VOICE AND VISIBILITY

The claiming of one Black woman’s education

by

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“Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery: None but ourselves can free our minds.”
~ Bob Marley, Redemption Song

Abstract

The purpose of my research is to contribute to the de/reconstruction of knowledge about the Black educational experience in Canada. Using post-positivist paradigms, critical Black feminist standpoint theory and auto-ethnographic qualitative methods of inquiry, I provide an insider perspective on being Black and female in the Canadian educational system, from primary and secondary experiences through the journey of claiming a higher education. My self-study explores the social and cultural forces that have impacted my life, highlights systemic racism throughout the journey, identifies themes in the educational experiences of Black students and Black women, uncovers contradictions between the dominant discourse and my reality, and incites reflection and action on the implications for teaching, research and educational policy.

1 Adinkra is an ancient Ghanaian pictographic writing system comprised of symbols often associated with proverbs. MacDonald, J. (2001).
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AYA “fern”, symbol of endurance and resourcefulness

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Chapter One

Introduction – “...Some of Us Are Brave”

In 1977, at a convocation speech at Douglass College, renowned feminist, poet and author Adrienne Rich urged female students to consider that they are not simply receiving an education but claiming one:

You cannot afford to think of being here to receive an education; you will do much better to think of yourselves as being here to claim one... ‘to claim’ is: to take as the rightful owner; to assert in the face of possible contradiction. ‘To receive’ is to come into possession of, to act as receptacle or container for; to accept as authoritative or true. The difference is that between acting and being acted-upon. (Rich, 1977, p. 1)

This activist perspective came from her knowing that the experiences of women have not been accounted for in higher education. For Black women, this exclusion is compounded. bell hooks argued that no other group has had their “identity socialized out of existence as have Black women” (hooks, 1981, p. 7). Extending this argument, Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith (1982) co-edited a book called All the women are White, all the Blacks are men: But some of us are brave dedicated to the subject of this exclusion.
Exclusion in the context of the academy was addressed by Constance Carroll who wrote: “There is no more isolated subgroup in academe than Black women...they have neither race nor sex in common with White males who dominate the decision-making stratum of academe” (1982, p. 118). Scott (1982) concurred about the overwhelming “depth and extent of the intellectual void that exist among social science scholars concerning the life experiences of Black women” (p. 86). She highlighted three observations that, in her mind, reflect a “pervasive racist and sexist bias in social science scholarship” (p. 86) within North American literature: the lack of acknowledgement of the role of Black women in history; the narrow examination of the lives of Black women from a ‘problems’ framework; and, the stagnant nature in which the experiences of Black women have been written over time. I know this all too well through my own lived experience.

Focus of the Study

The focus of my research is to contribute to the de/reconstruction of knowledge about the Black educational experience in Canada. My self-study explores the social and cultural forces that have impacted my life, identifies systemic racism experienced throughout my journey, uncover themes in the experiences of other Black women, critiques the deficit lens through which Black women are perceived, points to contradictions between the dominant discourse and my reality and invites reflection and action on the implications for teaching, research and educational policy. Using post-positivist paradigms, critical Black feminist standpoint theory and an auto-ethnographic qualitative approach of inquiry, I will invite the reader into my life and educational journey, from indigenous learning experiences, through primary and secondary schooling
experiences and to experiences of claiming a higher education. I will begin with my childhood experiences in the small village in Ghana, Africa where I was born, then work through my adolescent experiences as an immigrant in a small non-urban town in south-eastern Ontario and finally move to my experiences ‘claiming’ an education from a predominantly White Eurocentric institution of higher learning in Canada. In this way, I intend to provide an “emic or insider’s perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 84) on being Black and female in the Canadian academy. Over the course of the research, I will reflect on the following five questions:

1. What does it mean to be a Black female learner in the Canadian education system?
2. How can self-reflection and self-revelation, in the context of my marginalized identity, personally transform me as the researcher-author?
3. How can my lived experience impact and influence the receiver-reader?
4. What insights drawn from my story can inform the current literature on the educational experience for Black women pursuing higher education?
5. What are the practical and actionable implications of my story for equity in education?

A Word on Dominant Discourse

Before proceeding, I take a moment to say a word about the dominant discourse in Canada that compels me not only to do this research but to do it and present it in a way that resists Eurocentric, colonial, racist, sexist and elitist norms. A dominant social discourse serves to naturalize and perpetuate “assumptions, attitudes and beliefs about social life,...which shape, maintain and reinforce group relations including patterns of power (Jaworski & Coupland, 2006, p. 46). There is in Canadian society, and by extension in its institutions, a dominant racist discourse constructed regarding those of us
belonging to the African Diaspora (Kobayashi & Fugi Johnson, 2007). While this thesis does not intend to recount a history of racism in Canada, it does intend to account for the contemporary experiences of one African-Canadian woman and relate these to a social system that is steeped in overt and covert racism which continues to have effects on African-Canadians as individuals, as a people. Reflecting on the last century of historical, political and social perspectives and constructions of race and Blackness in Canada, one finds a highly racialized society with systemic racism rampant in its institutions. The next section will illustrate the assertion of systemic racism.

Since the early 1600s, when the first Black person, Mathieu de Costa, set foot in Canada, Canadians of African ancestry have suffered brutal effects of racialization (Kobayashi & Fugi Johnson, 2007). In 1908, the Conservative Party was declared, by immigration minister Robert Borden, as a party that “stands for White Canada” (Taylor, James & Saul, 2007, p. 158) and the government instituted a policy to restrict the immigration of African Americans from the U.S. Black people were “routinely excluded because...Canada judged that Africans were ‘unassimilable’” (Taylor, James & Saul, 2007, p. 159), a sentiment that was re-articulated as recently as 1955 by Jack Pickersgill, the deputy minister of immigration at the time (Nguyen & Stevenson, 2008). This early requirement of immigrants to assimilate is cited as a reflection of a racist discourse reinforced by and reinforcing the “stereotyping of [Black people] and the extent to which it is perceived that we can or cannot become ‘good’ Canadian citizens” (p. 159). Sherene Razack (2002) argues that immigration policy in Canada continues to be a racially stratified system that produces two (or more) tiers of citizenship (as cited in Taylor, James & Saul, 2007). Francis Henry and Carol Tator (2009) also contend that
racialization in Canadian society prevails today, insofar as individuals of African ancestry continue to be seen as “low educational achievers...and potential criminals, despite their long history in Canada and their high professional qualifications and ambitions. (as cited in Taylor, James & Saul, 2007, p.159/160).

An investigation of Canadian discourse in English print material between the 1980s and 1999 revealed that “the media articulates and transmits powerful and negative narratives, images and ideas about ethno-racial minorities that can have a significant influence on the collective belief system of Canadian society” (Henry & Tator, 2000). The dominant Canadian narrative emerges from racist stereotypes and a deficit lens through which society perceives Blackness, distorting, doubting and denying the moral character and motivations of Black people and communities. It is assumed that African Canadians are “more prone to deviant behaviour...lack the motivation, education or skills to participate fully in the workplace, educational system, the arts and other arenas of Canadian society” (Henry & Tator, 2000). For instance, gaps in the achievement of Black students and challenges they face, consciously or subconsciously, continue to be linked to this dominant racist discourse. Educational research on Black children in Canada continues to focus on “notions of ‘disadvantage’ and ‘underachievement’ [and] of ‘immigrant deviance’”; the dominant narrative blames the values and attitudes of Black communities for their “economic and educational plight” (Henry, 1993, p. 208).

The Henry and Tator (2000) investigation also found pervasive resistance, by dominant and more privileged social groups, of the existence of racism, despite the research and testimonials of scholars and those victimized by racism within the context and supporting literature of this study. This resistance comes in the form of overtly and
implicitly distrusting, disbelieving, discrediting, denouncing, doubting and denying Black people and our experiences. This deep-rooted and entrenched racist discourse acts to preserve a “capitalistic and highly stratified social system” (2007, Henry & Tator, p. 117), with Black people at or near the bottom of this social and economic class hierarchy.

The dominant discourse is so powerful that it creeps into our psyche and we find ourselves constantly fighting the internalization of “supremist values and aesthetics, a way of...seeing the world that negates [our] value” (hooks, 1992, p. 3). During this study, I expect to come face to face with my own internalized oppression and, in the end, affirm my resistance, forgive my surrenders and learn from the struggle. In other words, in part, my study intends to offer self-healing from injurious impacts of intra-psychic conflict caused by internalized oppression (Lorde, 1984) as well as the trauma of marginalization and silencing. In telling my story, I name and contest institutional messages that insinuate I do not belong in the academy, that proclaim I am only here because of equity measures not based on merit, and that maintain I cannot possibly contribute to the academic community. The counter narrative provided by my story is juxtaposed with the stories told by other Black feminist academics, scholars and writers. These counter narratives are stories of extraordinary psychosocial and intellectual assets and competencies that we as Black women must possess to enter and succeed in higher education.

**Critical Black Feminist Standpoint Theory: A Counter Narrative**

Almost thirty years after hooks and other Black feminist scholar-activists vigorously contested the social and academic exclusion of Black women, the lives and contributions of Black female scholars continue to be marginalized in the knowledge
generation and research endeavour. Patricia White (2008) writes about the continued marginalization of Black female scholars, particularly when these academics are perceived as “[straying] outside the acceptable boundaries of research for a minority female” (p. 85). Standpoint research emerges from the feminist critique of the absence of women from and in research and it is a perspective that seeks to bring to the fore knowledge that comes out of marginal experiences (Harding, 1987, p. 184, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 243). Rather than universalizing the experiences of women, standpoint theory emphasizes the “situated woman with experiences and knowledge specific to her place in the material division of labour and the racial stratification systems” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 243). Rai Reece (2008) asserts that, as we Black women negotiate our space and place in the world, our complex identities and experiences can only be viewed and understood through an “array of varying lenses” (p. 266). She refers to this standpoint when she speaks of “Black feminism” (p. 267) and differentiates it from “the first and second waves of feminism [historically] focused on the Eurocentric premise that all (White) women were oppressed equally” (p. 266). Reece characterizes Black feminism as being connected with activism and social justice in two significant ways: it demands more dialogue, theoretical representation and presence of Black women in the academy; and, it urges academics to take on the role of scholar-activist and to include the experiences of Black women in their teaching and research.

Referring to Black Feminist Thought, Patricia Hill Collins uses standpoint theory to draw out experiences and knowledge of Black women which are grounded in material circumstances and political situation (Collins, 1990). She writes that Black feminist standpoint theory, as a theoretical paradigm or interpretive framework, presupposes that
reality is a function of power relations and structures that affect the mutual construction of race, gender and class (intersectionality), that knowledge is rooted in the particular and situated experiences of Black women (subjectivity), and that to better understand and represent the world of Black women requires the use of ‘alternative’ research methods and evaluation criteria, such as lived experience, reflexivity, praxis, emotionality, and personal accountability, for instance. In this way, critical Black feminist standpoint theory demonstrates six distinguishing ontological, epistemological and methodological features (Collins, 2000):

1. an overarching purpose to resist (intersecting) oppressions;
2. ties between diverse individual/subjective experiences informing common themes in group knowledge/standpoint;
3. potential for transformation in thinking and consciousness through dialogical relationship between individual experiences and group knowledge;
4. merger of theory and action through links to community;
5. activist orientation that focuses on accessibility and relevance to non-intellectuals; and,
6. contribution to broader struggles for social justice.

My research is primarily concerned with the experiences of Black women in their journey to claiming an education, not with the numbers of Black students and faculty who enter and remain in the academy per se. That having been said, existing statistical data and trends on Black student enrolment, persistence and graduation as well as Black faculty recruitment, retention and promotion have some interpretative value in relation to the individual experiences and socio-political dynamics I aim to uncover. In the next section I comment on my findings as a result of a passing glance at some statistics of interest.
Statistics: Black in the Academy

Taking a brief detour to search the public websites of Statistics Canada, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU), I found that publications that looked at demographics in relation to higher educational trends focused primarily on gender and socio-economic status, with some recent emphasis on Aboriginal experiences. Here, I must note the Canadian government uses the term ‘visible minority’ to categorize non-Aboriginal persons who identify as non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour though the United Nations proposes ‘racialized persons’ is a term that more accurately reflects the idea that the process of racialization is imposed on a person by external perceptions.

Reports that looked at racial demographics, aggregated data for a category called ‘visible minority’ and did not provide any meaningful information and trends about Black students and faculty members. The AUCC does publish an annual report called Trends in Higher Education, which looks at faculty recruitment and student enrolment trends in post-secondary institutions and it does collect some data related to race/ethnicity. However, statistics on Black faculty are not collected and statistics on Black students are not adequately reported or analyzed. For instance, a graph depicting the likelihood of having completed university is provided in the publication with a breakdown of racial/ethnic groups, but the actual data is not fully reported nor analyzed (see Figure 1). Looking at the likelihood that members of visible minority groups between the ages of 25 and 64 years have completed a university degree either before they arrive or while they are in Canada, the Census data reveals that, overall, visible minorities demonstrate a
greater likelihood than the general population of having/completing a university degree. However, the graph, referenced above, shows that individuals who identify as Black (along with those who identify as Latin American or South Asian) have a lower likelihood than the average visible minority to have/graduate with a university degree.

Figure 1: Likelihood to have completed a university degree by race/ethnicity

The Report does not offer the actual percentage of Black students who have completed a university degree and it is silent on any analysis of these racial/ethnic differences. Having already commented on the deficit lens through which Black Canadians are perceived and the oppressive nature of this fabrication, I would venture to relate the lower average rate of university degree attainment/completion among Black Canadians, in part, to the impact of this formidable mythology on Black youth. This assertion will be supported by the themes that emerge from the review of literature as well as my own story. In another report by Statistics Canada (2003), Black Canadians were more likely to report feeling they had been discriminated against or treated unfairly by others because of their ethno-cultural characteristics. Nearly one-third (32%) of Black
Canadians, or 135,000, said they had had these experiences sometimes or often in the past five years, compared with 21% of South Asian-Canadians and 18% of Chinese-Canadians (see Figure 2). Another 17% of Black Canadians, 13% of South Asian-Canadians and 15% of Chinese-Canadians reported these experiences had occurred rarely.

**Figure 2: Percentage reporting discrimination or unfair treatment ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ in the past five years, by visible minority status, 2002**

Map of Thesis: A Transgressive Journey

Having remarked on some important statistics relating to higher educational attainment and self-reported experiences of racial discrimination among Black Canadians, I now turn to the organization of my thesis. My life and educational journey can be understood as a series of ongoing and constant border crossings – literally across national boundaries, but also across racial, cultural, gender and class lines (Tastsoglou, 2000). My story aims to reflect how this journey has been fundamentally shaped by
institutional structures that purposefully organize power around race, ethnicity, gender and class. As such, my narrative is structured so that it tells of my experiences and simultaneously resists, defies and transgresses conventions (including research methodologies) that are implicated in my oppressive experiences. To this point, this introductory chapter has prefaced my research and introduced my thesis topic, purpose and research questions as well as the concept of dominant discourse and its relationship to and impact on Black/African-Canadians. The chapter has provided an explanation of critical Black feminist standpoint theory and of the rationale for my research paradigm or interpretative framework. As well, it has briefly touched on some related statistics with respect to the Black experience in Canada.

