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Replanting a Wild Seed: Black Women School Leaders Subverting Ideological Lynching

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REPLANTING A WILD SEED:

BLACK WOMEN SCHOOL LEADERS SUBVERTING IDEOLOGICAL LYNCHING

A Dissertation

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Dissertation Abstract

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Much race-based educational research is focused on teachers interrupting systems of oppression in their classrooms, through methods such as curriculum and instruction, and preparing students to engage in the world (Alston, 2012; Bertrand & Rodela, 2017; Carpenter & Diem, 2013; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Furman, 2012). I intentionally focus my attention on school leadership because while all stakeholders are responsible for maintaining school culture, as school leaders it is our responsibility to create conditions where the work of enacting social justice is expected in our schools. There continues to be a gap in educational research that deeply examines this level of critical leadership (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012). There also is a gap of research on the innovation and contributions of Black women school leaders to the field of educational leadership (Dillard, 1995; Horsford & Tillman, 2012; Alston, 2014).

Black women have served in an array of leadership roles, such as activists, academicians, and educational leaders in primary, secondary and higher education for over 100 years (Reed, 2012). The goal of this study is to add to the powerful legacy of Black women school leaders in public education. This dissertation calls upon four main frames—Black feminist thought (BFT), critical race theory in education (CRTed), ideological lynching, and applied critical leadership (ACL) by which to understand the experiences of Black women school leaders. Ideological lynching is a term I developed to describe one of the many ways that systemic oppression seeks to kill Black people. Specifically, I assert that ideological lynching takes place to co-opt Black people's

epistemological understanding of themselves and their place in the world and reiterate institutional racism and other oppressions (Garrett-Walker, 2018; Griffin, 1997; McLauren, 1998 ; Tappan, 2005; Tatum, 1997; Young, 1990). I wanted my study to intentionally decenter the challenges faced by Black women and to instead recenter their perceptions of joy and needs for healing; this purposeful choice of focus was rooted in the adamant refusal to allow others to feast off the trauma of Black women (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

I conducted a qualitative research study with two subgroups, retired and current Black women school leaders (BWLs) of the same school district, to understand how they experienced and perceived their work. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. After undergoing multiple rounds of data analysis using open coding and thematic analysis, three main themes emerged: how Black women school leaders are extensions of a long legacy of resistance, their insistence on critical hope, and how they claim radical healing.

The implications of my dissertation study point to several areas of need, beginning with centering the experiences of racially diverse school leaders in the preparation and continued development of school leaders. My research adds to a growing cannon of leadership that guides new and established leaders through new tools and ways of thinking about self, anti-racist leadership practices, and how to interrupt harmful learning experiences for students.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctoral of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Whitneé Louise Garrett-Walker   6/2/2021
Candidate   Date

Dissertation Committee

Collette Cann   6/3/2021
Chairperson

Rachelle Rogers-Ard   6/4/2021

Emma Fuentes   6/6/2021

Patrick Camangian   6/4/2021

Dedication

I want to begin by giving thanks to my ancestors, known and unknown, for their

guidance, and protection.

To my brilliant, beautiful, patient, and loving wife, Dr. J. Garrett-Walker
I remember when we first started dating, I often spoke of my dreams, hopes, and
aspirations. Each time you always said, "I got you. Let's do it." I am so grateful to you
for all that you have given me—edits, space, patience, love, and an unwavering belief in
me. You are my moon and stars. From my full heart to yours, I love you and thank you.

To my adventurous, determined, beautiful Black child, Cadence Paz León Garrett-Walker
Mommy loves you deep as the sea, as far as the stars, and beyond what our eyes can see.
You are the manifestation of my faith. If you ever read this, know that your mama fought
and clawed her way out of so much negativity to become the person I am today.
Unfortunately, I had to go through all of this to find myself and my worth and you were
part of this journey—intimately.

*To my Fierce Maternal grandmother Momzie, Mrs. Barbara Louise Hughey, and Proud
Papa, Mr. Reginald Leon Hughey,*
I love you both more than words can say. I thank you for helping me become the woman
I am today. Thank you for believing in me and my potential at an early age and being
supportive of each and every step. Thank you both for being present at every graduation,
for counseling me when I was in doubt of my power, and for embodying "home." Papa, I
know you're no longer with us, but I feel your presence, and I feel it often. I know you're
proud and saying, "That's my Red Devil!"

To my paternal grandmother, Virginia B. Martin
Grama, thank you for introducing me to faith and hope at an early age. My faith and
ability to hope has sustained me in my darkest hour. Thank you for investing your time
and energy into me and pushing me to be my best in everything I do.

To my parents, Danette Verchér and James R. Garrett III
Thank you for your patience and desire to see me thrive. Now that I am an adult, I have a
better understanding that you did your best and that is all I could ever ask for. I am
grateful for the care you've given.

To my siblings, James R. Garrett IV, Adrian-James, Jewel, and Makayla
I love you and I see you.

*To the rest of my family: Auntie Karonta, Uncle Frank, Auntie Clarissa, Auntie Shalini,
Cousins, Kiarah, Taeilorae, Frank II, Taj, Maya-Devi*

Thank you for being so supportive and believing in me. Thank you for beginning the work of breaking generational dysfunction for our family. Thank you for believing in love, celebration, and having difficult conversations to maintain boundaries and re-establishing relationships. I am so honored to be part of the new family we've created. Thank you for loving and accepting J., Cadence and me, fully.

To my loving friends, Mary, Hélida, and Yuki

I appreciate you for cheering me on, and reminding me that our friendship is strong, near or far. Thank you for your grace these last few years as I dove headfirst into my doctoral journey. Your support has helped me move mountains and believe wholeheartedly in myself. Thank you for the late-night facetime dates, pep-talks, care packages, and words of affirmation. I love you three. Thank you for being riders.

To my Dissertation Committee,

Dr. Cann (Mama C), thank you for being your authentic self and pushing me to do the same. Thank you for elevating my understanding of what it means to be a Black woman, mother, and scholar-activist.

Dr. Rogers-Ard (Mama), I am grateful for your presence in my life. Thank you for being my only safe space when work as a practitioner was toxic and sought to push me out. Thank you curating safe spaces of learning, reflecting, and action-based professional development for Black folx.

Dr. Fuentes (Mama Emma), Thank you for being my advisor and guide for the last 5 years. Thank for your being available, loving, and thoughtful and for exposing me to bell hooks.

Dr. Camangian (Big Homie), I've known you for almost 10 years and I cannot tell you how much I appreciate you as a scholar-practitioner. Thank you for providing me with opportunities to thrive as an emerging scholar and reminding me that *surviving* is not enough. Thank you for helping me cultivate critical hope in my research, in my practice, and in my life.

As a committee, you've prepared me to take the next step in my career to become the scholar-practitioner I've always wanted to be.

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Chapter One: The Research Problem

Statement of the Problem

It's Spring semester of 2018 and I am halfway through my first year as an assistant principal and full-time doctoral student. I'm tired, frustrated, and full of so many seemingly answerable questions. The questions I had were completely normal to ask—*Why does politics always seem to get in the way of my ability to serve my teachers and students? Why does it seem like I'm being micromanaged more than my fellow assistant principal colleagues? Why do I have to jump through hoops to prove that I'm doing my job and doing it well? Why am I receiving such little support from my supervisors and being made to feel like I don't need or deserve it?* To me, these are examples of questions that are answerable, especially for a person like me, who has integrity and the desire to understand the challenges in serving my school community based on their needs, not a district prescription of one size fits all.

During this same semester, I took qualitative research methods with Dr. Camangian, one of my mentors and a colleague in the work of serving historically marginalized students and teachers in urban public schools. I had a meeting with him to talk through possible topics for my dissertation and how I could best use this course to figure out the next step of solidifying a topic of study for my dissertation. I was playing with many ideas for topics, and I needed help narrowing my focus on what truly mattered to me and what would make the most impact, not just in the academy, but to those who are to prepare the next educational practitioners.

At the time, I was interested in studying the history of eugenics, instruction in Title I schools, or Black women history teachers of United States history. I needed

support in narrowing my proposed topic. I had a deep desire for my work to be rigorous, applicable, and necessary to our field. During our meeting, I began rattling off my interests and how each of these ideas would be fun to study and are necessary in furthering the field of education. He smiled and agreed. Then he said, "Talk to me about your work." I spoke so long that I lost track of time. I talked about my dreams for the future of being a school leader and how these things were possible, but I still felt like I was being held back and not given a fair chance to reach my potential as a leader. He finally asked, "What or who do you think is keeping you from reaching your potential?" I replied, "That's a super loaded question."

I began to outline how I experienced hostile institutional oppression daily, and how it began showing up around me in situations at work—white parents not believing I am an administrator and refusing to speak with me, being labeled as fanatical and harsh when speaking out against racist teaching practices on our campus, being told that I will never become a principal because I'm "too emotional about race." I shared how some white teachers are less likely to respect me unless I assert my positional authority, which is something I hate doing, how my immediate supervisor would often assume we share the same life experiences since we are both women, despite her being wealthy and white. I had to fight every day for basic respect. I was just tired of proving myself. I said, "That's why I want to write a dissertation about something powerful, a topic that will take my mind off my current experiences. Maybe my topic should be on policy that will really shake things up?"

Dr. Camangian asked, "Why can't you research the experiences of Black women school leaders to find out whether they're having the same experiences as you?" I was

shocked. I responded, "What about my experience would be worth reading or learning more about? You know that I want to be a faculty member someday. This topic is not rigorous enough and I'm sure the academy will not accept my work as such."

Dr. Camangian stopped me immediately and said, "Whitneé, stop. Do you hear yourself? You're privileging the whack-ass academy over the experiences of Black women leaders in urban schools? I'm not letting you do that. Your work is rigorous, and so is your contribution to the academy. The academy is gonna get whatever you give it and ultimately, you're not gifting your work to them. Your work will be a labor of love— an ode to all Black women leaders who come across this work. Add to the academy with your experience and expertise. Shake the shit all the way up--that's what Black women have always done. Continue this legacy. Walk in this legacy. Expand this legacy."

It was this moment when my topic chose me. I thought about why I believed that studying Black women school leaders would not add to the field of educational leadership. I immediately felt ashamed and embarrassed that those words came out of my mouth. Thankfully, Dr. Camangian gently reminded me of my worth and how my work is vital for my own survival and the survival of new Black women school leaders to come. I thought about the ways in which I was prepared to be an administrator. Not once did my administrative credential program train me for how I would be perceived as a school leader, let alone reading about the experiences of Black, Indigenous or leaders of Color serving in urban schools. Not once had I read about the experiences of Black women school leaders and how we must navigate our work differently than our white male and male of Color administrator colleagues. I realized that this is my contribution to the field of educational leadership. This conversation birthed both my dissertation topic and an

IRB-approved pilot study that sought to understand the experiences of Black women leaders in urban public schools.

After this conversation, I cried the whole way home. Of course, I was stuck in the worst traffic on the I-80 freeway. Knowing that it would be a while before I got home, I decided to lean into this moment. I rolled down all my windows to get some air and allowed the San Francisco breeze to dry my tears. I took this moment to think about all the Black women in my life who were leaders. Both of my great-grandmothers, Della Louise Lanier and Sarah Rawls, and my grandmothers, Barbara Louise Hughey and Virginia Blanch Martin, came to mind. This was immediately followed by thoughts of Black women ancestors and elders who I've always looked to for reminders of my power—Dorothy Irene Height, Mary Church Terrell, Louise Thompson Patterson, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and the women of the Combahee River Collective. It was in this moment when I thought about their stories and how it is my job to document the experiences of Black women who have led and are currently leading in the same urban school district. I am also a Black woman and a leader, and I want to understand why we remain in the work, despite all the negative messages we receive about how we engage in our work and about our identities. I also realized that I need hope and a reminder that I am not alone. This work is for us and by us.

Dr. Camangian guided me to reflect on my experiences and how these experiences are part of my journey. It is up to me to decide whether I should internalize them. He gave me grace as I came to understand my research of Black women leaders in urban public schools as necessary. He also encouraged me to "take a unique and scathing stance" to both share and elevate our stories. The experiences of Black women leaders

aren't at the forefront of the literature or theory regarding educational leadership. And yet in my experience, observations, and conversations with fellow Black women school leaders, I know our work as Black women school leaders to be groundbreaking, humanizing, and widely replicated, with little credit given. I also know from observations and conversations that Black women school leaders experience gendered racism and anti-Blackness in their work, which makes their work more challenging and inflicts harm and pain. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, my professor, Dr. Camangian, encouraged me to embark upon a pilot study of my dissertation. From this study, I learned a great deal and my findings were as follows:

- Black women school leaders exist in silos, intentionally.

- Our joy in our service as school leaders often out weights our frustration and pain.

- Our intersectionality is our magic; it allows us to connect with all those we serve—from margin to center.

From this study, I was blessed with so much. I was given both a mirror and a pen. A pen to capture what I witnessed, and a mirror to give me the courage to reflect on who I am and how I show up in this work. Observing Sharon, a high school principal in a large urban school district, in her element transformed how I thought about Black women in school leadership. I witnessed her in a visible battle for her white staff's attention and respect, while simultaneously being offered trust and affection from her staff of Color. This was not what I expected to see. After much reflection, however, I realized that this is also what I experience daily. Simply put, it's not about pleasing white staff, it's about knowing that when we attempt to build genuine relationships, mutual and sustainable

trust will be built. Instead, we are faced with triple the work—making white staff feel comfortable, building trust, and defending our competence.

The Journey

During the first few years of doctoral coursework, I developed an interest in understanding lynching, specifically the fact that it still exists, just in more insidious forms. I also studied the accessibility of Black death via social media. I began to explore the ways in which new forms of lynching remain a pervasive practice. To explain the continued influence of racialized violence in the United States, and how it is virtually impossible to escape viewing images of Black death, I coined the term *digital lynching*. Digital lynching is the phenomenon of white dominance enacted through intimidation and physical, psychological, and emotional violence, and sharing Black death as a spectacle on social media (Garrett-Walker, 2020). While this term gave me language to describe the ways in which Black people and people of Color are still being physically subjugated, it didn't get to the core of what happens after we view these images and (re)experience these events. Whether we are witnesses of these events as they occur in real time or view the images posted on social media—these images and videos stay with us. They haunt us, just like strange fruit swinging from an oak tree (Holiday, 1939).

From research, I learned that something has been happening to us, generation after generation, that causes us to continue to be mentally oppressed as Black people. This terror affects us psychologically, spiritually, emotionally, and, potentially, ideologically (Ginzburg, 1962). I reflected on the idea of ideological lynching to provide us with language to explain the impact of viewing and internalizing these images and messages, and the ways in which this directly impacts Black people's ability to thrive in

the United States. These are some of the ways in which racism directly reproduces the disposability of Blackness, both bodies and minds, in all areas of society. I submit that ideological lynching takes place to co-opt Black people's epistemological understanding of ourselves, our place in the world, and reiterate institutional racism and other oppressions. Just as the traditional form of lynching sought to violently intimidate and subjugate Black people (Woods, 2009), *ideological lynching* is a concept that seeks to describe the psychological impact of racism on Black people.

The study of how people become (or continue to be) resilient in the face of adversity is not a new area of research. However, the study of what grounds Black women school leaders in their work as leaders of urban public schools, as well as the ways in which they subvert these negative messages that seek to further subjugate them, is in fact new. The stereotypical tropes of Black women as Mammies or Jezebels continue to follow us and intend to do what they've always done—usurp us of our deserved humanity (Hill-Collins, 2000). For this reason, we continue to be known and treated as the mule of the world—merely existing and surviving (Walker, 1983). Alice Walker, in her deeply heart-wrenching prose *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, walks her readers through the varied experiences of Black women since slavery. Specifically, she shares the terrible legacy of the lack of Black women's right to be creators and in need of the space and time necessary to feed the soul. Walker, a Black woman elder and noted poet, guides her readers to understand that our strength as Black women comes from our ability to survive through finding ways to feed what heals us and our communities. She writes:

> I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is
> radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye.

> She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty (Walker, 1983, p. 241).

Walker provides a direct task to Black women in this quote. She is calling us to know and engage in what heals us. She is also calling us to know that the historical tropes that sought to break us won't; they haven't thus far. To apply this to an educational context, scholars such as Cynthia B. Dillard (1995), Sonya Douglass Horsford and Linda C. Tillman (2012), Lisa Bass (2012) , and Judy Alston (2014) have researched the ways in which these tropes—Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire—have followed us into the field of education, making our visibility as leaders increasingly threatening to those in power. For this reason, it is necessary to send us a message to stay in our place. Black women school leaders pose a direct threat to the place that has been carved out for us because we continue to (re)construct space for ourselves as leaders. Our place as school leaders is an act of resistance. My dissertation is guided by this belief.

Keeping in this tradition of destabilizing damage-centered research (Tuck, 2009), this research study aims to explore the experiences of Black women school leaders of urban public schools and the ways in which they subvert ideological lynching in their daily practice in those roles. I intentionally connect the experiences of Black women leaders to that of the subversion of ideological lynching because our mere existence as leaders is, in fact, resistance. Black women as leaders, regardless of the field, pose a direct threat to those in power, namely those who seek to maintain the dominant narrative and wheel of control. Ideological lynching is the direct attack on the minds of Black people and people of Color, as if to say, "stay small" or a "warning to stay in your place" Just as the traditional live lynchings of the past sought to provide a visual representation

of the limits of freedom for Black people, ideological lynching seeks to do the same, only with our minds, to control the way we perceive self, our work, and those around us.

From the work of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) and Dorothy Roberts (1997), we learn about the concept of Blackness as disposable and how this narrative is being intentionally reproduced in all areas of society. This coercive act of stripping away African ways of knowing, first through colonization and slavery and then through the intentional stratification of systemic and institutional racism, has caused Black people to forget ourselves and each other (Harney & Moten, 2013). The concept of anti-Blackness is the cause of Blackness as disposable (Roberts, 1997). Both streams of theory and consciousness are rooted in the understanding that Blackness is dark, evil, and worthless, not worthy of life and at the very least needing to be conquered, and thus the existence and maintenance of the global institution of enslaving Blackness.

I assert that the most heinous form of racially motivated violence is controlling the way Black people think, as thoughts are what inform actions. For us to understand the experiences of Black women school leaders, we must understand them as whole. To do this, I argue the need to study the experiences of Black women school leaders and how they define the promises, challenges and potential of their work in schools. I will illustrate the experiences of my participants by engaging the work of elders and scholars in the fields of critical race theory in education, Black feminist thought, and applied critical leadership.

Background and Need

As a Black woman leader of an urban public school, I felt that it was necessary to connect with my experiential and professional knowledge, as well as the academic works

of Black women that have come before me, to best understand the unique standing of Black women leaders in schools. Since then, I've had the honor of reading many seminal texts from scholar-activists and Black feminists such as Michele Wallace, Patricia Hill-Collins, bell hooks, and Cynthia B. Dillard. From this work, I saw many connections between both my experiences and those I researched.

When I transitioned to research the contribution of Black women in the field of educational leadership, it became clear that we had been excluded from the canonical writings of leadership theory (Alston, 2005). Maybe it was silly of me to expect to see myself reflected in the field of educational leadership, but I wasn't surprised to discover that I was not. I was disappointed—especially since the year is 2018. My wife, J. told me very early on in my graduate studies that, "most times, your research will turn into (me)search," and the trajectory of my research has morphed into studying older versions of myself, with the goal of healing and (re)building the field of educational leadership. In studying Black women school leaders, I've found myself doing an intense amount of reflection, not just on my dissertation study, but more importantly, on how I fit into it, and how these elements of who I am and how I engage in my work as a school leader are not validated within the field of educational leadership (Burkhard, Randall & Howard, 2016).

