feel good about that. I am supposed to feel that you are making me a part of your group when I know why you are doing that.

Moreover, my presence was symbolized as a way for my colleagues to be perceived as if they were embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion. It was not for promotion to my current position or because of the hard work I put into my position. It was as if I was only existent for ways that could make them feel comfortable. This reflection gave insight into how I experienced otherness based on my race. I wrote:

> Today, during a DEI meeting for an upcoming diversity initiative, I could not shake the feeling that my presence was merely symbolic, a checkbox to be ticked off on someone's diversity agenda. It is disheartening to be reduced to a token rather than valued for my expertise and contributions. I long for a day when diversity is more than lip service and becomes ingrained in the fabric of our institution.

I am not spoken to when I am not approached for their needs. Simply they have very little use for me outside of stroking their own egos. My observations were that they felt threatened by my presence or that they were clueless on how to talk to me because I do not fit the idea that they have of what a Black woman should be:

> Others see me as a threat because they are uncomfortable with me in their space. So, when I walk into a meeting and have the title of a senior assistant dean, a director, and an adjunct professor, all of the boxes that they would feel comfortable putting me in as a Black female are no longer applicable. So, they treat me differently in that they discard me because they now do not have a place for me. So, they overlook me. They do not necessarily engage with me. They do not make me a part of the meeting…they do not give me a voice.

White males at my job served in the role as arbiters of systematic racism, using their power for the creation and perpetuation of upholding white structures and practices. As a result of this power dynamic, I experienced unfair disadvantages and inequitable policies that did not account for any of my Black and female identities. In navigating various spheres of higher education, I encountered many instances where my Black and female identities intersected to compound my challenges. One such experience was in the professional realm, where, despite possessing the qualifications and skills necessary for advancement, I found myself repeatedly passed over for promotions and opportunities. These decisions seemed to stem from a systemic disregard for the unique barriers faced by individuals of marginalized identities. Microaggressions and overt discrimination were not uncommon, highlighting the pervasive nature of racism and sexism within ivory-white halls of higher education structures. Moreover, inequitable policies often fail to consider the intersecting identities of Black women, resulting in a lack of support and opportunities for growth. These experiences took a toll on my well-being and sense of belonging, prompting reflection on the broader societal systems perpetuating such inequalities. However, through resilience and advocacy efforts, I sought to navigate and

challenge these unjust systems, finding strength in my identity and contributing to the ongoing dialogue for equity and inclusion.

Additionally, white male colleagues operated from a position of power and treated me like a subordinate with a lower ranking than treating me as a respected administrator to whom they report to:

> Oppression is the form of a person's perception. Then, they have power and can oppress or discriminate…there was a faculty member who was extremely rude to me in a specific situation surrounding a student.

Other encounters of bias and discrimination were documented in different reports that I selected as artifacts to support my claims in this study. In another instance of experiencing disrespect from a white male faculty, I escalated the issue to my supervisor and the human resource department. My report was not taken seriously, and my supervisor, who was also a woman, used the incident against me in future work-related situations, including to delay and ultimately deny my promotion:

> Moreover, I will never forget that because she then went on a bit of a mission. I challenged her to keep me from moving forward in my role until it became essential for her to make it happen. However, she kept it at bay for as long as she could. So, a promotion I was going to get never happened, and a merit increase I was going to get never happened.

My oppressor was not held accountable for withholding my promotion, and I experienced gaslighting from my supervisor and the human resource personnel as they told me that I was being too sensitive and that I might have misunderstood my colleague. Furthermore, I was blamed for defending myself. I stated in the interview, “All of a sudden, that person has an issue.

It is never the person in power who is the aggressor or has microaggression. It is never them. It is always another individual." My adverse experiences may have been minimized if a policy about microaggression existed. I reflected:

> I think that microaggression empowers people to treat people in ways that may not represent how an organization wants their individuals and employees to be treated. However, it often gets overlooked because there are no policies around it. What is microaggression? Some people see it as an interpretation.

To summarize my experiences, I experienced during this journey of racial oppression as a form of baseless and unjust marginalization on my journey of racial reckoning. My experiences included microaggression, in which my white colleagues had stereotypical assumptions about me and treated me based on those assumptions. I also experienced systemic or institutionalized racism in which my white colleagues held power over me and were enabled by the lack of policies that protected my rights as a Black woman employed as an administrator in the higher education setting. My experiences in the workplace included facing microaggressions from my white colleagues, who held stereotypical assumptions about me based on my race. These assumptions translated into differential treatment, highlighting the pervasive impact of bias and discrimination. Moreover, I encountered systemic or institutionalized racism where my white colleagues wielded power over me, enabled by the absence of protective policies that should have safeguarded my rights as a Black woman employed in an administrative role within higher education. The lack of such policies perpetuated discriminatory behaviors and reinforced the broader structural inequalities within the organizational framework. These experiences underscore the urgent need for proactive measures to address systemic racism power imbalances and promote equity and inclusion in higher education professional settings.

My oppressors were not held accountable for their offensive behaviors.

Research Question Two Results

RQ2 was, "How does the intersection of my race and gender contribute to my professional experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces?" This research question was composed of two sub-questions. The first sub-question was, "What unique challenges arise from this intersection?" The second sub-question was, "How are these challenges successfully managed?"

The unique challenges I have that were attributed to the intersection of my race and gender included my experiences of internal struggles due to not being able to be my genuine self in the predominantly white spaces in the higher education setting, as well as my experiences of oppression that was geared more towards my being Black. In pursuing an administrative role in the higher education setting, my experiences included suppressing my authenticity to make my white colleagues comfortable with me. Consequently, my behavior compromised my relationship with other Black people as they found my identity as a Black woman to be too loud and conspicuous for them. In suppressing myself, I also struggled with emotional exhaustion. I had feelings of constantly being weighed down, of guilt, and suspicion of others. My experience with my white colleagues, particularly white males, included microaggression and systemic racism. The themes that answered RQ2a were my experiences of race-based oppression and internally struggling to present my authentic self in their space.

My experiences included developing strength and resilience and embodying myself to overcome challenges. I learned to accept that I am a multi-faceted individual regardless of the space and that I did not have to suppress myself because all the facets of my identity, including

my race and gender, are parts of me. I also accepted that all parts of me have something to offer to the space. In the predominantly white higher education spaces, I offer my strength through self-advocacy in teaching and empowering marginalized individuals, especially students. My growth and resilience meant that I accepted how all my experiences, including the adverse ones, contributed to who I am and how I navigate the predominantly white higher education spaces. I upheld restorative justice practices and stopped giving power to my oppressors. The themes that answered RQ2b were growing strong and resilient and embodying my authentic self in any given space.

Theme 3: Fighting for Black Authenticity in White Spaces

Another challenge that I found unique about the intersection of my race and gender as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces was my internal struggle of wanting to be myself and fitting into the space. I struggled to find a space to be my authentic self while working in the higher education setting. When I was trying to fit in with my white colleagues, I became "too much" for Black people, and my relationship with other African Americans was compromised. However, for white people, I seemed to be not as good as my white male counterparts. Part of my journal was my thoughts about working hard but not getting the credit I think I deserve, especially compared to my white male colleagues. I wrote:

> Even though I had over 17+ years of corporate recruitment experience, recruiting from the top universities in the northeast and my white male counterpart had never worked off the campus of his school. Not again was my original thought, but then I thought at least disguise it and not throw it in my face, saying that I am not good enough, I am not equivalent, I do not matter, and my voice should not be heard. Again, my heart was broken, and I questioned my sense of self. Who am I, and what do people see when they

look at me? Where do I fit in this space? How can I gain access to the regard that is given to my white counterparts when they do not even try?

Juggling how I wanted to present my authentic Black woman self in conjunction with disapproval from Black and white colleagues for different reasons created an internal conflict with me trying to find ways of incorporating who I was in different situations. I had to be comfortable with myself. There were questions about myself that were also part of my experiences struggling with imposter syndrome. Based on my experiences, imposter syndrome was characterized by doubting my abilities and achievements. I felt the need to exert extra effort to prove that I fit into the space. I articulated, "I have always felt like I have had to be an extraordinary performer just to be seen as ordinary." In my journal, I reflected:

> I cannot shake this persistent feeling of imposter syndrome that seems to haunt me at every turn. As I prepare to attend a diversity, equity, and inclusion task force meeting, I cannot help but question my qualifications and legitimacy as a member of this task force. Will my white peers perceive me as competent? Will they dismiss my insights because of my race and gender? These doubts gnaw at me, but I tell myself the importance of representation and the value of my perspective in shaping institutional change.

Hiding my authentic self and having to do extra to prove my worth in predominantly white spaces in the higher education setting, I also reported instances of struggling with the emotional toll. I was weighed down by not being able to express myself genuinely and was often exhausted by switching from my authentic self to my work identity. My reflections were:

> In my professional space. It is more so in my professional space, where I am navigating, so it is predominantly white spaces that I am talking about, the social identity. When I think about my social identity outside of that space, I think that I have allowed myself to

> carry over some of how I identify in predominantly white spaces in other spaces of my life because sometimes, just switching off and on is exhausting.

Additionally, I felt weighed down by constantly worrying about what others thought about me and by being calculative in how I interacted with others. I was also often suspicious of others' intentions when they approached me. At times, I felt burdened having to hide my true self and my true racial and gender identities as I thought that I was going against my upbringing and socialization. Part of my self-reflection interview included the following excerpt:

> Moreover, that goes against the norms of my culture because I was taught to be boisterous and proud. Nevertheless, when that was not welcomed, I reverted to being someone who did not want to ruffle feathers.

As an administrator in the higher education setting, I felt weighed down by the guilt that I could have done more to speak up for marginalized individuals like myself:

> Furthermore, going against your norms constantly puts you in an internal struggle because you feel as if you have become complacent about watching things that are not necessarily just, and I am guilty of that. I have seen and heard things where I am almost ashamed that I did not speak up, defend, or do more.