Now I will briefly map out how the remainder of my thesis has been arranged, followed by a section that provides contextual information relating to the use of orality and imagery throughout this thesis. The second chapter is a review of literature on the subject of the Black educational experience in North America, within primary and secondary school systems and tertiary institutions. This review of the research on the subject is followed by a chapter detailing my research methodology, including my theoretical framework, rationale for using qualitative approaches, as well as methods employed to collect, analyze, interpret and report data. Within the third chapter I offer a metaphor for thinking about the evolution of my thesis as well as considerations related to quality, authenticity and ethics. The fourth chapter delves into my narrative story, including my Indigenous teachings, my primary school experiences in post-colonial Ghana, my public school experiences in Canada, my educational experiences within the context of community activism and my experiences claiming a higher education.
Obviously, my narrative story represents a very small part of my life and educational journey. The aspects which I choose to share with the reader are intentional and Chapter Five includes reflections on my research process, including what is said and what is left unsaid. This chapter begins by contextualizing social, cultural, historical, economic and political influences on my life by discussing my place of birth and country of origin, Ghana. The chapter then reflects on the common themes in the Black educational experience in North America followed by a discussion of issues of subjectivity, voice, legitimacy, positionality, vulnerability, empowerment, healing and mobilization as they emerged and related to my research and writing process. Throughout this chapter, I weave in the work of Black/African academics, and particularly Black/African women writers, poets and scholar-activists who have spoken about these topics. The sixth chapter explores the subject of spirituality and its centrality to Black identity and experience. This chapter relates spirituality as a protective force to a sense of belonging, agency, empowerment, community, activism, voice, resistance and healing. The final chapter offers my concluding remarks where I summarize the role of socio-cultural forces in maintaining a dominant racist discourse, highlight the significance of my study to research and activism, and reiterate the themes in the Black educational experience in the context of implications for educational practitioners, academics and policy-makers interested in change for educational equity. Throughout this thesis, I weave in various forms and orality and imagery to convey, as best possible, the complexity of meanings and feelings which are not captured by the written work in the same as it is in images. In the final section of this introductory chapter, I discuss orality and its importance to this research project and process.
Orality: The Art of (Her)story-telling

Orality is not only a communication vehicle or a means to convey knowledge from generation to generation, it is described by Maryam Nabavi as “pedagogy that takes on many forms, including proverbs, praise-songs, story-telling, folklore, debates, poetry, fables, riddles, singing, myths and mythologies” (Nabavi, 2006, p. 178). Drawing on and telling my oral history is a way of “finding voice against historical misrepresentations, and seeking empowerment” (p. 179). Throughout the thesis, I present several proverbs as metaphors to help think about or understand topics and concepts being discussed. Proverbs are an important part of the Ghanaian oral tradition and their use is widespread as mini-stories conveying cultural wisdom, values and expectations. Also, Ghanaians inherited from their ancestors a pictographic writing system comprised of symbols often associated with a specific proverb rooted in the cultural experience. This Adinkra system of symbols acts to preserve and transmit the cultural values of our people.

This rich oral, proverbial and symbolic literary tradition has been core to the survival of my culture, its people and its community. Among the things that have always been important to Ghanaians is the value placed on education, knowledge acquisition and openness to learning, exemplified by the Adinkra symbol of knowledge, life-long education and continued quest for knowledge (see page 15) and in the proverb:

“Knowledge is like a Baobab tree...no one can encompass it with their hands” (see Figure 3). This fundamental value counters the racism inherent in characterizations of Black people as uninterested in and incapable of contributing to knowledge generation, learning and education.
Figure 3: Baobab tree
Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

This chapter will provide a review of literature on the Black educational experience in North America within public schools and in the academy. The theoretical and methodological approaches taken by the researchers referenced in this section have guided the formulation of my research questions and the approaches that I have chosen for my study. To understand and contribute to the field in the Canadian context, my study focuses and builds on research findings and literary works by Black Canadian scholars, authors and activists who have contributed to a growing, but still limited body of literature on the Black educational experience in Canada.
Being Black and Female in the Academy

This section summarizes some of the research conducted by women whose theoretical frameworks, methodologies and findings have informed my research questions and approach. The literature described below uses narrative and phenomenological approaches to study the lived experiences of Black women who are undergraduates, graduates or faculty members in institutions of higher learning. These studies seek to give voice to the subjective experiences of Black women while finding the common themes in their stories in order to uncover aspects that impact their access, persistence and attainment in higher education. Some of these works are self-studies and others are ethnographic, but in all cases, the researcher is an insider, a Black female in the academy. Of the few studies that have explored the experiences of Black women in academe, much of the research is situated in the United States and is focused on the experiences of faculty and senior administrators. With respect to the “everyday” experiences of Black women faculty members in the Canadian academy, Annette Henry found that “Black women were in positions where they were isolated and bore the political responsibility of raising the awareness and consciousness of the White people in their work environment” (Henry, 2000, p. 97). While it is instructive to consider these findings, it is also important to examine the experiences of Black female graduate students, lest we be rendered voiceless and invisible by the class hierarchy within the academy.

In What’s Black About it? An Educator’s Auto-ethnography, Jamise Liddell spoke of her “trials and tribulations...in higher education” in an attempt to distinguish “what is Black about” her experience in “maneuvering through the challenges of working through
higher education” (Liddell, 2007, p. iii). This study took place in Arizona State University and the author used phenomenological approaches and auto-ethnographic methods to narrate the story of her doctoral dissertation journey. The purpose of her study was multifaceted: “(a) to understand what it means to a Black woman going through a doctoral program, (b) to inform the literature from the unique findings of the study, and (c) to experience personal change and transformation through the writing of the dissertation” (Liddell, 2007, p. iii). Using insights from her own life experiences, the author identified several factors that contributed to her educational journey.

Liddell intended for her personal narrative to counter the dominant message in academe by encouraging and empowering other African American women doctoral students, educators and administrators in higher education. In *Learning to Read Each Other*, Williams, Brewley, Reed, White and Davis-Haley (2005) explore the experiences of several Black female graduate students. Using Black Feminist Thought as a theoretical framework, the paper sought to explain the lived experiences of three Black female graduate students pursuing their doctoral degrees in a predominantly White institution. The research used phenomenological qualitative methods of inquiry to collect and analyze data that were drawn from open dialogues among the three students and two Black female professors who served as their teachers, advisors and mentors. The conversations allowed participants to openly discuss their challenges and frustrations while benefiting from the mentorship of faculty and networking with one another in the group sessions. Following the group discussions, students were asked to write about the events that contributed to their educational ambitions and perseverance. To help validate and locate student experiences within broader academic research on issues of race and
gender in the academy, citations to related literature were included alongside student stories. Findings revealed several common themes that connected the students to each other, including themes of identity, community service missions and empowerment. All students discussed their experiences with perceptions of Affirmative Action policies, with battles to counter negative stereotypes, with ‘stereotype threat’ or the fear of doing something that would confirm a negative stereotype, and with finding a place for themselves. They also shared the importance of influential people in their lives, their reliance on a vision of helping and serving others to get ahead as individuals and as a community, and the sense of empowerment in using their voice to break through isolation.

Turning from the experiences of Black graduate students, this next study explored the experiences of Black women at varying stages in their academic careers. In *Reflections on Mentoring: Black Women and the Academy*, Julia S. Jordan-Zachery used a phenomenological approach to investigate the experiences of five Black women with mentoring relationships in the academy. She conducted open-ended interviews with an undergraduate student, a graduate student, an assistant professor, an associate professor and a retired professor. Through in-depth telephone interviews, she asked participants to define mentorship, to comment on the roles they felt the mentor and the protégé should have, and to share any tips or guidelines they would offer to mentors and protégées. Common threads in her findings included the need to mutually cultivate relationships, the need for the protégé to take the initiative, the need for sincerity to sustain the relationship, and the need for departments to create better communication networks for scholars (Jordan-Zachery, 2004).
While Liddell and Jordan-Zachery looked at mentoring relationships this next study focuses on challenges for mature students. In *Sistahs in College: Making a way out of no way*, Juanita Johnson-Bailey turns our attention to the experiences of Black women who are further marginalized in the academy by virtue of their mature student status. Johnson-Bailey tells the stories of eight African-American women who did not complete higher education at a typical age, but returned later in life. Including her own story in the study, she embarked on her research because of a lack of information about the experiences of Black women re-entering the academy. She did not find her own experience articulated in post-secondary research. Rooted in Black Feminist Thought, her qualitative study explored the journeys of these women and the common experiences that influenced their persistence in the academy. Johnson-Bailey interviewed undergraduate and graduate women ranging in age from 34 to 54 and who attended a variety of post-secondary institutions, including 2-year community colleges and 4-year universities. She asked open-ended questions about their schooling experiences and found certain common barriers were faced by all, including a fear of failure, lack of self-confidence and challenges of balancing job, family and community involvement. As well, all women felt the experience of returning to higher education was life changing (Johnson-Bailey, 2001).

All of the studies described to this point, including my own self-study, are initiated by academics in predominantly White institutions (PWIs). My research does not attempt to provide a comparative analysis of literature and findings on the Black educational experience in Afro-centric independent schools or historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), primarily found in the United States. That said, such comparative research might offer some interesting similarities and differences to explore.
Beverly Daniel Tatum, President of Spelman College, the first historically black all-female institution of higher learning, invites such comparative analysis:

“I think it's important to say that - and I speak as someone who has been educated entirely myself at predominantly white institutions and spent most of my professional life working in predominantly white institutions...there are many excellent institutions where African-American students can be well educated, but there is something special about coming to an institution where you can say this place was built for me” (Chideya, 2006).

That said, the themes identified from the select literature on the subject of being Black and female in the academy suggests the existence of destructive forces or barriers as well as protective or supporting factors. To summarize, the former include isolation, stereotype threat, marginalization, barriers to access (financial, familial and community obligations), and systemic racism. The latter include a strong sense of racial identity, mentorship and networks, community involvement and service, self-empowerment, the use of voice, spirituality as an anti-colonial healing force, and a sense of place and belonging.

Black Youth and the School System

One cannot talk about the experiences of Black women in the Canadian academy without first exploring, analysing and understanding the Black experience in Canadian society and its public educational system – the primary and secondary school environments that, to a large extent, set the tone for the tertiary educational landscape. In 1988, the Toronto Board of Education reported that African-Canadians “are experiencing high dropout rates, low self-esteem, overrepresentation in low academic tracks, and lower academic achievement than other racial and ethnic groups” (as cited in Ladson-Billings & Henry, 1990, p. 73). In 1994, the Black Learners Advisory Committee Report on
Education asserted that “lacking reinforcement in their own historical experiences, [Black students] become psychologically crippled, hobbling along in the margins of the European experiences of most of the curriculum” (p. 40 as cited by Codjoe, 2001, p. 365). In a 1995 report that discusses the dynamics of the disengagement of Black students from school, the principal investigator, George Sefa Dei notes that much of the Canadian research and literature on the subject “focuses on the ‘problems’ of youth education in general (Dei, Holmes, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Campbell, 1995, p. 6). For instance, Dei says that a number of variables have been posited as affecting the educational progress of Black youth, including “migration stress, cultural differences, family disorganization, domestic responsibility, dialect interference, low self-esteem, disadvantage, culturally biased tests, low teacher expectation, unsuitable curriculum, low socio-economic class and racial hostility” (p. 5).

While some of these variables may play a role, he reports that a study of the factors influencing early departure of Black youth found “streaming in schools, poverty, Eurocentrism, [and] discrimination” as key contributors (Dei, Holmes, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Campbell, 1995, p. 6). Streaming refers to the act of guiding and directing Black students into non-academic preparatory programs of study that gear graduates towards applied and/or labour intensive vocations. In this report, Dei points to the need to “explore the questions of class, gender, race/ethnicity, power and history” in the discussion of the educational experiences of Black students. Dei (1995) argues that “issues of race, identity, representation and social difference continue to play significant roles in the process of delivering education in Euro-American context” (p. 1), and he points to “structural poverty, racism, sexism and social and cultural differences as
significant factors in the schooling outcomes of minority youth in particular” (p. 5). Dei concludes Black students have common thematic experiences related to Black identity, culture, differential treatment, gender, power, racism, representation, role models, stereotypes, teaching style, violence, and curriculum (p.13).

Perry (2003), writing about the stereotype of the intellectual inferiority of Black people, said that, despite the illusion of an open and accepting society, there continued to be a “pervasive, persistent, well-articulated, and unabated assumption of mental incompetence” directed at Black students (p. B10). While acknowledging that “some parents are not sufficiently well informed to offer appropriate guidance” in their children’s academic choices, partly due to differing backgrounds and experiences with educational systems, Henry (1993) argues that the dominant discourse inappropriately blames parent attitudes and values for the lack of success of Black student (p. 208) and that “the Black family, especially the poor and working-class Black family, and the Black mother have been distorted as sites of pathology and oppression” (p. 209). Indeed, sociologists have historically blamed Black students, families and communities for educational failure (Codjoe, 2006), however, research has demonstrated that under-representation of Black history and culture in the curriculum, as well as low teacher expectations and streaming of Black students have created inequity and exclusion (Codjoe, 2001; Smith & Lalonde, 2003). These exclusionary school policies, procedures and practices are referred to as the ‘hidden curriculum’ because they are implicitly informed by stereotyped and prejudicial views, in turn, perpetuate the myth of the academic inferiority of Black children and youth, particularly from low-income and single-parent families. Dei (1996) referred to the marginalization and depersonalization
of Black students of African origin in the Canadian educational system as “racial, cultural and gender ‘othering’ of [Black] students” (Dei, 1996, p. 44). Many scholars have written that the effects of “othering”, through overt and subtle forms of racism, are significant. Codjoe highlights the issue of systemic racism in Canadian society as a significant barrier to Black students (2001).

In one study, Codjoe (2001) describes racism as an ‘environmental stressor’ (p. 361) that can “increase emotional stress” of Black students and can, over time, hinder “efficient use of cognitive skills” as well as academic persistence and performance (p. 362). Codjoe cites media reports that assert “the impact of [overt] racial insults on the mental health of [Black] youths cannot be ignored” (Canadian Press Newstex, 1993, as cited in Codjoe, 2001, p. 361) and he argues the effects of individual and systemic racism on the learning of Black students cannot be denied. In another study, he looks at the effects of institutional racism on the educational experiences of “successful” Black students and how these students cope in learning environments steeped in systemic racism (Codjoe, 2001). Every one of the students in his study reported experiencing both subtle and overt racism. Codjoe found that racism continues to adversely affect the educational achievement of Black students who report psychological effects of discrimination and he identified five themes that emerged from the stories of the students he interviewed: “differential treatment by race; negative racial stereotyping; the lack of representation of Black/African perspectives, histories and experiences; low teacher expectations; and, ...a hostile school environment” (2001, p.349).

Research by Reynolds (1993) uncovered three broad classes of what he called protective factors – individual, familial, and social. The first included child temperament,
sociability, self-esteem, intelligence, and early school performance. The second included 
frequency and quality of parent-child interactions, parent expectations for children’s 
success, parent monitoring, and perceptions of belonging and cohesion among family 
members. The third included school and community influences on adaptation, quality and 
quantity of family-school relations, schools’ academic emphasis and the characteristics of 
the school environment, and the presence of social networks (p. 4 as cited by Codjoe, 
2006, p. 38). Codjoe (2006) also conducted research on academically successful Black 
high school students who were accepted into university and found these students had to 
“develop both academic skills and positive attitudes about themselves and about the value 
of education” (p. 36). He demonstrated that their academic achievement was associated 
with certain personal and psychosocial factors like “self-perceptions, attitudes 
and...intrinsic motivation” as well as interpersonal relationships that provided 
spoke of the “extra-cognitive, social and emotional competencies that [Black] children 
need in order to succeed in school” (p. 1).

Goss & Alexander (2007) studied the academic performance of middle-class 
African American children and found that they lagged behind their white counterparts in 
educational success. They concluded that even children of highly educated, affluent 
African Americans experience a set of social processes that pose overwhelming barriers 
to their academic and personal development and that race constraints the life chances of 
both their parents and themselves (p. 310). While more research needs to be conducted 
concerning the varying educational experiences and outcomes of Black students from 
middle-class families, Goss & Alexander suggest that Black parents experience racial
“liabilities” that prevent them from passing advantage on to their children, in part due to the historic and contemporary social ecology of ‘race’ in North America. They go on to argue that while “race-neutral remedies are increasingly favoured over race-specific ones...and some even want to suppress the collection of racial identifiers in research and government records...ignoring race won’t eliminate it as a stratifying mechanism” but may in fact delay the identification of remedies to help us progress towards a more just and equitable society (Goss & Alexander, p. 311).

One of the strongest themes that emerges from research about the educational experience of Black students is the finding that “knowledge and pride/affirmation in Black cultural and racial identity” is perhaps one of the most important contributors to student academic achievement and success (Codjoe, 2006, p. 39). Trueba (1994) wrote that there is “a profound link between ethnic identity and student’s ability to participate fully in academia” (p. 380, as cited in Codjoe, 2006, p.46). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) discussed collective identity development as a strategy adopted by members of the African Diaspora in the U.S. as a means to cope with systemic discrimination (as cited in Smith & Lalonde, 2003). Smith and Lalonde (2003) also studied the effects of identity development in U.S. and Canadian Black students and found those students with a stronger affinity to other people of African descent were psychologically healthier, notwithstanding the historical differences between the two Diaspora as well as the fact that most Black students in Canada are immigrants or descendants of immigrants from various Caribbean islands and African countries. They also found “a strong identity may act as a buffer against all the negatives with which [Black students] are bombarded” (p.
and they speculated whether psychologically healthier students may be predisposed to a stronger Black identity due to healthier process of racial identity development.