In my quest to gather information on Black women school leaders, I've found that there are gaping holes within this body of work (Grant, 2012). There are also very few empirical studies in which this specific area is explored and presented to extend our understanding of the experiences of Black women school leaders, how they engage in critical leadership, and the ways in which intersectionality manifests within our

leadership practices. Dr. Cynthia B. Dillard is among the first to explicitly research and thoughtfully document the experiences of Black women school leaders. In 1995, Dillard conducted a qualitative research study which sought to not only explore the experiences of Black women school leaders, but to call out the fact that Black women are missing from the narrative of urban school leadership. This article outlines what the term *effectiveness* means in urban schools and how it cannot be achieved by following a particular formula, which causes attrition in school leadership. Dillard walks the reader through a case study of a Black woman leader, specifically her upbringing, the way she navigates district politics, school leadership, and how she has given her life to this work. While the participant in this study transformed her school, she was rewarded with being transferred to another school to do the same work—thus the title, *Leading with her life*. In later work, Dillard called upon the use of the term, *endarkened feminism* as theory and methodology for understanding the experiences of Black women's existence and as leaders in the field of education (Dillard, 2000; 2012). Endarkened feminism refers to the epistemological and ancestral understanding of who we are as African (Black) women and how we navigate the world must be understood through this lens and many others given our intersectionality. Endarkened feminism is sister and friend to Alice Walker's womanism, and Collins's Black feminist thought. All terms and ways of knowing are necessary. After all, there is no wrong way to be and experience life as a Black woman (Walker,1983).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Black women school leaders of an urban public school district and how they define harm and their sense of

purpose, and how they articulate their need for healing. Black women have served in an array of leadership roles, such as activists, academicians, and educational leaders in primary, secondary and higher education for over 100 years (Reed, 2012), and to that end, the goal of this study is to add to the powerful legacy of Black women school leaders in public education. I have intentionally used the term school leader instead of principal, because I acknowledge that there are many people with positional authority on a school campus other than the traditional roles of principal and assistant principal. This study also seeks to better understand how Black women leaders build and maintain a sense of self-actualization and resilience, despite the ways in which institutionalized oppression has caused Black women leaders to be silenced.

Theoretical Framework

This dissertation will call upon three main frames—Black feminist thought (BFT), critical race theory in education (CRTed), ideological lynching, and applied critical leadership (ACL) by which to understand the experiences of Black women school leaders. For the purposes of my dissertation, I will focus equally on all theoretical frameworks to paint a clear picture of the intersectional experiences of Black women school leaders and how these experiences are defined by joy, harm, and healing (Hill-Collins, 2000); (Hull et al., 1982; hooks, 1981).

Black Feminist Thought

As mentioned, I sought to become more grounded in the theory and practices of Black feminist thought. It's interesting that as a Black woman, I needed to further legitimize my own hunches about my identity by studying empirical and theoretical works. On the other hand, it was quite refreshing to read the eloquent and empirical work

of Black women who have come before me. I read many articles and books, detailing the theoretical and practical aspect of BFT, its legacy, and the ancestors and elders who gave it to us. BFT seeks to outline Black women's experiences in this country from the vantage point of life, work, and existence in US society. Patricia Hill-Collins, bell hooks, and other elders I look to in this work and in life, begin their work detailing the experiences of stolen African women through describing the horrors of the Middle Passage and how through sexual and spiritual violence, European (white) colonizers sought to break us (Bell, 1992). Because white slave owners could not break us, regardless of how abhorrent the violence they inflicted, they sought to stratify the value of Black people, beginning with Black women at the bottom of this hierarchy (Bell, 1992). Many Black feminists conclude that our inner strength and regard for life— because we give life—provides us with the ability to survive and thrive. This ability to survive and thrive is collective, and this collectivity is in and of itself our survival. From the time of slavery, and even today, we have always understood that while individual freedom is paramount, our freedom as a people rests within collectivity and unity (hooks, 2015a).

Fighting the world is exactly what we have always done (Hill-Collins,1998). We see examples of this within our participation in many political movements. For example, Black feminists such as Florynce Kennedy and Anne Moody understood very early on during the Civil Rights Movement the importance of fighting for our rights as a Black people, but patriarchy prevailed, leaving Black women during this time the terrible choice of freeing our Blackness or our woman-ness (Beale & Bambara, 2008). This era had such a pronounced version of what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls respectability politics,

it caused some Black woman to have less of a leadership role during this era and other movements before it. Respectability politics refers to Black women following in the footsteps of white-elitist-heteronormative-Christian-capitalistic expectations for women (Brooks Higginbotham, 1993). Clearly, this served as another hegemonic ploy to remain as close to being white as possible. Ida B. Wells-Barnett was one Black feminist who subverted traditional notions of womanhood and has continued to transcended time as we think of because of her fight to protect the Blackness and the Black body. She and other Black women scholar-activists such as Sojourner Truth, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Mary Church Terrell, set the groundwork for a (re)birth and (re)imagining of Black women and our role in society. We see this (re)birth of a new Black women brewing even before the Civil Rights Movement. A Black woman who does not subscribe to heteronormative ideology and is explicitly for the collective freedom of all Black women, by any means necessary. This epistemological perception of who we truly are and what we are capable of is what gave birth to grassroots organizations such as the Combahee River Collective (Taylor, 2017).

In my research of BFT, I found that it is necessary to understand this framework as a critical pedagogical tool because it outlines the ways in which multiple elements of oppression seek to completely destruct our existence. We begin to see a shift in the 1960s in which more language is coined and available to verbalize the many layered experiences of Black women. In the 1960s a Black feminist, Francis M. Beal, coined the term *double jeopardy* to explain the institutional oppression that comes from being Black and a woman (Beale & Bambara, 1969). Fast forward to the 1980s, Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black woman, noted legal scholar-activist, and critical race theorist, coined the term

*intersectionalit*y to describe how oppressional are intentionally layered and intertwined for people with multiple oppressions. She contends that attempting to separate them forces us to choose which identity we value over the others (Crenshaw, 1989). Patricia Hill-Collins provides us with more language to define the Black woman's experience by outlining the applicable terms of *controlling images* and the *matrix of domination* to express the ways in which Black women have been intentionally caricatured and labeled throughout time—Jezebel, Sapphire, Mammy—and how this has contributed to a system that sees us, and will always see us, as such. These images contributed to the creation of the matrix of domination, because the patriarchal, social, capitalistic hierarchy does not include Black women at the top as it seeks to further oppress (Hill-Collins, 2000).

Research Questions

My research questions come from a deep desire to learn from other Black women school leaders (BWLs) and to identify shared experiences. My goal is to understand our narratives from the past and present through telling our own stories in a way that both brings more depth with intentional space to define our experiences for ourselves and adds to the growing body of literature of BWLs.

- **Research Question** #1: How do BWLs defines challenges in their work and the harm they may experience?

- **Research Question** #2: How do BWLs identify or find purpose and joy in their work?

- **Research Question** #3: What are the collective and individual needs for healing of BWLs?

Limitations

This dissertation is limited by the focus on one school district and on the Black women school leaders who agreed to participate in the study. Studying one school district and two groups of Black women school leaders does not equate or give way to generalizing the experiences of one group of people across the country. More research needs to be done on this topic to further disrupt the dominant narrative that exists about educational leadership and the ways in which Black women exist within this field. Black women school leaders have existed in many capacities for more than a century, yet their contribution to public education has not been widely documented. My dissertation seeks to add to this growing body of research to further substantiate and elevate the voices and experiences of Black women school leaders.

Educational Significance

Black women serve as a pure example of the possibilities that arise from intersectional service to communities that have been historically marginalized. For decades, researchers have studied the importance of understanding and implementing culturally responsive and critical pedagogical practices and how engaging these practices further empowers students who have been historically marginalized (Alston, 2005; Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Gooden & Dantley, 2012). Educational researchers have also studied the importance and power that students feel when they have even one teacher that looks like them (Ladson-Billings, 1994). From these two camps of research, it has been found that when students learn from teachers who look like them, and the teachers engage in critical and culturally responsive teaching practices, they are more likely to both retain what they have learned and become advocates for their learning experiences

(Camangian, 2015). This does not mean that students are incapable from learning from teachers who do not look like them. This means they learn deeper and more meaningfully because of the shared identity and direct applicability of shared life experiences.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In studying educational leadership, it's important to include the experiences, contributions, and research of Black women. Black women have been leaders in the field of education for centuries, yet are not included when discussing the field, literature, or best practices. This exclusionary act is unacceptable and, despite this act, we're still here, ready and willing to serve. The purpose of this dissertation is to ascertain the experiences of Black women school leaders through the ways they define their perceptions of joy and harm, and how they gauge their need for healing. By delayering their intersectionality, the ways in which society has taught them how to perceive themselves, coupled with the nature and context of their work, we can begin to understand their experiences. Therefore, the following review of literature is organized into three main sections. The first section explores current literature and empirical research on BWLs, the second reviews relevant literature and research on urban public schools, history of lynching, including current manifestations such as ideological lynching, and the final section looks at critical leadership and the necessity for this type of leadership in urban public schools.

Current Literature on Black Women School Leaders

This section seeks to provide a road map of the origin of Black women school leaders and the ways in which the narrative has yet to shift since we've become school leaders post–*Brown v. Board of Education*. I address the gap of understanding our experiences by revisiting Dillard's case study of a Black woman school leaders in *Leading with her life* (Dillard, 1995). I intentionally engage this work deeply, as Dillard's work is seminal and research on the topic of Black women school leaders since 1995 calls upon the use of this piece to set the foundation for our experiences. I then review

several qualitative research studies to further set the stage for research that currently exists.

In 1873, Sacramento, California had its second Black woman principal. Her name was Sarah Jones. She was recruited by the parents of a segregated school in Sacramento who migrated from the American South to the West shortly after the Emancipation Proclamation (Taylor & Wilson Moore, 2008). Under Jones's leadership, the school prepared primary school students to excel academically and, eventually, they surpassed white children in magnet schools. Her students were the first to be admitted into magnet schools that had yet to be integrated. This is the first known case of school integration in the state of California. The politics of her school surrounded funding—the fact that the school board could not continue funding school segregation, yet Black and white families still wanted their children to attend segregated schools. Since the school board could not continue to fund segregated schools, they decide to integrate them in 1894, despite the advocacy of the families. Jones's school was closed, and she was promoted to become a principal of a large comprehensive high school in Sacramento.

Jones's story has been reproduced several times over. Dillard, a noted Black feminist scholar, reported and recorded similar results to that of Ms. Jones' experience in the late nineteenth century in her research of Black women school leaders within the 20th and 21st centuries (Dillard, 1995). Specifically, Dillard expressed the depth of self and spirit that Black women give when leading schools and once a specific need is met—school transformation, increasing enrollment, building instructional and operational efficacy—BWLs are moved, only to do it again for another school. Dillard also writes a great deal about the lack of self-actualization and self-care Black women school leaders

experience, as well as how our presence as "clean up women" for schools in need of transformation, only to be reassigned once the school has been cleaned and made ready for another leader (Peters, 2005). Dillard thoughtfully shares the many experiences of Black women school leaders and likens the reproduction of these experiences as evidence of racial realism. Here, Dillard makes the salient connection of the experiences of Black women school leaders to that of critical race theory's racial realism:

> One of the ways to negotiate race relations and combat racism in the context of the school principalship is to not only learn the semiotics of the sociocultural context and circumstances but to (re)interpret one's responsibility to those circumstances within her own African American framework. If we agree with the argument put forth by Bell that racism is a permanent structure in American society and that schools as institutions are themselves not immune to racism (or other isms for that matter), then one way to provide leadership in schools is to enact a conscious transformative pedagogy and leadership towards those oppressive structures (Dillard, 1995, p. 547).

Natham, the participant in Dillard's study, became a teaching principal due to the lack of Black teachers and teachers of Color in her school. She took on this additional workload to further prove that she could do the work of a principal and a teacher, and to anticipate yet another roadblock, so that teachers could never claim that she didn't understand the plight of teachers. This also shows how these contexts are not meant for Black women leaders to succeed, yet in some cases, it happens anyway. Dillard further makes clear that we must continue to resist:

> Bell, (1992) suggests that Natham (subject), serves "to constantly remind the powers that be that there are persons like us who are not only on the side [of African Americans and other subjugated people] but are determined [through resistance and reinterpretation] to stand in their way…." Natham not only (re)interprets the meaning of her work for African Americans but chooses to reform the very profession that seeks to marginalize her. (Dillard, 1995, p. 199).

Natham aimed to give her all, and in the process, she led the school with everything she had. Through this collaboration and trust building with her teachers, being a warm demander and communicating with parents, she transformed the instructional focus, as well as the culture and climate of her school. This BWL took on more to silence the nay-sayers, and in the process provided a window into best practices of collaboration and critical and instructional leadership. Because of the gains made in this school, it seems as if district leaders could believe that she could do this again, one of the reasons she was moved to another school in need of transformation (Dillard, 1995; Pollard, 1997). This behavior displayed by school districts can also be paralleled to that of using Black women for breeding purposes, given the lack of consent or choice and an inability to humanize her work. This leaves BWLs with very few choices—keep a job and a small amount of what seems like respect in the district or say no to the district's plan and suffer the consequences of choosing health and self over politics. Dillard expresses that the mere presence of Black women school leaders "not only mocks the status quo and the illusion that those in power indeed have power over her decision making, but through seemingly ordinary acts of leadership provides an alternative interpretation of leadership possibility" (Dillard, 1995, p. 549).

This mocking causes further subjugation, and one of the consequences is to be given a workload that is seemingly impossible, as Natham was. In another qualitative study, Dillard (2000) studies three Black women—a doctoral student, Black woman principal, and herself—in a research study in which life notes were collected as data. Life notes served as points of reflection as to their daily experiences in the education system, such as daily interactions with peers and supervisors. Out of this study came experiences

such as imposter syndrome, lack of confidence, and the ways in which politics play out within, around, and above the participants. Because of this, Dillard analyzed the experiences using life notes instead of holding regular focus groups to determine whether these experiences were localized to only her. From the analysis of data Dillard found that "in order to transform that reality, the very language we use to define and describe phenomena must possess instrumentality: It must be able to do something towards transforming particular ways of knowing and producing knowledge" (Dillard, 2000, p. 3). Here Dillard explains the necessity and power of having language to describe how Black women feel and the ways in which our epistemological center must be maintained through shared language for ourselves. This is the foundation for my study—giving Black women the space to speak for themselves and define who they are and how they wish to be seen is necessary.

Another lens for the ways in which Black women school leaders show up in this work is through the work of Sonya Douglass Horsford and Linda C. Tillman (2012). They researched the ways in which Black women school leaders utilize *bridge leadership*. Bridge leadership and servant leadership are the "if not me then who" narrative that assumes larger responsibility to our race and to both personal and collective achievement. This higher sense of responsibility is noted by Lisa Bass (2012), in the coining of the term *Black feminist caring* to explain how and why Black women meet students where they are to create proper conditions for optimal learning outcomes. The intense personalization of the work and becoming family with students and staff—my students, my school, my community—makes the work even more personal and provides the drive that is often necessary to keep going (Bass, 2012).

Other authors who have researched the experiences of Black women in educational leadership have found many similarities in our experiences. Alston (2005) discusses the ways in which Black women superintendents of schools show up as leaders and refers to *tempered radicals*— a term developed by Debra Meyerson and Maureen Scully. *Tempered radicals* are "individuals who identify with and are committed to their organizations and also to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organization, they rock the boat and stay in the boat." (Meyerson & Scully, 2001, p. xi). Referring to Black women leaders as tempered radicals is a perfect depiction of our legacy as educational leaders, because we are often not able to be our full selves all the time. We must offer ourselves, our expertise, and our opinions in a highly curated way.

In more recent work, researchers such as Alston (2005), Bass (2012), Grant (2012), Peters (2012), and Reed (2012) have engaged in qualitative research studies such as focus groups, interviews, and various ethnographic and auto-ethnographic methodological approaches, detailing the varied experiences of Black women school and district leaders. Specifically, these authors elevate the following in their work: lack of representation of Black women in the field of educational leadership; engagement in caring and m(other)ing of their students, staff, and community; lack of support and resources of supervisors; school transformation; experiences of being clean up women; and the utter lack of self-care.

Urban Public Schools

The history of the education system in the United States is a long and sordid story of the quest toward access, upward mobility, and maintenance of power and privilege.

The purpose of this section is to provide a brief history of the education system in the United States, as well as provide a foundation for the inequities that have always existed within urban public schools for those who have been historically marginalized in this country including, Black people and other people of Color, those who are differently abled, and immigrants. Knowledge of the foundation of schooling in the United States will provide a through line in understanding inequity while further defining the complexity of how the matrix of domination exists and interacts in schools where Black women are leaders.

In the late eighteenth century, there was a movement for the government to create, fund, and maintain the integrity of public schools. This vision was driven and implemented by Horace Mann, most commonly referred to as the father of the common school movement. The purpose of this movement was to make education public, secular and available or common to all (Bernard & Mondale, 2001). This movement birthed education that was tuition-free, rooted in meritocracy, a delicate balance of church and state, and susceptible to local control and public policy. While the first public school opened in the 1600s, the public schools in the late nineteenth century were of a different caliber due to their explicit focus on educating all instead of the few. Horace Mann wanted the common schools to educate all children regardless of their socioeconomic background, religion, or gender. Horace Mann described his vision for the new public school system:

> It is a free school system, it knows no distinction of rich and poor… it throws open its doors and spreads the table of its bounty for all children of the state… Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the equalizer of the conditions of men, the great balance wheel of the social machinery (Bernard & Mondale, 2001, p. 29).

Horace Mann clearly outlines children of the state in this famous quote, but it means all

white children of citizens of the new United States of America, not Black and Indigenous

children. It was clear then that Students of Color were not seen as children of the state,

but as burdens of the state—which is exactly how Black, Indigenous, and children of

Color are perceived now. James Anderson, noted educational historian of Black

education, says that during this time,

> It became clear to most of them [African Americans] that a better education
> would not mean a better position in society, or a better job. They knew that they
> couldn't get into the trades in most places, so they began to redefine the very
> purpose of education. African Americans began to tie the quest for freedom and
> the quest for education and excellence together. And so they began to think of
> education as part of the freedom struggle (Bernard & Mondale, 2001, p.41).

This quote is quite salient because it provides a deep understanding and depiction

of how Black people understood their unique social, political, and economic standing in

the newly formed United States of America. They sought to prepare for the reality of

freedom. Even deeper than the physical fight for physical freedom were the fugitive

spaces created in secret to either make plans to escape North to freedom, to rebel, or to

remind each other that the purpose of their existence was worth much more than slavery

(Harney & Moten, 2013) The fight for freedom was in fact physical, emotional,

intellectual, psychological, and spiritual—just as it is now. This line of thinking caused

prolific and intentional growth in the number of schools, churches, universities, Black-

owned organizations, hospitals, and other businesses after the Emancipation

Proclamation in 1863. The growth in the number of Black schools really changed the way

the community engaged with the idea of school. For more than 200 years, generations of

Black people—enslaved or free—understood that their ability to read, write, think, speak

and act for themselves was an act of treason and was punishable by death. As soon as they were free, school was one of the first ways that newly freed Black people sought to access and communicate with each other near or far (Bernard & Mondale, 2001).

The expansion of Black public schools during this time was met with funding to access dilapidated buildings or build shacks to have a place to learn (Taylor & Wilson Moore, 2008). Teachers came to the South from all over the country to teach newly freed Black people. The inequities of funding discrimination begin here. For example, in the state of California, segregated schools existed in basements of churches or in homes of fellow community members. Even with the bleakest conditions, Black people were inspired to persevere. Reconstruction Era legislation allowed this kind of discrimination of funding and operation of segregated schools. Taylor and Wilson Moore (2008), esteemed Black historians, wrote a book on the ways in which Black women faired in the West from 1600 to 2000. This book contains recorded oral histories that detail the lives, work, and community-based organizing among Black women.

As one can imagine, most urban schools are filled with beautiful Black, Indigenous and children of Color who come from lower socioeconomic statuses, are English language learners, or have documented learning or behavioral differences as cited under the Individuals with Disabilities Act. While there is immense beauty and cultural wealth in the composition of urban schools, there is also an unprecedented amount of need that is not just tied to funding in these school communities (Yosso, 2005). Some would think that since most of these schools meet the requirements set forth by Federal Title I funding, meaning 40% of students come from low-income families, urban schools and districts would be funded using sustainable funding and district allocated resources to

address instruction and teacher and school leader attrition (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Due to systemic oppression, students teachers and school leaders are leading schools that have been doomed to fail since the Reconstruction Era, when segregated schools were first erected.

In 1996, a study executed by the National Education Center for Statistics documented the rise and complexity of urban public schools across the United States. This study was launched to measure the ways in which urban, rural, suburban, and high poverty school fair against each other, using many complex indicators including but not limited to the following race, education of parents, and teacher and leader attrition. According to this study, the following are definitions of urban and high poverty schools: Schools classified as urban are in central cities of Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs); schools classified as suburban are located within the area surrounding a central city within the MSA; and schools classified as rural are outside of an MSA. Urban schools were in central cities of all sizes, as defined by the Census Bureau.

> The Bureau of the Census defines a poverty area in a metropolitan area as a census tract with a poverty rate of 20 percent of more. But evidence from the research literature suggests that a more accurate definition of an area with the type of poverty concentration associated with large metropolitan areas, or ghetto poverty areas, is a neighborhood in a mid- to large-sized city with a poverty rate of 40 percent or more (U.S. Department of Education, 1996, p. 18).