Overall, the intersection of my race and gender led to my internal struggles in finding a place at the institution where I could not think about what other people thought of me. I was torn by thoughts of protecting myself versus being authentic in a space not built for people like me. To fit into the space, I had to hide my identity and my emotions and do extra work to be barely acknowledged. I felt the emotional toll of having to suppress my authentic self.

Theme 4: Black and Female By Any Means Necessary

With my experiences in predominantly white higher education spaces, I realized that I was damned if I did present my authentic self and damned if I didn't present my full self in white spaces. In turn, these experiences created a resilience in me to continue attempting to be my authentic self regardless of the potential consequences and reactions. I believed this newfound resilience was established through my experiences and was a trait passed down by my ancestors:

> Today was a reminder of the resilience within me—the resilience to navigate the complexities of predominantly white spaces, confront systemic injustices and stand tall in the face of adversity. Despite the countless daily obstacles, I refuse to be defined by them. Instead, I draw strength from my ancestors, who endured more significant hardships than I could imagine. Their resilience lives on in me, fueling my determination to create a more inclusive and equitable future for future generations.

I also took measures to build my strength. I realized that I needed my job to support my children, and if I were to stay at this job, I had to be able to address my problems. I started with seeking therapy, "I sought therapy to build confidence because my professional confidence was lacking in that I started to have panic attacks." I accepted my adversities in these predominantly white spaces in higher education as vital parts of building my strength. I also learned about restorative justice practices. The artifacts I reflected on included *The Little Book of Restorative Justice for Colleges and Universities 2nd edition* by David R. Karp. One of the things I learned from restorative justice was how to respond to others confidently and not let myself be oppressed. I reflected:

> I think that through working through restorative justice practices, I have learned to understand who I am better. Moreover, as a result of a better understanding of who I am, I can respond better. So, I may say to an individual, "Explain to me what you mean by that

> so I do not have to internalize it, and I do not have to assume anything. I now allow you to tell me why you can say that to me and what you mean by it." So, in coping with it, I have learned to be more confident in who I am. I am more confident in my identity, allowing me to understand the space around me better. Therefore, my coping mechanism is to consider the source.

Through building strength and resilience, I felt empowered and stopped giving power to other people who do not matter to me. As I spoke about my experiences of empowerment during the self-reflection interview, I elucidated, “I allow myself to consider the source, and then I can move past it because I have stopped giving those individuals power, so they do not matter to me.”

In addition, I felt empowered to advocate for social justice for other oppressed people at the institution. I established my self-advocacy and taught students to be confident in their authentic selves and to speak up when they are wronged. I reflected:

> So, I started to teach a course that helps students to identify who they are in the larger world around them. Furthermore, it is exciting because I talk about race, I talk about culture, I talk about discrimination. We talk about so many different sensitive topics, and the feedback that I got from teaching that course, I had a student who wrote, "She not only helps you see your place in the world around you, but she helps you want to be a better person in it." That kind of feedback from a 17- and 18-year-old is impressive because I have allowed somebody to see themselves authentically and wholly enough to understand how they fit in the world around them and in whatever space they occupy.

My growth and resilience would not have been possible without my cultural identity and experiences. I could not control how others behaved towards me, but I could control my response

to and educate them. I sought professional help to address my mental health concerns. I can continue showing up for work with confidence and with the advocacy to influence others, especially students, so that they, too, can stand up for themselves when others are suppressing their authentic selves.

Theme 5: Being Me Anytime And Anywhere

I was also able to overcome the challenges of the intersection of my race and gender and contribute to my professional experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces by embodying my true self. Returning to my self-concept, I understand my identity to be tied to my culture and the characteristics that make me unique. Through my experiences, I have grown to accept that I am not just Black and not just a woman, but I am a Black woman, among many other facets of my identity. I stated, "I cannot be placed in just a Black bucket or just a female bucket; I have to be seen as a Black female, and then it has to be understood that those experiences are different for me." In my journal, I reflected:

> Sitting alone in my office today, I reflect on the complexities of my identity and how it intersects with my role as an administrator in higher education. As a black woman in predominantly white spaces, there are challenges and opportunities. Feeling the weight of responsibility to represent and advocate for marginalized voices, I also recognize the strength and resilience of embracing my cultural heritage and lived experience. My identity is not a liability but a source of power and pursuit in the constant quest for equity and justice.

I became comfortable with myself and my feelings. More importantly, I became proud of my origins and my identity rooted in my culture. I articulated in the interview:

> So, I think it has evolved in how I see myself and, therefore, how I see myself in the spaces I occupy. I am much more comfortable in my person than I used to be, which has helped me evolve. I have a self-acceptance that I probably did not have before; therefore, I am stronger in who I am… So, I think they impact how I see myself because I am prouder of my cultural identity.

I also found validation from the allies who supported my full existence and individuality, characterized by different facets, including being Black, a woman, and an administrator. I sought the support of a colleague for an initiative addressing racial disparities. My reflection about seeking my colleague's support included, "Their validation and encouragement reminded me that I am not alone in this struggle and that collective action is essential for effecting meaningful change."

I was also led to the realization that identity was not a fixed character but was changing and growing. Age and wisdom have contributed to my growth and acceptance that I am a deep individual with something to contribute to the space. I reasoned:

> Well, in different social contexts, I think that in my workspace, I navigate my identity by just understanding who I am and permitting myself to be that person. Moreover, it is a constant internal conversation with myself. I always have the choice to be in a room and to revert to the way I used to be, but I consciously now make sure that when I speak, I speak from a place of, this is who I am, and this is how what you are saying or what you are doing or what we are talking about is making me feel as a person.

Self-acceptance has been vital for me to successfully manage the challenges of the intersection of my race and gender, contributing to my professional experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces. Through my experiences, I have learned

to embrace myself and that I am not one-dimensional. I became comfortable with the thought that I am more than what other people think of me. As I embodied my identity, I allowed myself to take up the space I needed to express my authentic self.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the results of this qualitative critical autoethnographic study. This study aimed to explore my struggle with identity as a Black female administrator in predominantly white higher education spaces of a large private university set in one of the most diverse urban areas in the world. I collected data from three data sources: a two-part self-reflection interview, artifacts, and personal journals containing my reflections about the artifacts and my lived experiences as a Black female administrator at the study site. The themes that emerged from the thematic analysis and triangulation of data were: (a) me versus perceived me, (b) my journey toward racial reckoning, (c) fighting for Black authenticity in white spaces, (d) black and female by any means necessary, and (e) being me anytime and anywhere.

My experiences as an intersection of many facets of my identity in the predominantly white higher education spaces influenced my identity and sense of belonging. I was in a space that was not intended for Black female leaders, as evidenced by the underrepresentation of Black individuals in general at the institution, as well as the absence of policies protecting Black individuals employed at the institution. I realized I had to blend in to navigate "their" space. While blending in, I socially isolated myself and lost my authenticity.

I faced unique challenges in encountering race-based oppression, especially in terms of microaggression and systemic racism. Microaggression was an indirect and subtle form of marginalization in which they excluded or conditionally included me. I was not part of the inner group. Additionally, microaggression entailed their treatment of me based on presumptions

because of their stereotypical beliefs about Black females. Systemic racism was an institutionalized form of marginalization that involved adverse experiences with white people not being held accountable for their offenses against me and white people holding power over me.

I also had unique challenges in my internal struggles about who I am and how I fit into the higher education space, and facing the emotional toll of attempting to fit into "their" space. I experienced imposter syndrome and reached the point of feeling too much for Black people but not enough for white people. I was cautious of how I presented myself and suspicious of others' intentions.

I developed growth and resilience to overcome my challenges and learned to embody who I am, regardless of whose space I am navigating. I learned to associate with allies supporting my individuality and developed self-acceptance that I am multi-faceted and can change and grow. I also accepted that all my experiences, the positive and the adverse, were necessary parts of my life for me to be able to be who I am today. This belief empowered me and decreased the power that my oppressors held over me. I also accepted my cultural identity as part of who I am. In the social context of higher education, I learned to use my identity as my self-advocacy to teach and empower the students and other Black female administrators.

In the next chapter, I will interpret and discuss the results I reported in this chapter. The discussion will include how the results fit into the literature on the Black feminist theory and intersectionality. The next chapter also presents the conclusions and recommendations for moving forward as we address the needs of Black female administrators in predominantly white higher education spaces.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

Often, Black female administrators who work in predominantly white institutions are the only representatives of their race and gender in the organization (Mitchell, 2021). Challenges such as bias and marginalization due to the intersectionality of being female and Black (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Young & Anderson, 2021) manifest as feelings of isolation, lack of belonging, and loneliness (Arjun, 2019; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Such isolation reflects Black females' underrepresentation relative to their presence in the general population and the student body (NCES, 2022; West, 2020). Underrepresentation persists through limited access to key professional networks (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Young & Anderson, 2021). Despite challenges, Black female administrators contribute unique perspectives and strengths to leadership roles (West, 2020). The untold stories of Black females' perspectives and strengths were one of the reasons that motivated me to create this qualitative critical autoethnography.

The purpose of the current qualitative critical autoethnography was to explore my struggle with identity as a Black female administrator in predominantly white higher education spaces in a large private university located in a diverse urban area. This autoethnography provided me with the platform to acknowledge the challenges faced by Black female administrators and to explore the culture of higher education. Higher education culture claims to support diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice in its restorative justice practices. This research focused on examining the unfulfilled claims and challenges specifically faced by Black women in higher education. It aimed to shed light on the unique barriers and systemic inequalities that Black female administrators encounter to advocate for meaningful change and

the implementation of a platform dedicated to addressing these issues and fostering equity and inclusion within academia.

The methodology of the qualitative critical autoethnography was chosen to cultivate a more profound understanding for readers in the educational community and beyond who care about equity and racial justice in education. This dissertation allowed me to move from my internal experience to outward expression as I worked empathically to take the readers inside themselves and out again (Leal-Covey, 2015). Black feminist theory provided the conceptual framework for the current study. The methodological data collection process entailed personal journaling, self-reflective interview data, and a review of artifacts related to the problem and purpose. To collect data, I delved deeply into my experience as a Black woman struggling with identity through the healing process of restorative justice in a predominantly white institution. Clarke et al.'s (2015) thematic analysis procedure using the data analysis software NVivo version 14 was used to identify themes within the data.