Activists and academics have long argued that recognition and inclusion of Indigenous, Afro-centric, student-centred and community-focused pedagogies are more engaging, relevant and, thereby, effective educational approaches. As an example, Ladson-Billings and Henry (2001) invoke the Sankofa principle by looking back to indigenous and Afro-centric methods of education to help Black students and communities progress educationally. They collaborated on two studies looking at pedagogical strategies employed by successful teachers of Black students in the U.S. and Canada. Ladson-Billings and Henry use the term “culturally relevant teaching” to differentiate between terms such as cultural-congruence, cultural-responsiveness and cultural-compatibility which they argue are concerned with fitting a non-mainstream culture into current school structures and systems as opposed to drawing out non-dominant cultures by empowering students to critically examine the educational content and process in order to make sense of the world (2001, p. 82). They found that classrooms of successful teachers seemed “noisy and chaotic” (p.78).

Ladson-Billings and Henry (2001) observed that students were permitted to move around the classroom and talk with others about their daily work, in contrast to other classes. They also found that teachers were in constant motion, moving “from place to place and from student to student” and they did not seem to be “preoccupied with maintaining order and control” (p.78). In fact, these researchers uncovered that successful teachers of Black students used music, bodily movement, rhythm, singing, rap and call-and-response techniques among their teaching methods (p. 79) and they consistently
linked subject matter to the lives and experiences of the students. The authors highlight how teachers brought the community into the classroom and more successfully engaged the students who found it difficult to simply be spectators or passive observers in this dynamic, spontaneous and participatory classroom environment. Molefi Kete Asante, the forefather of Afro-centric Thought, talks about the dominant vocal-expressive culture of African societies and the African Diaspora. He says this “expressive sense [manifests] itself in life force in dance, music and speech” (Asante, 1987, p. 59). Ladson-Billings and Henry (2001) conclude that teachers who create a culturally relevant classroom by using Afro-centric and student-centred educational methods have more success reaching and engaging Black students because the approach nurtures academic as well as social and cultural success, which together positively impact academic performance and ambition.

In summary, the common themes that emerge from research findings and literature on the education experience of Black youth in North American schools also include destructive forces or barriers as well as protective or supportive factors. The negative forces with which Black students must contend include racial stereotyping and a deficit myth, low teacher expectations, differential treatment and streaming, poverty, ‘othering’ and racial marginalization, lack of representation, exclusion of Black peoples and histories in the (hidden) curriculum, both subtle and overt acts of racism, hostility and violence. The mitigating protective factors that help Black students to succeed in the face of adversity include reliance on a strong inner sense of racial identity and pride, self-esteem, extra-cognitive social and emotional competencies, personal psychosocial assets,
sociability and interpersonal relationships, parental and community involvement, perceptions of belongingness and culturally relevant classrooms.
Chapter Three

Research Methodology

The introduction and the literature review, to this point, were intended to provide background and contextual information leading up and contributing to a rationale for the methodology I utilize in my study. In this chapter, I outline, in detail, my research methodology including the theoretical frameworks and lens through which I will approach my study and my rationale for choosing qualitative inquiry approaches and particularly the auto-ethnographic narrative approach. The frameworks, lenses and methods I have chosen for this study are chosen based on my answers to six core questions related to ontological, epistemological, methodological, philosophical, disciplinary, and praxis debates (Patton, 2002, p. 134) – namely, my belief (1) that reality is constructed, (2) that knowledge is subjective, (3) that methods used to learn about people and the world should be reflective of the unique and diverse identities that people hold, (4) that social power relations matter, (5) that lived experiences can yield valuable information about cultures, and (6) that research can and should engage social and
political action. I draw on several post-positivist paradigms and approaches. I use critical Black feminist standpoint theory and I employ auto-ethnographic qualitative methods of inquiry to achieve my research goals. Phenomenological and narrative approaches seek to uncover deeper understanding and meaning of my experiences; critical, feminist, and praxis-oriented approaches seek to deliver emancipation for me and my Black sisters; and, post-modern approaches seek to de/reconstruct knowledge about Black womanhood as dictated by a “‘master narrative’ or ‘grand theory’” (Smith, 1999, pp. 166 – 7).

**Rationale for Qualitative Approach**

Qualitative inquiry methods are most appropriate for uncovering deep insights into and interpreting the lived experience. Bond (1997), a proponent for using qualitative methods to bring voice to the experiences of women in the academy, asserts that “the influences which lead to discovery are not merely scholarly but include the personality, life experiences and the cultural context” (p.5). With auto-ethnography, I can place myself at the centre of the research, emphasizing reflexivity while stimulating deeper understanding and uncovering new meaning and appreciation of social and cultural dynamics (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). I use the term *auto-ethnography* explicitly to mean an ethnographic autobiography (Chang, 2008). It is a method of inquiry that connects “the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740) and uses “personal text as critical intervention in social, political and cultural life” (Jones, 2005, p. 763). This method allows me to remain true to an integrated view of myself where the “self as researcher and the lived self are not separate” (Richardson, 2000). Audre Lorde said it best: “If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s
fantasies for me and eaten alive” (1984, p. 125). By studying my own marginalized identity and social location, the auto-ethnographic process can facilitate my own resistance, transformation and liberation.

Before Ghana was a British colony, the history of most Ghanaians was preserved by oral historians. Today, the stories of many legendary leaders of Ghana's various ethnic groups are included in school history books. However, the voice is still the primary mode through which literature is transmitted amongst the masses and storytelling is one of the most important recreational activities for Ghanaians, especially in rural villages. Among the people of Ghana, folktale characters include the tortoise, hare, vulture, and crow, but Anansi the spider is the most popular character. Formerly human and now a half deity 'keeper of stories’ who is similar to the protagonists found amongst the trickster genre of folktales, such as the rabbit in Aboriginal literature or the monkey in Chinese lore, Anansi defeats his larger opponents by using his intelligence, humour and cunning, rather than through the use of physical force. Anansi stories of folklore form an integral foundation of Ghanaian culture.

As a member of the African Diaspora, narrative processes resonate with me – I was raised relying on and celebrating oral forms of expression. Africans believe in “nommo...the generative power of the spoken word” (Hamlet, 1998, p. 91). Oral histories were popularized and theorized during the feminist movement to bring voice to the experiences of women “in a culture that has traditionally relied on masculine interpretation” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 709). Today, narrative and auto-ethnographic approaches have emerged as ways to give voice to marginalized researchers and
participants while providing communities a deeper understanding of the meaning of these experiences (Williams, Brewley, Reed, White & Davis-Haley, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

My interest in the topic of the educational experiences of Black women in the academy and my approach to my research is certainly both personal and political as a Black, female, first generation university graduate. In order to account for my historical and contemporary realities, I critique, resist and challenge the dominant discourse and I use approaches premised on value systems and world views that not only invite but call for the de-colonization of research methodology (Hamlet, 1998). My research will be framed using critical Black feminist standpoint theory which acknowledges the interconnectedness of race, gender and class, the problems with the external definitions applied to Black womanhood and the need for Black women to define and to validate their own realities (Collins, 2000). This theoretical perspective “links the standpoint of Black women with intersectionality...[giving] keen consideration for power and structural relations” (Olsen, 2000, p. 244). Within the Canadian context, I will explore the “constructed silence around Blackness and the homogenizing tradition of Canadian feminism...within multicultural Canada” (Massaquoi, 2007, p. 9). Works by Black feminist scholar-activists will inform the narration and interpretation of my story.

Methods

As a post-modern feminist study that is critical of conventional processes and values, such as linearity and objectivity for instance, it follows that I will proceed in a fluid and dynamic manner. My story will emerge organically and be interpreted in a manner that provides sufficient flexibility to modify the process as needed. Collins (2009)
said “...the process of feeling one’s way [is] an unavoidable epistemological stance for Black women intellectuals” (p. 19). Personal information will build upon itself as it surfaces and significant themes will eventually become apparent. Relevant concepts and instructive experiences of other Black feminist scholars and activists will be explored throughout the iterative process and will be woven into the narrative.

Sample and Sources of Data

By choosing an auto-ethnographic method, my research is employing a purposeful sampling strategy. As a sample of one, I represent an “information-rich case” (Patton, 2002, p. 242) from whose lived experience much can be learned that is central to the purpose of this research. And, as a single “instrumental case study” (Stake, 2005, p. 445) my story will not only provide deep insight into my particular experiences but also facilitate understanding of broader social and cultural implications of the experience. The primary source of data for my narrative is the richness of my personal experiences drawn from reflection on memories, photographs, journals, poetry and music. My stepfather spent thirty years in Ghana and he kept detailed photo-journals of the time he spent in Prestea and other travels to nearby African regions. Photos taken, journals kept, cultural artifacts collected and historical documents stored by my late stepfather, A.M. Redmond, were used as were casual conversations with my mother and served as prompts to embolden my memory.

Data Collection, Analysis and Interpretation

With regards to the collection, analysis and interpretation of memory data, I used “chronicling” and “inventorying” strategies (Chang, 2008, p. 72) as means to collect and organize data from both past memories and current reflections into a thematic format. I
created an autobiographical timeline with memorable events and experiences, particularly those that are significant to my schooling and educational journey. Using the timeline as a stimulus, I recorded and transcribed oral recollections of my experiences, including conversations with my mother. Journaling, poetry and music have been and continue to be important means of expression for me, so I analyzed personal journal notes, school work, attempts at poetry and significant musical lyrics that impacted me.

Photographs, imagery and drawings were used as cues to elicit data from myself and included in the body of the thesis to bring to life particular illustrative aspects. These and other stimuli such as traditional food dishes like Jallaf rice and Hi Life music, customary clothing and textiles such as Kente cloth (see Figure 4), and cultural artifacts like ebony carvings, for example, were used to prod memory, release emotions and elicit information that may otherwise have remain buried if senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch were not stimulated. Self-reflective data was also collected by keeping a journal which offered an ongoing means of introspection and self-analysis during the research process.

Figure 4: Ashanti Kente cloth
My story is shared with the intention of gaining greater self-understanding, self-healing and self-empowerment while engaging the reader through an evocative and emotional narrative (Denzin, 2006). It is written in a different font to emphasize movement into a personal account of my experiences. The source of data for the text is coded using the following classification system: ME is used to reference data from my memory; PH for data from personal photographs; PI for public images; JW for personal journals and writing; PL for public literature; MU from musical lyrics; and, FO from food. As well, I use the following codes to identify data that is stimulated by items belonging to my late stepfather: PJ for photos and notes from his photo-journals; CU from cultural artefacts; and, HD from historical documents. Finally, data emboldened by casual conversations with my mother is coded as CC.

As for the analysis and interpretation of my story, Black feminist scholarship provides me with conceptual tools for further understanding and attributing meaning to my experiences. Relating stories of other Black feminists offers triangulation of the emerging themes from my narrative and common threads in the experiences of Black women in the academy. Stake suggests that such “multiple perceptions” of similar experiences can help “to clarify meaning” (Stake, 2005, p. 454). The structure and format of the thesis evolve as details of my story emerge, the themes become salient and the best way to connect the reader both intellectually and emotionally with my narrative is decided.

Before turning to quality, authenticity and ethical research considerations, I want to share a metaphor and visual model for my research analysis, interpretation and writing process. Prestea is near the coast of the Atlantic Ocean, so it is not surprising to me that
the following metaphor came to mind when envisioning a model for how my story would evolve (see Figure 5). Depending on varying elements, the ocean can be soothing or threatening. I envisioned the evolution of my story in wave-like iterations from a sea of emotion, memory and experience. With varying frequency, depth and breadth, I expected that waves of emotion would rise and fall, that memory would surface and submerge and that experiences would glide together and collide. At times, the process might feel like I am drowning, in over my head or adrift and at other times it may feel like I am floating effortlessly or even being carried against my will.

Figure 5: The ocean as a metaphor: Evolution of my story depicted as iterative waves

Quality and Authenticity

With regards to its quality as an auto-ethnographic narrative, Jones (2000) reviewed several models for evaluating auto-ethnographic work and offers the following list of criteria. Her interest is in how well the work (a) establishes a reciprocal relationship and shared responsibility between the author and reader; (b) presents a personal story that connects with other stories, ideas, discourses and contexts; (c) creates
a dialogue among and between actors; (d) engages in critique of positions, action and perceptions; (e) evokes emotion and incites action; and, (f) embodies or interrogates experiences that make political and social change possible. Just as Jones (2000) asserts her list is dynamic and generated “in the doing” (p. 773) of her writing, I expect that my own version of evaluation criteria will emerge and evolve over the course of my narrative journey.

The generation of emancipatory knowledge is an essential ingredient in realizing the empowering aims of any Black studies discipline (Kershaw, 1998, p. 39). Therefore, the quality of my research from a Black feminist standpoint will also depend on how well my narrative and analysis is able to empower me and speak to other Black women in the academy. The quality, from the perspective of the authenticity, of my research will rely not only on the richness (depth and breadth) of my lived experience but just as much on my own storytelling and interpretation skills. In other words, the skill and creativity with which I relay and engage the reader in my story will be paramount to the quality of my work.

**Ethical Considerations**

Much of the literature on the subject, albeit limited, uses both qualitative and quantitative inquiry methods to study the experiences of Black students who are the ‘Other’ in the research. Patricia White writes about this tendency for the academy to over-study the ‘Other’ to the extent that the “intense curiosity about the Other not only objectifies but also...betrays systemic and more insidious types of slavery” (White, 2008, p. 81). This self-study is a qualitative strength from the perspective of depth of meaning that may be drawn out, particularly as the research does not intend to generalize. As
previously mentioned, doing this work from my personal point of view is essential to my research as it is a political and emancipatory act. Collins (2000) reminds us that “Black women must drive the theorizing, scholarly production, and social commentary about ourselves” (p. 19). Further studies of female Black students in similar and different settings and contexts will build on themes or patterns that emerge from this study.

Auto-ethnographic methods minimize the risk of exploiting the ‘Other’ as there is no ‘Other’. However, it is important to note that auto-ethnography can easily slip into a self-exploitive exercise and one that loses its academic and emancipatory value. While telling my story, I will consider my own personal boundaries and commitment to self-care as well as be aware of the power that the reader has once they are privy to some very intimate experiences. As researcher and author, I must make grounded decisions about how much of myself I put in, how much I leave unspoken, how vulnerable I make myself, and how self-critical I am.

As Carolyn Ellis put it:

...auto-ethnographers gaze...outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretation. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 85)

Out of respect for their privacy and confidentiality as well as to safeguard their possible emotional impact, I will not approach family members beyond my mother. Their participation would require them to go to places I know they do not wish to revisit for their own personal reasons. The various sources and methods for eliciting personal memory and reflections will provide sufficient information for the purpose of this study. The anonymity of others will not be compromised as I will not discuss individuals
specifically but will rather discuss systemic power dynamics and ways that people and relationships within the academy contribute to the construction and perpetuation of the dominant culture.

As well, my awareness of power relations and attitudes towards systemic issues of oppression and the impact of internalized oppression cannot be ignored. These experiences are unique for every Black woman in the academy, despite common themes. My distinct experiences will, therefore, flavour how the story is read and draws out these common themes. Collins (1991) asserts that “Black women possess a unique standpoint on, or perspective of, their experiences” and “while living life as Black women may produce certain commonalities of outlook, the diversity of class, region, age, and sexual orientation shaping Black women’s lives has resulted in difference expression of these common themes” (p. 37). That said, I acknowledge the social, political, economic and historical differences between the Black experience in the U.S. and in Canada when drawing connections between and among works of other Black feminists.