Major results from this national study include that "urban students are more likely to be disadvantaged by having only one parent; having less educated and/or unemployed parents; having handicapping conditions or learning, emotional, or health disabilities; having difficulty speaking English; or by being homeless" (U.S. Department. of Education, 1996, p.2).

Many scholars, including Drs. Daniel Solórzano, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and William Tate IV, discuss the importance of understanding the ways in which the tenants of critical race theory (CRT) show up in the field of education. Afterall, the major purpose of CRT in education is to illuminate for the educational community and society at large the ways that systems of oppression converge in schools. The research of scholar-activists within CRTed outlines the inequities and hardships faced by generations of children who have attended urban public schools. Horsford and Grosland (2013) discuss badges of inferiority (the many forms of oppression) and how these badges are not worn with honor but diagnosed with pride. In this article, the authors assert that these badges of inferiority affect not only teacher perception of students, but also students' perception of self. This reproduces a sense of inferiority, by the students and reifies that the fact that they are indeed inferior by the systems designed by those in power, which directly impacts student learning.

History of Lynching

According to Cutler (1906) lynching is defined as a circumstance "whereby mobs capture individuals suspected of crime, or take them from officers of the law, and execute them without any process at law, or break open jails and hang convicted criminals, with impunity" (Cutler, 1969, p. 1). James E. Cutler, noted researcher of lynching, wrote a canon of lynching, *Lynch-law*, published in 1905, which includes deaths of people who were murdered via lynching. Cutler made the connection to race and these murders using data. He noted that Black people men and women were lynched far more often than any other race. Lynching by its nature is in fact racially motivated and deemed as the only

way to protect white women and children from the "Black brutes" of the world (Woods,

2009). Manfred and Berg describe how

> Lynchers made every effort to ensure that the [B]lack community got their
> message. They left the bodies of their victims on display for hours, sometimes
> even for days, and attached signs warning that future offender would meet the
> same fate. Spectacle lynching…were frightening reminders that there were
> virtually no limits to what whites could do to [B]lacks (Manfred & Berg, 2011, p.
> 92).

This quote clearly outlines the intentional harm brought upon Black people, in the past

and currently. The message and spectacle made of Black death was enough to caution

Black people and make them mindful of their actions toward white people. What makes a

lynching different than other forms of murder in its sinister disregard for the law, need to

condemn Black people's supposedly sinful actions, torture—sometimes by burning and

castration—the need for an audience, and relics.

> Although the excessive brutality of many lynchings distinguished them from
> executions, their performative and symbolic value… to understand the
> significance of public executions in the [S]outh is to make sense of not only that
> excessive brutality but also the pleasure that so many [W]hite southerners derived
> from seeing it (Woods, 2009, p. 24).

In this quote, we see how pleasure and Black death go hand in time. For example, one

can examine the notorious lynching of William Brown in Omaha, Nebraska, during the

Red Summer of 1919. He was taken into custody because he allegedly sexually abused a

white woman. During this time, angry white men, discontent with due process, demanded

that William Brown be given to them so justice could be served. The sheriff and mayor of

the town did not initially give Brown to the white vigilantes, which sparked even more

anger. This anger turned to rage. The angry white mob set the jail on fire, causing all the

inmates, including Brown, to be released. Once Brown was captured, they lynched him

and the mayor of the town. The people pleaded with the mob to cut the mayor down, and

he was saved within minutes of his life. William Brown on the other hand was lynched and murdered. Instead of being content with the lynching that caused his death, they put him before a firing squad posthumously and then proceeded to burn his body (Woods, 2009)**.**

The picture of William Brown's body, burned like the carcass of an animal, was on the front cover of every major news outlet in the country. In some places, the original picture was thought to be too gruesome for public consumption and was edited so as not to include the smoking body of William Brown tied to a wooden post (Woods, 2009, p. 212). This incident, as well as the riots and racial tension in Omaha, were not isolated events. There were several other outbreaks of racial violence across the country, and it became known as the Red Summer of 1919. This was a period of history where Black people were 50 years removed from the Civil War, and their parents and grandparents could have still been slaves and lived through the Reconstruction Era. The Red Summer of 1919 is a pure example of what happens when Black and white people are vying for access to the same resources such as jobs and education, and how Black people are left unable to obtain such resources due to their social standing. These examples highlight how racially motivated violence, specifically lynching, is not just an American horror of the past. Lynching is still happening. It is used to maintain white dominance through making a spectacle, and a statement, of Black death on social media and the news (Woods, 2009; Garrett-Walker, 2020; Givens, 2019). Blackness has been equated with violence and disposability in a way that is even more pronounced because now we cannot escape it because it's everywhere, all the time.

> The apposition of Fanonian and Artaudian cruelty is an itinerancy that bridges life and [B]lackness. Movement towards and against death and its specific and general

prematurities and a willingness to break the law one calls into existence constitute their very relationality. But what's the relation between willingness and propensity? And what's the difference between fight and fatality? What are the politics of being ready to die and what have they to do with the scandal of enjoyment? (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 50).

This quote taken from Harney and Moten's *The Undercommons* explains that Blackness brings about an intense cruelty that necessitates death in this country. This has not changed since the moment we were kidnapped and brought to the United States as slaves. Blackness is violence.

Ideological Lynching

Lynching is currently happening as a form of racially motivated violence. Just as the traditional form of lynching sought to violently intimidate and subjugate Black people (Woods, 2009), ideological lynching is a framework that seeks to describe the psychological impact of racism on Black people. Ideological lynching is the direct outcome of being digitally lynched. After viewing a Black death plastered on every social media and news outlet, what happens to us as Black people? How have these images of Black death reiterated that we must tread lightly, lest we be next? How have these images caused us to believe what we've been shown? Currently, the best way for these questions to begin to be answered is to look to the frame I've created with digital lynching. It centers white society's deep desire to witness Black death. I assert that this desire has done something to the minds of Black people, and it has been reproduced over several generations. My dissertation seeks to explore the ways in which the psychological abuse of being exposed to racially motivated psychological, emotional, and physical trauma has had on BWLs and their ability to remain in this work.

Paolo Freire argued that people respond to inequality through three stages of consciousness; magical, naïve, and critical (as cited in Solórzano, 2013). For the purposes of my dissertation, I will focus on the naïve and critical responses to inequality. The fact that some poor and working-class people merely acknowledge that there are systems of oppression that exist, and instead of changing the system itself they conform to meet the expectations of the system. Freire also argued that this perspective is due to the awareness of the inequitable systems, but the idea that the system itself is too large and too powerful to dismantle, and so the only recourse is to succumb to the system. For example, during slavery in the United States, Black slaves were taught by their slave masters, using the Bible, that they were born to be subordinate and must obey their masters. This was common sense for Black slaves and their white slave owners during this period. Black slaves acknowledged that the system of slavery dehumanized them, and some believed that there was no way out other than death. I assert that ideological lynching takes place to co-opt Black people's epistemological understanding of themselves and their place in the world and reiterate institutional racism and other oppressions.

Applied Critical Leadership

Including the review of critical leadership is necessary to my dissertation and research study because it provides a necessary foundation of best practices for leadership in urban schools. Because little is known about the ways in which Black principals engaged in school leadership Pre-*Brown* (Siddle Walker, 1993), I explicitly use ACL. ACL is more than engaging in reflection or perceived social justice work on behalf of students and teachers. It is the intentional centering of love, humility, distributed

leadership, and actively engagement in equity-centered conversations and actions on behalf of transforming the learning community. To that end, this section serves as a review of best practices that have appeared in many of the aforementioned studies about how Black women school leaders show up in the work.

Applied critical leadership is a theoretical framework that incorporates the need for reflection, critical consciousness, and faith in the collaborative process of leading schools for and by those who are oppressed (Freire, 1970). It is a framework that seeks to understand more about the ways in which school leaders are choosing to interrupt white supremacy and other harmful and inequitable practices on their campuses (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015). Freire discussed the purpose of dialogical love and its place in the transformation and reclaiming of schools by those who are oppressed. He stated, "dialogue cannot exist in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself." This conceptualization of "dialogical love" is characterized by humility, faith in the people, hope, critical thinking, and ultimately, solidarity. (Miller, et al., 2011). From this standpoint, critical leadership is defined using a series of characteristics needed by school leaders. ACL is the courage to engage in dialogue, even when it is uncomfortable. The hope is that through this method of leadership, the work of school leaders and those they serve will not only benefit, they will also grow together to create the school community that is needed.

According to Santamaría and Santamaría (2012), ACL has interdisciplinary theoretical foundations, including transformative leadership, critical pedagogy, and CRT.

> In ACL, critical theories function to analyze asymmetrical power relations and inequities in educational contexts to "expose underlying assumptions that serve to

conceal existing power relations" and the way dominant members of societies construct "common sense" practices that result in long-term educational inequities for indigenous learners, other learners of color, their families, and often their communities (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015).

The work of ACL posits that one of the ways that we can honor the experiences of leaders of Color and Indigenous leaders is by acknowledging the ways we lead through both professional best practices and an innovative system of service. Our experiences and positionality are the foundation by which we lead and the reason why our leadership style is applicable and necessary for urban schools (Alston, 2005; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012).

Muhammad Khalifa (2012), noted researcher in the field of educational leadership, conducted a longitudinal ethnographic research study where participants (principals and members of the school community) were interviewed and observed over a two-year period. This study also focused on the ways in which principals build, retain, and sustain trust from and with their school communities. More specifically, what happens when they build and do not build this trust, and how this directly impacts the school community's ability to have trust and rapport with the any element of the school. This is directly related to many things, notably why teachers become and how they are trained to become administrators.

Catherine Marshall and Maricela Olivia (2005) discuss administrator preparation and whether or not some of the essence of what principles for social justice can be taught through a cohesive curriculum. Gerardo López (2003) discussed the ways in which CRTed shows up in leadership practices. He asserts that this type of leadership practice, though it causes tension, needs to be implemented in K–12 educational administration preparation.

While many preparation programs are shifting with the times, it seems that even the most progressive credentialing programs lack a full understanding of what is needed to lead urban schools, regardless of positionality (Bogotch, 2002 ; Cooper, 2009; Dantley & Tillman, 2006). Critical leadership, while not a new practice, embraces many elements of best practices in school leadership while also critically preparing the leader, including leaders of Color, for how they will be perceived by their school community and how to engage in the difficulties that arise due to their positionality, as well as working in communities that have been historically marginalized and intentionally underserved. While BWLs are not the only leaders who experience challenges in their work, it is imperative to explore the reasons behind their challenges, as those may be different that their white women and woman of Color colleagues.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of this work is to further our understanding of the ways in which the intersectional identities and leadership practices of BWLs affect how they view the purpose of their work and experience joy, purpose, and their need for healing. As this is activist research, the research project itself also acts with the goal of attempting to create change for BWLs in the work itself. The hope of this study is that in doing the research, a revolutionary space for the uplifting, support, and celebration of BWLs is also created. This research also aims to explore how BWLs engage healing if and when they are confronted with primary and secondary trauma experiences due to their identity during their work as leaders of urban schools. The main research questions are:

Research Questions

- Research Question #1: How do BWLs define challenges in their works and the harm they may experience?

- Research Question #2: How do BWLs identify or find purpose and joy in their work?

- Research Questions #3: What are the collective and individual needs for healing?

Methodology

There are three main methodologies that I will engage in this research study; critical race methodology (Yosso & Solórzano, 2002), critical auto-ethnography (Camangian et al., 2020; Holman-Jones, 2016) and counterstorytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 200). I will briefly discuss each methodology, followed by explicitly engaging the reader with how these three distinct methodologies are appropriate for my research study.

Critical Race Methodology

Critical race methodology (CRM) calls for research to be explicitly conducted and presented from the perspective of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) as a point of liberation and our ability to transform the narrative of our existence (Yosso & Solórzano, 2002). For this reason, I understand CRM as a container, whereby BIPOC researchers are able to intentionally create sacred spaces for BIPOC participants to share our stories.

The work of Drs. Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso(2002) within CRM is also deeply related to the work of their colleagues, Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2014), and their work on refusal calls for those in research to engage the critical perspective of research—the socio-political, economic, racial, engendered ways in which the participants enter and navigate the world and, through research, refuse to reproduce the many ways that the academy and research institutions push our work to be the exact opposite. These authors also call for those being researched to be understood using their own words. Words that are not rooted in how they're damaged, but rather through the lens of power, intersectionality to best present who they are. Accurately engaging CRM calls for the use of counterstorytelling as the pillar of shifting and (re)constructing a narrative that consists of the perspectives of both the researcher and the data from participants as a counterhegemonic that makes this research critical (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Use of this method, along with interviews, will provide BWLs the space to share each of their cohesive stories and provide space for me to make sense of their thoughts while presenting them (as participants) as whole and not in need of something they do not have the power to provide for themselves.

Critical Auto-Ethnography

Critical auto-ethnography (CAE) is also a liberatory methodology. CAE calls for the researcher to become participant to reflect on the various ways that systems of oppression are at play around and within them, as a means of self and collective liberation (Cann & DeMuelenaere, 2012; Camangian, 2015). As a researcher, and a person who shares various identities with my participants, I wanted to have a space where I could share my story, to not only engage my reflexivity, but also to begin my journey of healing as a BWL. This deliberate (re)telling of my story and willingness to be vulnerable models the purpose of counterstorytelling for the expressed purpose of liberation from the white supremacist value of silence. Just as I asked my participants to be vulnerable in defining and sharing their experiences as school leaders, I must also have the courage to do the same.

Research Design

This critical qualitative research study will utilize semi-structured interviews and compilation of field notes as the main mechanisms for collecting data. Using these research methods will allow for multiple ways to make sense of the varied experiences of Black women school leaders. The decision to engage interviews comes out of the need to bring Black women together, as well as a keen need to understand the experiences of Black woman school leaders over time, and whether these experiences have changed as time has progressed.

Participants

All participants will be recruited through a school district located in Northern California and is in a city that has an extensive legacy of Black freedom fighting (District X). District X is an urban epicenter of both social and political activism. District X has a

sordid history of scrappy politics among district leadership and poor budget management that has included the board of education, which has greatly trickled down to the ways in which schools of historically marginalized youth are served. While there are many progressive initiatives that were created in good faith, a legacy of mismanagement and misappropriation of funds increased turnover of school leadership, teacher attrition, and ever-shifting district initiatives has caused District X to be progressive and thriving in pockets instead of as a whole. District X was selected because I have worked in District X for 8 years and more than anything, I'd like to engage its flaws on a deeper level in service of and for Black women school leaders.

Recruitment of Participants. I worked with district personnel to obtain a list of all BWLs in the district. At the time of this study, there were 12 BWLs within the district. I sent a blanket email to all BWLs who fit the scope of my research (Black/African American, woman-identified, School Leader [Principal, Assistant Principal, Community School Manager]). During my initial recruitment phase, I began to wonder about the experiences of retired BWLs, as there are many still working in District X in various capacities. I contacted the president of the administrator union to request the contact information for all retired BWLs, so as to recruit BWLs from District X. Through engaging the snowball method, I secured four current and four retired BWLs as participants. I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews of retired BWLs to further understand and juxtapose their experiences with the current BWLs. This intergenerational approach to this study is meant to compare and contrast the experiences of BWLs over time, and whether or not their conditions have changed.

Methods

Data Collection

With the permission of each participant through the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board process, data was to be collected using audio recordings and artifacts from each interview. Every interview was audio recorded and transcribed by a third party with a high level of confidentiality and privacy (Robinson, 1999). The decision to engage in semi-structured interviews was due to the need for flexibility for follow up to nuanced experiences.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a three-tiered approach: open coding, thematic analysis, and reflexivity. I began with open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to understand preliminary patterns elevated within the data. Once I understood the patterns that began to arise, I utilized thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Creswell, 2003) to identify, analyze, and connect patterns within and across narratives. I used Nvivo, a useful technological tool, to guide my visual understanding of my data. I engaged reflexivity to focus my analysis on the experiences defined by my participants and not engaging in my own experiential analysis while engaging theirs (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Straus & Corbin, 1990).

Researcher Background

As a Black, Indigenous woman who is an openly queer school leader and doctoral student, I recognize that many would find that my study hits quite close to home. As previously mentioned, this dissertation comes out of my need to not feel alone, and is deeply rooted in BFT, a central tenant of which is reflection of self (Evans-Winters &

Love, 2015). As I research these women, I am aware and mindful of my positionality and how this could show up in my research. Some might call this bias, I call it experience (Dillard, 2000). Because of this, I plan to take field notes after each session to process the interview from my perspective and to think critically about how my own perceptions show up in my interpretations of each interview. Additionally, I plan to bring the data back to the group to have them member check my codes and themes. This dissertation is an ode to all BWLs, to support them along their way of finding self within a broken system, to find each other, and to remember that being whole in whatever you do is all that matters.

Chapter Four: Overview of Findings

Only the BLACK WOMAN can say, "when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed

dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then

and there the whole… race enters with me."

—Anna Julia Cooper, 1892

Introduction

The goal of this research study was to understand how Black women school

leaders who serve in an urban school district define their challenges, name what keeps

them in the work, and gauge their need for healing. Over a period of six months, I

conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of eight Black women; four current

(cBWL) and four retired (rBWL) Black women school leaders from the same school

district. During this time, I was welcomed into their personal space and I listened with

both my heart and my mind to understand each individual participant for who she is, as

well as who we are collectively. I listened intently to each story, with special attention to

the ways each woman told her own story. I found it odd that none of my participants had

ever been asked to tell their story, and I made it my mission to not only hear her, but to

carry her words with great care and immense pride.

In this chapter, I revisit my research questions, outline key findings from my

study as it pertains to my research questions, and review major themes that deepen our

understanding of the experiences of Black women school leaders. I then situate these key

findings and themes in relevant historical and political contexts. These contexts are

critical to setting the stage for the findings chapters that follow.

Research Questions

This study was grounded in three research questions that explored the experiences of BWLs in an urban school district in Northern California. This research study aims to answer the larger question of how BWLs define the promises, challenges, and potential of their work both in and out of schools. The following sub-questions help us further breakdown how the larger question was answered

1. How do BWLs define challenges in their work and the harm they may experience?
2. How do BWLs identify or find purpose and joy in their work?
3. What are the collective and individual needs for healing?

In the table that follows, I outline the research questions, followed by the corresponding themes that arose from the data.

Table 4.1 Research Questions and Corresponding Themes

Research Questions	Corresponding Themes
1. How do BWLs define challenges in their work and the harm they may experience?	Legacy of Resistance
2. How do BWLs identify or find purpose and joy in their work?	Critical Hope
3. What are the collective and individual needs for healing?	Healing Radical Healing

The major themes elevated throughout my data share how my participants demonstrated a legacy of resistance, critical hope, and how they understood their need for healing. In the subsequent chapters, I paint a picture for each participant subgroup through the ways they speak to these major themes of a legacy of resistance, critical hope, and how they discuss their individual and collective needs for healing. In chapter five, I address the experiences of rBWLs. In chapter six, I delve into the experiences of cBWLs. The decision to separate participants according to subgroup comes from the need to share distinctions in the data based on the unique contexts that each group was living and working in. I present their findings in separate chapters because their differing

historical and political context created unique findings in my study. How they viewed and experienced school leadership was radically different, and I provide a full chapter to highlight the findings for each subgroup.

In chapter 7, I include my own experiences as the glue between both major subgroups, as I have so many shared experiences and have recently resigned from District X. I offer my unique analysis using CRM, CAE, and counterstorytelling to elevate the experiences of the participants in my study. The analysis of the data engages the art of counterstorytelling, as defined by CRM (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), to end the pervasive silence around our experiences. The decision to include myself in a findings chapter comes from my desire to share my story, as a researcher who shares the same identity with my participants as a BWL and to share the ways in which my identities as a professional and researcher intersect and have shifted throughout this process. The analysis of current and retired groups will be brought together in the Discussion and Implications section in chapter 8.

Historical and Political Context for Black Women School Leaders

> …she had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not
> anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may well have invented
> herself.
> ---Toni Morrison

In my literature review, I offer a brief background of the history of Black education in the context of urban schooling. In this section, I describe the journey of how Black women took leadership in the fight towards the development of educational institutions for Black people. Despite being shunned from Black spaces for being women and pushed out of spaces dedicated to the cult of domesticity, Black women carved out spaces for themselves to enact a *both/and* mentality (Giddings, 1984). I call this a

both/and mentality because as Black women, we hold intersectional identities that seek to further subjugate us in society, yet we must persevere. For example, we are Black and women, Black women and school leaders. We are not welcomed in most spaces, and despite this, we continue to the legacy of freedom fighting. Given this, I felt the need to delve deeper into the nuances of the historical and political context of the conditions by which Black women became school leaders.