The themes answered the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways did my personal experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces shape my identity and sense of belonging in these spaces?

RQ2: How does the intersection of my race and gender contribute to my professional experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces?

RQ2a: What unique challenges arise from this intersection?

RQ2b: How are these challenges successfully managed?

This research explored the subtle yet harmful means racial biases occur in everyday interactions, impacting perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors within the institutional context. Five themes were drawn from the analysis. The themes were: (a) me versus perceived me, (b) my

journey toward racial reckoning, (c) fighting for black authenticity in white spaces, (d) being black and female by any means necessary, and (e) being me anytime and anywhere. These themes are organized under their respective research questions. They will be discussed in this chapter through an interpretation of the findings, consideration of limitations, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research. The chapter will end with a summary.

Interpretation of the Findings

The section interpreting the findings is organized by theme. Themes will be discussed in the context of the previous findings from the literature review in Chapter 2 and Black feminist theory. Conclusions will be drawn based on the findings and the overall discussion.

Theme 1-Me Versus Perceived Me

Theme one answers RQ1: "In what ways did my personal experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces shape my identity and sense of belonging?" This theme highlighted my self-concept and how my white colleagues perceived me. As a Black woman, my white colleagues' perception of me was quite different than my self-perception. White colleagues predominantly perceived me as a Black woman but not as an administrative leader. Conversely, I perceived myself as a creative manifestation of many facets of my identity, including my culture, upbringing, and experiences.

I began my professional identity formation by first feeling out the limits of the instructional landscape. Social withdrawal was a conscious choice, as I shared a bit of myself and observed colleagues' reactions. Their reactions subtly informed me of the limits of my self-expression, which was being objectified in my colleagues' vision. Like Heled and Davidotich (2021), my professional identity was significantly impacted by the way that I believed my

colleagues perceived me. Understanding myself in the context of the education system is reliant on how fellow educators and stakeholders view me.

Since Black women were underrepresented in the institution, my natural introversion turned into social withdrawal. Not wanting to be objectified, I tried not to draw attention to myself, drastically limiting my self-expression. The predominantly white space was reinforced by colleagues' perceptions of me and how I expressed myself (See Heled & Davidotich, 2021). Within the white space, the expressive vibrancy of Black culture was discouraged, and I felt the space for my identity diminished. This lack of acceptance led me to censor myself and withdraw from socialization and is the beginning of my journey of healing as me vs. perceived me.

Consistent with previous literature (West, 2019), my study revealed how administrators such as myself often develop strategies to manage discrimination, advocate for change, and foster inclusivity while avoiding potential backlash. This repertoire of defense mechanisms is needed to navigate the constant microaggression and political backlash faced in their daily experiences in higher education. At the beginning of my ethnographic journey, I minimized my presence. Still, throughout this study, I learned how to advocate for change and foster inclusivity. Thus, throughout my journey I was able to go from a place of isolation and minimizing myself to one of power and purpose.

The intersection of multiple marginalized identities exposes Black women to various points of discrimination (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Young & Anderson, 2021). This includes being stereotyped in ways that do not accurately reflect the complexities of their identity, such as the inability to be a mother or spouse (Cox & Ward, 2019; Ward & Grower, 2020). As a result of biased perceptions (Cox & Ward, 2019), Black women do not feel comfortable expressing themselves authentically with colleagues due to fear of being perceived

as stereotypical tropes such as the "angry Black woman" (Coker et al., 2018; Cox & Ward, 2019; Ward & Grower, 2020).

My experience as an underrepresented Black woman dealing with stereotyping based on race or gender was consistently present in the literature (Chance, 2022; Coker et al., 2018; Commodore et al., 2020). Additionally, the literature on Black feminists has identified the process of observing others to determine how one should act as hyperawareness (Williams & Lewis, 2021). This theme aligns with previous research (Edwards, 2019; Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021), highlighting the internal conflict may Black women may face in the workplace. My experience during this phase was defined by a constant battle between how I perceived my full and authentic identity and my attempt to reconsider and modify how I moved in white spaces due to assumptions and the perceptions my colleagues had of me.

Theme 2-My Journey Toward Racial Reckoning

The second research question was: “How does the intersection of my race and gender contribute to my professional experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces?” This, RQ2 required two separate subquestions to fully explore this dynamic. The first sub-question, RQ2a, was, “What unique challenges arise from this intersection?" My journey toward racial reckoning and fight for Black authenticity in white higher education spaces were two themes that answered this research question.. First, I will discuss the journey toward racial reckoning and then turn my attention to my continued fight for Black authenticity in their white spaces.

Regarding the theme of my journey toward racial reckoning, I experienced systemic racism, unfair disadvantages due to the power dynamics, and the lack of policies enabling inequalities against Black employees at the predominantly white higher education institution.

Disadvantages included white male colleagues perceiving they had an inherent right to wield power and influence over me because I am both Black and female. In addition, white males with lower ranking also treated me with disrespect despite me being in a higher positional rank than them. whiteness is what was deemed tangible and of value for acquiring power. This is another example of how I was disregarded as a Black female of authority, both because of my gender and race (See Edwards, 2019; Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021).

The wall of whiteness extended to obstructing my pathway toward promotion and elevation. When I attempted to rectify the blatant insubordination using the appropriate institutional channels, human resources ignored my claim, held it against me and used it as ammunition to deny a rightful promotion. I experienced gaslighting and was blamed for defending myself. I also experienced the intersection of my race and gender within the context of the predominantly white higher education spaces in the forms of microaggression and systemic or institutionalized racism. I understood microaggression as subtle and indirect unjust impositions about me because of my appearance. Further, I believe that these systems of oppression perpetuate future oppression, creating a paradigm in which gatekeepers ensure that my complaints about the injustices I face are not heard or rectified, thus aligning with themes in Hardaway et al. (2019).

Additionally, others' conceptions about Black women informed by the status quo, unconscious privilege, and lack of awareness about Black culture led to microaggressions about how I should be and how they could treat me. Being a successful senior assistant dean did not fit the stereotypical role for a Black woman in higher education, and going through this process was part of my journey toward racial reckoning and the alignment of my perceived identities and professional identity. Not fitting the stereotype of a Black woman made colleagues feel

threatened and unsure. Black women in management and leadership positions are often viewed as threats to white people whom they supervise or have direct contact with (Chance, 2022). Being the token Black woman in leadership also made me the voice and representation for all Black women to my white colleagues. The emotional labor Black people take on due to being the sole representation in predominantly white spaces can be exhausting (Erskine et al., 2020). As a result of these limiting beliefs, my professional identity and qualifications were ignored, and I was not communicated with anyone except when needed for a specific task.

Bias and discrimination resulting from holding a double minority status were present in the literature (Crenshaw, 1989; Fay et al., 2021; Moorosi et al., 2018). My experience with microaggression and systemic racism was strongly reinforced in the literature that presented similar experiences for Black women in educational settings (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Gause, 2021; Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2022; Mitchell, 2021; Young & Anderson, 2021). Like Townsend (2021), microaggressions and the inability to be my true self impacted my professional identity development and positional growth. Additionally, the cumulative emotional toll or emotional labor, due to the persistent nature of racial microaggressions, is understood as *racial battle fatigue* (Corbin et al., 2018). Racial battle fatigue is the social, psychological, and physiological weight built up by the constant vigilance demanded to navigate and combat racist behaviors (Corbin et al., 2018). This is often associated with compounding medical and mental health and wellness issues that negatively influence Black people's personal lives.

White privilege and/or whiteness are the determining factors in selecting college leaders, and Black women do not fit the mold determined by white people and white power structures (Gause, 2021). The persistent challenges of resistance to change advocacy and invisibility were also present in the literature (Beatty et al., 2020; Lloyd-Jones, 2009; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019;

Mitchell, 2021). The Black feminist theory posits this may have been an instance of the HR representative believing Black women were all burdened with anger, leading to ignoring my experience while extending patience to my white colleague (See Hardaway et al., 2019). This form of oppression was acknowledged extensively in the literature examining intersections of discrimination for Black women in the workplace (Arday & Mirza, 2022; Chance, 2021; Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Corbin et al., 2018; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2021; Young & Anderson, 2021).

Theme 3-Fighting for Black Authenticity in their white Spaces

As stated previously, this theme also answered RQ2a. As a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces, I experienced an internal struggle of being myself and fitting into the space. Other Black people thought I was "too much" when I was trying to fit in with my white colleagues. Fighting for Black authenticity in a white space did not begin well for me. White colleagues perceived me as less than my white male counterparts, no matter what I did. The continuous professional disrespect of being better qualified but undermined by white male counterparts led me to feel heartbroken and question my place. Over time, my professional identity became warped under the pressure of discrimination. The emotional toll was exhausting and demoralizing. I struggled with imposter syndrome and consistently doubted my abilities and achievements.

The complexities arising from my racial and gender identities, which inherently embody confidence and empowerment, were hindered by the hostile environment within predominantly white higher education spaces, characterized by microaggressions and unchecked discrimination. At this point in my journey, fighting for Black authenticity in a white space was demoralizing and exhausting. While hiding my authentic self and being forced to prove myself constantly,

imposter syndrome made me doubt my worth. Struggling with repressing my identity, I felt guilt about not being more of an advocate for marginalized individuals like myself. These problematic and conflicting emotional states built up until I began to suffer panic attacks.

The literature affirmed my experience with fighting for Black authenticity in a white space. Researchers in the literature have pointed out that the demands of mental and emotional labor required by Black women in leadership roles while attempting to preserve their genuine racial and sexual identities are profoundly draining (Erskine et al., 2020). The constant requirement to hide my authentic self led to becoming obsessed about how others saw me and suspicious of their motives and the nature of our interchanges. In the literature, this phenomenon is known as *attributional ambiguity*, an experience in which the underrepresented person struggles with determining whether positive or negative interactions have occurred because of their minority status (Brower et al., 2019).