Having outlined my methodology as well as some methodological issues for consideration, the next chapter presents ‘my story’ which, in fact, only represents a part of my journey towards claiming an education. The choice of experiences, thoughts and feelings shared is intentional and motivated not only by the goals I seek to achieve in doing this research but also by the need to maintain a level of privacy, safety and dignity in the process, which I will explore further in the fifth chapter.
Chapter Four

In this chapter I offer a narrative story to describe aspects of my journey to claiming an education. I start with my indigenous Ghanaian teachings as a child and my early experiences in a (post) colonial Ghanaian school. I continue with my primary and secondary schooling in Canada as well as my educational experiences in the context of community activism. Finally, I conclude with my experiences towards and within the academy, attempting to claim a higher education.

My Story

"The traveller can tell all she has seen on her journey, but she can’t explain it all." ~ Ghanaian proverb

Indigenous Learning and (Post) Colonial Schooling in Ghana

Very early on in my childhood, I began to receive messages about those who were the “haves” and those who were the “have-nots”. I had daily chores like collecting the eggs that the chicken laid and walking to the market to sell them so we could continue to eat. I was responsible for grinding cayenne pepper to cure the meat to keep it from spoiling. I delivered food to the village chief. ME, CC

Out of necessity, I was very connected to and interacted with my community and the physical world immediately around me. For instance, I used materials in my environment to create toys like a doll out of sticks strung together. I looked after the younger children in the village especially when women came together to cook. The eldest always looked after the younger. ME, PJ
I was born in Prestea, Ghana – a small gold-mining town in West Africa. It had only been eight years prior to my birth that this former British colony, called the Gold Coast, gained independence and assumed the name Ghana. I can recall looking out into the distance, from the shanti-town (see Figure 6) where I lived, towards the English compounds (see Figure 7) of the nearby gold mine. Shanty-towns are settlements of impoverished people living in improvised dwellings made of scrap materials and usually built on the periphery of cities without proper sanitation, electricity or other facilities. ME

Figure 6: Two village children in Prestea shanty-town, photo by A.M.Redmond c. 1942
Late in the evenings we would all gather to hear stories told by various village elders. Sitting in a circle, we would be told tales of Anansi the spider, a cultural hero among the Ashanti tribe in Ghana. Education focused on life lessons, skill acquisition and survival. When I turned seven, I was able to extend my right arm over my head and bend it so that it reached my left ear – that was the test to tell my mother it was time for me to start going to school. ME, CC

The public school I went to was located on higher ground near the English compounds, far away from my home. I didn’t own a pair of shoes but I would walk barefoot for over an hour every day to school (see Figure 8). I would put on my school uniform – the only dress among my few articles of clothing. It was a forest green sleeveless dress with a trim of yellow around the shoulders. I was aware that these were the national colours but didn’t know the name nor had I seen any pictures of our President or even the man who was responsible for the independence of Ghana – Dr Kwame Nkrumah. I was very familiar however with the face of the Queen of England as I had seen her picture hanging on the walls of a clay village hut and in the classroom. ME, PI
The school was in a cement building with no roof and a number of stools and planks laid out where we would sit in rows. Without the aid of any textbooks, my teacher used a chalkboard to teach me my ABCs. She was an older African woman who was distinctly not from the village. The classroom was very quiet and controlled and I don’t recall there ever being chaos or misbehaviour. Order and politeness were paramount. We didn’t sing our traditional songs like we did in the village, though we sang the national anthem. There was no laughter in the class. School was not nearly as fun as the stories told by the village Elders. ME, PI

I grew up in dire poverty on African soil while witnessing land and resource exploitation by the British and other European colonial powers. A poor girl from the village was not expected – even by Ghanaian standards – to have or pursue educational ambitions. However, as fate would have it, I would escape extreme poverty. Ironically, colonialism brought an Irish-Canadian man from Hartington, Ontario to Prestea, Ghana who would soon transform my life. ME, PL
Arnold Molson Redmond (see Figure 9) arrived in Prestea, Ghana in 1942. He was one of few “English” gold miners who refused to comply with company orders not to enter the nearby village. He didn’t heed warnings from his foreman who insisted he would get his head cut off by the “natives” and refused to call the locals “boys” or “Black bastards”. He frequently visited Prestea and travelled across the regions meeting the local people and getting to know his surroundings (see Figures 10, 11) – this would be his home for the next 30 years! CC

Figure 9: Arnold (dad), Assistant Surveyor, photo c. 1942
Figure 10: “The writer examining bananas”, from photo journal by A.M.Redmond, c. 1942

Figure 11: “The writer and a neighbour’s pet – George – at Prestea”, from photo journal by A.M.Redmond, c. 1942
During his visits to our village, he met and developed a relationship with my mother, Florence Esi Yankah. They married, and travelled together to Canada to raise enough money to return to collect my brother and me (see Figure 12). I recall posing for a photo when mom and dad were leaving for Canada. Two years later I was off to Canada (see Figure 13). ME, CC, HD

Figure 12: Six year old Hagar (front, left) with extended family

![Image of Hagar with extended family](image1)

Figure 13: Hagar's "landing" in Kingston, Canada

![Image of Canada Immigration stamp](image2)
“If you visit the village of the toads and find them squatting, you must squat too.” ~ Ewe, Ghana

Crossing Borders: The Land of Milk and Honey

It was winter when we arrived in Kingston. It was the first time I’d ever seen snow (see Figure 14). I felt like I was in a paradise, with new, clean, expensive looking things all around me. I was dazzled by the silver and gold candy bar wrappings. There were few things that I recognized, like the Pepsi and Fanta pop bottles, but most other things were different. ME, PH

Figure 14: Hagar and family: first experience with snow

There seemed to be so much more food. Until I arrived in Canada, I had normalized the fact that, at the age of eight, I (and the other girls in my village) weighed the equivalent of a five-year-old Canadian child. I had also normalized inadequate rations and didn’t recognize this as malnourishment – I was accustomed to running off and hiding with a crust of bread to avoid sharing with other children. More than one meal a day was a luxury. ME

A new ritual was introduced. While braiding was familiar to me, now I was expected to have my hair greased and plaited daily to be more “presentable” for school (see Figure 15). I attended my first day of primary school in Canada wearing a pair of shoes and “civilian” clothing. I was noticeably among the smallest in my class. ME, PH
The White woman at the front of the class greeted me, but I couldn’t understand what she or the other children were saying. As the only Black child (and child of colour), I was bewildered (see Figure 16). Nobody looked like me! I eagerly and desperately looked at pictures to make sense of this new world around me. I relied on symbols, visuals and gestures to communicate. I remember the sense of familiarity when I recognized the picture of a banana. The pictures around the classroom and characters in the books we read told me a story. None of the images looked like me. ME, PH
In Ghana I was Akua (Hagar) Araba Prah and my brother was Kobina (Emmanuel) Kojo Prah. We spoke Fanti. In Canada, I was called Hagar Redmond – my colonial Christian first name and the last name of my Irish-Canadian stepfather; my brother became Emmanuel Redmond. I didn’t speak English, the language of instruction, other than the two words my mother taught me: “please” and “thank you” – she had only completed her primary education. My mother, whose sole mission was for us to assimilate – for better or for worse, stopped speaking to us in Fanti and told us only to speak English. The loss of language ensued rapidly.

At school, I had a rude awakening – the harassment and abuse began almost instantly and it was relentless. I endured the daily torment of being called “nigger”, having my hair pulled, being dissected figuratively and literally and being taunted with no support or intervention. It was a regular occurrence to be stared at, pointed to with inquisitive looks or laughs, and called names. Oftentimes children would touch my skin and hair, taking liberties to ‘explore’ what was different or ‘other’ to them. ME

I couldn’t understand the words hurled at me but I could interpret the body language and I certainly felt the physical insults. I recall a boy performing across the playground. He stuck out his lips, bowed his legs, bent his arms in a way to gesture scratching his armpits and jumped from one foot to the next, while laughing with his friends. This was all really overwhelming. I had never experienced such negative attention. At first I didn’t quite get it, but in no time I realized it was because of my skin colour and my appearance. Of course I knew I didn’t look like everyone else – they all didn’t look like me and my friends in Ghana – but it wouldn’t have occurred to me to make fun of or hurt the other children because we were different. I was hurt and I was sad, but I soon became angry and fought back. ME

It had not been in my nature to speak out of turn, but after being sat on and assaulted on the playground I was compelled to use my voice and fight back as the teachers just watched what was going on. Over the course of my public school experiences, when I stood up for myself, teachers dealt with me more like the way they handled the boys at schools than the way they handled the other (White) girls. Somehow, my Blackness worked to move me from their fragile, helpless and angelic female gender stereotype to their loudmouthed, aggressive and troublemaking male gender stereotype. In one instance, a teacher physically pushed me against a wall and hollered at me for talking back. Another teacher warned that I should change my behaviour if I wanted a boyfriend. ME

These and numerous other abuses from peers and authority figures made for a daunting school experience and almost unbearable existence during my adolescent years as an African immigrant in a small Canadian non-urban town. ME
"If you are on the road to nowhere, find another road.”
~ Ghanaian proverb

Inklings of Hope and Possibility: A Turning Point

In Kingston, I grew up in working poor neighbourhoods and government assisted housing surrounded by White working class families among which were many Portuguese, Greek and Italian immigrants. My primary school and my first secondary school were labelled problem schools. The schools predominantly served working poor families and at risk youth.

Student’s struggles were visible – by that I mean you could see some of us didn’t have enough to eat, weren’t adequately clothed and suffered from neglect and abuse at home. Drug addiction, incarceration and prostitution were not uncommon family experiences. Sexual assaults and fights were frequent occurrences on the playground. Particularly in my high school, knives were carried by students and there were frequent visits from the police and publicly viewed arrests.

My mom and dad had split up and she was now raising my brother and me on her own. A single Black mother with a grade eight education in a predominantly White town, my mother worked 12 hours shifts cleaning other peoples’ homes or cooking or both. From time to time I would come back from school and she wouldn’t be at home. She thought it would be helpful for me to live with families of my White friends and I would do this for several weeks at a time. In her mind, it would help me learn English and the culture. She was never available nor in the mindset to attend the school functions like parents night. I couldn’t turn to her for assistance…it was just the way it was. My teachers interpreted this as her being less interested in me or my academic performance. The fact is that our need to survive required her to work to the extent that she could not attend to my school needs.

At my first secondary school, I was given a course plan. I don’t know who chose those courses for me and how I was streamed into basic level and applied courses, including cooking, home economics and hairdressing classes. Most students did not openly aspire to be professors, lawyers or CEOs for instance – these lofty academic, professional and corporate career goals were not part of the social and educational discourse at this high school. Success looked like graduates making it into the National Hockey League or joining a band that would become famous later. I don’t recall attending any career fairs but I remember a cook teaching us how to make pizza and talking about the food industry. I didn’t have any interaction with guidance counsellors and over time I became bored and frustrated at school.
In high school, there were few racialized students. I was ecstatic to find three other Black students. There was some small comfort in knowing I wasn’t the only one. Unfortunately, we Black students were practically forced to get to know one another and, as it turned out, we didn’t actually get along. Though we didn’t really hit it off, we had a shared experience and would often support one another with just a glance that would say “I know how you feel”. And, knowing that someone else got it was invaluable to countering my second-guessing and internalizing the discrimination I was experiencing. We validated and legitimated each others’ feelings associated with the impact of these experiences. ME, PH

There were many incidents that served to negate and demean. One example took place while I was participating in the high school production. I was to play one of the three pigs and the lines were written for me – they were written in Eubonic and urban speech. I couldn’t simply be one of the pigs – I had to be a “Black” pig. I wasn’t reading the lines the way the producers of the show wanted me to, “No, no, no, like this…” they said and then proceed to mimic the way they wanted me to speak in order to fit into their idea of what Black is and, perhaps, to add to the entertainment and comedic value of the play. ME, JW

A turning point in my life occurred when my family made a move and transferred from one government housing complex to another that was in the west end of the city, and an opportunity arose for me. Now I was living in a mixed neighbourhood and I was regularly seeing lawns that were being mowed, nicer properties, and tree lined streets. We were not living in a cubicle of a unit on the edge of nowhere. I took in my surroundings and began to think about the possibility that life could be very different for me. Only then did I think of transferring to a closer high school. In grade 11, I made the switch. Once I got to the new school, the differences I saw at the school inspired me to aim higher and to have a new outlook on life. While at this school, I didn’t see any police visits, knives flashed or major fights. ME, PH

My first high school did not have enough resources, its teachers were stressed and impatient and sometimes they were violent. In my second high school, teachers seemed to have more time for students. While I had to ask for what I wanted, I wasn’t discouraged. I requested to move from the basic/applied English course to the advanced/academic English course. I also chose German, Sociology and Law courses for myself. Teachers were using different pedagogical tools that engaged me. The first time I really felt that I might really do alright in school was when I experienced a sense of interest and intrigue with the content of the sociology course. Rather than being bored, I was excited to be learning this material. I did well in most of these courses – as opposed to my mediocre marks in hairdressing and cooking despite the fact that I had been cooking since the age of six. ME
In my English class we analyzed the lyrics of songs by Simon and Garfunkel, like “a rock feels no pain” (see Figure 17). We were asked to think about the meaning for each of us; I was freed by the knowledge that there was no right answer. I was encouraged to interpret and bring in my own perspective. Participating in analyzing the words and seeing how others related to the content allowed me a rare opportunity to engage with my classmates and with the teacher in a way that I hadn’t before. I had had no words for the isolation and loneliness I had been feeling. I assumed no one else felt this way. I began to realize that my peers and teachers could not relate to my feelings of displacement. I was the brunt of the anxiety and discomfort (conscious or not) that students and teachers felt when they encountered the difference they saw in my Blackness.

Figure 17: I Am a Rock (Simon, 1966, track 11)

I Am a Rock by Simon and Garfunkel

A winter’s day
In a deep and dark December;
I am alone,
Gazing from my window to the streets below
On a freshly fallen silent shroud of snow.
I am a rock,
I am an island.
I've built walls,
A fortress deep and mighty,
That none may penetrate.
I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain.
It's laughter and it's loving I disdain.
I am a rock,
I am an island.
Don't talk of love,
But I've heard the words before;
It's sleeping in my memory.
I won't disturb the slumber of feelings that have died.
If I never loved I never would have cried.
I am a rock,
I am an island.
I have my books
And my poetry to protect me;
I am shielded in my armor,
Hiding in my room, safe within my womb.
I touch no one and no one touches me.
I am a rock,
I am an island.
And a rock feels no pain;
And an island never cries.
In the lyrics of the song, I found words for the sense of displacement and melancholy that I felt. It was validating to find these words which made such an impact because they were accompanied by music that tapped into and moved my spiritual being. During this course, I experienced a turning point in my life which involved a new relationship with music which, to this day, continues to be a source of psychological and spiritual nurturance and healing. As I began to be much more attuned to my feelings and actively worked not to succumb to those negative ones, I sought out challenges and opportunities. ME, MU

In grade 13, I took an advanced theatre arts course – I came alive in this class that introduced Shakespeare in a way that resonated with me. I could relate to the issue of class in the novel through the dramatization and was able to understand the plot and characters by seeing and being them. I also found a way to really express myself and use my voice. ME

My teacher stayed behind with me when I struggled to understand and I felt safe to ask for help. I was able to show and express a critical analysis of the power relationships and dynamics between people and in the social and political setting of the story. Soon, heads would turn in class to listen to what I was saying. My peers were interested in what I had to say and were asking me about my opinions. I was getting applause and recognition for my participation. Finally I was feeling like a truly had something to offer in this learning environment. I was asked to be Assistant Director of the play and also came away with the award for best actress. ME

These seemingly small acts of recognition went far to build up my sense of accomplishment and hope that I could learn just as much and do just as well as my peers. In this school, I began to reflect on my own life and started to identify my own isolation. The education I was now receiving was beginning to be transformational and a by-product was that it was healing. That said, these moments came so late and, in the context of so many other barriers, were not enough to alter my fate after graduation. ME