In tracing the historical context of Black participation in public education, it must be noted that before 1860, Black people were legally enslaved and legally perceived as less than human (Giddings, 1984). As mentioned in chapter 2, for Black folx, learning to read and write carried hefty consequences and, when done, was shielded from white slave owners. After the United States Civil War (1861–1865), a period called the Reconstruction Era began and sought do three major things: restore the union, free enslaved Black people, and pass progressive legislation (Anderson, 1988). Simply put, this era was designed to provide not Black people, but Black men with equal rights to vote, own land, and participate in society as full citizens of the newly constructed United States of America (Siddle Walker, 1996). This era lasted nearly a decade and, while it brought about incredible changes to the lives of Black people in their ability to access rights to their person, land, and education, for the second time in history, we see that Black success could not exist without white terror. For example, the design and implementation of the Black Codes was created immediately after the U.S. Civil War to maintain white dominance, both socially and economically (Anderson, 1998). While Radical Reconstruction did away with the Black Codes, after slavery we see the ways in

which federal systemic and structural racism continued to subjugate newly freed Black people.

Among the first actions to establish newfound freedom from slavery, Black people changed their names to reflect a new definition of self and family, and there was the opportunity to learn, openly. Black people organized among themselves to create their schools, as in most states public education systems did not yet exist. They held community fundraisers through community organizations such as churches and Free towns to purchase land or rent buildings to host schools. They also had access to resources from northern abolitionist organizations and the Freedman's Bureau such as funding and military protection to create and sustain primary, secondary, and land-grant schools.

Once Radical Reconstruction produced the 14th and 15th Amendments, along with frustrated white southern democrats abhorring Black access to full citizenship, it ended (Patel, 2019). Again, Black people continued to engage as if they were all each other was all they had. Despite this, specifically in the realm of education, Black men and women were teachers, coordinators, leaders, and community members. Teaching openly and unapologetically continued to transform the Black community; often unacknowledged, are the roles that Black women played in this transformation, as they were the very center of this change. Black women become not just teachers, but leaders and organizers of learning (Giddings, 1984). Black men who sought to bar Black women from the political work of abolition before, during, and after the Reconstruction Era. This forced Black women to organize amongst themselves. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson-Moore (2003), wrote:

Women's nurturing roles as mothers supported their participation in schooling-oriented activism, but these same women often saw schooling in the larger context of citizenship and race pride, thus potentially blurring the boundaries between genedered "rights" and roles in the nineteenth-century Civil Rights Movement. To recognize [B]lack women's involvement in educational reform, it is necessary to see politicized actions beyond the political convention or the demand for the ballot" (Taylor and Wilson-Moore, 2003, p. 98).

There is a long legacy of resistance by Black women in the field of education. Taylor and Wilson-Moore share primary resources that speak directly to Black women's contributions to the field of education as a both/and. The both/and mentality speaks to their intersectionality and their activism.

This quote also illuminates one of the major themes of my dissertation, legacy of resistance; despite a history of not being welcomed or recognized as educational activists, Black women have a long history of creating fugitive spaces for themselves to do the work on behalf of young people (Harney & Moten, 2013). They engaged in this work in direct service of Black youth, often working in schools with few resources. Educationally speaking, from teaching in living rooms to organizing community lunches for their students, they took the learning process of each child seriously and personally. And the field of education continues to be a space where Black women exercise their critical hope.

The following sections show the historical and political contexts that challenged Black women leaders in one urban school district. It is critical to understand their contexts so that we better understand what they were resisting and why they needed critical hope. That is, to better understand their legacy of resistance, we need to understand what they needed to resist. The historical context of the retired and current BWLs are vastly different; while both groups were up against something, they were up

against vastly different challenges and, thus, their resistance took different forms. Given that these participants served as school leaders over the span of several decades, the context of their leadership is quintessential to explore because context, law, and policy matter greatly in mapping out what was possible in their roles of school leadership; thus, what they hoped for—and how they hoped—differed.

Each BWL in my study served as a leader (principal, assistant principal, community school manager) between the late 1980s and 2020s, which is over 30 years of service in an ever-changing field. During their tenure as school leaders, they witnessed various shifts in national, state, county, and district policy, which greatly impacted funding, school discipline, access to the arts, and so much more. For these reasons, these next sections outline key historical and political events and policies that directly affected their autonomy as leaders, the lives of their students—most of whom were BIPOC—and their ability to lead as Black women.

Historical and Political Contexts for Retired Black Women School Leaders

At the national level, during the late 1980s, former president Ronald Reagan was committed to an administration that honored conservatism and upholding racist and inequitable values in nearly all areas of American life, making it nearly impossible for poor and working-class communities to become economically successful (Cook & Polsky, 2005). Under the Reagan administration, policies were introduced that further criminalized communities of Color through the *War on Drugs* and tax reforms like Reganomics, most famously, by cutting federal aid to schools that needed it most. The ramifications of these two policies caused irreversible damage to communities of Color. It was during this era that we see many Black people, in particular Black men, serving

long sentences in jail for petty drug crimes (Nunn, 2002). These racist policies set the

stage for the ways in which the criminal justice and education systems would continue to

villainize BIPOC children (Forman, 2012). It was during this time that the decision to

assign officers to schools that served large populations of BIPOC youth. James Forman

writes,

> Just as Jim Crow defined [B]lacks as inferior, mass imprisonment encourages the larger society to see a subset of the [B]lack population—young [B]lack men in low-income communities—as potential threats. This stigma increases their social and economic marginalization and encourages the routine violation of their rights. Intense police surveillance of black youths becomes accepted practice. Their misbehavior in school is reported to the police and leads to juvenile court. Employers are reluctant to hire them. Thus, even young, low-income [B]lack men who are never arrested or imprisoned endure the consequences of a stigma associated with race" (Forman, 2012, p. 111)

Forman (2012) explicitly connects the policed experiences of Black youth in schools to

racist policies from a different era, that have been reincarnated with an emphasis on

further subjugating Black people's ability to thrive. In this case, policing in schools from

the Regan administration ushered in what we now understand as the school to prison

pipeline (Nelson & Lind, 2015). To better paint the picture of how racism and gendered

racism actively converges in schools, I offer a few relevant statistics from the U.S.

Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, Issue Brief No. 1 on School Discipline,

Restraint, and Seclusion Highlights:

- **Suspension of preschool children, by race/ethnicity and gender (new for 2011–2012 collection):** Black children represent 18% of preschool enrollment, but 48% of preschool children receiving more than one out-of-school suspension; in comparison, white students represent 43% of preschool enrollment but 26% of preschool children receiving more than one out of school suspension. Boys represent 79% of preschool children suspended once and 82% of preschool children suspended multiple times, although boys represent 54% of preschool enrollment.

- **Disproportionately high suspension/expulsion rates for students of Color:** Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than white students. On average, 5% of white students are suspended, compared to 16% of Black students. American Indian and Native-Alaskan students are also disproportionately suspended and expelled, representing less than 1% of the student population but 2% of out-of-school suspensions and 3% of expulsions.

- **Arrests and referrals to law enforcement, by race and disability status:** While Black students represent 16% of student enrollment, they represent 27% of students referred to law enforcement and 31% of students subjected to a school-related arrest. In comparison, white students represent 51% of enrollment, 41% of students referred to law enforcement, and 39% of those arrested. Students with disabilities (served by IDEA) represent a quarter of students arrested and referred to law enforcement, even though they are only 12% of the overall student population.

- **Restraint and seclusion, by disability status and race:** Students with disabilities (served by IDEA) represent 12% of the student population, but 58% of those placed in seclusion or involuntary confinement, and 75% of those physically restrained at school to immobilize them or reduce their ability to move freely. Black students represent 19% of students with disabilities served by IDEA, but 36% of these students who are restrained at school through the use of a mechanical device or equipment designed to restrict their freedom of movement (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).

Simply put, these statistics are alarming and unsettling, yet this is the reality of the experiences of children of Color in our public schools. It is clear that the values of racism and sexism and an implicit bias in national policy continue to permeate public schools and ravage the lives of children of Color. While Reagan was not the first sitting president to institute such racist policies, historians often point to his presidency as the beginning of an era that demonized Black children and robbed them of their parents (Days, 1984). Reagan's successors, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, would continue a neoliberal agenda that sought to further to stratify access to a quality education, by introducing a wave of standardized testing and accountability measures, such as No Child Left Behind

in 2004, which continued to bludgeon urban school districts such as District X (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Smith & Lytle, 2006).

At the state level, during the time the rBWLs were school leaders, California was beginning to understand the consequences of Proposition 13 (Prop. 13), which cut property taxes as a funding source for schools, thus making the state the primary funder of public education (Fischel, 1989). What started as a small protest from wealthy property owners resulted in a catastrophic string of events that completely upended how public schools received funding. For the first time in California's history, the state was responsible for allocating baseline funding to school districts without additional funding from property taxes. Vanessa Rancaño explains this devastating policy change:

> Before Proposition 13, local property taxes were the main source of K–12 funding. California school district had a great deal of autonomy. They had their own tax bases and set their own tax rates. The state guaranteed a base level of funding for each pupil and districts used their local taxes to increase funding to the desired level. On average, local property taxes made up 60% of school funding, while the state kicked in around 30 percent (Racaño, 2018).

Without additional funding from property taxes, low-income districts implemented massive cuts in the arts, music, and extracurricular activities. In fact, Prop 13 resulted in state take-overs of school districts and financial bailouts for districts who needed more than the base funding the state provided (Fischel, 1989).

This change directly impacted school leaders, namely those of urban schools, because they were faced with an impossible task—to provide children with a meaningful educational experience with less and less funding each year. There was little funding for books, art, curriculum for teachers; there was, however. funding to place police officers in schools. In the case of Black women school leaders, Prop 13 set the groundwork for leaders to lead their schools despite uncertainty and without funding.

Parents and community members with children attending schools within District X witnessed the worsening conditions of schools and their educational quality. In 1997, parents and community groups created coalitions to demand that the school board do something about failing schools across the city (Murphy, 2009). This spurred the beginning of the small schools' movement, which lasted until the mid-2000s. The purpose of this movement was to create smaller schools within large campuses to provide more personalized learning opportunities for children. Soon, this movement was funded by major philanthropists, who gave money to create schools, without thinking through the financial and academic sustainability of creating more schools within a district that had already been struggling financially for many years. Many of these organizations put together proposals to effectively divide schools in half and in some cases more than half. Katy Murphy describes,

> In 2000, the board approved a small schools policy that led to the creation of nine new schools in the first three years. From 2003 to 2007, the district closed seven large middle and high schools and at least seven elementary schools— those in the city's poorest neighborhoods—and reopened smaller, themed ones in their place. Teachers and principals had to reapply for their jobs. More than 40 new schools later, [District X] is transformed, at least on the surface. But many of its problems—low test scores, high dropout rates, staff turnover— remain.

Schools were divided and school leaders and teachers were treated disrespectfully in the small schools movement.

The small schools movement greatly impacted the leadership experiences and ability to lead in District X. In 2009, researchers from Stanford University conducted a study to measure the effectiveness of the small schools movement in District X. They focused on 7 of the 49 small schools created from this movement that were situated in the most diverse neighborhoods in the city (Vasudeva et al., 2009). They found that many of

the schools ended up closing within the first few years. In fact, less than five of the schools from this movement still exist (Murphy, 2009). The movement was unsuccessful and thoroughly drained valuable resources from District X. In 2008, District X went into state receivership due to the crumbling of its fiscal vitality, and it remains in receivership today (Vasudeva et al., 2009). Effectively, the state of California remains directly involved in all major fiscal decision-making and maintains the authority to make decisions with or without the collaboration of District X leadership.

The leadership of the participants in my study was impacted by these policies. The context of District X during the time that my retired participants were in school leadership, because of their working conditions, looked very different than my cBWL participants. The types of funding, autonomy over their schools, and overall structure of District X was heavily impacted by political upheaval, including massive budget cuts that resulted in forced retirement. Despite the national, state, and local contexts, the rBWLs continued to serve their school communities with all they had. They tapped into their legacy of resistance and leaned into critical hope to fortify their purpose and actively seek healing.

Historical and Political Contexts for Current Black Women School Leaders

My cBWLs are a unique group, ages range from 40–50 years old. They have been in service to the district for 20–24 years. All participants in this subgroup began working in District X in the late 1990s. While the War on Drugs, Prop 13 and the small schools movement were still very much relevant to their work, there were additional contexts that further complicated their work.

Educational reform policies in the 1990s were influenced by a growing national obsession with high stakes testing and calls for increased accountability. Clinton reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1994. Though the purpose of its reauthorization was to provide more federal funding to school districts with high concentrations of students with low socio-economic backgrounds (Darling-Hammond, 2007), ESEA also emphasized teacher training, student achievement, and standards-based testing. While this act sought to improve outcomes for students who comes from historically marginalized backgrounds by providing funding for new books and trainings for school officials, it also began to hit schools with standardized testing in a way that they hadn't been before. The next novel federal policy would send achievement-based assessments to the next level, causing student achievement to be tied to teacher and leader efficacy.

In 2004, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), was passed under the Bush administration. NCLB sought to align all curriculum and funding in public schools to national standards for the purposes of equity and access for all children. Additionally, NCLB held schools accountable for ensuring that these standards were implemented and that all students achieved—as measured by test scores—under these new standards. When these goals were not met, regardless of resources available to schools to meet these goals, schools were threatened with closures. Linda Darling-Hammond writes,

> In 2002, civil rights advocates praised NCLB for its emphasis on improving education for students of color, those living in poverty, new English learners, and students with disabilities. NCLB aims to raise achievement and close the achievement gap by setting annual test-score targets for subgroups of students, based on a goal of "100 percent proficiency" by 2014. These targets are tied to school sanctions that can lead to school reconstitutions or closures, as well as requirements for student transfers.

This policy proved to be a challenge for District X and, as Darling-Hammond noted, for most urban schools, the policy "paradoxically, reduce[s] access to education for the most vulnerable students," including those in District X (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Barack Obama also passed legislation regarding education, Race to the Top, in 2010. This policy encouraged school states and school districts to design new learning plans for students to that would directly impact education reform and school improvement (McGuinn, 2011). Obama's plan was to circumvent traditional streams of funding by pushing states to shift their district-based policies to improve student and teacher performance by creating innovative and collective responses to district and state-based issues. This legislation also sought adoption of the Common Core State Standards, a set of national standards developed to align what is taught across the country. Race to the Top was initially widely praised. However, like ESEA and NCLB, it did not fix the fundamental issue of funding inequities. In fact, many speculate ESEA, NCLB, and Race to the Top further plummeting school districts into educational debt. The cBWLs in this study began and continue their leadership careers in the shadows of these three federal initiatives.

Due in part to these federal policies and the legacies of Prop 13, in 2003, District X went into state receivership (Gill et al., 2019). According to Gill et al., the state of California assumed full responsibility of the school district's spending, due the need of a $100 million bailout, the largest ever bailout for education in California's history. School leaders no longer had the autonomy they once had to make decisions for their schools, such as, school budgets. This led to numerous school closures and disruptions. For example, large comprehensive high schools that had been separated into small schools

were forced to reform as comprehensive high schools once again and come back together after spending time as autonomous small schools.

At the start of this research project, though, a new funding scheme was to go into effect in California. Though the current Black school leaders could not speak to its effect yet, it is important to note that in 2020–2021, a new funding formula was to go into effect with the goal of providing equitable funding across the state of California.

The current Black school leaders in my study were impacted by these policies. Specifically in District X, there was an increase in charter schools, which not only caused tension through the vying for students to fill seats, but charters also had access to the same funding. Another way that cBWLs were impacted by federal policy was through the welcoming of Common Core State Standards, a set of standards which seeks to align the learning of students across the country by grade level and discipline (California Department of Education, 2020). Adopting these standards greatly shifted teacher and leader autonomy over curriculum and instruction.

Despite the national, state, and local contexts, the cBWLs have continued to serve their communities through moments of resistance, being aware of their purpose and joy, and through beginning to gauge their needs of healing.

Conclusion

National policies such as the War on Drugs and educational reform measures such as ESEA, NCLB, and Race to the Top continue to miss the mark in providing access to high-quality, culturally rich and differentiated learning experiences for youth in schools. This missed mark continues to plague students of Color in urban public schools, leaving them with high levels of what Gloria Ladson-Billings calls educational debt (Ladson-

Billings, 2006). Instead of referring to lack of quality learning experiences as achievement gaps, in short, Ladson-Billings argues "that the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have create an educational debt" (p. 5).

The rBWLs witnessed the continued creation of the educational debt for Black, Indigenous and children of Color, due to the War on Drugs, Prop 13 and the small schools movement. I argue that society's values converge in schools and we see clearly from these policies that society does not value its racialized youth. This is most evident in urban public schools such as District X in the way they are over-surveilled, underfunded, and then dismantled (Anderson, 1988; Delpit, 1995). As we will see in the next chapter, this context had a drastic effect on the ability of rBWLs to do their work. They were given less and less and expected to do more and more; in fact, at one point, one of the rBWLs was expected to lead two school simultaneously, and to do so without greater compensation. Despite the continued attacks on education, youth and their careers, however, they committed their lives to ensuring that students of Color still had access to a quality educational experience. They resisted every attack on their schools with everything they had while maintaining critical hope.

The participants in the cBWL subgroup all entered leadership at different times, though they are all between their late 30s and early 50s. Three of the four participants held teaching roles from the late 1990s until the early 2000s, when they shifted into school leader roles. Within this subgroup, there are two principals, Angela, who is finishing her second year in the role at the middle school level, and Sharon, who is in her seventh year as a large comprehensive high school. Ms. Smith is the lone assistant

principal of the subgroup, and Lyndsie is a community schools manager, an administrative position entailing management of all community partnerships and socio-emotional supports for her school site.

This subgroup of women all served as teachers or college mentors before the small schools movement in the late 1990s and transitioned to school leadership during the decline of this movement in the 2010s. I share this piece of institutional knowledge because this is what led this subgroup to have the exact opposite district experience of rBWLs, resulting in less autonomy in decision making and more direct supervision of budgetary process with less direct leadership support such as leadership coaching and collectivity, as with the ability to locate and create informal working groups, among school leaders as a group.

In the coming chapters, I will further paint a picture of each participant subgroup through the ways they speak to my major themes of how they demonstrate a legacy of resistance, critical hope, and discussion of their individual and collective needs for healing. In chapter 5, I address the experiences of rBWLs. In chapter 6, I delve into the experiences of cBWLs, and in chapter 7, I include my own experiences.

There are four beautiful and brilliant rBWLs who served as participants in this subgroup and led schools prior to the small schools movement and retired during its height or at its end. Each participant was gracious enough to welcome me in their homes and share their stories with me—for this, I am eternally grateful. While interviewing each of these women, I was immediately transported to a time I'd never known existed in District X. Each participant in this subgroup served as a teacher and teacher-leader for more than 10 years before transitioning into administration. They as a subgroup also

spent an average of 35 years serving in District X. This caveat is important because it further paints a picture of their expansive institutional knowledge of District X, and also deeply informs their commitment to educational leadership.

Chapter Five: Retired Black Women School Leaders

There were four gracious rBWLs in this subgroup. I would first like to thank them for allowing me into their homes and trusting me with sharing their beauty and vulnerability of their stories. Spending time with these women while pregnant and in the process of healing slowly but surely guided me back to myself and reminded me why I matter. I am intentionally thanking my participants before I share their experiences because I am deeply grateful and humbled to be trusted with such stories. This is my resistance, my direct disruption of how data is "supposed" to be written, analyzed, and presented to readers. I will not further marginalize my participants by saving my gratitude until the end of my dissertation. I will thank them first because they are the living giants of whose shoulders I stand. Because of them, I am.

Participant Descriptions

Granny Washington, a Northern California native, served District X for 55 years as a teacher, instructional coach, and principal at both the elementary and middle school levels. Granny Washington is a "sharpshooter," who never minces her words. Granny Washington is someone I have personally and professionally looked up to since I met her in 2013, during my first year of teaching. She was placed at my school as a substitute administrator, after my principal and assistant principal, both Black women, had been fired in the middle of the school year. She eased my fears and offered much support as I found my way, both as a new teacher and in life. Her nature of leadership, as well as her ability to keep students first, are inspirational. She continues to be a mentor to me and many others in her work as a substitute administrator in District X.

Ms. Kelly is a spunky 5 foot and 1 and ¾ inch tall 80-year-old Black woman who is full of joy and a desire to continue learning and she loves to garden. She's from Texas and carries a contagious Southern charm in the way she speaks about her work with children. She believes that genuine care comes from relationships and accountability. It is evident that in all her time working in District X, she regrets nothing, and she still seeks to give the children she volunteers with everything. I have had the pleasure of knowing Ms. Kelly for one year, and I seek to learn more from her, still. She has worked in all grade K–12 levels as a teacher, and vice principal for 45 years in District X. Ms. Kelly's level of care, along with her innovation, will never age because her focus is on making schools a safe place for kids to take risks and thrive.