The literature has shown that racist perceptions distort the evaluation of Black women's capabilities, constraining their opportunities to advance and leading to racial battle fatigue and eventual imposter syndrome (Corbin et al., 2018; Moorosi et al., 2018). The complex and exhausting struggle against prejudice is emotionally draining (Crenshaw, 1989; Erskine et al., 2020). Those like myself, who remain emotionally under siege by racial battle fatigue, may be more susceptible to imposter syndrome (Corbin et al., 2018).

My experiences aligned with the literature, which emphasized that the imposter phenomenon is a critical barrier to advancement for Black women (See Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021). People who are suffering from imposter syndrome, particularly Black women, struggle with accepting praise as they doubt professional accomplishments (Edwards, 2019). Although I did not feel this way at first, over time, I realized that I was beginning to suffer from imposter

syndrome. Rather than recognizing my achievements as well-deserved, those suffering from imposter syndrome see myself as misrepresenting my abilities (See Edwards, 2019). The mental and emotional toll that I felt (See Cox & Ward, 2019; Townsend, 2021) and my lack of belonging were acknowledged in the literature (See Cooke & Odejimi, 2021; Wright-Mair, 2020).

The theme of fighting for Black authenticity in a white space is one of the reasons Black feminism was developed (Collins, 2000). Black feminism grew from the need to examine the historical tapestries of Black women intertwined at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class (Clemons, 2019). Profoundly impacted by stereotypes and discrimination, Black women struggle to express themselves authentically in white spaces (Spates et al., 2020). Black feminist theory helps to question and dispel harmful stereotypes and is a valuable tool in fighting for Black authenticity in a white space (Collins, 1986; West, 2019).

Theme 4-Black and Female by Any Means Necessary

Theme 4 was Black and female by any means necessary. The fourth theme addressed the second subquestion for RQ2. RQ2b asked: How are these challenges successfully managed? To manage the intersecting challenges of my race and gender in predominantly white higher education spaces, I developed resilience to empower being black and female by any means necessary. I drew strength from my ancestors, who developed resilience through many hardships. I stand on the backs of my ancestor's achievements. My progression was not just about my accomplishment but nurtured a profound desire to catalyze change and give back to communities that had given so much to me.

I nurtured my resilience by refusing to let my marginalization define me. Rather than allowing the challenges at work to break me down into quitting, I shook myself up by reminding myself I needed this job to take care of my family. I could not do that if I did not confront the

challenges healthily, and so I began therapy. I started to see my white colleagues and the systemic racism supporting their behavior and beliefs as the weights I would lift to cultivate my resilience.

In addition, I learned about restorative justice practices to overcome oppression. Restorative justice helped me improve my self-perception and confidence. As a result of these practices and therapy, I grew my resilience and empowerment. With this empowerment, I seek to identify and confront unjust practices entrenched within the institution and work towards proactive change. This personal growth equipped me to better advocate for marginalized individuals at the institution, which may reduce discriminatory discipline patterns. I want to help students learn to disempower oppressors before they become so impacted by stress that they lash out behaviorally. The journey related to this project reflects a profound contextual understanding, knowledge, and awareness I now channel into empowering others through teaching a course that helps students identify who they are in the larger world around them.

The literature affirmed my data. My experience was echoed in the work of Gümüş et al. (2021), who found that school leaders grounded in social justice successfully fostered inclusive environments, giving students of all backgrounds equal opportunities for a high-quality education. The course I teach is aimed at leveling the playing field and helping students dismantle interior barriers limiting their equitable learning experiences (Gümüş et al., 2021; Ocampo-González & Collins, 2019). The literature on restorative justice empowers individuals to confront unjust practices entrenched within institutions and work towards making proactive change however possible (Blas Pedreal, 2014; Gümüş et al., 2021).

The Black feminist literature affirmed my journey as represented by the theme of being black and female by any means necessary. Black feminist literature has shown that Black women

in leadership in education have encountered and successfully navigated challenges, exhibiting a correlation between adversity and their development of essential leadership skills for career advancement (Chance, 2021). I experienced this as the adversity I confronted helped me develop resilience and empowerment.

Theme 5- Being Me Anytime and Anywhere

Theme 5 also answered RQ2b: How are these challenges successfully managed? Being me anytime and anywhere resulted from my empowerment and healing journey. I have achieved the embodiment of my true self, a Black woman in a predominantly white higher education space. I have embraced my identity as being even more than a Black woman, an administrator, and an advocate for social justice. Embodying my true self has given me an evolving perspective of endless growth of my identity. The work done in this project has given me the confidence and appreciation to see my identity not as a liability but as a source of power in the ongoing quest for equity and justice.

The literature supported and reflected my experience as a Black woman in a predominantly white education institution. This uplifting and empowering story was also represented in the literature in that school leaders grounded in social justice successfully fostered inclusive environments in educational settings (Gümüş et al., 2021). In my story and within this context, restorative justice emerges as a form of social justice that empowers individuals to proactively address systemic racism and discrimination resulting from societal procedures and educational institutional decision-making (See Hopkins, 2021). This is something that I continue to strive for.

Due to the personal growth this project supported, I feel more equipped and empowered to be the change I want to see in the world. Being me anytime and anywhere was supported by

the empowering Black feminist material, which supports Black women delving into the intricate intersections of identity and supports a deeper understanding of the pervasive issue of gender and racial inequality (See West et al., 2021). Black feminist literature has many stories of Black women responding to their experiences with defiance, strength, pride, and empowerment that protect them from gendered racism and intersectional oppression (Williams & Lewis, 2021). I felt much the same way and have cultivated a social justice disposition and used the understanding gained from my lived experience of marginalization to help students become critically reflective and more aware of the moral use of power (Bogotch, 2002; Shields & Hesbol, 2020).

Policy Implications

Policy implications in higher education should prioritize establishing mentorship programs specifically tailored for faculty and administrators who identify as Black women. These programs should facilitate mentorship relationships where Black women can be mentored by experienced Black women leaders within academia. Such mentorship initiatives provide valuable guidance and support and contribute to the retention and advancement of Black women professionals in higher education. Additionally, policy frameworks should emphasize the creation and support of DEI offices or leadership roles within institutions tasked with overseeing and implementing initiatives that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. These offices foster a more inclusive and equitable academic environment, address systemic barriers, and advocate for marginalized communities.

Furthermore, introducing an ombudsman position within higher education institutions is warranted to address discrimination, bias, and equity concerns. The ombudsman can serve as an independent and impartial resource for faculty, staff, and students, providing confidential

guidance, mediation, and resolution of disputes. Policy recommendations should also encourage collaboration with organizations such as Sisters of the Academy and the American Association for Blacks in Higher Education, leveraging their expertise and resources to support mechanisms like leadership and mentoring institutes. These partnerships can strengthen the impact of DEI initiatives, promote professional development opportunities for Black women in academia, and contribute to a more inclusive and supportive educational landscape.

Practice Implications

My story of social isolation, oppression, and discrimination in the workplace is not a singular experience but an all-too-common problem for Black women in predominantly white education settings. An implication for practice to address social isolation would be increasing access to mentoring for Black female educators of all ages and positions in the school. Mentoring helps guide the development of professional identity (West, 2019), as the sense of belonging is critical in forming healthy professional identities (Wenger, 1998). If I had an opportunity to have or be a mentor, I would not have felt as isolated and battered down as I did. Additionally, my professional identity would not have warped so drastically.

This implication also reflects the underrepresentation of Black women in education (NCES, 2022; West, 2020). Black women make up less than 7% of all managers in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, contrasting to the heavy presence of white men and women, who collectively have over 60% of managerial roles (NCES, 2022). Disparities are more pronounced when considered by gender, as while 38% of chief academic officers are women, only 3% of these roles are held by women of color (Espinosa et al., 2019). This is a problematic ceiling to break, which may be aided by mentoring communities providing encouragement and networking. Chance (2021) distinguished the barrier prohibiting Black women from advancing to

leadership positions as the *concrete ceiling*. Providing mentoring networks for as early as college students with an eye on leadership development may improve the educational community's representation rate. This practice may help address the scarcity of Black women in leadership roles, contributing to a lack of role models for aspiring Black female administrators and students of color (Mitchell, 2021).

Additionally, a practice implication presents itself in the role of chief diversity officer, which I have participated in. Fifty-six percent of chief diversity officers are occupied by women, which emphasizes a drive toward diversity at the executive level (Ash et al., 2020; Pasque & Nicholson, 2023). There is a growing movement for equity and inclusivity for gender and race in the educational community, and encouraging more women of color to take on the role of chief diversity officer may assist with strengthening this office and its impact. The demise of DEI roles in Florida and North Carolina is highlighted by the impact of plagiarism allegations and the targeting of DEI personnel in higher education (Haider & Kettles, 2024).

For example, in recent developments, the DEI landscape in Florida and North Carolina has been marked by challenges, including plagiarism allegations and targeted actions against DEI personnel in higher education (Haider & Kettles, 2024). These incidents signify a concerning trend toward the undermining and dismantling DEI efforts within academic institutions (Harris, 2020). The accusations of plagiarism tarnish the credibility of DEI initiatives and erode trust and confidence in the individuals leading these crucial roles. Furthermore, the targeted actions against DEI personnel reflect broader systemic issues and resistance to advancing equity and inclusivity within higher educational settings (Harris, 2020). These challenges underscore the urgent need for robust support and protection of DEI initiatives and personnel to ensure the

continued progress toward a more equitable and inclusive academic environment within predominantly white higher education spaces.

Many professionals in my field are experiencing the same struggles as I was. Still, they may not be aware of it due to the isolation and lack of connection with other Black female leaders. For example, this project helped me diagnose myself with imposter syndrome as I identified the symptoms of a pervasive doubt that skills, intelligence, and success are not deserved or overestimated (Edwards, 2019; Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021). Resulting of the pressure of discrimination, I could not see through the delusion of imposter syndrome until I began the self-healing journey of this project, therapy, and study. This implies that many other Black female leaders in education may be in the same position and would benefit from education or training on the known risks of being a Black female leader in a predominantly white educational setting. If I had been given access to this information, I might have been able to look out for symptoms and address the problem earlier, saving me much suffering. Making imposter syndrome a part of the educational curriculum for Black women on the path to leadership would benefit this at-risk population.