I never heard the word “university” in my circles and it certainly wasn’t used in reference to any aspirations I might have had. I never contemplated continuing my education – it was never expected of me nor did I think it was remotely possible. To some extent I felt like it was a fluke that I made it this far. Some of my friends talked about college, but they talked about it among themselves, they didn’t include me in those conversations. Even with these friends, I was left out of conversations about life after high school. Maybe they all assumed that I would naturally be thinking about higher education or maybe they assumed I wouldn’t/couldn’t attend college or university. Instead of joining that dialogue, I became silent. I had no one to ask, no one to suggest or encourage my thinking about higher education. In fact, I had absolutely no clue about my options. ME
I talked to a guidance counsellor to keep me focused on staying in high school and doing well, but there was no conversation about the possibility of higher education. I resigned to thinking that was an experience that my White friends would have because they were different from me – they had money, they had support from their families, they didn’t have to work, and so forth. Many of my classmates were expected, by their parents, to go to university or college. They were socialized to believe that they could and should pursue higher education and they felt a sense of entitlement about going. This wasn’t normalized for me. I internalized overt and subtle messages, sent through the hidden curriculum, social media, and my culturally homogenous environment, that university was for those White kids with the big homes I sometimes got to see when I was invited to a party. ME

After graduation, I left home and fell back on my cosmetology courses and got several placements in the fashion and retail service industry. The unspoken message I received at home was that I had to work to survive. It seemed like a luxury to go to school, one I couldn’t afford. I didn’t understand that I could be “paid” to go to school through grants and loans that could help cover tuition and living expenses. I didn’t make the connection that education could be the key to breaking the cycle of poverty and that there was even a chance that I could carry a debt to gamble for a shot at a better way of life. I realize now what I needed was a mentor. ME

“We must go back and reclaim our past in order to create a better future.” ~ Sankofa philosophy

SANKOFA – Spirit and Strength

In so many ways, my public school experiences were heartbreaking. Socially, I was very isolated and I did not feel consistently encouraged about my abilities. Stereotypes and prejudices were barriers that blocked me from experiencing the same types and levels of friendship and relationships (with both girls and boys) that my peers were experiencing. I moved in and out of feelings of sadness, pain, indifference, loneliness, low self-esteem, and anger. I had normalized the harshness in my life. There is no doubt that the combination of discouraging, dehumanizing and discriminatory acts injured my psyche, but they didn’t break my spirit. It is extraordinary that I was able to experience significant moments of joy, self-confidence and hope! ME

During the period between my graduation from high school and my decision to pursue an undergraduate degree, I experienced significant personal growth and recaptured a sense of self and identity. I developed a positive self-concept and racial/ethnic cultural identity, reclaimed my African name, gained greater capacity to deal with racism, achieved success in my workplace, grew self-confidence and felt a greater sense of belonging and security facilitated by the stability of my family life and my long-term employment. ME, JW
At the age of 19 years, I left home and reclaimed my African name, Akua Prah. I kept the name Hagar as it is still very symbolic for me. The name Hagar links aspects of my identity and history that I am not ready to relinquish and other aspects that I am reclaiming as a source of pride representing independence, strength and perseverance, inspired by the Judeo-Christian story of Hagar the Egyptian slave and mother who survived exploitation and rejection. ME, PI

To understand my resilience and relative success in the face of adversity, I have to go back to my teachings in Africa and particularly the strong sense of cultural pride, strength of spirit and connectedness to others in community. As a young adult, I embraced my Blackness and always gave people the benefit of the doubt. I felt that people, for the most part, were well-intentioned and when I was beat down I picked myself up and carried on. I have many recollections of strong women in the village and have the example of my mother’s strength in the way she lived and fought to make a better life for me. Docility and fragility were not traits that I was raised to value as a young girl in the village nor while growing up with my mother. ME, CC

Though my grandmother was formally Baptist, informally she was known as a village healer or medicine woman. In my village spirituality was a way of life and an expression of self and communal awareness. Witnessing a libation ritual was one of my earliest exposures to spirituality – thanking ancestors for all that we had, paying respect to a higher being or energy than ourselves. Libation is an African tradition invoked before partaking of a meal or drink or starting an event. It involves the ceremonial pouring of liquid, water or alcohol, on the ground in a special and intricate pattern to pay homage to and awaken the ancestors, and to provide clarity, spiritual cleansing and protection. I became a mother at the age of 22 years and when my son was born, my mother performed the libation. ME, CC, PI

When I immigrated to Canada at the age of 8 years, the spiritual component of my life began to diminish until I was of an age that I could better understand and have the agency to re-introduce spirituality into my life. I found comfort in using all my senses to take in my surroundings. I burned incense and essential oils, played music and danced daily, surrounded and adorned myself with vibrant coloured art, clothing and accessories, carried my son everywhere I travelled (usually by foot) and while working. However demoralizing and dehumanizing were my experiences of chronic, pervasive and seemingly inescapable poverty, discrimination and violence, I found peace and happiness in cooking colourful, tasty and healthy meals for my family and a constant stream of guests among artists, musicians and activists. ME, JW, MU, FO, CU

2 Black American feminists have compared the story of Hagar to that of slaves in American history. Bailey (1994) refers to Hagar as a "maidservant" and "slave". She sees Hagar as a model of "power, skills, strength and drive."
As a young Black woman, I recall that I wanted to connect with other Black women and circumstances led me to the International Centre at the local University. There I did indeed see and meet other Black women – some students, others partners of students, some Canadian from other cities and others international visitors and residents. Most, if not all, of the women I happened to come across had come from middle to upper class families and had relatively conservative social ideals. Almost immediately there was a clash of cultures – these women had clearly drawn class lines and I found no ‘natural’ sense of community or belonging with them. ME

Nevertheless, my presence on this university campus inspired me to attempt to take a course. I was interested in film and loved to critique it, so I decided to register in a film course. I enrolled with the assistance of a bursary from a campus service for mature women students. The bursary subsidized the cost of childcare for my son. I quite enjoyed the class and did well by all accounts so I registered for the following term and completed another course. ME

When I went to enrol for a third time, the woman behind the part-time and continuing education reception desk said, “At this rate, you’ll never get this degree done.” These words literally stopped me dead in my tracks. I became discouraged and began to wonder if I was deluding myself, wasting time and money. I didn’t enrol and gave up, for the time being, any thoughts of continuing to pursue a higher education. ME

“If you take your tongue to the pawnshop, you can’t redeem it later on.” ~ Ghanaian Proverb

Activism: Finding my Voice

Crossing class lines and becoming involved in community activism was pivotal for me. Finding myself in a relationship with someone who was not working class, someone who had gone to university, opened doors for me. My social networks expanded and in time I met someone who thought I’d be a great addition to her workplace. She worked at a local women’s centre that was looking for a volunteer coordinator. Incidentally, she was from a working class background and understood my process and the challenges I had faced, internally and systemically. She insisted, after speaking with me, that I would do really well in the role and that I’d add so much value to the organization and the women it serviced. ME

I was petrified during the interview, but I got the job! Before this position, I spent many years cooking in various restaurants, making minimum wage and sometimes being paid in food. Now, I was in a social service field, using my experiences and skills to educate young women, to help other women in need of support and advocacy. ME
My own vulnerability as a young Black female trying to raise a child, navigating government services, trying to survive on nominal income and dealing with racism and sexism were all experiences that helped me to relate to the women using the women’s centre. I could personally understand these women’s lives and their experience of violence and violation. I could communicate across class and racial lines – after all I had almost three decades of experience doing just this. ME

The Centre evoked familiar feelings of community and worked within frameworks that validated my way of knowing and being in the world. While the Centre wasn’t perfect, it strove to promote individual voice, diverse representation, equity and inclusivity. It attempted to diffuse and share power. Before the Centre, I didn’t use the word feminist to describe myself; I didn’t know it though I had lived and fought for many of the things feminism stood for. During this time, I began to explore my feelings through poetry (see Figure 18). ME, JW

Figure 18: Giving voice to feelings through writing, (Prah, 1993)
While involved in over a decade of grassroots community organizing, I found my voice and joined others in actively and visibly resisting oppressive forces (see Figure 19). Through networking with strong, vocal women from across Canada, I came into my own and developed a real sense of pride, personal worth and belonging to a purpose more than a place or peoples. Most importantly, I met many inspirational Black women and they paved the path of possibilities for me. They were invaluable models and mentors that I didn’t have access to locally. I saw myself in them and dared to consider the extent of what I could accomplish. ME, PI

Figure 19: Hagar holding left side of banner during an anti-racism rally

At the Centre, I was responsible for training women in areas that drew on sociology, social work, and psychology. I was engaged in learning about legal, medical, political and social aspects of violence against women by working ‘in the field’ but also attending professional development courses, consulting with experts and reading numerous resources for instance. Though I didn’t think of myself in this way at the time, I was really a student and an educator. It was the most intellectually and spiritually stimulating environment I had ever been in. I experienced an awakening – possibilities that seemed closed before were now opening up for me. I realized that university was within my reach and I felt driven to pursue a degree. And, my son was now at an age where I could turn my attention to my personal, academic and career development in a way that I couldn’t when he was younger. ME
“You must act as if it is impossible to fail.”
~ Ghanaian proverb

Being Black and Female in the Academy

Once I opened myself up to the possibility of higher education, I came face to face with my internalized oppression. And, no amount of strength and resistance could protect me from internalizing the decades of overt racial stereotyping and characterization. I regularly had to engage in self-care and self-talk to cleanse myself of the toxicity of racist images, representations, words and behaviours that sneakily crept into my psyche, eroding my self-concept. These were revealed in the form of anxiety that turned into tentativeness to follow through with my academic hopes, for fear of failure. Again, I turned to music during this time in my life. In music I could make myself vulnerable, go to the emotional places I couldn’t go in my day to day life where I had to keep up appearances. Artists like Sinead O’Connor and Lauryn Hill combined strong feminist lyrics to beats that spoke to me. Their songs served as mantras to help me reject any self-shame or self-blame invited by internalized oppression and to embrace my inner pride, strengths and resilience (See Figure 20 and 21). ME, MU

Figure 20: What doesn’t belong to me, (O’Connor, 2000, track 8)

What Doesn’t Belong To Me
by Sinead O’Connor

I Miss You But I’m Glad You’re Gone
I Want You But I’m Not Alone
I’m Haunted By You
But I’ll Get You Gone If It Takes Me All My Life Long
You Take Back The Pain You Gave Me
You Take Back What Doesn’t Belong To Me
Take Back The Shame You Gave Me
Take Back What Doesn’t Belong To Me
I’m Irish, I’m English, I’m Moslem, I’m Jewish,
I’m A Girl, I’m A Boy
And The Goddess Meant For Me Only Joy
And Real Love Requires You, Give Up Those Loves
Whom You Think You Love Best
Love Puts You Through The Test
And Only Loyal Love Will Bring Me Happiness
And Take Back The Rage You Gave Me
Take Back The Hatred You Gave Me For Me
Take Back The Anger That Nearly Killed Me
Take Back What Doesn’t Belong To Me
And Take Back The Pain You Gave Me
You Take Back What Doesn’t Belong To Me
Take Back The Blame You Gave Me
Take Back What Doesn’t Belong To Me
As a Black working poor woman, I was inexperienced in the higher educational system, as most of my peers and immediate family members had been historically excluded from it. I recalled the discouraging words the woman behind the counter of the Continuing Education office almost 15 years earlier. With very few models or champions to encourage and assist me in my development, I had to develop myself on my own. I never experienced anyone fully believing in and encouraging my educational and academic capabilities, so I had to draw on the years of self-healing and self-confidence as well as the fierce yet caring words of my Black sisters (artists, activists and academics) who filled the void of nurturance and encouragement over the years (see Figures 22). These women became a part of my unseen but vocal community of sisters, mothers, grandmothers and ancestors who carried me and urged me to persevere against societal lies that would have me believe I didn’t belong in the academy – that I could not possibly make it let alone play any substantial role. ME, PI, JW
If You Lose Your Pen
by Ruth Forman

and all you find is a broken pencil on the floor
and the pencil has no sharpener
and the sharpener is in the store
and your pocket has no money
and if you look again
and all you find is a black Bic
and the Bic you need is green
and if it appears beneath the mattress of your couch
but the couch is dirty and you suddenly want to clean
beneath the pillows
but you have no vacuum and the vacuum is in the store
and your pocket has no money
it is not your pen you are looking for
it is your tongue and those who speak with it
your grandmothers and doves and ebony spiders
hovering the corners of your throat
it is your tongue
and if you cannot find your tongue
do not go looking for the cat
you know you will not find her
she is in the neighbor’s kitchen eating Friskies
she is in the neighbor’s yard making love
if you cannot find your tongue do not look for it
for you are so busy looking it cannot find you
the doves are getting dizzy and your grandmothers annoyed
be still and let them find you
they will come when they are ready
and when they are
it will not matter if your pockets are empty
if you write with a green Bic or a black Bic
or the blood of your finger
you will write
you will write

Sister Outsider
by Opal Palmer Adisa
(for Audre Lorde)

we
women black
are always
outside
even when
we believe
we’re in
but being
out side
ain’t so bad
cause
we be
learning
to love
each other better
we be
learning
to listen
more closely
to one another
we be
learning
to allow
all of us
our humanity
sisters
are too often
out side
fronting
trying
to get over
but
we be coming
together
ending our silence
transforming
space and pace
searching
and finding
the most valuable
is often
that which is
overlooked us
Eventually, after almost two decades of community activism, I found the strength and confidence to return to education as a mature student. I enrolled and was accepted in an interdisciplinary undergraduate degree program that combined my passion for social work and counselling psychology. My undergraduate experience was self-affirming – the process confirmed my passion for learning and my capabilities academically. I was introduced to theories and language used to describe the work that I had been involved with at the Centre. Some of this was new to me and some I had known through my lived experience and the stories shared by the women I had worked with over the years. Though an exhilarating experience, completing this degree, while maintain a full-time job, counselling trauma survivors, and raising my son during his pre-teen and teenage years was gruelling!

The undergraduate experience was very self-directed, with little interaction with professors beyond their delivering lectures and grading my papers. One high moment for me occurred when I received a hand-written note from one of my professors. The course was one about family violence and, having worked in a women’s rape crisis centre, I had many thoughts and much to say about the topic. What I wrote incorporated real life experiences and complexities associated with violence experienced by women and children. I’d like to think that my contribution not only brought some emotion to the sterile and lifeless material presented in lectures and that my comments stirred more critical thinking about the systemic as well as individual issues at play. His note was scribbled in the corner of one of the papers returned to me after grading. It said: ‘I enjoyed reading your paper. Would you like to work with me as an understudy?’

After receiving my undergraduate degree I was anxious to continue to pursue a graduate degree. Partly because I so enjoyed the learning process and the validation of succeeding in higher education, but also in truth as I realized that my new credentials and accomplishments did little to change my social positionality and future career prospects in the field that I not only loved but that I excelled at. Most disappointing was that even within feminist circles and in community-based organization that purported to work within anti-oppression frameworks I was still marginalized by my (White) colleagues’ lack of awareness of issues of race – they persistently stopped at the analysis of gender and class. I felt that I should seize every opportunity to combat the socio-economically stratifying effects of racialization.