Catherine G. is a well-traveled 72-year-old Black woman who is now a firm believer in self-care as a means for survival. She served District X for 25 years, 13 of those as an elementary school principal. Her main belief as a school leader was to, "build a community of leaders," so everyone could see themselves reflected in the school—its low and its high points. I was connected to Catherine G. through Granny Washington, as they have been friends for decades. Catherine G. has served as a coach to new school leaders and is currently serving as substitute administrator in various school districts. During her interview, I found so many commonalities between her and myself. I look forward to maintaining a relationship with her and cultivating my boundaries for self-care.

Yvette is a 65-year-old Black woman who recently retired from District X as a district administrator who served as a middle school teacher, vice principal, and principal at the same school over the course of 15 years. She served District X for a total of 20 years. She is credited with transforming this school into what is consistently one of the highest performing schools in District X. In my early years of becoming a school leader, she became my mentor. She taught me a great deal about myself and how to survive in District X. She is currently a coach to new school leaders in various school districts in Northern California.

In this chapter, I will share how these rBWLs demonstrated their legacy of resistance, critical hope, and how healing has been a part of their respective journeys. This chapter is divided into three sections, each covering one of these three major themes that arose in the data. My rBWLs participants demonstrated these themes in the data differently than the cBWL participants in this study.

Legacy of Resistance

I define legacy of resistance as the strategic application of the collective wisdom and freedom fighting of their parents, grandparents, and ancestors to their work as educational leaders. There were direct links between their leadership stories and the journeys of how both their close family members and their ancestors engaged activism in their own communities. The parents and grandparents of my retired participants saw their jobs as parents and educators as extensions of their activism. This theme was heavily prevalent in the data and in the literature surrounding the work of Black women,

specifically in relation to freedom fighting (Taylor, 2012; Carruthers, 2018; Love, 2019).

The rBWLs demonstrated this through collectivity and self-advocacy, despite gendered

racism. They created fugitive spaces among themselves to collectivize knowledge and

find the power and strength to speak up for themselves when they were mistreated or

discriminated against. Collectivity and self-advocacy were the ways that further

described how the rBWL legacy of resistance is consistent with traditional notions of

how Black educators have organized on behalf of educational access and resources since

the Reconstruction Era (Anderson, 1988).

As each rBWL shared her leadership story, she referred to her family and how

they helped shaped the educator that she became. This legacy of resistance directly

informed her practice as a leader. Granny Washington, Ms. Kelly, Catherine G., and

Yvette all specifically called on the names of a parent or grandparent while they told their

leadership stories, defined their challenges, how they persisted, and how they refused to

succumb to challenges or bow out when things became difficult. Ms. Kelly grew up in

rural Texas. She comes from a family of educators and her father was a teacher, principal,

and superintendent in their part of the state. She worked with him from a young age and

became an educator because she saw the power of education for Black folx in the South.

Granny Washington shared,

> All that I am I owe to my grandmother. She was a very strong woman. And I think I got a
> lot of that because a lot of times my family would say, "you sound just like your grandmother." She didn't take no crap off of nobody. She didn't care who it was. And, I saw that growing up under her, saw how she handled things, and you know, and she was very strong you know?... I got this from my grandmother who raised me, is that if you feel you are right, you have to stand your ground.

Granny learned a great deal from her grandmother, most notably to stand her ground.

This was a particularly beneficial trait in multiple situations she faced, further discussed

later in this chapter. Granny Washington's explicit naming of how her grandmother

raised her, and this continued belief in what she was taught, are a pure example of how

she continued her grandmother's legacy in her life and work.

Catherine G. also detailed two foundational experiences from her mother that

prepared her early in life for what she would encounter in life as a Black woman.

Catherine G. said,

> I connected those dots, and what happened to me growing up in San Francisco.
> Not being able to be a Brownie at the school I was at because they didn't let
> [B]lack girls in. So my mother started her own Brownie troop. You know, she
> was always my example. You don't let these things stop you, you just keep
> moving forward. That's just her personality; when she was alive, she was always
> fightin' for one thing or another. It's in our blood. She doesn't, you know, you
> don't accept the status quo. My mother was PTA president for the entire time I
> was in elementary school because she wanted to determine that we would, we
> were going to be treated fairly. And when we got to high school and had to take
> swimming in the morning, and this was before natural hair, and the vice principal
> wouldn't allow us to wear head scarves, my mother said, "I'll take you to the
> Board of Education. You don't understand what this does to these girls." My
> mother was before her time, but she was perfect for me.

Catherine G. cites multiple examples of how her mother enacted resistance. Specifically,

resistance to the gendered racist roadblocks impeding the ability of her children, and of

other Black children, to thrive in school. She took a more active role in Catherine G.'s

schooling because she understood very clearly that she wasn't just standing up for her

children, but for other people's children as well.

It is clear from these stories that these women learned a great deal about

resistance in the field of education from their family members, and it is evident in their

ability to engage self-advocacy as a central part of their resistance in their careers as leaders.

Self-advocacy Despite Gendered Racism

Each example presented is a complex story that clearly delineates the experiences of rBWLs with gendered racism. The purpose of sharing these particular stories is not to share what might be considered to be what had gone wrong in each rBWLs career, but to share how they resisted and advocated for themselves instead of merely accepting the scraps presented to them. Black women have a legacy of resisting, even when the consequences of pushing back against systems of oppression could present personal or professional consequences. It is important to note that the following counterstories were told with the understanding that they were not victims. They shared these stories from a place of wisdom after many years of deep reflection. These incidents happened to them, but they did not define them.

Granny Washington, the eldest rBWL, recalls an incident when she was principal where an unhappy Black mother wanted her twins in the same 2nd grade classroom after witnessing poor teaching practice in the classroom of one of her children. Granny Washington and the parent had several meetings where class balancing, equity of decision-making, separate learning spaces for siblings, and teacher support were discussed. After many meetings and discussions, the parent was still unhappy and decided to contact her supervisor, the network executive officer (NEXO), a white woman. Granny Washington shares,

> So one day she called me, and invited me to lunch, this supervisor. And we had lunch, and she asked me, "Have you ever thought about working in another position like maybe a VP [vice principal] at a school, or something?" And I said, "What are you getting at? Are you trying to say you want to move me from my

school because of this parent's insistence on moving her kids?" And I said, "I'm not going anywhere. I am staying at my school." I called for a meeting. So it was the union rep, superintendent, associate superintendent of the boss, my immediate boss. I told her, "You, you cannot judge me on [this] parents' dissatisfaction with what I have done." I have 350 parents' kids at my school. I can bring in 200 plus parents to say just the opposite of this one parent. This one parent is not going to make a decision of whether or not I will be a principal.

Granny Washington stood up for herself and refused to be passive aggressively bullied into a demotion at the insistence of her supervisor. Rather than the NEXO having a three-way conversation with Granny Washington and the parent, she opted to move towards demotion, something that mostly likely would not have happened with a white woman, or a leader who was a man. Given this, Granny Washington pushed back and called a meeting with the superintendent that included the presence of union representation. During this conversation, Granny asserted herself and named the unprofessional behavior of her supervisor.

In terms of how race and gender played out between the Black mother and Granny Washington as Black women, they were both advocating to be heard, and for action around better treatment for themselves or their children, so they can have their best chance. Granny Washington shared that she did not take the incident personally and that they both had their roles to play, one as a parent and one as a school leader. What makes Granny Washington's resistance so powerful is that she was able to hold true to her beliefs about equity and celebrate the fact that the Black mother was also advocating for her children, as she is supposed to. Instead of using this moment to be angry with the Black mother, Granny Washington was able to see that her white supervisor was actually attempting to pit both Black women against each other, and whether this was intentional or unintentional, it happened. Granny Washington did not take the bait because her work

as a school leader was not about ego, it was about service. Granny had provided the best possible equity-centered service, and instead of being supported by her supervisor, the supervisor manipulated the situation and did not expect to be called out for her behavior. The act of scheduling the meeting to air out her grievances in front of her supervisor, union representative, and the superintendent was one of great risk.

Granny Washington was steadfast in the quality of her work and knew she had a right to stand up for herself. She demonstrated that Black women have a right to stand up for themselves, and there should never be any risk in this—and yet there is always risk. Risk of not being seen as a team player and risk of being perceived of as pushy or aggressive. For Granny, her self-advocacy is deeply rooted in what she had been taught by her grandmother, and she was determined to be assert her intelligence, professionalism, and equity-driven leadership practices. The outcome of this situation was that the Black mother advocated for her Black children to be moved to another school, which is what happened. Granny stood up for herself, just as her grandmother taught her. This resistance resulted in the reassignment of her supervisor.

Granny Washington shared a great deal about her experiences as a teacher, teacher-leader, and school leader in District X. She shared that in the late 1990s, due to budget cuts, she and five other Black leaders were asked to assume the responsibility of principal of two schools, simultaneously, for one school year. She shared about this experience with relative ease, stating , "I had two great staffs," but went on to tell how no event hurt her more than being part of a group of educators who were pushed to retire because they had been in the district longer than 20 years and were of great financial strain to the district during a budget crisis in the early 2000s. Granny Washington shared,

He [superintendent] sent out letters to 20 principals, and most of them were African American principals that had been in the district forever, including me. And so they wanted to either put us back in the classroom, or you could retire. Well they didn't say you could retire, or you could leave. I met with the superintendent, and we sat down, and I, and I said, "Can you tell me exactly why it is that you feel that you want me to go back in the classroom, or you know, or not be a principal at a school?" And according to law, the only thing the superintendent has to say is, "They have no confidence in your ability as a principal." And that was, that was it. It was so hurtful to me. I went to crying. I was like, "You're kidding me." I had been in this district forever, and you're telling me after 10 years as a principal that there's, there's no confidence in me?"

So he said, "Well you can go back in the classroom, or you can retire." So I said, "Well I'm not going back in the classroom." I said, "So I'll put in for my retirement." [The superintended said] "Don't tell your parents, or your staff, or anybody about this." I looked at him, and I said, "You're kidding me." I went straight and told my parents, and I told my PTA, and my teachers. And they were like, "Oh my god." So they started writing letters. They started making phone calls. But it didn't do any good.

This experience exhibits pure disrespect, unprofessionalism, and an attempt to silence Granny Washington. She was pushed out of her role for racist, political, and financial reasons, not because of a lack of effectiveness. The superintendent expected her to go quietly, but she didn't. While her school community showed up for her and voiced their concerns about this forced retirement, their efforts were unsuccessful. I want to name that the most interesting part of this narrative as the fact that Granny found being principal of two schools easier than being forced out of a job she loved dearly.

Similarly, Catherine G. shared am incident about becoming the principal of an elementary school that served primarily Black and Asian American students. She was told that a school board member, who later became mayor of the city, was very unhappy about the fact that the Asian American candidate for principal was not selected. In response, this school board member began using tactics of passive aggressive bullying in an effort to push Catherine G. out of her job. Catherine G. shared that the board member,

would sit out in front of the school every morning for two weeks when I first started. I mean, it was just, you know, those kinds of things. But I decided I would just, I had dealt with this stuff, since I grew up in San Francisco, and watched how my mother dealt with what she called the "racism under the rug." It's a part of life and I got a job to do. I don't think it harmed me, it just kind of kept my eyes open. I also knew that, when I first got my job as a principalship, I couldn't call my NEXO. You couldn't call them often for help, because if you called them for help then they would assume you couldn't do the job. And the next thing you knew, they'd be recommending that you didn't have the job.

In all three of these examples, we see abuses of power and insidious attempts to unnerve Granny Washington and Catherine G. by a school board member and a superintendent. In these stories, we see both participants navigating incidents of gendered racism by their supervisors. Instead of cowering in response to what had been done to them, they stood erect and pushed back against unfair practices. Catherine G. and Granny Washington defined and rationalized that each event took place because they were Black women and had they been white women or men, these things would not have happened to them.

Collectivity

Collectivity was necessary for rBWLs. Unlike their white leader peers, they did not have the luxury of challenging policy outright or getting any official support, because showing a need for support during principal meetings could become a political problem and somehow indicate "that you couldn't do the job." Granny and Catherine G. shared that they'd created an informal support group of made up entirely of Black women school leaders in the district, which served as the first line of support. These Black women were able to create a fugitive space to further their practice and humanize each other in the work, as mothers, wives, sisters, and friends (Harney & Moten, 2013). Through these spaces, they learned the political dance of District X and were able to help each other two-step through it, using their respective strengths. This space was also necessary for

rBWLs to be able to sharpen their tools to become the best leaders they could possibly be, especially because, as mentioned by Catherine G., "asking for help was not a safe thing to do."

Granny Washington, Catherine G., Yvette, and Ms. Kelly all created informal working groups and communities of Black school leaders at some point during their careers as school leaders. These groups sought to serve as a safe space for these leaders to be themselves, get support, and as thought-partners to process complex tasks. We see both Catherine G. and Granny Washington, along with the other rBWLs, create informal groups of Black principals to create space for meaning making of the role, shop talk, support with growth areas, and to build community.

Granny Washington and Catherine G. met in one of these informal groups for BWLs and became life-long friends and confidants. Granny Washington shared,

> When you needed help with something, you made alliances with people you knew. And in principal meetings you were always aware of those principals who were more knowledgeable about things. I happened to be in a group of women, like I said, [Catherine G.] was very good with budgets. May was very good with organization. You know? So it was like, you know in our group we had like a little group of us. And it was all Black women.

Catherine G. said,

> I think the plus of that is that, you know, leadership is lonely. And [District X] doesn't have schools, at least they didn't at the time, where there were a lot of assistant principals, so you didn't have anybody else that you could bounce ideas off of. So the plus was to have a group of women where you could bounce ideas off, or you could even talk about something serious that you're dealing with at your school, and [Granny Washington] was a principal before me so she had some experience that I didn't have—you know? June and I became principals at the same time. We all were at different levels, and they had different kinds of experience in dealing with different kinds of schools.

Yvette also shared,

Interestingly enough, my more intentional relationships are with two [Black] men administrators who I went through credentialing program with, and we go to dinner every three or fourth months. And we've been doing that for 19 years. You know, just that it is important to have someone you can talk to that you trust. Hopefully you can always do that with your family but having a professional colleague is better but you gotta make sure you can trust them.

The rBWLs in my study learned to trust and thoroughly lean on each other because they truly understood that all they had was *each other*. The power of collectivity is that they created a space where they could be themselves and be successful, and they could do that separately by doing it together. There was no space for competitivity because they understood that being together was better and safer than being alone in this work. Also, when one fellow BWL was successful and remained in the work, it was a win for them all. Being a school leader can be incredible lonely and isolating work. There's only so much that can be shared with a significant other or friend who is not in the same profession because no one fully understands the work of school leadership unless they've done it or are in it. Each Black woman had something to offer and was an expert in a skill that others needed support in. The creation of this fugitive space was more than a time to be themselves, it was also a space for collective learning. These women were committed to their informal groups because it was a community, a fugitive space where they were able to share knowledge and support each other in the journey of successful school leadership; after all, they were not receiving consistent or meaningful support from the district.

Critical Hope

I understand critical hope just as I view faith. My paternal grandmother, Virginia, always tells me, "Whitneé, if you wanna see something happen, you can't just want it,

you gotta pray and act." I believe my participants have done just that—melded faith with action. Given this, it was serendipitous that critical hope was elevated as a major finding in my dissertation. Dr. Jeff Duncan-Andrade, noted scholar-activist and school leader, wrote a piece after the presidential inauguration of Barak Obama, stating that as people of Color working with youth who have been historically marginalized, we must have critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). He describes the dangers of hope that lacks criticality and reality, such as hokey hope, mythical hope, and hope deferred. These types of hope do not take the world as it is, they merely look on the bright side, through rose colored glasses, with intentions but no critical action. Specifically, he details that critical hope is comprised of the ability to prepare students to navigate the world around them as a means to control what they can (material hope), painful self-reflection about how one's place in the systems and structures of oppression around (Socratic hope), and the ability to have hope despite so many of the ways that negativity is reproduced in the lives of the students we serve (audacious hope). Material hope, Socratic hope and audacious hope seek to stand in the reality of what is, and to prepare students for what will inevitably come due to their positionality and the world we live in. Critical hope is not surviving, but it is also not thriving because, after all, what does it mean to thrive as a BWL in an oppressive system?

I want to be clear that critical hope does not mean there is an absence of joy or happiness. Being a Black woman serving BIPOC youth in an urban school is not about happiness. It is about purpose. Sure, there are moments of joy, but they are often fleeting. My rBWL participants did not discuss happiness in the traditional sense, but rather a contentment and sense of duty with knowing that they were using their lives to be the

change. This doesn't mean that they were not happy. They experienced joy in their service but more important was their ability to directly participate, to in some ways have direct control over learning outcomes, and to prepare students who have been historically and systemically marginalized for the world. This finding was consistent across both subgroups.

Unapologetically Equity-Centered Leadership

This ability to be unapologetically equity-centered in their leadership and communicate expectations on behalf of BIPOC youth created the foundation for how they exhibited critical hope in their work as leaders and why they stayed in the work as long as they did.

Yvette became the principal at the middle school where she had once been a teacher and assistant principal. During her tenure as a teacher, she was a math teacher who was passionate about preparing students for the increasingly difficult math classes in high school and, later, in college. She would often cite the fact that when students aren't exposed to Algebra 1 during middle school, the likelihood was that they would not be eligible to apply to 4-year institutions, or even to graduate, and she was correct (Cruz v. State of California, 2014). In 2014, the *Cruz v. California* case was brought against the California Department of Education by concerned community members because it was found that high school students, namely students of Color, had not been given access to meaningful instructional courses that would prepare them for post-secondary education. Specifically, the students in this case had been given blocks of time during the school day where they had no classes at all and were also not on track to graduate. Yvette had this concern as a math teacher, more than seven years before this case was brought against the state of California. As a teacher, she urged a change to the math curriculum and was not

heard. When she became principal, she changed her tune, but kept the same song.

Instead, she centered graduation data, and when her math teachers still didn't make the

changes, because she was principal, she was able to change the math master schedule.

Yvette had the foresight to enact change that addressed this math preparation issue more

than five years before the lawsuit was brought against the state. Yvette shared,

> I had a lot of flak for that because, and I told them it is better for them to fail
> Algebra than to get an A in Math 8 and not even have ever been exposed to the
> concepts. So that really was what fueled my desires. That equity issue and
> understanding that you can be an influencer as a teacher, but you can't be a change
> agent as a teacher as much as you can as a leader, simply because you have the
> authority to make decisions. Okay. Now it's not that teacher leaders aren't
> important and it's not that you don't need the buy-in but it's the educational leader
> who sets the expectations, who sets the framework. But it doesn't come with just
> walking in the door and saying this is how we're going to do it. It involved, "What
> do I need to do as a leader?"

This quote from Yvette is so powerful because she is thinking about BIPOC youth's

ability to access math courses in high school that would both aide their ability to graduate

from high school, but also prepare them to apply to the University of California and

California State University college systems (University of California, n.d.). In the state of

California, there are a set of standards called, A-G Requirements that drive the high

school learning process to prepare high school students to attend college (University of

California, n.d.). For example, if a student did not take an Algebra 1 course before their

9th grade year, they would be less likely to complete Statistics or Algebra II, and both are

necessary for graduation and for college applications. This lack of math exposure before

high school greatly impacts BIPOC students, and it contributes to push-out rates (Cruz v.

State of California, 2014). No matter how many times she told her staff this as a teacher

and math department chair, they were stuck in their old-school mindsets and unwilling to

change. When she became principal, she made the change and pushed her staff to think

about the lack of equity head-on. She used her positional authority to enact the type of change she believed would contribute to provide educational access as much as she possibly could, even beyond her school. This is an example of unapologetic and equity-centered leadership because Yvette knew what was necessary to increase student access, and made it happen despite the pushback she received from her staff. This type of leadership stance requires leaders to have forethought, and to ask and attempt to answer difficult questions and take action.

Ms. Kelly shares a story about holding high expectations for students, regardless of the stakes, because they will always rise to the occasion. She shared a story about her favorite student-athlete.

> I only had to walk out on the field one time in [the city of Olympia], I was a teacher at [Main High School], and said, "If you don't get my assignment, you're not gonna play that game and you have to turn it in." Coach called him, saw me on the field, "Ms. Kelly, where are you going?" [Ms. Kelly responded] "On the field. If you don't get him off, I will get him off because he didn't do what you say and you will forfeit this game because your player won't have a 2.0." So, [the mother said,] "My child was the star quarterback," and I said, "[he] has to get my assignment Econ, 'cause if you don't pass Econ, you will not graduate from high school."