I also experienced racial battle fatigue from the constant microaggressions embraced by the white power dynamics at the institution (Corbin et al., 2018). I believe the microaggressions psychologically wore me down and contributed to the development of imposter syndrome. We all form our professional identities through social reinforcement (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Townsend, 2021), and the constant social reinforcement of prejudice led me to doubt myself. This intersection of the personal and social realms implies that all working in the educational setting play a role in uplifting each other, making social choices for equity and inclusion, and breaking the status quo of institutionalized racism.

Within the daily practice of educators are myriad choices reflecting beliefs about race and gender, both conscious and unconscious. All educators must hold themselves accountable institutionally to the highest standards of equity and respect if we expect students to do so. This implication may be supported through cultural competency, cultural relevancy, and implicit bias training. However, it is essential to consider that all cultures and races must be embraced, valued, and celebrated if these measures are to be effective. Training that subtly or overtly denigrates the white culture is likely to backfire and reinforce racism through embedded power structures, minority threats, and white individuals feeling persecuted. Only by educators practicing respect for all will those groups consistently marginalized be uplifted along with everyone. This principle is represented in the Black feminist literature of Bell et al. (2021), emphasizing the value of non-Black allies supporting collective action. Respect for all cultures is also a restorative justice element that encourages nonpunitive, relationship-centric methodologies in the hopes of healing (Fronius et al., 2019; Kohli et al., 2019).

Limitations

Every study is designed within the scope of its problem, purpose, and population. Designing within this scope presents limitations as the study's parameters are defined. The current autoethnographic study's limitations shaped its scope and reliability as any research method will. The primary limitation was the study's small sample size, which was the researcher only. As such, the primary limitation of this autoethnography is generalizability. The data consisted of personal perspectives relating to subjective experiences so that the findings may be contextually and individually specific and not universally applicable. Having a single participant exposes the study to potential biases and challenges related to my perspectives, memories, and

interpretations. This limitation could influence the findings through a possible warping of memory due to the emotions involved in recalling my story.

The second limitation was bias. As this journey is incredibly personal, my own preconceived ideas may skew my findings. The potential for bias was accounted for through rigorous honesty in my reflections, double-checking my memory and recording over the six months of the study, and striving for unbiased transparency. Additionally, I employed a proxy to administer the interview and check my transcribed data to ensure that my authentic feelings were recorded. Additionally, there were ethical concerns limiting self-discourse, especially if my experiences involved sensitive or personal information. Although autoethnography can provide rich and nuanced insights, researchers and readers must consider these limitations to interpret findings appropriately.

Recommendations for Future Research

More research is needed to understand more deeply the experiences of Black women in leadership positions to support this current population and its growth. Also, increased research may highlight consistent themes in a larger population of Black women. Consistent themes provide a roadmap to design strategic interventions and support, such as those of Coker et al. (2018), who conducted an autoethnographic study grounded in Black feminist thought. Coker et al. (2018) identified the consistent themes of (a) family expectations and support, (b) self-efficacy, (c) the importance of role models, (d) resilience in dealing with stereotypes, and (e) multiple responsibilities that included self, family, and community. Many of these themes were present in the current autoethnographic study, and more autoethnographic studies utilizing qualitative semi-structured interviews would support a stronger delineation of the experiences of Black females in educational roles.

Future research would benefit from more qualitative autoethnographies to contribute to the first-person narrative of the lived experiences of the population. The first-person narrative can generate empathy, understanding, and transformative emotions that raise awareness of this complex issue. Additionally, future research would benefit from qualitative semi-structured interviews with Black women in education in leadership positions and those striving to enter leadership positions, such as graduate students. Qualitative semi-structured interviews allow in-depth analysis of the participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and feelings that may translate into effective interventions and support.

The studies of Chance (2021), West et al. (2021), and Coker et al. (2018) used Black feminist theory as a conceptual framework to analyze the experiences of Black women in academic and leadership roles. Future research could build off this approach to expand the range of insights and applications. Building on the work of past researchers may provide the large amount of data needed to create best-evidenced-based practices for interventions and support from Black women in educational settings.

Many Black female leaders in predominantly white educational settings may be struggling with imposter syndrome that is breaking down their confidence, job satisfaction, and mental health. More research is needed on this phenomenon and effective interventions to expand awareness for those most at risk of developing it. In their research, Manongsong and Ghosh (2021) expressed that multiple diversified developmental relationships were essential for minority women to address the imposter phenomenon and develop positive leadership identities. More research on this would provide more best-evidenced-based practices on which to build strategic interventions.

Conclusion

The problem this qualitative critical autoethnography sought to explore was the intersecting challenges associated with both race and gender I, as a Black female administrator, face in predominantly white institutions (Crenshaw, 1989; Mitchell, 2021; West, 2020). This project reveals a healing journey through six months of personal journaling, self-reflective interview data, and a review of artifacts related to the problem and purpose. This project was a success as I began my journey by identifying struggles being managed under the surface and going through a process of awakening that has made me stronger.

The findings were discussed through the themes of (a) me versus perceive me, (b) my journey toward racial reckoning, (c) fighting for black authenticity in white spaces, (d) being black and female by any means necessary, and (e) being me anytime and anywhere. These themes were discussed through the Black feminist conceptual lens, and extensive correlations were found with the literature in Chapter 2.

The next steps implied from this research are raising awareness of the pernicious problems Black females experience in educational settings, advocating for change, and creating effective interventions for change. Black women must support each other academically to develop a healthy professional identity (West, 2019) and a sense of belonging (Wenger, 1998). The path of healing educational institutions is through every interaction educators have with each other and themselves. Academic institutions can live up to their equity, inclusivity, and respect mission. However, to do so, they must enforce policies reflecting equity in curriculum, hiring, discipline, promotion, and pay. If educational institutions rise to this challenge, they may become the bastions for forward thinking and evolution of the human condition they claim to be.

Based on my research findings, I write the following letter to myself and anyone who struggles with identity in white spaces. This letter shares the motivation I have used to reach this point. All quotes are attributed to the motivational speech "You are Enough" by Lisa Nichols. (Jan. 2022)

Dear Me,

You have come to this place with the strength acquired along the way. The scares, the pain, the purposeful hurt experienced. The resolve that you are more than someone's thought of you. You have survived, you have conquered, you have forgiven, you come from greatness. Anyone's definition of you no longer holds you. YOU are your own person, define your destiny, and embody God's grace, beauty, wisdom, and knowledge. His path for you is all you need. You are enough. You have always been enough, and you will always be enough. You have risen to unimaginable internal depths to go from one day to the next. But you survived, and you found ways to thrive. Each time, you grew stronger and pushed harder. Your tears became the water that washed away your fears as you dried them. Their deficit has become your motivation. Their inadequacy is your determination. And you reach, you reach higher, grow stronger, and take back the power you have given them. You are the owner of your destiny; you share that ownership with no human being. "If you want something you have never had, then you must do something you have never done." You must believe in yourself and present yourself authentically, no matter the cost. You must be willing to gamble if you wish to win. "You have to say something you never said, and you must go to a place you have never been." You get to redesign yourself; you are the artist of your most precious piece of art. So, stand in your greatness, own your light, own your brilliance, you are bold, you are courageous, you are perfect in your imperfection; this is your time. You are bright enough, you are old enough, you are young enough. You are

ENOUGH, and no one owns you!

Love, Me

REFERENCES

Adams, T. E., Jones, S. H., & Ellis, C. (2015). *Autoethnography: Understanding qualitative research*. Oxford University Press.

Angelle, P. S., & Torrance, D. (Eds.). (2019). *Cultures of social justice leadership: An intercultural context of schools*. Springer.

Arar, K., Brooks, J., & Bogotch, I. (2019). *Education*, *immigration and migration: Policy*, *leadership and praxis for a changing world*. Emerald Publishing.

Arday, J., & Mirza, H. (Eds.). (2018). *Dismantling race in higher education: Racism*, *whiteness and decolonising the academy*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Arjun, W. A. (2019). *Life at the intersection: Intersectionality*, *self-definition*, *and identity negotiation among Black women mid-level administrators at predominantly white institutions* [Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University]. https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/files/neu:m044c9434/fulltext.pdf

Arms Almengor, R. (2020). *Colorizing restorative justice: Voicing our realities*. Living Justice Press.

Ash, A. N., Hill, R., Risdon, S., & Jun, A. (2020). Anti-racism in higher education: A model for change. *Race and Pedagogy Journal: Teaching and Learning for Justice*, *4*(3), Article 2. https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/rpj/vol4/iss3/2/

Banerjee, A., & Chaudhury, S. (2010). Statistics without tears: Populations and samples. *Industrial Psychiatry Journal*, *19*(1), 60–65. https://doi.org/10.4103%2F0972-6748.77642

Beatty, C. C., Tevis, T., Acker, L., Blockett, R., & Parker, E. (2020). Addressing anti-Black racism in higher education. *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity*, *6*(1), 7–27. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48644508

Becks-Moody, G. M. (2004). *African American women administrators in higher education: Exploring the challenges and experiences at Louisiana public colleges and universities* (Publication No. 3151818) [Doctoral dissertation, Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. https://www.proquest.com/openview/32278968b571ab2af3ddb4154c31d631/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Bell, M. P., Berry, D., Leopold, J., & Nkomo, S. (2021). Making Black lives matter in academia: A Black feminist call for collective action against anti-Blackness in the academy. *Gender*, *Work & Organization*, *28*, 39–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12555

Blas Pedreal, M. L. (2014). Restorative justice programs in higher education. *The Vermont Connection*, *35*(1), Article 5. https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol35/iss1/5

Bogotch, I. E. (2002). Educational leadership and social justice: Practice into theory. *Journal of School Leadership*, *12*(2), 138–156. https://doi.org/10.1177/105268460201200203

Boylorn, R. M., & Orbe, M. P. (Eds.). (2020). *Critical autoethnography: Intersecting cultural identities in everyday life*. Routledge.