At this point in my life, I was much more equipped to succeed. I had more knowledge, language and a strong academic record as well as a better understanding of social and educational systems, a strong sense of self and a support network to deal with the barriers I would surely face in the academy. I began to explore my options and voiced my interest in higher education to a few feminist scholars and activists who could see and hear me and my potential.
These individuals acted as mentors and role models to me. First and foremost, they offered support and encouragement. They also shared their political knowledge of the system and stories of their own challenges and strategies to navigate the system. They demystified the post-graduate process and experience, bringing it within the realm of possibilities for me. I decided to enrol in a graduate program which turned out to be a much different and more difficult experience that my undergraduate studies. \textit{ME}

In the beginning, I feared that I might not succeed as compared to the students who seemed groomed for this type of academic work. My lived experiences and non-traditional route to higher education was both an asset and a barrier. At times, my analysis of concepts was second guessed by professors who wondered if I was using my own voice. Somehow, the fact that I wasn't a vacant or empty vessel waiting to be filled with brand new knowledge imparted by the teacher or literature was suspect. \textit{ME}

The graduate experience involved much smaller, more intimate classes – we were all ‘known’ to and noticed by each other. Discussion and debate were hallmarks of the experience, unlike my undergraduate experience. On the surface, this would seem to be positive. However, as the only Black student in all my classes, in a predominantly White institution with little racial and ethnic diversity among the professoriate and equally limited diversity of curriculum and pedagogy, I found the situation taxing. I had of course lived and worked my entire life up to that point in a predominantly White town and with mostly White colleagues. The difference was that there seemed to be new ‘rules of engagement’ that were very strange to me. \textit{ME}

Although we had rich discussions in class, with a cohort including several mature students and some with international experiences, it was disheartening when, at times, social stereotypes went unchallenged and students in the room were not held accountable for prejudicial comments they made that judged whole groups of people. For instance, a student could hold up one interpretation of reality as the only truth and not be challenged to reflect on other possible truths. Professors, by not challenging or re-framing questions and comments, inadvertently created unsafe learning environments that sent an unwelcoming message to those of us members of racially marginalized groups. Frequently, I wondered whether I could actually get through the process and I briefly, but seriously, contemplated quitting my program. I asked myself whether going through this process was really worth the painful ordeal and I reached again to that place of strength to carry on. Once again, I turned to a spiritual place within me and to my unseen but vocal community rooting for me. And, again, the lyrics of resilient women rang in my ears (See Figure 23). \textit{ME, MU}
Global and critical perspectives were not in abundance in my discipline and there were no Black professors in my Faculty. The few Black feminists scholars/activists in the institution were not readily available, nor visible to me on a day to day or even month to month basis. While I didn’t set out to look for Black women educators and committee members their absence was felt as I began to delve into my research. In accepting this reality, I made a conscious effort to seek out critical feminist scholars and theorists who were aware of issues of power and whose work acknowledges the intersections of gender, class and race – namely, my supervisors and the few mentors I mentioned earlier. To be able to remain in the academy, I had to have certain expectations of academics that served as my mentors and who have, in fact, been invaluable in offering constructive feedback and challenging me to find and use my voice throughout this journey. ME
Access to graduate school would not have been possible without mentorship from these key feminist academics. They either understood or, in the very least, validated the challenges I faced as a Black woman studying in a predominantly White university. These mentors not only shared information about how the institutional system and research process worked, but also what to expect and strategies to work through barriers. More importantly, they allowed me to be vulnerable, offering empathy, support and encouragement when I needed to let my guard down to admit my fears and to reveal the impacts of individual discriminatory acts as well as systemic oppression within the academy. They reciprocated this vulnerability appropriately, making them more human and accessible. These mentors were instrumental in supporting me to remain true to myself in choosing my courses and identifying my research focus, knowing that my choices were unconventional. ME

And, here I am, set for the next leg of my journey: my defense. Having reached this point in my story-telling, I am suddenly overtaken with an unsettling feeling. I realize that I have both made a choice and felt that I had no choice but to take this research route. Digging deeper, I uncover anger and sadness that I have had to leave so much unsaid, not for conciseness, but for my own safety and the safety of my loved ones. As I prepare to defend my thesis and my story as a relevant contribution to research in education, the cycle starts over again and I must draw on all of the self-healing and self-empowerment survival tools I have learned along my journey so far.

Figure 24: Hagar on her way to a graduate class

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Chapter Five

Reflections on an Unconventional Path

“Do not follow the path. Go where there is no path to begin a trail”. ~ Ghanaian Proverb

My story began with my early childhood experiences in Ghana and has ended in the present day. It did not intend to capture my entire life story, but relevant aspects I choose to share with the reader. Throughout my thesis, I make reference to the lived experiences narrated in the previous section. In this chapter, I reflect on and discuss issues that came up for me during the process of recalling and writing my story. In a sense it is a debriefing process, having released and unpacked highly emotional experiences in my life. The chapter offers a preface to help the reader to situate me and my story in a broader social, cultural, historical, economic and political context. It then summarizes the common themes in the Black educational experience that also emerged in my narrative, and discusses issues of subjectivity, voice, legitimacy, positionality, vulnerability, empowerment, healing and mobilization. The reflections on my research process relate to my ongoing liberatory journey.
Ghana is the place that served as the base of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which purchased and transported (among those who survived) millions of Black African slaves to the Caribbean Islands and North America from the late 1400s to the mid 1800s (GhanaWeb, n.d.). The village where I was born, Prestea, is situated between the imperial remnants of two slave castles: Fort Santo Antonio de Axim (Axim) to the Southwest and Fort Sao Jorge da Mina (Elmina) to the Southeast. These imposing bastions are among tens of forts and castles built by the Portuguese, Dutch, British, Danes, Swedes, French and Germans which still mar the Ghanaian coastline. The British proclaimed the coastal area a crown colony in 1874 and were the colonial occupiers of the region, named the Gold Coast, until 1957. Not only did colonialism leave “lasting marks on the landscape, as well as the political, social and economic organization of the African peoples”, it has left wounds from the “attack on the mental, spiritual and emotional realms of Africans” (Wane, 2006, p. 87), the scars of which are still visible today.

Before the introduction of post-colonial public schools, colonial Castle and Mission Schools were dominant institutions. Castle schools came into force in the mid 1500s and were operated by Portuguese, Dutch, Danish and English colonial companies that provided instruction in reading, writing and religious education within fortress walls to “children of wealthy African merchants and relatives of some of the important local chiefs (SUEE, n.d., ¶ 5), the majority of which were mixed race children of the European castle staff and the African women who bore these children. Mission schools were introduced in the mid 1800s and run by Methodist and Presbyterian Missionaries intent on converting locals to Christianity and these schools persisted well into the twentieth
century (SUEE, n.d., ¶ 10). Between the mid 1800s and the mid 1900s, the British colonial government intervened to provide broader access to education “as an important civilizing mission to Africa” (SUEE, n.d., ¶ 14). Prior to any semblance of these European colonial systems of schooling were the informal and indigenous systems of learning through which Ghanaians prepared to live and labour in community. “In Ghana, the first ‘school’ was the home: the ‘teachers’ were the parents and the elders in the family. The ‘curriculum’ was life and learning was by observation” (Eyiah, 2004, ¶ 3).

At the outset, the functions of education were to instil “good character and good health in the young members of the community” and “to give them [students] adequate knowledge of their history, beliefs and culture, thus enabling them to participate fully in social life” (McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, as cited by Eyiah, 2004, ¶ 3).

Although centuries of colonialism did not completely annihilate indigenous ways of teaching and learning, evidenced by its persistence in my own childhood experiences, Afro-centric education was interrupted and dominated by formalized colonial school systems. After gaining independence in 1957, and renaming the region after the ancient empire called Ghana, the new government, under the regime of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, introduced policies on free compulsory basic education and free textbooks (Eyiah, 2004). Today, all basic public school (kindergarten, primary and junior secondary) tuition fees are waived. However, costs of educational supplies as well as indirect and opportunity costs, such as the ability to forego income generated by child labour or by parental labour only made possible by the availability of older children to provide childcare for younger siblings, pose barriers that disproportionately affect girl children and access to quality, safe and relevant primary (let alone secondary and tertiary) education. Far fewer girls
than boys enrol in school within 62 of 110 Ghanaian districts, including the entire Western region in which Prestea is located (Otoo, et. al., 2009). Today, across Africa, there is a resurgence of efforts to return to and integrate indigenous values and methods in teaching, learning and education (Zulu, 2006).

Reflecting on my formative school experiences in Prestea, I see how (post) colonial Ghana maintained the British colonial legacy that is still dominant in various African countries in the aftermath of hundreds of years of European colonial and empirical occupation. While I will never know what my life and educational journey would have been had I remained in Ghana, it is almost certain, given my circumstances, that higher education would not have even entered into the realm of possibilities. In fact, completing a basic primary education would have been considered, by all accounts, a tremendous feat. It is ironic that I would experience issues of access to, quality of and safety in education in a ‘developed’ country such as Canada.

*Themes in the Collective Black Educational Experience*

Though my identity has certainly been shaped by a legacy of over 400 years of colonization, enslavement, displacement, exploitation and execution of my ancestors and my people, I am nonetheless a product of multiple, complex and dynamic experiences influenced by traditional West African, post/neo-colonial European and pluralistic Canadian cultures, although, these historical occurrences and socio-political forces do not define me. My story demonstrates how my personal experiences, however multiple, complex and dynamic, are related to two broad themes found in the collective Black experience. These themes are categorized and discussed in the next section. The first is comprised of a set of subthemes that relate to the impacts of living and attempting to
learn in systemically racist institutions and the second is comprised of subthemes that relate to ways of surviving and thriving in these climates. The former subthemes include experiences of racial stereotyping, low teacher expectation, streaming, racial marginalization, alienation, lack of representation, irrelevant curricula, and subtle as well as overt racism. The latter subthemes include reliance on a strong sense of identity, belonging, community, spirituality, self-agency and involvement in activism.

*Dealing with myths and impacts.* In 1991, the Canadian Alliance of Black Education said that Canadian schooling was systematically failing Black youth (CABE, 1991). While sociologists have tended to blame Black communities for this failure, numerous scholars and activists have demonstrated there are powerful social and cultural forces at play, presenting sometimes insurmountable academic barriers to Black students (Codjoe, 2006; Henry, 1993). Research on the subject of the Black education experience in North America has depicted an historical and contemporary battle in which Black students and communities are engaged against destructive social biases and myths as well as pervasive institutional discrimination that permeate all aspects of the educational system (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1995). Black students commonly encounter individual racism through implicit and expressed racial biases and stereotypes and they contend with both subtle and overt forms of systemic racism manifested in the hidden curriculum, inequitable treatment and violent behaviours (Henry, 2003; Perry, 2003). Black students also commonly report they encounter stereotype threat, including low teacher expectations and streaming into low academic tracks, and they contend with the impacts of the hidden curriculum which under-represents (if not ignores) Black history and culture in its content and employs culturally irrelevant teaching pedagogies (Codjoe,
2001; Smith & Lalonde, 2003). Stereotype threat is a phenomenon that occurs when a person, who is subject to inauspicious stereotypes (e.g. Black students and academic capability) are negatively affected by the salience of their category membership.

Research demonstrates the Black educational experience is fraught with feelings of marginalization, alienation, isolation and loss of identity (Dei, 1996; Dei, 1995). With respect to the experiences of Black women in the academy, they report similar challenges as well as bearing the burden of educating others on issues of racism (Henry, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2001). As well, female scholars report actions taken by members of dominant groups, intentional or not, to discredit, disqualify and disgrace them and their work (Carroll, 1982; hooks, 1988; Lewis, 1997; White, 2008; Williams, 1991).

*Debunking the myths and surviving through spirituality.* The literature also shows that those Black students that succeed, in spite of this adversity, have benefited from certain protective factors, including a strong racial identity, cultural pride, psychosocial competence, interpersonal strengths, a sense of belonging and community involvement (Booker, 2004; Codjoe, 2006; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Reynolds, 1993; Trueba, 2004). These mitigating factors are also present in the themes that emerge from the stories of Black women in higher education, in addition to a few other aspects that act as empowering tools for resistance, liberation and actualization (hooks, 2009; Liddell, 2007; Jordan-Zachery, 2004; Wane, 2008; Williams, Brewley, Reed, White & Davis-Haley, 2005). My story contradicts the lies and myths dominant society would have me believe. In my case, and in the case of many other Black youth and students, there is a story of proven educational ambition, academic capability and psychosocial competence. Also, there is demonstrated strength and resilience, integrity and genuineness, and capacity for
deep empathy and nurturance in the face of adversity. Culturally relevant practices and pedagogies in the classroom have been shown to be effective in engaging Black students academically, socially and culturally, leading to better outcomes. These practices include pedagogies that arguably invoke a spiritual side of students who come alive and engage with a learning process in which they can see themselves. The concept of spirituality repeatedly emerges as a powerful source of belonging, agency and liberation from which we Black people draw strength and resilience to continue the struggle. However it is invoked or manifest, its self-reflexive and relational emphases have provided Black women protection, solace, hope and grace in the face of adversity. Black scholars/activists are insistent on using their subjective voices in resistance, engaging in activist and praxis oriented work in order to mobilize change and community betterment, and attending to the important work of self-healing.

Subjectivity, Voice and Legitimacy

Paulo Freire argued that educational systems serve the interests of the dominant culture in society and that there is a need to fundamentally challenge and change the normative values through which society operates and organizes itself if human beings are to realize their full potential (Freire, 2007). My educational experiences have certainly been fraught with struggle to counter these dominant cultural messages; I struggled to find representation of my marginalized identities among my peers and among my teachers and professors; I struggled with the lack of inclusive and critical materials in the curriculum; I struggled with the lack of visibility of my issues and reality in the classroom; I struggled to voice and articulate what exactly was missing for me; and, I struggled with whether to risk backlash by naming these missing elements.
Freire (2007) said, “We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order to later become [subjects]” (p. 68). When I began this research process, I thought I might interview a few Black female students to explore and understand the Black educational experience in the academy. Certainly, my own experiences would be incorporated in such a case study. However, as I thought more about the process, I felt that my own experiences were valuable to explore in and of themselves because of the uniqueness of my story, on the one hand, and the common threads that they exemplify in relation to the Black female educational experience, not only in the academy, but more importantly in relation to the conceptual and actual journey toward higher education. Soon, I found myself asking if anyone else in my faculty had used the auto-ethnographic method but quickly challenged myself as to why that would matter. As Wane (2007) put it: “the curriculum confers illegitimacy upon those it excludes” (p. 137).

My research methodology aims to push the boundaries of what has conventionally been thought of as legitimate academic research. Annette Henry suggested that Canadian educators and administrators should seek alternative approaches to educate Black children and that African-centred and Black feminist standpoint epistemologies may be useful tools to create new and more relevant Black educational theory and practice to inform these alternative models (Henry, 1993, p. 206). It is through this Black feminist lens that my reality is validated and my choice of research topic, the context that frames my research questions, my methods of study and analysis, my emphasis on select content, my interpretation of these experiences, and, ultimately, the value of my work is legitimized. By using an auto-ethnographic style, I believe I am contributing to the “...preservation of disappearing cultures and vanishing lore” (Lionnet, 1989, p. 99) while
performing a counter-hegemonic act of resistance and offering a different way of understanding and affirming the Black experience.

Lionnet (1989) discussed the autobiographies of Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou, two African-American women who belong to very different cultural backgrounds but who share a “profound concern for the rhetoric of selfhood, [and] the processes of self-reading and self-writing as facilitated or impeded by the styles and languages in which they are compelled to write” (p. 21). Like these women, Lionnet could not bring herself to adopt the common Western ethnographic prose and assigned role as detached, objective interpreter and translator of the experiences of Black females in the academy – an anarchic work (pp. 99 – 100). Lionnet argued that the autobiographical process acts as a “revalorization of oral traditions while re-evaluating Western concepts” and it leads to “reclaiming absent history and memory or acknowledging ideological distortions thereby re-appropriating the past to transform and understand ourselves” (pp. 4 – 5). She asserted that those of us who have been oppressed and silenced have much to offer to a global understanding of affirmative and egalitarian principles.

In life I have always insisted on using my voice and being visible. A very dear friend who shared similar yet distinct experiences of oppression and silencing as a Jewish woman described my insistence on voice and visibility in the following lines of a poem called Not gonna make you invisible Zolf, 1999, p.64):

“Can’t afford to split
or I’d be dead
she cracks… one fist outstretched and one wrapped round her son…”
It is paramount that my research process does not imitate conventional Eurocentric methods of inquiry and taking a subjective Black feminist standpoint in this study is fundamentally an act of resistance, liberation and empowerment.

**Positionality and Vulnerability: Insider/Outsider Dilemma**

While the subjective standpoint has been necessary for the goals I identified in this auto-ethnographic process, I did experience the challenge of writing while simultaneously occupying more than one position on the privilege – marginality continuum in the academy. This multiple positionality, resulting from efforts to deal with interlocking systems of oppression, is described by Collins (1991) as a hallmark or distinguishing standpoint of Black feminists. Reece (2008) explores this concept of positionality by describing the “insider/outsider dilemma” she confronts (p.268). She describes her challenge of writing about the “other” from the perspective of the “other” – as a “neo-colonized body, with particular educational, class, and ability privileges, yet…simultaneously writing as a marginalized and racialized woman re/articulating the experiences of other marginalized and racialized women” (p.269). Reece argues that academic discipline imposes boundaries on the researcher through “subtle indoctrinated coercive influences…[that] become naturalized” (p. 270). For these reasons, it has been imperative for me to remain conscious of all the tensions that inform my research.