Ms. Kelly went on to share how the mother and coach pleaded with her because he had a full-ride football scholarship, but she would not let up until he completed his assignments. Ms. Kelly shared that this student pulled it together to complete his assignments and on more than one occasion has shared that he was grateful for this experience. Everyone else believed that Ms. Kelly held his future in her hands, when in reality she believed it was the student who held his future in his own hands—he just needed to be reminded of what it stood in front of him and how to reach it. The lesson here is about the communication of expectations, centering student needs, and pushing

Black students to expect both from teachers and staff, at all times. This is yet another

example of unapologetic equity-centered leadership because Ms. Kelly actively took

steps for her student to engage his own sense of agency and self-efficacy. While this

student, a young Black man, is a participant in a system that was designed to fail him,

Ms. Kelly stepped up and reminded him of the power he actually did have and the way to

access that power was to complete his assignment.

Catherine G. shared the following example,

> I remember I had a little girl whose mother was strung out on crack. And she was a smart child, but she wasn't doing, working to her potential. So I sat with her, she was in the fifth grade, and I talked to her in my office, and I said, "I know you can do so much better. You're not." I said, "Look at these, the scores where your classmates are, and look at where you are. You can do so much better." So I ran into that young woman, she must have been in high school. She said, "[Ms. Catherine G.], do you remember me?" I said, "I remember your face." She gave me her name. I said, "Oh, wow. I do remember you." I said, "How are you doing?" She says, "I have a 4.0 in high school, I'm getting ready to graduate." And I said, "And how is your mother?" And she said, "She died." That's why I stayed. When I think about that child, I get teary now.

This example is salient because it illustrates what happens when a leader cares

enough to check-in with students who are struggling and to have the capacity to hold

space for them. This is only possible when a leader has relationships with their students,

and their students know they care (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015). Catherine G., a

Black woman, was able to have a thoughtful conversation with this young Black girl to

let her know, "I see you and you matter to me." This moment was powerful because

Black and Latinx youth are not given this level of humanization where educators and

school leaders reach out to find out what is happening in a child's life (Freire, 1970).

Instead of suspending the young girl, Catherine G. simply had a conversation with her,

found commonality in their shared identities, and acknowledged the situation that she was going through. This simple act of humanization changed this child's life.

Critical hope is more than just not giving up. Critical hope is the melding of strategic action and love to further protect and prepare youth of Color for the world. As a Black woman, Catherine G. was intimately aware of the way that the world was going to treat this child and rather than allowing her to be sucked into a pattern of predictability, she immediately took action to interrupt it. Many years later, she ran into this same young girl and she had a 4.0 grade point average. The young Black woman cited her conversation with Catherine G. as one of the reasons she had not given up and was committed to her own success. Unfortunately, not all stories end like this. Some end in student death or further disenfranchisement. Because of this, Catherine G. refers to this experience as the reason why she remained in the work as long as she did. This is also an example of how the purpose of our work comes full circle to remind us why we are committed to freedom fighting in the field of educational leadership. This form of critical hope lies within the action to transform the teaching, learning, and community conditions for learning in our schools.

Catherine G. shared another example of action in relation to addressing equity concerns on her campus. She noticed that many of her Black students were being sent out of class for the same behaviors her Asian American students exhibited. She was not afraid to tell teachers, "You know, maybe this is not the profession for you." On the staff level,

> I suggested that we read a book and to have book discussions. So we read Other People's Children, and we would have book discussions. And then the staff suggested that we have training. That we bring in an outside person to do some training on equity. And you know, some of the training can be very

uncomfortable, because people have to deal with their deep-down beliefs about other people. But it was a step forward for the staff. Did it change everything? No. But it was a step forward. And it kind of put it out there in the open for people to have to grapple with.

These examples are direct demonstrations of critical hope because Yvette, Ms. Kelly, and Catherine G. operated as Black women teachers and leaders from the space of service, demonstrating Socratic hope; they approached their respective situations knowing what it took to prepare their students for the future, showing material hope; and they used audacious hope as they made leadership decisions based on equity that would directly impact their young people (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015).

Continued Volunteering In Education

Each rBWL is also still working in the field of education in some capacity, and not because they have to. They are working as substitute principals, volunteering in elementary school classrooms, and coaching new leaders. This continued work in education is also a clear definition of critical hope because they have not given up. They still see themselves as part of the solution to making classrooms and schools a safe place for students of Color to learn.

Healing

In a marked divergence from my other subgroup, I found that rBWLs had several years to reflect on their time as school leaders. When asked the question about healing, three of the four rBWLs claimed they had something to heal from, while one, Yvette, merely felt exhausted, yet still described a process of healing. For this reason, I submit that healing in this context refers to space, self-care, and reflection, which all participants agreed they needed at some point during their leadership careers. In this broad definition, all participants across both subgroups needed and engaged in some form of healing.

Granny Washington asserts that she needed to heal from specific situations, and that

redemption helped her access healing faster than forgiveness. After she was forced to

retire, the same superintendent who pushed her to retire called her personally to request

her services as a sub principal. Shortly after she agreed to fulfill this sub-principalship

role (in yet another struggling school in District X), she received a certificate of

achievement from a state representative for her school's significant academic

improvement. She shared,

> I felt really sad, but I knew my own worth. And I knew that he could not define me, or take away who I was and what I accomplished. And so, I went back to the old things, it's not about me, and it's not about you, it's about the kids. And that's why I continued, because it was about the kids, especially African American kids. I didn't hold onto the hurt. I let it go. And you know that let go and let God. That was it. I felt God had my back, and I was just going to go forward.

Granny Washington's healing came from redemption and knowing that she was a good as

a principal as she thought she was. She was forced into retirement and begged to come

back and lead a school. She also had no choice because she had not been given the time

to prepare for retirement and still needed to work. She was caught in a bind and it was not

of her doing.

The following are specific examples of rBWLs and their descriptions of healing.

Catherine G. shared,

> You know what I do? I go to church. I take it to the altar, and I leave it up there. I don't take it back and try to solve it myself. I always felt like you spend all this time on your career... this is the advice I give to people now—live a full life. That you have, that you have things that you do that you enjoy. That you have people that you love and love you. And that you're giving to somebody else.

And Yvette,

> So healing in the sense that when you leave the role, the exhaustion goes bone-deep. If you've done the work, well if you've done the work to the high standards that's required, it's bone-deep exhaustion.

And finally, Ms. Kelly,

> Healing, I think you have to learn to accept the harms, the hurts. They were the experiences at that time. You accept those, you worked with them the best you knew how at that time with your knowledge level, you learn to move on and grow from those challenges and hurts. You learn to do it differently; you learn to do it better.

Each rBWL has had time to reflect, accept, and release what harms had been done to

them. It is evident that there was a need for healing at some point in their careers.

Chapter Six: Current Black Women School Leaders

There were four dedicated cBWLs that were interviewed in my dissertation study. Similar to chapter 5, I would like to begin this section by extending my deepest gratitude to my participants in this subgroup. I am thankful for each cBWL who I was given the opportunity to interview. All if my cBWL participants are Bay Area natives with as many as 24 years of dedicated service. These women made time to share their experiences with me at the end of a long and grueling day of work. We developed sacred and fugitive spaces in their offices and where they were able to take off their armor and just be (Dillard, 1995; Harney & Moten, 2013). I could physically see their bodies relax when they closed the door to begin our interviews, and I was so grateful to witness them actively take back a moment of peace. As mentioned in chapter 5, I intentionally show gratitude to and for my participants before sharing their experiences. It is my resistance and my duty to present Black women as whole. To do this, I must first begin with humanizing their experiences by grounding my findings chapter in gratitude for their existence and persistence.

Participant Descriptions

Sharon has been an educator in District X for 24 years. She is a 6-foot-tall dark skin Black woman who dresses to the nines daily with her signature short purple, pink, and/or blue hair. Her warm smile lights up every hallway she walks down as her school community members greet her. She has served as a teacher, vice principal, and principal in District X, and is the longest sitting principal of her large comprehensive high school. Sharon is committed to equity, unapologetically and by any means necessary. I have had the pleasure of being mentored by Sharon and I have learned so much from her and her commitment to her school and values.

Ms. Smith has served as a teacher, teacher-leader, and assistant principal at the same school for 22 years. She is in her second year as an assistant principal. She is a brilliant, caring, and community-oriented school leader who believes in the beauty of BIPOC children. Ms. Smith is a pillar in her community and is dedicated to holding her school community together through the values of family, fun, and faith. I have had the pleasure

of working with Ms. Smith when we were teachers. Having observed her nature with students, I know she cares deeply.

Angela has served as teacher, instructional coach, assistant principal, and principal at the same school for 17 years. She is in her second year as a middle school principal. She brings immense joy and the intentionality of listening as strengths to her leadership practice. I have known Angela for many years and have looked up to her in the work of education and school leadership. She is a leader who is deeply dedicated to her community, both in and outside of school. To that end, she continues to work with community-based organizations to better the learning experiences for youth who have been historically marginalized in her city.

Lyndsie is the only participant in this study who is a school leader without having first been a teacher. She is a beautiful Black woman whose superpower lies in operationally serving youth through the socio-emotional learning. She began as a college advisor at her current school and has remained for almost two decades. She noticed her heart was in the coordination of wrap-around supports for youth, which include but are not limited to mental health supports and food and housing insecurity. She has worked at the same school for 19 years and currently serves as a community schools manager. In District X, the role of community schools manager is an administrative role and has similar authority to that of the assistant principal and principal.

In this chapter, I will present the experiences of four cBWLs and how these nuanced experiences are demonstrated within major themes of legacy of resistance, critical hope, and healing. This section, similar to chapter 5, is organized according to these major themes. Throughout this chapter, it will become obvious that the experiences of cBWLs, although similar to those of rBWLs, had vast differences. To be clear, the experiences of Black womanhood and Black women as school leaders are not a monolith, nor do they exist in a vacuum. To that end, I invite you to view all experiences shared in this dissertation individually, collectively, and as whole.

While interviewing each cBWL, it became clear that they had not been asked or given the opportunity to openly reflect about how their identity as Black women impacted their leadership, but they were all aware of the impact that that identity. All of the cBWLs were aware of the fact that there was an impact because they felt it. Because

this group was still in the work, a lot of the ways they navigated of politics and negative experiences were very present, and I expected this. Oftentimes, when you're in the work, it is impossible to take respite to reflect deeply due to exhaustion, lengthy to-do lists and intense looming thoughts. Despite this, there were beautiful metaphors that arose from this group to describe their experiences. These metaphors illuminate a very different political landscape of District X compared to the experiences of rBWLs, and they provide a glimpse into the worlds of cBWLs.

Moments of Resistance

Unlike my rBWLs, cBWLs are still very much in the work and have not yet had a career that exhibits a legacy of resistance, as defined in chapter 5. The cBWLs in my study did not discuss their resistance as legacy, but through moments of resistance throughout their day, and shifts in their leadership practice in their school community. The rBWLs specifically named the practice of continuing the legacy of resistance shown to them by their grandparents, parents, and other ancestors, specifically in the freedom fighting tradition. The women in the cBWL subgroup did not do this, but this does not mean their resistance is not a part of their legacy or the freedom fighting legacy of Black women who have come before them. Given this distinction in their experiences, I have differentiated their resistance as moments of resistance, to further make sense of how they push back against district politics and gendered racism.

District Politics & Gendered Racism

This section delves deep into two poignant and complex examples of district politics and gendered racism. The decision to include both subcodes in the same section is because of the way the two interact; the context is the district politics, and the

experience of gendered racism is the impact. I tried to separate the two, but each time I was unable to create a clear distinction. There would be no experiences of gendered racism for cBWLs if systems of oppression did not converge and come crashing down on them in what BFT scholar Patricia Hill-Collins refers to the matrix of domination (Hill-Collins, 2000).

Pushing back against unfair policies and decisions in District X was something that three of four cBWLs had experience with. Most significant to my findings was the experiences of Lyndsie and Ms. Smith, both school leaders at Friendship Middle School. There was significant amount of district politics surrounding their school. Lyndsie has been member of the Friendship Middle School community for 19 years and is currently the community school manager. She is responsible for managing all community partnerships for her school, such as food bank and managing mental health referrals and programming. Ms. Smith has been a member Friendship Middle School for 22 years as a teacher, teacher-leader, and currently as assistant principal. Collectively, over their decades of service to their school, they have had more than twelve district administrators, principals, and assistant principals lead their school and very few left this school better than they found it.

During their service to Friendship Middle School, Ms. Smith and Lyndsie witnessed various demographic shifts. When they began working at Friendship Middle School, there were more than 700 students, packed classrooms of mostly Black youth being taught by mostly Black and teachers. Over the last 12 years, there was a slow decline in students of Color due to gentrification and the placement of two charter schools within a block from the school, which caused a scrambling for students. In the

past 5 years, the school has been consistently scrambling to achieve for 250 students

across grades. These students, still all of Color, are now being taught by mostly white

teachers from Teach for America. According to Ms. Smith and Lyndsie, they have

managed to hold on to a total of four Black staff members, all Black women, including

two Black woman paraprofessionals who have served as pillars in the community for

decades, in addition to Ms. Smith and Lyndsie.

Lyndsie shared a powerful quote about her experience of school leadership in

District X:

> And I think that sometimes with Black women and African American leaders, if
> our personality type is just like, up front and very direct, we're intimidating, or the
> angry Black woman and [told] we're difficult to work with. And that part is hard
> because you feel like there's a secret deck of cards. I don't even get those set of
> cards. I never saw them. Like, we're not even playing the same game… I can't
> fight a ghost… So what makes it hard to lead is when every time I'm trying to
> lead, the answer to something is, "oh well, there's also this rule. Oh, well, there's
> also that."

Lyndsie is speaking about the invisible and visible roadblocks that impeded BWLs from

leading in the way that works best for their school communities. I interpret the deck of

cards to be white supremacy culture, and the ghost to be the ever-changing political

landscape of and insurmountable number of hoops that must be jumped through to find

resources to serve students and teachers. Lyndsie provided an example of the "secret deck

of cards" in the following quote. To give a bit of context, there was a staff member who

was not showing up to work because the district had not paid him for his service.

> My job is to manage programs and services. He [staff member] is not coming,
> therefore we don't have a program and service, meaning needs are not being met.
> Not even saying he was doing a great job, because he wasn't. But his role is not
> being fulfilled, and I'm questioning you [supervisor] on it. And you tell me, "that's
> not your business. Stay in your lane." I guarantee you would not say that to a
> person who did not look like me and has a couple of years on me. But I feel that
> sometimes what people feel at liberty to say to women in general, women of

color, and Black women, depending on where you stand positionally in society based on your race, color, or anything else, is ridiculous.

Lyndsie demonstrates that even in the process of doing her own job, which is to manage community partnerships, she is being told to "stay in her lane" by a white male network superintendent. This is a direct manifestation of gendered racism and district politics at play. She is a leader, has a scope or work, and is being told not to manage because she's stepping on toes and holding people accountable to her school. She could have not said anything, but how would that have made her look to her staff? Had she been a man or not Black, she may not have received this unprofessional and demeaning response. As her job, as she has outlined, is to manage programs and services, and she is addressing a program and service that is not being provided, the question becomes: how much more in her lane can she be?

Lyndsie and Ms. Smith also served on multiple school redesign teams for Friendship Middle School, which is currently undergoing a school merger with a neighboring school. Lyndsie shared how this third round of school redesign has maintained an open wound for her and other FMS staff.

> I think that the shifts and changes that we've seen over the years have been really challenging. So the whole intent of school redesign was a big harm. Not the folks who, like, had to play it out, but the folks who created the system… I didn't know how to protect myself because I knew I couldn't be, like, on the proposal writing committee [again]. I knew that would be too emotional. It exhausted me. And so literally you are fatigued and exhausted. And I remember feeling that way of just, wow. Like, they're trying to bleed us dry and leave us with nothing.

The process of redesigning a school is more than being dreamy in the development phase. It requires countless hours of research, consensus building, gathering community input, securing additional funding for innovation, revamping curriculum and instruction, and

building plans for culture and climate of the new school. They engaged in this work three

times with three different teams, all while running the school that currently exists.

Lyndsie continued to describe and define the harm of the school redesign process,

> I also feel like the harm [extends to] our parents and there's something to be said
> for, like, institutional knowledge. But I do think that when you undergo
> something really challenging, if you've never considered being at another space, it
> makes you consider it. So that process I think, did. I think having a really
> challenging relationship with the previous assistant principal was another time
> where it was just like, this is not the space for me, and I never thought that would
> be. So that's true harm because like, that's a whole new reimaging of self and
> removing yourself from a space that you truly, truly love. It can make it harder to
> find joy in the work if you allow it to.

Lyndsie shared her experiences and named harm. Specifically, how District X has done

everything it can to push Lyndsie, as well as Ms. Smith, to the edge and out. Lyndsie's

moments of resistance in the face of gendered racism has taken two forms; asking

questions and maintaining boundaries. She asks questions to clarify the scope of her work

and set a boundary by deciding not to participate in the third round of school redesign.

Ms. Smith also details experiences at her current school site with the principal, a

Black man who is new to her school. She shares how she is actively working to build and

maintain a sense of community, even with the consequence of being reprimanded.

Specifically, there was an incident with two Black students who cursed out a white

teacher saying, "you racist pig. I'll fucking beat your ass." The following quote further

illuminates the fallout of this situation and how Ms. Smith did what she believed was

right for both the student and the teacher.

> And I was like, "Well, what are we gonna do with those kids?" [the Principal
> said,] "Well, he's gonna have to learn how to deal with them and go through the
> behavior hierarchy." I said, but in that situation, there is no behavior hierarchy. So
> I'm trying to tell [the principal], you know, we have to support him in this place
> right now. This [teacher's] face is clearly beet red, because he's frustrated and he's
> angry. And you mean to tell me, he's gonna have to learn? And I said, "What do

you mean he has to learn?" And I just had to tell myself, "Be quiet. Just be quiet." I just closed my mouth and turned around. Like, don't say a thing else. And when I saw [the principal] walk down the stairs, I went in the classroom and told those two kids to get over in this room with me. Because I thought that we should have supported [the teacher]. In that particular place. And him learning whatever behavior hierarchy... that would come at another time. But right there in the moment, no. You can't do that teacher like that. So that's like, one of those times that I, I had to let [the teacher] know that, I have your back like family would.

While it is not clear why the students cursed out their teacher, it is clear that the students and the teacher needed a reset and a break from one another. It is clear that Ms. Smith's reaction to the incident and her resistance to her principal's was necessary. She waited for her principal to walk away before handling the situation in the way she felt was equitable and respectful to both the students and the teacher. She called a teacher on prep to cover that teacher's class and took the students to her classroom to decompress and share what took place. Later, she brought both parties together to participate in a restorative justice circle to repair their relationship. The fact that her principal could not see that her actions of humanization—of both the teacher and the students—says so much about the load Ms. Smith carries for her school. When the principal found out what she had done, he reprimanded her with a warning via email.

I believe her support of this situation was two-fold; she strove both to make the teacher feel supported and come back to work and to provide a safe space for students to process the antecedent behavior of the teacher that caused their reaction. What's interesting is the principal's reaction and apparent unwillingness to get involved and humanize the experiences of both the teacher and the students. Yes, teachers must learn to manage their own classrooms, but as new teachers, this takes time. This leads me to believe that the principal himself was overwhelmed and did not have the capacity or compassion to offer, and because he was unable, he did not want Ms. Smith to offer it

either, out of fear that it would breach the power dynamic. As Ms. Smith mentions, there

was another administrator, a Black male administrator, who witnessed the incident and

also did not act in a compassionate manner toward the students or the teacher. Instead of

listening to what Ms. Smith had to offer, they gaslit her and proceeded to make her feel

incompetent and out of place. Instead of following suit, Ms. Smith pivoted and took

matters into her own hands, because she felt she had no choice.

These two examples clearly demonstrate powerful moments of resistance. They

detail not only the treatment of two Black women school leaders, but how district

politics, gendered racism, and lack of respect continue to be present in their daily practice

of leadership on their campus. Yet they still show up to work every day, despite these

experiences of harm, for their students and greater school community.

Critical Hope

As mentioned in chapter 5, critical hope is the manifestation of the promise of

Black women school leaders, and it is the reason we continue in this work. We do the

difficult work because we find purpose in changing learning and life outcomes for

racialized youth. In alignment with rBWLs, cBWLs demonstrate what Duncan-Andrade

theorizes as critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Both rBWLs and cBWLs

demonstrated critical hope, but in different ways in their leadership journeys. Both

subgroups exhibited an unapologetic equity-centered leadership stance in their roles as

school leaders.