Buchanan, N. T. (2020). Researching while Black (and female). *Women & Therapy*, *43*(1–2), 91–111. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nicole-Buchanan/publication/337365095_Researching_While_Black_and_Female/links/5e13ac264585159aa4b82dff/Researching-While-Black-and-Female.pdf

Buenestado-Fernández, M., Álvarez-Castillo, J. L., Gonzalez-Gonzalez, H., & Espino-Diaz, L. (2019). Evaluating the institutionalisation of diversity outreach in top universities worldwide. *PloS One*, *14*(7), Article e0219525. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0219525

Burton, L. J., Cyr, D., & Weiner, J. M. (2020, May). "Unbroken, but bent": Gendered racism in school leadership. *Frontiers in Education*, *5*, Article 52. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.00052

Butler, B. R. (2021). Ain't I A woman: Black women's endurance in higher education, the implications of linked fate, and the urgent call for greater cultural responsiveness. *Journal of African American Women and Girls in Education*, *1*(3), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.21423/jaawge-v1i3a97

Carastathis, A. (2014). The concept of intersectionality in feminist theory. *Philosophy Compass*, *9*(5), 304–314. https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12129

Chance, N. L. (2021). A phenomenological inquiry into the influence of crucible experiences on the leadership development of Black women in higher education senior leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *49*(4), 601–623. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211019417

Chance, N. L. (2022). Resilient leadership: A phenomenological exploration into how Black women in higher education leadership navigate cultural adversity. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *62*(1), 44–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678211003000

Chang, H. (2016). *Autoethnography as a method*. Routledge.

Clarke, V., Braun, V., & Hayfield, N. (2015). Thematic analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (3rd ed., pp. 222–248). SAGE Publications, Inc.

Clemons, K. M. (2019). Black feminist thought and qualitative research in education. In G. Noblit (Ed.), *Oxford research encyclopedia of education* (Online). https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1194

Coker, A. D., Martin, C., Culver, J., & Johnson, C. (2018). Black women's academic and leadership development in higher education: An autoethnographic study. *Periferia*, *10*(2), 44–66. https://www.redalyc.org/journal/5521/552157626004/552157626004.pdf

Coles, S. M., & Pasek, J. (2020). Intersectional invisibility revisited: How group prototypes lead to the erasure and exclusion of Black women. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, *6*(4), 314–324. https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000256

Collins, P. H. (1986). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of Black feminist thought. *Social Problems*, *33*(6), s14–s32. https://doi.org/10.2307/800672

Collins, P. H. (2000). Gender, Black feminism, and Black political economy. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *568*(1), 41–53. https://doi.org/10.1177/000271620056800105

Collins, P. H. (2020). Defining Black feminist thought. In C. McCann & S. K. Kim (Eds.), *Feminist theory reader: Local and global perspectives* (pp. 278–290). Routledge.

Comas-Díaz, L., Hall, G. N., & Neville, H. A. (2019). Racial trauma: Theory, research, and healing: Introduction to the special issue. *American Psychologist*, *74*(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000442

Commodore, F., Lockett, A. W., Johnson, A. C., Googe, C., & Covington, M. (2020, January). Controlling images, comments, and online communities: A critical discourse analysis of conversations about Black women HBCU presidents. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *78*, Article 102330. Pergamon.

Cooke, S. M., & Odejimi, K. B. (2021). Examining practices of retaining Black female faculty and staff in independent schools. *Journal of Black Studies*, *52*(2), 202–219. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934720967038

Cooper, R., & Lilyea, B. V. (2022). I'm interested in autoethnography, but how do I do it? *The Qualitative Report*, *27*(1), 197–208. https://doi.org/10/46743/2160-3715/2022.5288

Corbin, N. A., Smith, W. A., & Garcia, J. R. (2018). Trapped between justified anger and being the strong Black woman: Black college women coping with racial battle fatigue at historically and predominantly white institutions. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *31*(7), 626–643. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2018.1468045

Cox, V., & Ward, L. M. (2019). A wholistic view of Black women on scripted TV: A content analysis. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *45*(6–7), 540–570. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798419887072

Crenshaw, K. W. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, *140*, 139–167. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315051536-2

Crenshaw, K. W. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*, 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Crenshaw, K. W. (2017). *On intersectionality: Essential writings*. The New Press.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative*, *quantitative*, *and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.

Cruz-González, C., Rodríguez, C. L., & Segovia, J. D. (2021). A systematic review of principals' leadership identity from 1993 to 2019. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *49*(1), 31–53. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143219896053

Cupid, S. (2020). *"It felt like home:" Exploring practices and mentoring experiences among Black doctoral women and Black faculty women in sister circles at mid-Atlantic universities* (Publication No. 27958146) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, Baltimore County]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. https://www.proquest.com/openview/1bd8a38eb2734b3c2e8160b26364f612/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Davis, J. (Writer), Zimmerman, B. (Writer), Ramm, D. (Writer), & Mantegna, J. (Director). (2015, January 21). Anonymous (Season 10, Episode 12) [TV series episode]. In M. Gordon (Executive Producer), *Criminal Minds*. The Mark Gordon Company; Touchstone Television.

DeCuir-Gunby, J. T., Johnson, O. T., Womble Edwards, C., McCoy, W. N., & White, A. M. (2020). African American professionals in higher education: Experiencing and coping with racial microaggressions. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *23*(4), 492–508. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2019.1579706

Denzin, N. K. (2013). *Interpretive autoethnography*. Sage Publications.

Dickens, D. D., Womack, V. Y., & Dimes, T. (2019, August). Managing hypervisibility: An exploration of theory and research on identity shifting strategies in the workplace among Black women. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *113*, 153–163. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.10.008

Dover, T. L., Kaiser, C. R., & Major, B. (2020). Mixed signals: The unintended effects of diversity initiatives. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, *14*(1), 152–181. https://doi.org/10.1111/sipr.12059

Edwards, C. W. (2019). Overcoming imposter syndrome and stereotype threat: Reconceptualizing the definition of a scholar. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, *18*(1), Article 3. https://repository.lsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1205&context=taboo

Eisner, E. W. (1997). The promise and perils of alternative forms of data representation. *Educational Researcher*, *26*(6), 4–10. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X026006004

Eisner, E. W. (2008). Persistent tensions in arts-based research. In M. Cahmann-Tayor & R. Siegesmund (Eds.), *Art-based research in education: Foundation for practice* (pp. 16–27). Routledge.

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2010). Autoethnography: An overview [40 paragraphs]. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *12*(1), Article 10. http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1101108

Erikson, E. (1959). *Theory of identity development*. International Universities Press.

Erskine, S. E., Archibold, E. E., & Bilimoria, D. (2020). Afro-diasporic women navigating the Black ceiling: Individual, relational, and organizational strategies. *Business Horizons*, *64*(1), 37–50. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2020.10.004

Espinosa, L. L., Turk, J. M., Taylor, M., & Chessman, H. M. (2019). *Race and ethnicity in higher education: A status report* (Publication No. 89187) [Doctoral dissertation, Virginia Tech]. VTechWorks. http://hdl.handle.net/10919/89187

Fay, D. L., Hicklin Fryar, A., Meier, K. J., & Wilkins, V. (2021). Intersectionality and equity: Dynamic bureaucratic representation in higher education. *Public Administration*, *99*(2), 335–352. https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12691

Fields, L. N., & Cunningham-Williams, R. M. (2021). Experiences with imposter syndrome and authenticity at research-intensive schools of social work: A case study on Black female faculty. *Advances in Social Work*, *21*(2/3), 354–373. https://doi.org/10.18060/24124

Fronius, T., Darling-Hammond, S., Persson, H., Guckenburg, S., Hurley, N., & Petrosino, A. (2019). *Restorative justice in US schools: An updated research review* (ED595733). ERIC. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED595733.pdf

Gause, S. A. (2021). white privilege, Black resilience: Women of color leading the academy. *Leadership*, *17*(1), 74–80. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715020977370

Goodman, D. J. (2020). Cultural competence for equity and inclusion: A framework for individual and organizational change. *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege*, *10*(1), 41–60. https://www.wpcjournal.com/article/view/20246

Gramlich, J. (2023, June 16). Americans and affirmative action: How the public sees the consideration of race in college admissions, hiring. *Pew Research Center*. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/06/16/americans-and-affirmative-action-how-the-public-sees-the-consideration-of-race-in-college-admissions-hiring/

Gümüş, S., Arar, K., & Oplatka, I. (2021). Review of international research on school leadership for social justice, equity, and diversity. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, *53*(1), 81–99. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2020.1862767

Guy-Sheftall, B. (1995). *Words of fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought*. The New Press.

Guy-Sheftall, B., & Yancy, G. (2010). *Convergences: Black feminism and continental philosophy*. State University of New York Press.

Hardaway, A. T., Ward, L. W., & Howell, D. (2019). Black girls and womyn matter: Using Black feminist thought to examine violence and erasure in education. *Urban Education Research & Policy Annuals*, *6*(1), Article 913. https://journals.charlotte.edu/urbaned/article/view/913

Harris, T. M., & Lee, C. N. (2019). Advocate-mentoring: A communicative response to diversity in higher education. *Communication Education*, *68*(1), 103–113. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Tina-Harris-3/publication/329404792_Advocate-mentoring_a_communicative_response_to_diversity_in_higher_education/links/5c23cab3a6fdccfc706b10a5/Advocate-mentoring-a-communicative-response-to-diversity-in-higher-education.pdf

Harris, T. W. (2021). *The sisters are alright: Changing the broken narrative of Black women in America*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Heider, K. G. (1975). What do people do? Dani auto-ethnography. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, *31*(1), 3–17. https://doi.org/10.1086/jar.31.1.3629504

Heled, E., & Davidovitch, N. (2021). *Personal and group professional identity in the 21st-century case study: The school counseling profession* (EJ1300434). ERIC. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1300434

Holman-Jones, S. (2016). Living bodies of thought: The "critical" in critical autoethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *22*(4), 228–237. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800415622509

Hopkins, P. (2021). Social geography III: Committing to social justice. *Progress in Human Geography*, *45*(2), 382–393. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132520913612

Howard-Vital, M. R. (1989). African-American women in higher education: Struggling to gain identity. *Journal of Black Studies*, *20*(2), 180–191. https://doi.org/10.1177/002193478902000205

Hubbs, D. L., & Brand, C. F. (2005). The paper mirror: Understanding reflective journaling. *Journal of Experiential Education*, *28*(1), 60–71. https://doi.org/10.1177/105382590502800107

Iheduru-Anderson, K., Okoro, F. O., & Moore, S. S. (2022). Diversity and inclusion or tokens? A qualitative study of Black women academic nurse leaders in the United States. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*, *9*, Article 23333936211073116. https://doi.org/10.1177/23333936211073116

Jones, T. B., Dawkins, L. S., Glover, M. H., & McClinton, M. M. (Eds.). (2023). *Pathways to higher education administration for African American women*. Taylor & Francis.