Writing this auto-ethnography felt like a courageous endeavour as I had to recall and reflect on difficult and painful memories and feelings (Ellis, 2004). I found myself negotiating what to share and about what to remain silent. Lewis (1993) discusses the notion of tentative speech in relation to what she calls the “dangerous and uncertain terrain of memory work” (p. 9) where we are “caught between moments of
re/examination, re/evaluation, re/appropriation and re/affirmation on the one hand and experiences of pain and loss on the other” (p. 8). The experiences I do share, and which constitute this representation of my life story, are those that I felt I could disclose while maintaining a sense of privacy, dignity, and safety.

*The Power of Stories: Empowerment, Healing and Mobilization*

Testimonials can be powerful tools to influence affective, cognitive and behavioural awareness and change. Sharing the depth of my individual story was intended to bring the reader into my lived experience and affect not only their hearts and minds but also to move them to action. Personalizing the research was an invitation for the reader (future professor, practitioner or policy-maker) to feel authentically, think critically and act responsibly to contribute to more inclusive education. Still, I accept the reader controls their own interpretation and action. Some readers may take in my story as new or useful information. Others might use it to reflect more deeply on their identities and relationship with privilege in education and society and begin to ask important questions about the organization of power along these lines. Yet others may bank it with other testimonials and maintain their denial (benign or not) of the realities of the Black educational experience. I did not know the themes that would emerge as my story unfolded, however, I felt certain the process of voicing my experiences and insisting on being visible in this way could transform me personally while having the potential to empower and mobilize others.

Uncovering old as well as fresh wounds and delving into the emotionality of the memory work required that I temporarily strip away layers of the protective emotional shell, the invisible armour that I put on every day. But, every time I resurfaced from the
depths of my memories and emotions, I felt my shield had become stronger. Soon the act of documenting my experiences evolved into a therapeutic and empowering process. In writing about the memories of what I experienced and reading the stories of other Black women, I found I had so much in common with other Black women. This, especially, was validating and worked to break my isolation.

Through the process of writing this thesis, I learned my inclination to care for and nurture others was more spiritual and connected to my cultural identity than I had previously thought. I truly believe this inherent spirituality and connection to my cultural roots has led me to my vocation: counselling and social work. In turn, this work invokes an ancient African indigenous spirituality in me as it relies on authentic relationships, empathy, self-healing and challenging conventionality (Wane, 2007). It is regenerative and healing. I also affirmed my own inherent intelligence and capabilities as well as the depth of my inner strength and resilience. Through this narrative exploration of my life and educational journey, I provide the reader with an insider perspective on the Black educational experience. In the process, I critique and counter dominant racist discourses about Black people and communities, thereby deconstructing mainstream knowledge and understanding of the Black educational experience. Through my experiences, a different story of the Blackness is offered, thereby reconstructing knowledge and understanding that is informed by acknowledgement of power relations within Canadian society and its institutions. The project not only has the potential to benefit the reader, the educational practitioner and the research community, its process has benefitted me as a I discovered and engaged in healing, self-empowerment and resistance.
Chapter Six

Sankofa – Spirituality, Community, Activism and Voice

“If things are getting easier, maybe you’re headed downhill.”
~ Ghanaian proverb

As mentioned in my story, my journey to self-empowerment began after I escaped the confines of the public school system, when I started to become more critically conscious of my oppression, to reconnect with my spirit and to use my voice. This chapter delves into the subject of spirituality and how it can be invoked as a protective force. Below, I define the term spirituality for the purposes of this thesis and discuss the relationship between spirituality and belonging, agency, empowerment, community, activism, voice resistance and healing.

Reviving Spirituality

The concept of Sankofa advocates that the way forward involves looking to the past and bringing forward historical and indigenous knowledge to make positive progress into the future. It is a wisdom based on the belief that the past holds important and relevant lessons that must be recognized and integrated in order to develop (Wane, 2008). Wane (2008) writes about the importance of using “reflective anti-colonial spiritual knowledge” (p. 205) associated with the African Sankofa philosophy as a framework for
understanding colonization, colonial education and neo-colonial education. Wane & Neegan (2007) describes spirituality as a means through which community and relationship building are expressed (p. 28). Tisdell (2000) suggests that spirituality is in essence how individuals construct knowledge unconsciously and symbolically through cultural forms like music, art and ritual for instance (as cited in Wane & Neegan, 2007) and it “is about meaning-making and is always present in the learning environment” (p. 28). Mtetwa (2005) describes spirituality as “a force concerned with day-to-day human activity that plays a particularly transformative role in the shaping of human interpersonal relationships” (as cited in Wane & Neegan, 2007, p. 28). These relational definitions resonate with me because, first and foremost, spirituality offers me the opportunity to feel whole and connected to myself and then through myself to other people and my surroundings.

Spirituality has always played a role in my life – even when I was not conscious of it. I truly believe that spirituality nurtured my soul and allowed me to transcend the multiple barriers I experienced, to survive and thrive despite them and to recover a sense of purpose, belonging and connectedness in life. Wane and Neegan (2007) argue that spirituality has historically served as a personal and communal source of liberation, solace, hope and forgiveness for many women of African descent (p. 30). They assert that, for women of the African Diaspora, spirituality is central to our inner strength and struggle for liberation (p. 35). Consciously or not, we draw on our ancestral spirit of resistance and resilience to drive our struggles in the face of oppression and use spiritual powers for protection and healing (p. 40).
In my own life, methods of teaching that are compatible with indigenous and Afro-centric approaches and values, such as incorporating music, rhythmic movement, performance and storytelling as pedagogic tools, have been crucial to my learning in the formal school system and my survival in the world. In retrospect, when the educational material and style of teaching resonated with me at school, it was not because the teacher was particularly aware of culturally inclusive pedagogies but rather because the subject itself (e.g. Drama and English) typically incorporated popular culture, music, use of voice and body movement, for instance. The school system did not foster culturally relevant and inclusive education – this outcome seemed to rely on individual teachers and their motivation to create engaging curriculum for the mainstream student, and by chance engage the marginalized student. While I did not consciously recognize it at the time, the use of music and theatre, voice and movement, tapped into my innate sense of spirituality and brought me to life.

**Belonging Begets Agency and Empowerment**

The spiritual coming home I just described – the revelation and awakening that re-engaged me, however temporarily, with learning – was connected to the sense of belonging and meaning that was evoked. In turn, these hints of belonging and meaning led to my unlocking and unleashing my sense of agency and self-empowerment, concepts which I will now discuss. Booker (2004) investigated the sense of belonging experienced among African American high school students to uncover possible cultural and environmental influences on their achievement and found positive “relationships with peers, teachers and involvement in extracurricular activities” had the most influence on belongingness (p. 139). In turn, her research overwhelmingly demonstrated a sense of
belonging was linked to “achievement, autonomy…emotional functioning, self-concept and self-esteem” (p. 132).

My schooling experiences were not culturally congruent, responsive or compatible let alone culturally relevant to me. The hidden curriculum communicated an insidious and lasting message that crept into and grasped my psyche. This message complicated and impeded, whether I knew it then or not, my sense of belonging, my sense of self-esteem and my sense of my own learning capabilities. Furthermore, my teachers did not inspire in me a sense of academic possibility and ambition. None of my public school teachers and counsellors, and all but one in secondary school, verbalized or acted in ways that expressed their support of my learning or confidence in my academic abilities, though I regularly witnessed their accolades and encouragement of other students in my classes. This ignorance translated into my feeling that my teachers did not hold high academic expectations of me. Such formative experiences contributed significantly to the lack of agency I felt throughout my early educational journey and well into my experiences in higher education. To clarify, I did not lack internal agency or a sense of pride and self-empowerment discussed throughout this thesis, but rather external agency or a sense of entitlement and access to opportunities.

Similar experiences of and impacts on other Black students are discussed by scholars. In an interview, bell hooks speaks about the impacts of oppression and the dominant discourse on the academic aspirations of Black students based on her observations on two different campuses:

The first thing I noticed was that my students were equally brilliant in...Harlem...as they were...at Yale or Oberlin but their senses of what the meaning of that brilliance was and what they could do with it, their sense of agency was profoundly different...It has nothing to do with the level of knowledge
[but] more to do with their sense of entitlement...When I see...really brilliant students in Harlem, many...have very difficult lives, they work, they have children...they don’t have that sense of entitlement, they don’t have that imagination into a future of agency. (Jhally, 1997)

In her book entitled *Belonging: A culture of place*, hooks (2009) wrote that a crucial aspect of her homecoming process involved “locating the space of genuineness, of integrity...[of] the past...to connect it to the ideals and yearnings of the present” rather than simply looking back nostalgically to an idealized past (pp. 4 – 5). Today, the sense of belonging, home and place for me is not in the physical space where I live. Instead, my sense of cultural place and belonging comes from a spiritual grounding or ‘homecoming’ that is founded on an unwavering sense of strength in myself and a deep sense of purpose and meaning in life. Much of this spiritual grounding fuelled and was nurtured by my community work, involvement in activism, and the use of my voice, topics to which I will now turn.

*Community and Activism*

In public school, my teachers did not take steps to reach out to my mother by calling our home or offering to make a personal home visit or sending a personal invitation to attend a school meeting or function, for instance. Furthermore, my teachers did not mentor me, nor did they foster a sense of a caring school community to which my family and I should have belonged. Chronic academic limitations and barriers, such as streaming practices and the hidden curriculum discussed previously, as well as the lack of role models and mentors defined my entire educational experience (Carroll, 1982). In the academy, Black women report their reliance on mentorship, community service, activism and, most importantly, spirituality to resist oppressive forces, heal and survive its injuries
as well as to thrive in the higher educational environment. The mentorship of other Black academics and feminists has been critically important to Black women graduate students accessing, persisting and succeeding in higher education. These graduates, in turn, speak about the need to help pull others up behind them as a form of community responsibility. Black women highlight that involvement in community service as well as community activism is critical to their making meaning of their lives and their research – linking theory to practice.

A sense of community did not exist for me until I joined the anti-violence movement. The network of peers and mentors in this movement, to which I contributed, was instrumental in allowing me to both give to and receive from others in the context of community service. This was one of the most important ways that I found meaning, purpose and a sense of belonging. Community service and activism were central to my eventual decision to resume my pursuit of higher education. Specifically, it was during this time that I developed a greater critical consciousness of my multiple identities and positionality and particularly strengthened my sense of Black pride. An introduction to Black and African notions of feminism was transformative and liberating at this moment in my life.

*African Feminism: An Emancipatory Paradigm*

In the 1980s, African feminism emerged as an alternative, emancipatory paradigm in response to the belief by Black women of African descent that White women and Black men had failed to confront their respective racism and sexism. Lewis proposes a return to this paradigm to address the marginalization of African American women in the academy by incorporating Afro-centric perspectives and global approaches (Lewis, 1997,
Lewis (1997) contrasts mainstream and revolutionary feminism. She says the former is an exclusive feminism that primarily focuses on reforming gender inequities and the latter is a more inclusive and transformative form that acknowledges interlocking constructions of race, class and gender. She argues that feminist and development theories must converge to appropriately account for the lives of women of African descent and, through this, Black women can be viewed as a majority and empowered to reject the minority status conferred by the Western hegemonic paradigm. She argues there is a “global racist hegemony in the academy” and encourages marginalized groups to reject this “academic imperialism” (1997, p. 44), saying:

Educational systems...are the formal institutionalized, systematized vehicles through which the larger society socializes youth to the values held by the dominant or ruling group. The basic assumption of this analysis is that Black females in the academy are imprisoned in a dysfunctional paradigm because they are paralyzed by its logic, structures, and biased knowledge base. The smoke and mirrors that make the system work day in and day out are not easily perceived because only the hegemonic versions of reality are reflected in the mirrors. The images of impoverished Black females do not shine because the mirrors are grounded to deflect their contributions. (1997, p. 43).

Voice and the ‘Angry Black Woman’

Systemic denial and resistance act to socially marginalize if not silence those of us who attempt to counter the hegemonic and dominant discourse. Lewis (1997) discusses the challenges scholars face when they raise questions that defy set norms, including exclusion from significant research projects and funding (p. 43). These challenges, in a variety of social, professional organizational and academic settings, surface in both discreet and palpable ways. There are many mechanisms employed with the goal of silencing our voices and one particular tactic used to discredit Black women is the spoken or unspoken accusation that we are over-emotional and angry. Throughout my life I have
felt that I have had to be more qualified, articulate, assertive, persistent and patient to succeed in this patriarchal society, even among White women and Black men (Carroll, 1982, p. 124). Recall, in my story, the surprise and suspicion with which my professors received the work that I submitted. While defending myself, I have always had to be conscious of presenting as too ‘aggressive’ or ‘sensitive’ and invoking stereotypes of ‘the angry Black woman’. Too often, my passion and pain are dismissed as irrational anger and my emotion is used to suggest incompetence. Society has constructed figurative and literal confines in which Black women must remain in order not to disturb the status quo. Within the parameters of this dictated social order, acceptable emotions and behaviours include those that please and entertain the dominant group. hooks talks about ways in which she is seen as entertaining when she adopts a “popular, performative, Black storytelling mode” of expression (hooks, 1990, p. 22). However, dominant society can change the rules as it pleases. For instance, an emotional, passionate and spiritual style is questioned in the academy precisely because it moves people (p. 21). The style is suspect and considered lacking in substance, though it legitimizes a very African/Black cultural communication style and way of being and relating in the world.

Yet another attempt to censor if not silence Black women, is the tactic of accusing us of cultural bias when we speak to any issues of race and racism. Williams (1991) shares a story about being asked to advocate on behalf of a Black student who has been labelled an “activist” (read: troublemaker) by her professor after she contests that an exam is racist. After reviewing the text of this and many other exams brought to her attention, she is interested in challenging the “blatant expressions of cynical stereotypification”, but she is faced with a dilemma: “how to raise the issues in a way that
can best be heard, and heard in a way that will not be taken as ‘censorship’” (p. 85). Patricia White also talks about the dilemmas she has encountered in the academy. She suggests that the climate in higher education continues to disadvantage Black female students and scholars “by provoking exhaustion” as a result of “an intense set of exposures” in the academy (White, 2008, p. 87). She writes about being on “the hot seat” as a Black graduate student in higher education. She discusses how greater attention to her “otherness” in the academy was exacerbated by the absence of racialized faculty, and in particular Black female bodies, during her ten years in higher education (p. 83). White describes several experiences where she had not chosen “to be identified, but by which [she] was forced to identify [as] Black and under-represented in higher education.” These and other experiences remind her “that even within higher education, there are still doors marked “Black Only” (p. 85).

**Resisting from the Margins**

hooks also speaks of experiences of alienation, disrespect, humiliation and frustration in the academy as racism worked to undermine her credibility (hooks, 1988). She interrogates the dominant discourse and asks, “how do we create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive, self-actualization?” (hooks, 1990, p. 15). hooks describes a “fierce and unrelenting” oppression that can destroy those struggling within the movement (1990, p. 16) yet she asserts that “assimilation, imitation and assuming the role of rebellious exotic are not the only options” (p. 20) in dealing with this oppression. Further, hooks declares that resistance is not enough and discusses the process of developing critical thinking and
consciousness as well as inventing new and alternative ways of being while resisting from the margins. Distinguishing between “marginality that is imposed by oppressive structure and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance, as location of radical openness and possibility”, she argues that the margin is the only “site of transformation where liberatory Black subjectivity can fully emerge” (p. 22). In *Teaching to Transgress* hooks expresses gratitude to Black women who choose to “create theory from the location of pain and struggles” (1994, p. 34). She asserts that, in addition to charging and challenging us, these liberatory acts are healing – they restore and reinvigorate our commitment to the ongoing revolution (hooks, 1994).

*An Anti-colonial Healing Force*

Returning to the Sankofa principle, reviving my African spirituality has been a valuable healing force to treat the devastating blows that racism continues to hurl at my body, mind and spirit. Wane (2008) draws from her experiences as a Black academic in a predominantly White setting and writes about “the spirit’s injuries...experienced in...teaching controversial and contentious topics” such as diversity and social justice (p. 203). Wane believes that “colonial and neo-colonial practices disturb and disorient” and that a “sense of culture” and “politics of history and identity” must be acknowledged so that truths (and spirits) are not suppressed, marginalized and murdered (p. 206). Wane highlights spirituality as an essential method of survival, providing “sustenance for [her] psychological well-being” (p. 205).