Unapologetically Equity-Centered

Sharon, principal of a large, successful comprehensive high school in District X,

discussed her purpose in school leadership. She described how her foundation impacts

how she shows up as leader dedicated to equity. Sharon shared,

> I really feel like education is a life saver, and I just feel like I'm saving lives here. So I guess one of my core values is just helping students understand the importance of education and where it could take them. Because there are not enough people that look like me, that can talk to my kids and get them to understand. So, even as a principal, I do a lot of discipline still because I know that I speak the same language as kids. And that they understand and that when I say it, it comes across much differently than if it's said by a white man. I just think that I'm more effective.
>
> The fact that I have been where most of them are. I have been the angry teenager, I have been the teenager who didn't feel supported, who felt looked over. And I'm a mom, so I know what they're struggling with. And I think because I was them, I can relate. You know, I grew up in a family with, where my parents were probably alcoholics, but functional. I grew up in a family full of dope fiends. You know, I'm just, I'm from [Olympia] (laughs), I know your momma, I know your uncle. I know somebody. Or they know me, and, you know, and that always helps.

In this quote, Sharon outlines why she remains in the work, and it is explicitly for students and her ability to serve them in the way they need it. She touches on her own life journey as a means of humanizing the experiences of youth in her school. It is also because she knows the power of having a principal who looks like them and takes a community-based approach to her leadership. The ability to engage with racialized youth in a way that is familiar and warm is the embodiment of what it means to lead as a Black woman. Not only do you look like them, but you're able to tap into their spirit in a way that others simply cannot. This is a gift, and Sharon highlights this gift in her quote. She is also elevating her own experience as a teenager and her ability to humanize the learning experiences of youth through empathy as a mother, Black person, and their school leader. She shares what it means to be a community leader, a leader who is born and raised in the city they are serving in.

Sharon also seeks to build relationships with students that don't look like her, as she seeks to be a mentor and role model for every student she serves. She shared,

> Every child or group of children I walk by, I speak to. Because, usually, it's just my Black girls or my Latino girls and they're saying hi as I walk down the hallway. And it just makes me so proud. And it made me feel good. I'm like, wow. You can change things, just by showing up. People always ask me about how do I think I'm making an impression on the Black girls? But it's bigger than that. All kids are seeing me run this school. Including my kids, you know? And it means a lot to my Black girls, but I think it means a lot to, to every [student], or I hope that they've noticed. You know, because it ain't just the Black girls who need to be motivated. You know, it's my Yemeni girls, where they may not see, you know, a Yemeni principal. But they have a principal that knows their name, learns about their culture, and welcomes them.

From this quote, it is evident that Sharon has a desire to have an impact on all 2,000 of her students, in the best way she can. For her, centering students comes from empathy and intentionally building meaningful relationships with them. Representation on a campus is nothing without relationships. Students must know that you're there for them and this comes from meeting them where they are. While interviewing Sharon, I got the sense that while this brought her immense joy, like the rBWLs I interviewed, it seemed more like a sense of duty and purpose, not what we know as happiness. I must say, I was not shocked by these findings. Not only is this our career, and how we care for ourselves and our families, but it is also our activism, our gift to our community. This same feeling was present for Angela, Lyndsie, and Ms. Smith—there were moments that brought joy, but it was fleeting because we are not in the work for happiness. This does not mean there is no happiness or that we are not happy. It means that we, like so many of our freedom-fighting ancestors, are content with our service and can see the difference we are making, despite the way that systems of oppression that exist and impact both us and our students.

Leading though unapologetically equity-centered practices is critical hopes (re)imagined. Our willingness to push—engage in difficult conversations with staff, enact equity-focused professional development and policy—and aid the process of protecting

our students and providing educational access. Sharon spoke in-depth about the

importance of facilitating equity-based professional development, even when your staff is

mostly white. She frequently discussed the importance of data to guide staff to

understand how policies impact youth of Color differently than those same policies

impact their peers. She shared,

> I started off with the dress code because everybody wants a dress code. I said, "But look who's referred? What's common in these girls?" And what I said is, "Girls that looked like me get referred for dress code but girls that look like [Christina] don't, but we got on the same clothes." You can't send a kid to the office no more for dress code because only Black big girls get sent out. So that's what, you know, now you can't send out none of them, let all the little girls run around here naked (laughing) and they all runnin' around here naked (laughing). I didn't care because I really don't think that the way I'm dressed should determine how you treat me.

Sharon described that while this was a great exercise for the staff, to engage dress code

data, it also gave the staff the chance to see their racial gender bias and hyper-

sexualization of Black girls. Because the data did not change, regardless of the

professional development meetings about equity, Sharon made the decision to get rid of

the dress code all together because of the racist and sexist practices being exhibited on

her campus, and because she believed it should have nothing to do with how children are

taught.

This is a prime example of critical hope because there's a direct action through re-

written policy. This policy could have simply been handed down from the top, but Sharon

used professional development and data to aid in her strategic decision-making. She

engaged critical pedagogy through her professional development and empirical dress

code data from their school to shift patriarchal white supremacy culture relating to

disproportionately disciplining Black girls with the dress code. This is in direct alignment with the tenants of ACL (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015).

Radical Healing

I define healing broadly. We all need rest, to find ourselves, medical attention, psychological support, and spiritual grounding. In the role of school leadership, all of these things get tapped out. My rBWL participants were able to acknowledge that there was a need for them to heal at some point during their career, but not all of my cBWL participants felt the same way. When asked directly if there was a need for healing, three of four cBWLs responded yes. Sharon did not feel she needed to heal from this work, but she did talk in great detail about her level of insurmountable exhaustion. Given the difference of how both subgroups responded to healing, I felt it was important to view healing differently for cBWLs. For this reason, I apply Dr. Shawn Ginwright's concept of radical healing. In 2009, Ginwright introduced a concept called radical healing. This section will share how cBWLs made sense of their need for healing. The need for radical healing is explored last in this chapter because understanding that my participants need to heal, along with what they need to heal from, is central to this section.

Angela shared a brief story about her personal sacrifice.

> Yeah. I mean, that's a very good question and I'm thinking about this more now that I'm getting older and I'm wondering, is this a symptom of me being 41, almost 42, or is this because like this work is stressing me, like for the past few days leading up to Monday, I've had like the most severe, you know, stomach ailments. I'm like, "Am I just eating wrong or what's going on?" But I really, I think it is connected to the stress that I'm feeling and then, you know, I feel so stupid for saying this too, but I, I have invested so much time and energy into this lifestyle that I'm in, I was in school for a number of years, even when I started teaching, like getting my teaching credential, and then my masters, and then going back to get my admin credential, and then clearing the credential. And so, I've just spent so much time and energy that I didn't focus a lot on my personal life and

that's why I'm 41 and don't have kids, and according to my doctor, probably can't, you know? And so, for me, that was the ultimate sacrifice, and you know, I'm glad that I have a partner now, but just, that was something that I gave up. Yeah... after we got married, and you know, heard that news, I'm reflecting now, but I was really depressed for a long time because I'm like, How did all this time pass? You know? But you just get so deep in it and you're just always in it and it's hard to get out that you know, time just passed. That's why right now, it's so important for me to, you know, have more of a work life balance even though, you know, now I've transitioned to this role [of principal], where it's so hard to, to do it. But I do try to build in opportunities to like step away, even if that means like leaving my computer here for one day a week and I... I haven't don't that as much as I need to, but for me, it's also about making sure that other people are doing that for themselves because I know that the impact that it's had on me and I don't ever want anybody else to find themselves you know, 15, 17, 18 years later and they've you know, given up a lot that they probably didn't need to or even want to, but it just happened.

Angela shared her deepest grief—her inability to have a child from her body. As she reflected, she also named that her mental health suffered from this realization. She also shared about how deep in the work she was that she did not even notice how much she had given up. In the same breath, she is doing the work of making sure her teachers and staff are learning to engage in self-care for themselves, so they do not find themselves in a similar situation. Angela names that she needs to heal. She names that part of her healing journey is also caring enough for others to humanize their experience of being an educator by encouraging care, which was not done for her.

Lyndsie's shared,

I think yes. Absolutely. I think that you very often solve someone else's problems in this work by absorbing it, and that takes a lot. So you have to be able to heal from that. Um, I think sometimes we're put through processes that are very damaging. You have to heal from that.

Lyndsie named that she does have a need to heal, and perhaps from trauma that is not her own. She explicitly named absorption, and that is so important to explore. As a Black woman, she has spent so much time shielding members of her school community from

the direct impact of harmful district politics, that she holds it daily. The

acknowledgement of the need for healing here is powerful and consistent with the needs

of radical healing (Ginwright, 2010). Here, Lyndsie is naming both a superpower and a

weakness—taking on more than she can bear on behalf of service to her community. I see

this extreme burden in terms of body shots. We continue to take so many hits that no one

can see or help us block. After a while, these body shots impact our internal organs and

cause irreversible damage, as was the case with Angela's infertility. Lyndsie is also

defining that as a Black woman school leader, she has to heal from this.

Ms. Smith's statement on healing:

> Of course there's a need for me to heal. Yeah, yeah there is. When you're doing
> like, the reflection and the soul searching, and saying why are these things
> happening? And I have to say, there's nothing a fault of my own. I have to heal
> and think about what other people didn't do for me, and kind of forgive them for
> that. And not question why. I mean, you can think why. [Then I wonder] But why
> wouldn't you mentor me like I should have been mentored? Why wouldn't you
> take me under your wing and try to help me become a better person in that
> position?

Ms. Smith names as part of her healing the need to release and forgive. She also

explicitly names a couple of the things she needs to release, which ultimately have tried

to keep her from feeling worthy in her role as a school leader. This notion of releasing is

consistent with how rBWLs also engaged in healing over the years. I believe releasing is

appropriate language to use because we cannot expect an apology for most of the things

that happen to us, for this reason we have to let it go.

Sharon shared,

> I don't think I'm so wounded that I need to heal. I don't, mm-mm [negative]. I've
> had a rough life, and this is a hard job. It is the worst job I've ever had but losing
> my brother, my sister, and my mom was 10 times harder. If I can do that, I can do

> this. No, my life has been hella hard, you know? So mm-mm [negative], nope. All these people have not injured me to the point where I need to heal (laughs), no, I don't take it that serious. I just don't prioritize myself. I just put myself on the back burner for everyone else. So I think about everybody before I think about myself. I don't take care of myself well.

Sharon had an interesting response about healing. She actively refused to give power to toxic systems and experiences that have impeded her ability to live the life she desires and knows is possible. However, she names exhaustion and her need to think about and care for herself. I interpret this to mean that her need is to break free from the systems that are keeping her from thriving. I argue that to do this, it takes more than naming, there must be action through radical healing. Ginwright (2010) tells us that radical healing seeks to

> build the capacity of young people to act upon their environment in ways that contribute to well-being for the common good. This process contributes to individual well-being, community health and broader social justice where young people can act on behalf of others with hope, joy and a sense of possibility…. Radical healing points to the process of building hope, optimism and vision to create justice in the midst of oppression. Healing from the trauma of oppression such as poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia and class exploitation is an important political act (Ginwright, 2010, p. 85).

Ginwright theorizes that healing is not only an individual act, but also a collective and political act. He originally applies this concept to youth who have been historically marginalized and are directly impacted by systemic oppression. This subgroup is in need of radical healing because unlike the rBWLs who have had a good deal of time to process, the need for healing for cBWLs includes the exhaustion from these systems of oppression and the ways in which they converge and interact in schools. This goes deeper than racial battle fatigue because of the physical nature. With this definition, I argue that radical healing is in fact a need for all cBWLs. Their ways of healing are through their work, their naming of systems of oppression, and the creation of their offices and even

their schools as spaces of healing for youth who have been historically marginalized. The need to point to systems of oppression that drain our ability to operate at a healthy capacity. Ginwright originally applies this concept to youth who have been historically marginalized and their ability to heal from various forms of trauma.

Another element to consider when reviewing this data about healing is *racial battle fatigue*, a term coined in 2003 by Dr. William A. Smith to describe the psychosocial impact of being a member of a racially oppressed group (Smith, 2003). These participants, both cBWLs and rBWLs, have definitely been impacted by racial battle fatigue yet persist in their work as school leaders, continuing to navigate the impact of factors such as district politics, racism and sexism. Similar to Sharon, before I was able to acknowledge the fact that I needed to heal, I realized the impact exhaustion had on me. I was always tired. No amount of sleep—going to bed early and sleeping in on the weekends—could help me shake the heaviness of the work. Given this context, healing also includes rest (Ginwright, 2010).

When reviewing cBWL quotes regarding their needs for healing, it is evident that they are all in different place of healing because they all need different things. Healing is more than healing from wounds that are seen, it is about healing the spirit, the mind, and the internal body. Research shows that Black women are becoming more and more vulnerable to physical and mental health disparities due to stress, such as heart disease and autoimmune diseases (Woods-Giscombé, 2011). I submit that every participant in my dissertation study has been impacted greatly by stress. However, rBWLs have been able to heal, but it took years and separation from the work to begin this process. For cBWLs, they have not yet had the chance to engage their healing. Because Black women are

going to continue to be freedom fighters in the field of education, I wonder if remaining

in a perpetual state of healing is necessary to keep from further internalizing systemic

oppression and maintaining a healthy work/life rhythm? I believe it is possible for

cBWLs to heal-in-action, but to do this, we must be able to create sacred spaces of

healing mind, body, and spirit, and spaces to support ourselves professionally.

Chapter Seven:
No Choice but to Heal, a Love Letter to New Black Women School Leaders

I was fully prepared to cocreate sacred spaces with and for my participants, not realizing that I also needed sacred space—to take up space to share my own story. So, I created it for myself. Just like my participants, no one had ever given me the space to just speak my truth, raw and unfiltered. For this reason, as a BWL who is currently and fully engaged in healing, I am giving myself the gift of space, something I rarely do. I am using this chapter to tell the story of my experiences as a BWL. This chapter begins with my leadership journey, my journey towards healing, and a love letter to new BWLs, as my planted Wild Seed. This chapter is vulnerable, written for me and is not meant to be analyzed. I am actively taking this space to share my own experiences, and further develop my capacity to become the both/and. Both a mother and a leader. Both a scholar and a practitioner. I will further explore the both/and in the discussion and implications chapter.

The Journey

Before deciding to become a school leader, I took my time. I watched the work of school leaders around me, who happened to mostly be both Black and women, as they attempted to achieve a rhythm within their personal and professional lives (Stovall, 2018). I was a witness while they endured and navigated the worst political scrimmages. From being reassigned in the middle of the school year to being pushed out of schools they had spent years redesigning and leading to the meticulous building of iron-clad walls around their hearts for protection. Through all of this, they continued to show up for their school communities, but not for themselves. Looking back, I'm not sure that I felt that my experience of being a school leader would be different from theirs. Nonetheless, I was

determined to live a life I could be proud of. For me, this looked like continuing to dance, read, spend time with my family, and travel. Throughout my journey, I was able to maintain some of the things I loved, but not everything. I was forced to choose, and this is not something I wanted to do, nor was I prepared to do it.

Every day of my first year as a school leader, my integrity felt compromised. I felt that I had to choose between my integrity and if I wanted, or at times needed, to engage in shady politics to get a request granted so as to best serve my students. There are definitely moments that I am not proud, times when I towed the party line, stayed silent because a request was being granted but others could not be made aware. This experience of choosing was present every day and often left me and my position in the school in a state of purgatory. It felt like I was wading in a swamp of negativity. It became impossible to lead my teams and provide the resources they needed in order to serve without bending to the whims of district administrators and their ulterior political motives.

After my first year as an assistant principal at a large comprehensive high school, our two female principals, one Filipina and the other white, were disrespectfully pushed out and replaced after they had been aggressively recruited. After witnessing this and how new principals had been selected before they went through the community-agreed upon interview process, I stopped toeing the party line' I knew I was playing a risky game, but I did not care. I refused to accept vague answers to impactful, often one-sided decisions made in our school, like master schedule and funding structures. These are massive systems that demonstrate a school's values, and these decisions are a chance to be highly collaborative with our teacher-leaders. For example, we had been told for years

that we had no funding for essentials like toilet paper, but we now had funding for co-principal salaries of more than half a million dollars? Of course, I understood how budgets worked; there are discretionary funds, ADA, and various budgetary factors, but I also could not believe the intentional lack of prioritization of funding for programs for youth. Because of this, I made the choice to stand in my truth and in solidarity with students and teachers by asking questions and being vocal about inequities I witnessed, such as those regarding suspensions and expulsions. The consequence: I was slowly relieved of the projects that made my days and lifted my spirit. Grants that I had authored on behalf of our teachers were taken from me. Teams that I had worked hard to create sustainable community-based systems and structures with were infiltrated with agendas and facilitators that did not include me. I was invited to the table as a thought partner with the organizations I had formed relationships with, only to be drained of my ideas, energy, and spirit for my projects. They could not hold these meetings without me, and I knew that was the case. However, during these meetings they made sure I was uncomfortable and that I was clear about who was in power, and that it was not me or the community organizations. It was so uncomfortable to be consistently cut off, to give an answer to an operational question and be told that I did not know what I was talking about. I was so embarrassed. I had never been put in this position before. I was angry, hurt, and felt deeply disrespected.

Overtime, I hated coming to work. In fact, as I drove up the hill to school every day, I cried. I turned to my music—often N.W.A, Incubus, Célia Cruz, or Beyonce's Formation album—to hold onto to my reason for coming to work and not turn around and quit each day. I would park in my spot, put on my lipstick, fix my mascara and be

prepared to greet students as I walked to my office. It was painful. I had gotten into this routine for more than a year. I felt inauthentic. My teachers and staff could tell I was unhappy, but I was their buffer, protecting them from many changes. Because they knew this, they did all they could to make my load lighter. My students hugged me tighter and tighter each day. I never told my teams everything I was going through because I did not have to, they witnessed it. They often learned of teams I had been stripped from when I did—in staff meetings or via email.

In January 2019, I started creating boundaries—leaving at 4pm, not working on weekends. They didn't know it, but my wife and I were preparing to expand our family. It was a very stressful time at work and my co-principals continued to violate these boundaries. My blood pressure was consistently high, I was having frequent panic attacks, and I had no healthy coping skills to help. One morning I woke up and bled, immensely. It took a week and blood tests to find out that I had miscarried. I had lost my first baby after the week from hell, which included being forced to physically restrain students and take on even more time-sensitive tasks outside of my responsibilities.

That spring semester was a rough one. During the annual retreat with my academy hosted in my home, we heard that teachers were officially going on strike. We stood around my kitchen and I told them "I stand in solidarity with you. I know you love our kids. Just know that I love them just as much. All I ask is that you not make this an 'us against them' moment, because I will be on the line with you every day." Not only was I mourning a loss, but I also lived and worked through my first teacher-strike. My nerves were shot every day as teachers who were not members of my team exhibited a lack of criticality and care toward students, me, each other, and, at other times, towards

substitutes a who had no choice but to cross the line and work. As we came back together after the strike, our school morale was positively shattered. There was no trust, care, or willingness to engage around the ugliness we had witnessed as a school. Instead of tackling this for 250 staff members, I had brought my 70 person staff together to begin our healing. We were determined to restore any faith that had been lost. Because the Indigenous practice of restorative justice is a foundational tool used in our community agreements and overall function, this process went relatively smooth. I listened to my staff, but I was clear about my refusal to take on any additional emotional labor or responsibility for things outside of my control. We came back to each other over time.

After a couple of procedures, in May became pregnant, and I told no one. I made the decision to not work in the Summer. I took the time to reground myself in my new reality of motherhood. I was terrified and determined not to lose this baby. I took the Summer to enjoy being with my family, travel, and feel my baby grow. When I returned to work in August, it was the start of the 2019–2020 school year and I was 12 weeks pregnant.

The Incident

The beginning of this 2019–2020 school year was tough; it was the most volatile in all my years in education. There were multiple fights happening daily for the first seven weeks of school. Back-to-back meetings with families, restorative and peace keeping circles, and even with all the preventative methods and relationship building, a lot of different types of assaults continued to occur. Our administrative team was getting hit hard. By this time, I had already had some very intense meetings with families where I had been threatened by parents. On one occasion, I had been threatened and verbally

assaulted by a Black father who told me that I should watch my back. He knew I was pregnant, but he was angry with me because I had to refer his child for expulsion due to sexual harassment. I asked to be taken off the case and for a stayaway order to be given because he had threatened me. I was told I had to complete the paperwork for the case and no stayaway order could be given. This is yet another time that I felt unsafe and unsupported.

I woke up on Tuesday, September 24, 2019, a healthy 21 weeks pregnant and ready for the day. I remember what I was wearing—a yellow shirt, really cute green maternity pants, and my Chuck Taylor sneakers. I remember this day perfectly, because I was especially excited that my baby bump had begun to grow more pronounced. I also started to feel my baby kick more intensely the previous weekend, and it was a joy I had never known.