Kaplan, S. E., Gunn, C. M., Kulukulualani, A. K., Raj, A., Freund, K. M., & Carr, P. L. (2018). Challenges in recruiting, retaining, and promoting racially and ethnically diverse faculty. *Journal of the National Medical Association*, *110*(1), 58–64. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0027968416301031

Karp, D. R. (2019). *The little book of restorative justice for colleges and universities*: *Repairing harm and rebuilding trust in response to student misconduct*. Good Books.

Kelly, B. T., Raines, A., Brown, R., French, A., & Stone, J. (2019). Critical validation: Black women's retention at predominantly white institutions. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research*, *Theory & Practice*. Advanced online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025119841030

Kilgore, A. M., Kraus, R., & Littleford, L. N. (2020). "But I'm not allowed to be mad": How Black women cope with gendered racial microaggressions through writing. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, *6*(4), 372–382. https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000259

Kohli, R., Montaño, E., & Fisher, D. (2019). History matters: Challenging an a-historical approach to restorative justice in teacher education. *Theory Into Practice*, *58*(4), 377–384. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1626613

Leal-Covey, C. (2015). *An autoethnography on the reasons for mixing identities* (Publication No. 3714873) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Phoenix]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. https://www.proquest.com/openview/76c602c0ccf76cfa4cf5fd7f99c5c06b/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750

Liamputtong, P. (2020). *Qualitative research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Lloyd-Jones, B. (2009). Implications of race and gender in higher education administration: An African American woman's perspective. *Advances in developing human resources*, *11*(5), 606–618. https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422309351820

Manongsong, A. M., & Ghosh, R. (2021). Developing the positive identity of minoritized women leaders in higher education: How can multiple and diverse developers help with overcoming the impostor phenomenon? *Human Resource Development Review*, *20*(4), 436–485. https://doi.org/10.1177/15344843211040732

Marder, I. D., & Wexler, D. B. (2020). Mainstreaming restorative justice and therapeutic jurisprudence through higher education. *University of Baltimore Law Review*, *50*, 399–423. https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/ublr50&div=18&id=&page=

Maree, J. G. (2021). The psychosocial development theory of Erik Erikson: A critical overview. *Early Child Development and Care*, *191*(7–8), 1107–1121. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2020.1845163

Marshall, T. F. (1999). *Restorative justice: An overview*. Home Office.

McChesney, J. (2018). *Representation and pay of women of color in the higher education workforce*. College and University Professional Association for Human Resources. https://www. cupahr.org/surveys/research-briefs/2018-representation-pay-women-of-color-higher-ed-workforce

McCluney, C. L., & Rabelo, V. C. (2019). Conditions of visibility: An intersectional examination of Black women's belongingness and distinctiveness at work. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *113*, 143–152. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S000187911830109X

Melo, A. I., & Figueiredo, H. (2020). Performance management and diversity in higher education: An introduction. *Tertiary Education and Management*, *26*(3), 247–254. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11233-019-09044-x

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Wiley & Sons.

Mertens, D. M. (2010). Transformative mixed methods research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *16*(6), 469–474. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410364612

Mitchell, N. A. D. (2021). *The triple burden: Black women leaders in predominantly white institutions of higher education* (Publication No. 1406) [Dissertation, The University of Vermont and State Agricultural College]. The University of Vermont ScholarWorks. https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/graddis/1406?utm_source=scholarworks.uvm.edu%2Fgraddis%2F1406&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages

Moorosi, P., Fuller, K., & Reilly, E. (2018). Leadership and intersectionality: Constructions of successful leadership among Black women school principals in three different contexts. *Management in Education*, *32*(4), 152–159. https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020618791006

Mosley, M. H. (1980). Black women administrators in higher education: An endangered species. *Journal of Black Studies*, *10*(3), 295–310. https://doi.org/10.1177/002193478001000304

Muldrow, M. (2016). *An exploration of the imposter phenomenon and its impact on Black women administrators in higher education in the South* (Publication No. 1502) [Doctoral dissertation, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro]. https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/1502/

National Center for Education Statistics. (2022, February). *Employees in degree-granting postsecondary institutions*, *by race/ethnicity*, *sex*, *employment status*, *control and level of institution*, *and primary occupation: Fall 2020*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_314.40.asp?current=yes

Nichols, S., & Stahl, G. (2019). Intersectionality in higher education research: A systematic literature review. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *38*(6), 1255–1268. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1638348

Njoku, A., & Evans, M. (2022). Black women faculty and administrators navigating COVID-19, social unrest, and academia: Challenges and strategies. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(4), Article 2220. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19042220

Ocampo-González, A., & Collins, P. H. (2019). *Interview with Patricia Hill Collins on critical thinking*, *intersectionality and educational: Key objectives for critical articulation on inclusive education* (EJ1227654). ERIC. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1227654

Offermann, L. R., Thomas, K. R., Lanzo, L. A., & Smith, L. N. (2020). Achieving leadership and success: A 28-year follow-up of college women leaders. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *31*(4), Article 101345. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.101345

Ortlipp, M. (2008). Keeping and using reflective journals in the qualitative research process. *The Qualitative Report*, *13*(4), 695–705. http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR13-4/ortlipp.pdf

Papa, R. (2020). *Handbook on promoting social justice in education*. Springer.

Pasque, P. A., & Nicholson, S. E. (Eds.). (2023). *Empowering women in higher education and student affairs: Theory*, *research*, *narratives*, *and practice from feminist perspectives*. Taylor & Francis. https://myacpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Empowering_Women_Slideshow_pasque_wimmer.pdf

Poulos, C. N. (2021). *Essentials of autoethnography*. American Psychological Association.

Reuters, T. (2022, December 15). Harvard names new president, first Black woman to hold top job. *U.S. News*. https://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2022-12-15/harvard-names-new-president-first-Black-woman-to-hold-top-job

Romano, A., & Arms Almengor, R. (2021). It's deeper than that!: Restorative justice and the challenge of racial reflexivity in white-led schools. *Urban Education*, *59*(1), 182–209. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085921998419

Shields, C. M., & Hesbol, K. A. (2020). Transformative leadership approaches to inclusion, equity, and social justice. *Journal of School Leadership*, *30*(1), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684619873343

Simms, J. (2018). *Experiences of African American women and their ascension to senior academic leadership positions in higher education institutions* (Publication No. 10936897) [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Missouri-Saint Louis]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. https://www.proquest.com/openview/853c019635a511c4b0a85c9494a51ada/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Smith, A. N., Watkins, M. B., Ladge, J. J., & Carlton, P. (2019). Making the invisible visible: Paradoxical effects of intersectional invisibility on the career experiences of executive Black women. *Academy of Management Journal*, *62*(6), 1705–1734. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2017.1513

Spates, K., Evans, N. T. M., Watts, B. C., Abubakar, N., & James, T. (2020). Keeping ourselves sane: A qualitative exploration of Black women's coping strategies for gendered racism. *Sex Roles*, *82*, 513–524. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-01077-1

Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College. (2023). 600 U.S. No. 20–1199. https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/20-1199_hgdj.pdf

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, *62*(4), 271–286. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271

Taylor, T. O., & Bailey, T. K. M. (2022). Does race matter? An experimental vignette study on harm severity, college student discipline, and restorative justice. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advanced online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000427

Tevis, T., Hernandez, M., & Bryant, R. (2020). Reclaiming our time: An autoethnographic exploration of Black women higher education administrators. *Journal of Negro Education*, *89*(3), 282–297. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/802522

Townsend, C. V. (2019). *Advancing African American women in public higher education: A phenomenological study of recruitment*, *retention*, *and career ascension* (Publication No. 22586980) [Doctoral dissertation, Northwest Nazarene University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. https://www.proquest.com/openview/7c3eb48383106dcb8baca9966ad56d71/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

Townsend, C. V. (2021). Identity politics: Why African American women are missing in administrative leadership in public higher education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *49*(4), 584–600. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220935455

Waite, D., & Arar, K. (2020). Problematizing the social in social justice education. In R. Papa (Ed.), *Handbook on promoting social justice in education* (pp. 169–192). Springer.

Ward, L. M., & Grower, P. (2020). Media and the development of gender role stereotypes. *Annual Review of Developmental Psychology*, *2*, 177–199. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-devpsych-051120-010630

Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: Learning as a social system. *Systems Thinker*, *9*(5), 2–3. https://pesquisa.bvsalud.org/portal/resource/pt/lis-LISBR1.1-10835

West, N. M. (2019). In the company of my sister-colleagues: Professional counterspaces for African American women student affairs administrators. *Gender and Education*, *31*(4), 543–559. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1533926

West, N. M. (2020). A contemporary portrait of Black women student affairs administrators in the United States. *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education*, *13*(1), 72–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/26379112.2020.1728699

West, N. M., Payne, A. N., Smith, M. D., Bonds, N. T., Alston, A. D., & Akalugwu, W. N. (2021). A collaborative autoethnography of six Black women walking tightropes in higher education. *Negro Educational Review*, *72*(1–4), 131–163. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nicole-West-11/publication/359924938_A_Collaborative_Autoethnography_of_Six_Black_Women_Walking_Tightropes_in_Higher_Education/links/6256d1d0709c5c2adb783f6f/A-Collaborative-Autoethnography-of-Six-Black-Women-Walking-Tightropes-in-Higher-Education.pdf

Williams, B. M. (2019). *I did everything I was supposed to": Black women administrative professionals' push out and opt-out of higher education workplaces* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia]. https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/williams_brittany_m_201905_phd.pdf

Williams, D. A., & Wade-Golden, K. C. (2023). *The chief diversity officer: Strategy structure and change management*. Taylor & Francis.