For Wane, spirituality “guides [her] quest for greater meaning in life” and is a “process of struggle and self-recovery, and a path to follow in order to become whole and liberated” (206). She too discusses the burn out associated with the struggle against
resistance (p. 210) and the psychological and emotional drain of committing to approaches to “teaching that are not confrontational or counterproductive and that reduce rather than increase resistance” (p. 212). She uses passion to “evoke the everyday realities of students” while challenging biases across social identities.

This chapter reflected on and discussed how the process of writing my story illuminated, for me, the relationship between spirituality and belonging, agency, empowerment, community, activism, voice resistance and healing. And, it contextualized these concepts and their interrelationship in regards to my journey to claiming an education. In the following chapter, I bring my thesis to a close with concluding remarks about this research, its importance as well as its implications for educational intervention.
Chapter Seven

Concluding Remarks

This final chapter offers my concluding remarks where I summarize the role of socio-cultural forces in maintaining a dominant discourse, the significance of my research to academic and activist projects and communities seeking to understand and unsettle the dominant discourse, the links between my story and the collective Black educational experience, and the possible implications of the themes in the Black educational experience in Canada for educational practitioners, academics, and policy-makers.

*Understanding Socio-cultural Forces and the Dominant Discourse*

In Canadian society, there is a prevailing belief that our official multicultural policy proves Canada is populated by a ‘tolerant’ people who value multiculturalism and, therefore, it is not contaminated by racism. The themes that emerge from the literature and from my self-study reveal that this is a myth. Surveys that investigate the experience of racial discrimination among Black Canadians indicate the persistence of significant discriminatory attitudes within Canadian society. As well, my story unmask
of this Canadian myth and reveals the underbelly of Canada, with its deeply embedded racialized social and institutional underpinnings (Kobayashi & Johnson, 2007). I use the term ‘underbelly’ intentionally to emphasize not only the notion of weakness or vulnerability, particularly to exposure, but also the notion of concealment and, therefore, dishonesty. The social and cultural forces at play must first be acknowledged and understood in order to attempt to make any improvements to the Black educational experience. Once the existence and impact of these forces are accepted, the contradictions in the dominant discourse about the Black experience can surface.

Western systems of education, texts, and literature continue the colonial tradition by “rewriting history to deny [our] existence, devaluing [our] knowledges, and debasing [our] cultural beliefs and practices (p. 87, Wane, 2006). They are steeped in subtle and overt Eurocentric and colonial value systems. They privilege written over oral, scientific over intuitive, academic over practical, detached over expressive and linear over circular ways of knowing, learning and teaching and, in so doing, their curriculum and pedagogy are culturally irrelevant to so many students of the African Diaspora. My journey exposes not only the many mythologies and systemic challenges in society but also those barriers embedded in its primary system of social reproduction, education.

Significance of My Story

Given the limited research on the educational experiences of Black women in Canada as well as the current national climate tending towards the resistance of dealing critically with issues of race and gender, I believe my research is timely and relevant. I have taken up the challenge to use my voice and participate in constructing alternative narratives so as not to become complicit in my own oppression (Henry, 1993). Through
my story, I offer a counter-narrative about Black women and an alternate interpretation of the realities of the Black educational experience in Canada and journey towards claiming a higher education. Rather than studying what Black students experience, this research describes how Black students, and particularly one female Black graduate student, have experienced the educational system in Canada. My research contributes to works seeking to understand the gendered and racialized experiences of oppression within educational systems from primary through to higher education in Canada and it has practical implications for individual teachers, faculty, administrators and policy makers with the interest and political will to create the conditions for academic success among some of the most marginalized students in academe.

Most importantly, for me, this research process has reflected the Freirian concept of liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 2007) and engaged the Black Canadian liberation struggle. Using post-positivist paradigms, critical Black feminist standpoint theory and an auto-ethnographic qualitative method of inquiry, I set out to conduct research that would contribute to the de/reconstruction of knowledge about the educational experiences of Black females and the struggles to claim a higher education. By exploring and sharing how social and cultural forces have impacted my life, I identified for myself and the reader the effects of systemic racism on my educational journey. In the process, I found that my experiences were consistent with themes in the experiences reported by other Black youth and by Black women in higher education and such shared experiences uncovered contradictions between the dominant discourse and my reality as a Black women as well as the potential of many Black students in Canada. Among the themes, I discovered several tools I and others employed, consciously or not, to survive and thrive
in the face of adversity. Next, I will recap the themes in the collective Black educational experience found in the literature and contrast these with the themes that emerged from my story.

*My Story and the Collective Black Educational Experience*

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the literature I reviewed regarding the experiences of Black women in the academy as well as the experiences of Black youth in the school system demonstrates several themes in the collective Black educational experience. There exist destructive forces which act as barriers to educational achievement as well as protective factors which mitigate the educational experience and support achievement. To recap, Black women in the academy experience isolation, stereotype threat, marginalization, barriers to post-secondary access and persistence in the form of financial, familial and community obligations, and systemic racism. These destructive forces and experience are mitigated by a strong sense of racial identity, the presence of mentors and establishment of networks, community involvement and service, self-empowerment, the use of voice, spirituality as an anti-colonial healing force, and a sense of place and belonging. As for Black youth, they face similar challenges in the school system, including racial stereotyping and a deficit myth, low teacher expectations, differential treatment and streaming, poverty, ‘othering’ and racial marginalization, lack of representation, exclusion of Black peoples and histories in the (hidden) curriculum, both subtle and overt acts of racism, hostility and violence. The mitigating protective factors that facilitate Black student achievement include a strong sense of racial identity and pride, self-esteem, extra-cognitive social and emotional competencies, personal
psychosocial assets, sociability and interpersonal relationships, parental and community involvement, perceptions of belongingness and culturally relevant classrooms.

With regards to my story and my educational experiences in the school system and the academy, similar themes emerged. Barriers and challenges in my early educational experiences included poverty, lack of parental involvement, lack of community during early adolescence, cultural displacement, isolation, loneliness, lack of representation, hidden curriculum, racial harassment and violence, alienation, lack of belonging, stereotyping, streaming, low teacher expectation, lack of mentorship and academic guidance. Getting through my school experiences required that I draw on inner strength and sense of self-worth as well as relishing the rare but powerful instances when I glimpsed the possibility of achieving educationally, facilitated by culturally relevant teaching practices and styles that touched me on a cognitive, emotional and spiritual level. The factors that contributed to my developing a sense of academic capability and resolving to pursue higher education many years after graduating from high school included the nurturance of my sense of inner strength, reconnection to spirituality that grew from a strong sense of self and African pride, location and use of my voice, and establishment of a sense of belonging and agency through community activism. These experiences enabled me to conceive of returning to higher education. However, actual enrolment and participation in the academy would not have been possible without additional supports. Feminist and activist musicians, poets, authors and scholars urged and uplifted me, my own passion for and success in my undergraduate program courses encouraged me, and key academic mentors guided me through my graduate experience. Figure 25 depicts the individual experiences as well as collective themes in the Black
educational experience, showing the overlap between themes found in the literature and my own story. A more accurate illustration would have circles in the diagram sitting almost on top of one another with the area that represents the collective Black educational experience as constituting the largest area.

Figure 25: Themes in my story and the collective Black educational experience
Themes in the Context of Five Research Questions

In the following section, I address the five questions I proposed at the beginning of this thesis in the context of the themes that emerged in my own educational experiences and which I outlined in the last section. As a reminder, I list the five questions below:

1. what does it mean to be a Black female learner in the Canadian education system;
2. how can self-reflection and self-revelation, in the context of my marginalized identity, personally transform me as the researcher-author;
3. how can my lived experience impact and influence the receiver-reader;
4. what insights learned from my story and journey can inform the current literature on the educational experience for Black women pursuing higher education;
5. and, finally, what are the practical and actionable implications for equity in education?

In regards to the question of what it means to be a Black female learner in the Canadian education system, this thesis has demonstrated a reality filled with struggles to counter a dominant racist discourse that is manifest in overt, implicit, hidden and unconscious racist social and institutional agendas. To traverse the educational terrain and remain physically, emotionally, psychically and spiritually intact, as a Black and female learner, necessitates strength and pride in racial and ethnic identity, extraordinary psychosocial assets, and spiritual resilience to face and combat relentless adversity.

Using self-reflection and self-revelation, in the context of being a Black woman situated in the margins of the academy and various research agendas, has personally transformed me as the researcher-author. My personal transformation has not only been a result of
self-healing through reflection and the use of my voice, but also as a result of the emancipatory effects of this work. By insisting on using orality and narration, I have contributed to defending my ancestral cultural values and finding a place for them within the research project. My unconventional approaches have been acts of resistance, offering liberation to me personally and potentially to my people.

With regards to the influence and impact of my lived experience on the receiver-reader, I suggest that sharing my personal and emotional journey has offered the potential of consciousness-raising and transformation. My aim in this approach was to affect readers on cognitive, affective and behavioural levels. Not only did I wish to influence hearts and minds, but also to move readers to embrace personal change as well as to mobilize as allies for systemic change towards more inclusive and equitable educational environments. In educational settings and contexts, issues of equity and inclusivity are often engaged only at the cognitive and theoretical level. Sometimes the behavioural level is engaged and learners find practical ways to mobilize for change. Of late, social justice educators have been employing experiential learning pedagogies, including the use of personal stories and sharing, in order to engage learners on the emotional level. Researchers are finding that such affective engagement and development of empathy and greater human connectedness is resulting in positive diversity learning outcomes (Chávez, Guido-DiBrito & Mallory, 2003; Lu, Dane & Gellman, 2006).

There are several insights from my story and journey that can inform the current literature on the educational experience for Black women pursuing higher education. First, my personal story and themes found in my experiences affirm and build on the research that describes the common themes in the educational experience of Black youth...
in Canada, as reported by George Sefa Dei, Henry Codjoe, Gloria Ladson-Billings and Annette Henry among others cited in this thesis. My story also corroborates existing literary works and research, by scholars and activists such as Jamise Liddell, Julia Jordan-Zachery, Juanita Johnson-Bailey, bell hooks, Patricia Williams, Patricia Hill Collins, Njoke Wane, Audrey Kobayashi, Francis Henry and Carol Tator for instance, that discuss the racialization of Black students (and people) in Canada as well as the themes in both our impacts and resilience. Secondly, my research acknowledges the importance of the auto-ethnographic and narrative methods to research conducted by or about peoples and cultures that are marginalized and who value orality as a way to preserve, reconstruct and chart our histories, which have otherwise been distorted or altogether excluded.

With regards to the question of practical and actionable implications for educational inclusivity and equity, these are only limited by individual creativity and institutional will. The removal or reduction of the destructive forces already discussed would have certainly made a difference in my lived experience and educational outcomes. However, even if these barriers remained intact, I would have had a much greater sense of possibility and been one step further towards greater opportunity for educational achievement much earlier in my life if I had more of the protective factors or support systems in place. Educators have a responsibility to become aware of both the destructive forces and protective factors at play and to use their agency to create the conditions for academic possibility and success for all students. The following section outlines suggested interventions and reflection questions for public consideration.
Possibilities for Educational Intervention

Notwithstanding the structural and policy changes that are required for systemic and sustained social and educational change, individual teachers and faculty members can use their influence and control, however limited in their respective domains, to make change. At the individual level, educators can foster inclusive and equitable educational experiences by employing some social justice strategies. For instance, they can start by taking responsibility to gain an accurate and critical historical and contemporary knowledge about the Black experience in Canada. Educators should also understand how oppression works, be aware of their own power and privilege, be self-critical, be willing to make mistakes and be role models by recognizing and interrupting racial bias and stereotyping.

Academics and practitioners can ask critical questions. As a teacher or faculty member: (1) how can you interrupt racial stereotyping, contest dominant discourses; (2) how can you improve teacher pre-service training and education curriculum; (3) how can you increase your knowledge, attitudes and skills related to inclusive education; (4) how story-telling and narratives help you and your learners to connect and relate better to issues of inclusivity; and, (5) how can you offer access to support networks as well as mentorship and academic advice to a racially marginalized student? As a student service provider: (1) how can you foster more equitable and inclusive broader learning environments; and, (2) how can you improve your counselling services for marginalized students or invest in and support student clubs and groups that offer a connection to ethnic/racial identity and cultural pride? As an administrator or policy-maker: what educational policies will you (re)formulate to improve equity and inclusivity in access,
retention, persistence, graduation, post-graduate pursuits, faculty recruitment, promotion and tenure? Had these stakeholders reflected critically on these issues, my lived experiences and my educational opportunities and journey could have been much different.

Students also have an important role to play as co-learners and co-educators. As a student: (1) how do you hear and respond to the experiences of your peers who belong to more marginalized groups than you; (2) how can you challenge and broaden your own world views and perspectives; (3) how can you become more culturally competent and globally minded; (3) what skills do you need to develop to contribute to dialogues across difference; (4) what expectations do you have for receiving a global education and participating in an inclusive classroom environment; and, (5) what pressures can you place on the university and the government that is responsible for delivering your higher learning outcomes?

Recommendations to improve equity and inclusivity in access, retention and success of Black students are plentiful. Researchers and practitioners have suggested that a diverse and eclectic pedagogy that is culturally relevant, links subject matter to student experiences and draws on students’ cultural roots is most effective for teaching Black students in the public school system (Ladson-Billings & Henry, 2001, p. 77). At the primary and secondary levels, Dei (1995) suggested the following improvements: schools that reflect the communities in which Black students live, a curriculum that includes the ancestral histories and cultural heritages of Black students, a greater connection between what students learn and their lived experiences and broadening of the curriculum to include the history of political resistance of Black people to counter the
“victim stance” and narrow view from which Black students are perceived (pp. 139). Dei also suggested increased representation of Black role models in schools including teachers, guidance counsellors and administrators coupled with “fundamental changes in the school system” (p.140) and he invites unconventional social definitions of “family” and “parent” to accord power to voices and proxies who are important to the lives and success of the student but are marginalized or excluded from current communication and feedback systems in schools (p. 142). The report written by Dei offers many other practical recommendations at the individual and systemic levels.

Similarly, recommendations for institutions of higher learning have been documented. Among critical factors suggested to improve retention and success of Black students in the academy, Dei (1995) recommends the following: greater opportunities for and access to counselling and support services as well as academic advising and mentorship for Black students; support for student-run groups and programs that offer Black students venues to freely express their racial/ethnic identities and celebrate their cultural pride; more inclusive curriculum that reflects the histories and cultures of African-Canadians; scholarships and recognition of academic excellence among Black students; and, visible symbols and images of prominent African-Canadians. Codjoe (2006) also draws attention to consequential inequities in the educational system and cites recommendations for more inclusive schools by scholars who advocate for “changes in the curriculum; the teaching materials; teaching and learning styles; the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours of teachers and administrators; and the goals, norms and culture of schools” (p. 49).
To be effective change agents, educators must also appreciate, and not only understand, the impacts of individual and systemic forms of racism and be knowledgeable of identity development theory as well as human emotional, intellectual and behavioural responses to challenge and change. It is imperative they be able to perceive and address individual and group processes and utilize knowledge and skill to create a more inclusive classroom experience. Teachers and professors must build their capacity to be self-aware, attuned to group dynamics, able to pick up on vibes in order to establish a classroom that allows for the authentic expression of racial and cultural identity. Kobayashi (2009), in writing about her experiences as a woman of colour in Canadian academia says “special pedagogic and counselling techniques have to be developed for dealing with students” (p. 68) in order to foster an inclusive classroom.

As a student, community activist, social worker and educator, I have learned how knowledge, attitudes as well as communication, conflict resolution and facilitation skills can reveal the hidden curriculum and transform the educational content and context. Ideas are invited not only to raise awareness about but also to contest inequitable access to and undignified participation in the education system. While this may seem a daunting task, as it must involve multiple stakeholders across varying jurisdictions and levels of power and control, I propose that each of us must find and act on the sites where we have some agency to make individual as well as systemic change. My life’s work as an educator embraces such a commitment and my self-study will have been most meaningful if it manages to inspire such commitments in other actors in the educational system in Canada.
NYANSAPO “wisdom know”, symbol of wisdom, ingenuity, intelligence and patience

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