Williams, M. G., & Lewis, J. A. (2021). Developing a conceptual framework of Black women's gendered racial identity development. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *45*(2), 212–228. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684320988602

Wright-Mair, R. (2020). Longing to belong. *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity*, *6*(2), 2–31. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48644535

Young, K., & Anderson, M. (2021). *Hierarchical microaggressive intersectionalities: Small stories of women of color in higher education* (EJ1295189). ERIC. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1295189.pdf

APPENDIX A: APPROVED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Self-Reflection on Identity

- How do you define your own identity?

- How has your sense of identity evolved?

- What cultural, social, or personal factors have influenced your identity?

2. Cultural Influences

- How has your cultural background shaped your identity?

- How do cultural norms and values impact how you perceive yourself?

- Have you experienced conflicts or tensions between different aspects of your cultural identity?

3. Social Identity

- How do you navigate and express your identity in different social contexts?

- Have you experienced belonging or exclusion based on your identity?

- How do societal expectations and stereotypes affect your sense of self?

4. Intersectionality

- How do different aspects of your identity intersect and interact?

- Have you experienced privilege or oppression based on intersecting identities?

- How does intersectionality influence your experiences in various settings?

5. Coping Mechanisms

- What coping mechanisms or strategies have you developed in response to challenges to your identity?

- How do you navigate situations where your identity is questioned or misunderstood?

- Have you found support or resilience in specific aspects of your identity?

Questions Connecting Autoethnographic Research to issues of microaggressions, race, and privilege. (How do you define identity)

1. Microaggressions

- How have microaggressions, subtle or unintentional forms of discrimination, influenced your sense of self?

- Can you identify specific instances of microaggressions related to your race or other aspects of your identity?

- In what ways have you coped with or responded to microaggressions, and how have these experiences shaped your identity?

2. Race and Identity

- How does your racial identity influence how others perceive you and how you perceive yourself?

- Have you faced challenges or opportunities based on your racial background?

- In what contexts do you feel your racial identity is most salient, and how does this affect your experiences?

3. Privilege

- Reflect on any privileges associated with your race or other aspects of your identity. How do these privileges impact your daily life and interactions?

- Have you encountered situations where your privilege was evident, and how did you navigate them?

- In what ways do privilege and disadvantage intersect within your identity?

4. Intersectionality and Microaggressions

- Explore how different aspects of your identity intersect with experiences of microaggressions. Are there specific intersections that make you more susceptible to such incidents?

- Reflect on how microaggressions might differ based on race and other intersecting identities.

- How do microaggressions contribute to or challenge existing power dynamics related to race and privilege?

5. Language and Microaggressions

- Examine the role of language in microaggressions related to race. Are there specific terms or expressions that have been used as microaggressions against you?

- How does the language surrounding race impact your sense of belonging or exclusion?

- Reflect on any strategies you employ to address or educate others about microaggressions related to race.

6. Microaggressions and Coping Mechanisms

- Explore how microaggressions have influenced the development of your coping mechanisms. Do you have specific strategies for dealing with these subtle forms of discrimination?

- Reflect on the emotional and psychological toll of experiencing microaggressions and how they intersect with your racial identity.

7. Microaggressions and Power Dynamics

- Consider how microaggressions are connected to broader power dynamics, particularly race-related ones. How do these dynamics affect your sense of agency or disempowerment?

- Reflect on instances where individuals in power and authority perpetuated microaggressions.

8. Race, Privilege, and Future Identity

- How do you envision the role of race and privilege in shaping your future identity?

- Consider the impact of societal changes on the dynamics of microaggressions, race, and privilege in your life.

APPENDIX B: LIST OF CODES AND THEMES

RQ	Initial Codes	Focused Codes	Preliminary Themes	Themes
RQ1: In what ways did my personal experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces shape my identity and sense of belonging in these spaces?	Became withdrawn	Blended in	Hiding my true self	Me versus perceived me
	I limited myself to be accepted into a predominantly white space.			
	Realized that authenticity was not allowed and celebrated	Realized that authenticity was not allowed and celebrated		
	Cannot relate with colleagues	Cannot relate with colleagues	Navigating their space	
	Felt a divide among colleagues	Felt a divide among colleagues		
	Influence of others' doubt	Influence of others' doubt		
	Receiving microaggressive comments	Receiving microaggressive comments		
	Underrepresentation of black individuals in higher education	Underrepresentation of black individuals in higher education		
RQ2: How does the intersection of my race and gender contribute to my professional experiences as a Black woman in predominantly white higher education spaces? RQ2a: What unique challenges arise from this intersection?	Feeling guilty for not speaking up	Feeling guilty for not speaking up	Feeling the emotional toll of fitting into their space	Fighting for Black authenticity
	Tended to be suspicious of others' intentions	Tended to be suspicious of others' intentions		
	Exhausted by switching identities	Weighed down by not being able to be myself		
	A feeling of cannot do anything anymore.	Adversities in lacking privileges	Struggling to find my space	
	Having limited opportunities			
	I felt the need to do extra	Experiencing imposter syndrome		
	Protecting myself versus being my authentic self	Protecting myself versus being my authentic self		

RQ	Initial Codes	Focused Codes	Preliminary Themes	Themes
	Affecting relationships with other areas	Too much for black people but not enough for white people		
	Feeling not enough			
	Feeling too much			
	Seeing myself as different from others			
	Can feel others' discomfort around me	Othering - my experiences of being not fully included in their space	Microaggression - their unjust impositions towards me	My journey toward racial reckoning
	Not been spoken to			
	Others are clueless about how to interact with me.			
	Others cannot predict me.			
	I think I am a threat to their comfortable space.			
	Included only when 'needed'			
	Not part of the 'real group'			
	Only spoken to if needed.			
	Represent DEI			
	Treated differently			
	Others' assumptions that I should be a certain way	Their assumptions of me because of what I look like		
	Not expected to speak up when wronged			
	Offended by others' prejudice			
	Others did not think I could be more than a Black female.			
	Achievements were overlooked and dismissed.			
	Others' imposition that black students should come to me			
	Others' imposition that I can relate to all females' problems			

RQ	Initial Codes	Focused Codes	Preliminary Themes	Themes
	Prejudice affecting other aspects of my identity			
	Not treated as a person	Others' assumptions that they can treat me a certain way		
	Treated with bias			
	Delayed and denied promotion	Dealing with power dynamics based on race	Systemic racism - my experiences of unfair disadvantages	
	Male subordinates explicitly disrespect me.			
	Hierarchies in college			
	Lack of commitment to diversity and equity			
	Blamed for defending oneself	People at fault are not held accountable.		
	Gaslighted			
	No policies about microaggression			
RQ2b: How are these challenges successfully managed?	Influence of AA friends who took pride in their culture	Finding belongingness in my allies	Finding my space	Being me anytime and anywhere
	Interacting with like-minded individuals			
	With a person who treats me like an individual			
	Changes with age and growth	Learning that identity can change		
	Depending on setting			
	Gets more prominent with more understanding of the culture and the world			
	Making the choice to be oneself	Making the choice to be oneself		
	My diverse, multi-faceted family	Impacts of upbringing on my perception of identity	My foundations of identity formation	
	Seeing people for their individuality rather than stereotypes			

RQ	Initial Codes	Focused Codes	Preliminary Themes	Themes
	Not seeing color as anyone's sole defining feature			
	How I present myself	My understanding of identity		
	Influenced by culture and ethnicity			
	Influenced by the intersection of my race and gender			
	What makes me unique			
	Being comfortable with my feelings	Acceptance that I am multi-faceted	Self-acceptance	
	Being comfortable with myself			
	Putting myself first			
	Being proud of my culture	Accepting my cultural identity		
	Celebrating cultural norms			
	Decided to teach and empower students	Decided to teach and empower students	Establishing my self-advocacy to teach and empower	Black by any means necessary
	Educating others	Educating others		
	Encouraging others to speak up	Encouraging others to speak up		
	Promoting for people to be comfortable around each other	Promoting for people to be comfortable around each other		
	Belief that adverse experiences led to acceptance of identity	Growing stronger with my experiences	Stopped giving power to my oppressors	
	Building resilience			
	Sought therapy			
	'Stopped feeling' to avoid feeling hurt			
	Standing up for myself after learning about restorative justice practices	Standing up for myself after learning about restorative justice practices		

APPENDIX C: IRB APPROVAL

Fwd: IRBNet Board Action

Sheila Russell <srussell@lions.molloy.edu>
Mon 1/29/2024 10:10 PM
To:Sheila Russell <russells@stjohns.edu>

* External Email *

---------- Forwarded message ---------
From: **Patricia Eckardt** <no-reply@irbnet.org>
Date: Thu, Jan 25, 2024 at 10:38 AM
Subject: IRBNet Board Action
To: Sheila Russell <srussell@lions.molloy.edu>, Warren Whitaker <wwhitaker@molloy.edu>

Please note that Molloy University IRB has taken the following action on IRBNet:

Project Title: [2144358-1] Navigating Whiteness: A Critical Autoethnography of the Lived Experience of a Black Female Administrator in the Predominantly White Spaces of Higher Education
Principal Investigator: Sheila Russell, BA, MA

Submission Type: New Project
Date Submitted: January 2, 2024

Action: APPROVED
Effective Date: January 25, 2024
Review Type: Exempt Review

Should you have any questions you may contact Patricia Eckardt at peckardt@molloy.edu.

Thank you,
The IRBNet Support Team

www.irbnet.org