During lunch time, three young Black girls who were not our students walked onto our campus and proceeded to jump one of our students. I was asked to stay with this young Black girl who had been assaulted while she was visibly emotionally escalated and screaming at the top of her lungs. At this point, her upset mother and sister were on the way, and I felt very anxious because I knew I was going to have to step in and deal with this. I wasn't the only pregnant woman in this room—there was another pregnant support staff member who was there—and we were both feeling really uncomfortable. But what else could we do?

Once our student's mother arrived, I was radioed and walked our student to the front of the school. As we all began to walk towards the car, our student started to get upset all over again, which she had every right to do. All of a sudden, the student's sister,

who was also a former student, started popping off, which she also had every right to do. This child's safety had been breached because the school did not have security at the front gate. Here I am, a Black mother, standing in front of this Black family and trying to help them. I somehow went from being helpful to this Black family to being cursed out and made the enemy. Of course, this did not faze me, so I kept walking and saying to the student's mother, "I completely understand how you feel, but I can't take you in the office for safety reasons. Let's get you and your children off campus." We had several police officers on campus already and, more than anything, I just wanted this family to make it off campus safely. After nearly a decade in District X, I knew angry parents and school police could result in situations even more terrible than the initial incident. After being cursed out for a while by the mother, I turned to the mom and said, "I'm trying to help you and your child. You can't even see that, but you won't call me a bitch again. It is unprofessional, disrespectful, and not okay. Help me help you." I was tired of being disrespected and called *out of my name*. I understood her anger. It was warranted, of course. As school administrators, we learn to take these verbal body shots, daily, without space to stand up for ourselves or our humanity. On this day, I was clear about my role and that I was not going to continue to take shots not intended for me.

Before I knew it, the two daughters dashed over to one of the entrances to the administrative building, where the other Black girls were being handcuffed by school police. I walked over and I put my arm in the front of them. "You see I'm pregnant. Relax. It's fine. Step back. Think about this." The mom came over and said, "Move, bitch," and she pushed me in the stomach. I fell. After a few moments, I got up and I walked over to a tree in front of my office. I couldn't breathe. I put my hand on the tree to

catch my breath. I have believed my entire life that I have had mild anxiety. But this was something I'd never experienced. I was navigating two different identities, one as a Black woman school leader and the other as a new mother, and I was doing this in real time. For the first and last time, I put my role as a BWL before that of being a mother and was injured deeply—not just physically, but psychologically. I felt it immediately.

At that point, the other coprincipal, another BWL, told a Black male teacher to come and walk me to his empty classroom. I could barely walk. I could barely breathe. I have a volatile panic attack and our school nurse, a Black woman, was called. The other administrators and the nurse wanted to call an ambulance because I was struggling to walk and shaking violently. I struggled to catch my breath, and my blood pressure had skyrocketed. I just told them to call my wife. "She'll be here in 20 minutes. Just call her." All I could do was hold my stomach and sob. I was cracked completely open.

When my wife arrived, we went straight to the emergency room. We got a full ultrasound. There was the baby, completely fine, doing flips and relaxing. In that moment, when I heard my baby's heartbeat and we saw that they were healthy, all of the adrenaline rushed from my body and an unimaginable pain took over. My back felt twisted and bunched. The left side of my stomach had begun to bruise with shades of purple and green. In the emergency room, my obstetrician, a Black woman, came to see me. She took me off work immediately. This was the first time I had high blood pressure during my pregnancy and high blood pressure continued throughout the rest of the pregnancy. The impact of this event caused me to later have labor induced due to concerns of preeclampsia.

When filling out paperwork and writing that it was a workplace incident, I felt shame. I kept thinking to myself, "I should be able to dust off and keep going," but I couldn't. Not this time.

Cracked in Half

On Friday, September 27th, I got a voicemail from my grandmother and a text from a family friend saying, "I'm so sorry for your loss." I called my grandmother, and she was in tears. My grandfather had passed away while I was in the doctor's office. If it were possible to be completely cracked in half, that is what I felt. I was undone. I think I had expected my coprincipals to have at least an ounce of care and compassion, but I got nothing. This only made things worst. As one could imagine, sending an email to request bereavement leave was tough. I didn't even get the standard response of "I'm sorry for your loss." Instead, they had postponed things that I held, like emergency drills, and shared with the staff, "Ms. G.W. had a death in the family and we will wait until she returns to do the drills." While this may not seem like a harmful response, consider my privacy; I was not asked if this could be shared. It should also be considered that I had sent an email from my hospital bed to my administrative team delineating the flow of the emergency drills and now, days later, everything still had to be held by me a Black woman who was just assaulted while pregnant and had just lost her grandfather. I was not shown humanity. I had given all I had to this campus and the fact that I received so little when I needed to be shown care shattered me. No one from the administrative team offered condolences or asked me if I was okay. It took me two weeks to build the courage to be honest and vulnerable enough to share how I felt. I sent an email sharing with the administrative team that I felt the lack of execution of the emergency drills was blamed

on me and my absence. I also shared that I'd sent an email from a hospital bed with clear steps on how to execute the emergency drills. In response to my email, I was told by one of my coprincipals that I was unprofessional. I let it go. I stopped checking my email for weeks, except communication about worker's compensation with the district. It was so difficult to talk with people during this time. I could barely talk to people about this incident without having panic attacks. My wife had to help me check and respond to emails. She had to help me have conversations because I was nervous, on edge, scared, ashamed, and angry all the time. This was not healthy for me or my baby. I finally reached out to my obstetrician, and I told her, "I need to talk to somebody. I can't do this anymore and I need help, now."

She referred me to a psychiatrist and honestly, I considered not going. I had so many feelings and I was scared to share them. I didn't want to be seen as an unfit person, which is a reality for many Black birthing people experiencing mental health concerns. Despite my negative feelings, I was pleasantly shocked by how easy it was to tell the doctor how I felt about what happened to me and had no skills to cope with. He said, "When you break your arm, you get immediate care. For you, you're not broken. You've got to start healing, but you need to space to do it." During my second visit, I was formally diagnosed with PTSD and anxiety. I immediately began crying. I asked, "How am I supposed to heal through this? I can't work and heal, not yet. Not right now. I'm so scared of what would happen to me and what would happen to my baby." I was immediately taken off work until my maternity leave began and the next day, I started attending therapy.

I wasn't particularly excited about going to therapy, but I was at the point where something had to give. I went to group therapy first. My first meeting, I was in a room full of strangers at Kaiser with two male therapists of Color, and the first topic was self-compassion. This is when I learned that I gave all my compassion to my work and none to myself. I blamed myself for being assaulted and felt shame because of the workload left for my peers. This was a red flag that I clearly needed the space to re-center my priorities, as well as heal through my current reality.

Seeking Healing

This incident attempted to stead the joy of my pregnancy and love for my research away from me. I wouldn't let it. I dove back into data collection for my dissertation and used the time to listen. I never told my participants what happened to me. I just sat there and enjoyed sharing space with them. They didn't know it, but they were the glue that held me together. Hearing their stories made me think about the ways I continue to show up for my school community. As I asked my participants the questions, "What keeps you here? What brings you joy? Why do you do this? Why do you stay?" I also reflected in my fieldwork notebook out of curiosity for my own answers. I wrote, "I stay because of kids. Who else is going to support, and protect, and love, and cherish BIPOC kids at my school? Who else can I trust to interrupt racist teaching for them? I'm the only administrator who is willing to do this at my school." One of the ways I have demonstrated this was by hosting retreats for my team in my home. For example, I hosted a staff retreat in my home February 2019, right before district teachers went on strike. In fact, while we were at the retreat, we watched the video of the teacher's union president confirming the strike together in my kitchen. I told them, "I don't care what happens.

Know that I love you. Know that I know you love our kids. And I stand with you. Please remember that." I was determined to always treat my staff well, so they would treat my students and each other well. I made myself available to them, so that they would continue to have the capacity to make themselves available for my kids and families. I built their capacity for engaging in critical reading, writing, thinking, speaking, and acting, and their ability to teach this, so that my students would garner these same skills. I gave so much, yet no one felt it was important gave back to me. And so I gave too much. While I did not give with the expectation of getting something in return, I did expect to be invested in and cared for at the professional level. If this experience taught me anything, it is that despite the fact that I have taught and led for over 12 years, and I am replaceable in this role, just as I am in society.

I'm Awake Now

I have learned that healing is not linear. Healing is necessary and ongoing. I still have nightmares. I still cry. Even though I look at my beautiful 14-month-old baby and I am so enamored with them, I also think about how they could have died from how hard I fell. But they didn't. Every time they smile at me, it's a reminder that I'm here. I'm not broken. I am whole. I make the decision every single day to heal. Every day, I do the work of reframing the way that I think about myself, the way that I perceive the world and my place in it. After having my baby in February of 2020, I realized my focus, the way that I approached and understood my research and my work as a practitioner, was different. I too have moments of resistance. I exhibit critical hope and I am actively on a journey of radical healing.

It's Okay To Be A Wildseed: A Love Letter To New Black Women School

Leaders

Dear Sis,

I call you sis because while we've never met, you're reading my dissertation. This piece of writing might be the rawest piece of writing I will ever give to the world and since I'm already raw, I might as well keep it real with you.

I want to speak to your spirit, the fighter in you. The resistance in you. The wild seed planted by our ancestors. I want you to know that it's okay to be a wild seed. Be unapologetic. Be free. And know that you will pay a price for this. But you'll also pay a larger internal price for sitting on your hands instead of doing what you know it right for kids, your staff, and, don't forget, right for you. I know that your preparation program will most likely not talk about how Black women lead. Leadership is like breath for us. It's what we do, and how we survive.

I want to shift this narrative for you right now. We know how to lead, and we know how to rest. We know how what feels right and what doesn't. We know how to heal. Since no one is going to give you permission to rest, I will. Please rest. The evenings and weekends are meant for you to decompress, slow your mind, and be with yourself and loved ones. Yes, answering emails late at night might lighten your load for the next morning, but let's be real—it really doesn't. You get no points for burning out. Since no one will give you permission to do what feels right, I will. There are spaces where we are welcomed (as welcoming as they can be towards Black women) and you know what that feels like. There are spaces that are closed to us, and you definitely know what that feels like. You do not have to compromise your integrity to lead effectively. You do not have to compromise your purpose to lead sustainably. When something does not feel right, more than likely, it isn't. Follow your intuition.

Before you take the plunge into the work of becoming a school leader, I want you to make a list detailing the qualities of who you are and I want to you keep this in your office, for the days when you feel lost, compromised, or like you don't matter. I want you to look at how you named and defined yourself. No one has this power, but you.

I'm not going to give you tips on how to navigate politics or engage in decision-making—you already know how to do this, otherwise you wouldn't be considering leading a school. What I will share is what my Momzie says: "Just listen. People will tell on themselves and share their true intentions." My hope for you is to stay free and grounded. Continue with a routine that allows you to care for your spirit because this work will attempt to break you.

Much Love and Respect,

Whitneé

Discussion and Implications

My dissertation study began with an earnest desire to learn more about the experiences of fellow Black women school leaders. As noted in chapters two and four, there is minimal research about Black women school leader, and thus gaps in our understanding of how Black women navigate their roles as school leaders given their intersectional identities (Dillard, 1995; Horsford & Tillman, 2012). I was also eager to hear the stories of other Black women in my field; this research created a subversive space for Black women to tell their stories and to end the silence around their—and my own—experiences. And on a personal note, I craved community with fellow BWLs. This research provided the opportunity to build community among retired and current BWLs.

The focus of my research study is centered on how Black women define themselves and their experiences. For so long, society has robbed us of our ability to name and claim our experiences for ourselves. This lack of space to define ourselves is consistent with the literature of BFT (Hill-Collins, 2000). Specifically, the matrix of domination seeks to demonstrate how interlocking oppressions faced by Black women create unique challenges, and unique opportunities for Black women. And yet we have rarely been asked to name and define our experiences of school leadership as people who sit at the intersection of marginalized and gendered identities. Thus, my research problem sought to understand the experiences of BWLs and, importantly, to ask them how they thought about their own work.

I conducted a study with two subgroups, retired and current BWLs of the same school district, to understand how they experienced and perceived their work. My research aimed to understand how Black women define the promise, challenges, and potential of

their work in schools. I wanted my study to intentionally decenter the challenges they faced and to instead recenter their perceptions of joy and needs for healing; this purposeful choice of focus was rooted in the adamant refusal to allow others to feast off the trauma of Black women (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

After undergoing multiple rounds of data analysis, three main themes emerged: how Black women school leaders are extensions of a long legacy of resistance, their insistence on critical hope, and how they claim radical healing. As explained in chapter four, in the process analyzing the data, it became clear that historical and political contexts were critical to this data analysis. Specifically, rBWLs demonstrated each theme differently than cBWLs, given their generational and contextual differences. In this final chapter, I discuss the findings in light of the extant literature and consider implications for future research and practice in the field of educational leadership.

Legacy of Resistance

The experiences of Black women as leaders in schools are rendered invisible; they are overlooked in research on women in school leadership and in research on Black leaders (Horsford & Tillman, 2012). Despite their long history in teaching and leadership, particularly in the education of Black youth, research says very little about their existence. My research, then, adds to a body of scant research that explicitly focuses on Black women and their intersectional experiences while leading within urban schools. This research provided the opportunity to bear witness to their individual and collective experiences of hurt and harm as a means to highlight how they resisted and persisted in their service of youth.

As BWLs shared their challenges and harm, in the same breath they elevated how they actively pushed back against systems of oppression that sought to impede student learning while treating them unfairly as they did their work. Mt rBWL participants shared how they relied on traditions of resistance they inherited from their parents, grandparents, and other ancestors to persist in their work. Specifically, they called forth this legacy of resistance against district politics and gendered racism through collectivity and self-advocacy. For example, rBWLs created informal support groups where knowledge was exchanged freely, and intentional fictive kinships fostered fugitive space where they could be their full selves as Black women and Black leaders (Harney and Moten, 2013). Each of the rBWL participants described an incident where they advocated for themselves when the insidious nature of white supremacy sought to limit BWLs' ability to be whole in their work. My participants shared how deeply hurt they were by these incidents and how they felt compelled to speak up for themselves, despite being reprimanded, reassigned, or fired from their jobs.

My cBWL participants did not engage in resistance in the same way as rBWLs; in fact, they did not refer to inherited legacies of resistance, nor did they perceive their work as a whole as a career of resistance. Instead, they identified smaller moments of resistance. As they are still in the midst of their careers, they are still actively learning how to navigate politics in a way that asserts their experience and authority as leaders in the face of gendered racism and district politics.

Resistance as a theme is consistent with the literature of BFT and CRT and CRTed. In BFT resistance is described through Black women's existence in and on the margins, and Black women's ability to reshape these margins from the inside (hooks,

1984; Isoke, 2013). It is impossible to understand how the most disrespected human in the world continues to be at the center of so many movements on behalf of justice and peace (Malcom X, 1962). As a Black woman, I cannot quite put my finger on why or how we show up the way that we do, other than the fact that we have no choice. Findings from this study suggest that resistance does not show up in a monolithic way; historical and political contexts, where one is in her career—novice, midcareer, or retired—all shape how resistance shows up. Collectively, the way my participants manifest legacies or moments of resistance as educational leaders further substantiates how Black women continue to break free, daily. from the matrix of domination. My participants have navigated and circumvented gendered racism and harmful district politics to continue to be of service to their school communities.

In chapter two and chapter four, I offered ideological lynching as a concept to further examine the ways that systems of oppression seek to violently co-opt our ability to think and act critically. Since the highest form of white supremacy is lynching, amounting to the white supremacist enaction of Black death, I argue that lynching our minds is just as impactful. Therefore, my study focuses on how BWLs are threatened by, but ultimately subvert, ideological lynching. Ideological lynching appeared in numerous examples provided in chapters five, six, and seven. By way of example,, supervisors attempted to silence and subjugate Black women school leaders through refusing to acknowledge and include them as leaders, reassigning and/or recommending demotion based on systemic and political differences, and assigning unfair workloads to push them out of the work of school leadership. Subversion to this attempted ideological lynching was demonstrated when Black women school leaders created space for themselves as

educators and leaders in the movement for Black liberation, despite efforts to invisibilize them through mobilizing their critical hope. Just as Black women were overlooked as the leaders they were during the Reconstruction Era, they were also overlooked in District X. And just as in the Reconstruction Era, BWLs asserted their leadership in District X, despite clear and persistent challenges to their district, their schools, and their own authority.

Their sheer ability to take on the role of school leadership is an assertion of the both/and concept. In my literature review and in chapter four, I explored the historical context of Black womanhood, as well as Black women's contributions to the field of education. In short, Black women have had to choose which identity is more salient—their Blackness or their woman-ness. To this end, Black women through time have engaged a both/and mentality to celebrate our multifaceted identities, even when we were not welcomed in either camp due to the patriarchy of Blackness and the racism of not being woman enough. The resistance of Black women in the field of educational leadership is powerful and necessary to study because there is much to learn from how Black women have had success in serving school communities, despite the attempts to break our spirit, and from our activism as leaders in schools.

To continue the conversation of resistance in the other main theoretical frameworks in my study, CRT and CRTed, resistance is discussed as completely transforming the systems and structures around how we deliver education to youth. Freire discusses the power of building awareness, guiding others to let go of harmful beliefs about oppressed groups, both in and out of the educational context, so they can become facilitators of their own learning for the purposes of liberation (Freire, 1970).

Furthermore, critical race theory in education centers tools to create sustainable shifts to rid schools of anti-Blackness, racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression to better serve youth who have historically marginalized (Ladson-Billings, 1998). My participants engage in this work as school leaders through their unapologetic equity-based leadership stance. They did this through intentionally building community, seeking collectivity in decision-making, regularly having difficult conversations with members of their staff on behalf of equity, and facilitating meaningful anti-racist professional development opportunities to deepen learning that stems from the mission and vision of the school. These leadership moves are directly applicable to the applied leadership framework (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2015).

Critical Hope

According to Duncan-Andrade (2009), critical hope is not just a wish or fleeting happy thought. Critical hope is about an educator's ability to hold reality, and the need to prepare BIPOC children for the world around them. This preparation includes knowledge of self within and outside of systemic oppression, joy, and the reality that pain and suffering are part of the journey toward collective liberation. Through our youth, and our ability to engage them critically, we will be liberated. Critical hope is a theoretical and practical approach to the ways in which educators remain in the work. The joy of seeing students prepared to critically and actively engage the world around them, coupled with those same students fulfilling the African proverb of "each one teach one" is one of the purest senses of joy that an educator can experience. While the concept of critical hope was first applied to teachers and their ability to manifest critical hope for and with their

students, I apply this concept to the work of BWLs as they exhibit a deep sustained commitment to youth, thus enacting critical hope in their work.

BWLs expressed critical hope in their ongoing service to youth who have been historically marginalized and ignored by the school system. Even as the school system divested in the education of racialized youth, BWLs doubled down, dedicating themselves to more fully making the school community and the learning process welcoming, nurturing, and safe. This expression of critical hope—committing even when they had every reason to lose hope—was consistent across both subgroups within my study. Retired and current BWLs felt a sense of duty and deep responsibility to serve their students regardless of policy and politics. This is consistent with the existing research studies that shows BWLs as servant leaders, as those who lead with an ethic of caring, and as leaders who lead with their lives (Dillard, 1995; Bass, 2012). BWLs express "ethics of caring and personal accountability, which embrace conceptions of transformative power and mutuality" (Hill-Collins, 1991, p. 132). BWLs coupled caring with action to empower themselves and the communities they serve. The specific care that the BWLs in my study provide their students and staff is indicative of the depth of their commitment to social change.

In alignment with deep caring and responsibility, another expression of critical hope is seen in how my participants demonstrated unapologetic, equity-centered leadership. Retired and current BWLs were not afraid to have difficult conversations and make difficult decisions about how race, gender, and class converged in their schools. Specifically, cBWLs and rBWLs named that student needs remained at the center of all decisions made both individually as school leaders and as a larger school community. For

example, all rBWLs pointed toward coaching teachers out of their school if teachers were unwilling to participate or commit to equity-based professional development. The rBWLs explicitly told these teachers that "this may not be the best place for you" when teachers were unwilling to thoroughly examine their implicit bias and how it played out in their classrooms. From these difficult conversations and decisions came the positive outcomes of creating a safer and more culturally relevant and intentional learning environment for BIPOC youth. Being unapologetically equity-centered is more than an outward expression. It is about upholding students and their needs above politics, despite the risks to their careers. This is a manifestation of critical hope because it shows their ability to speak truth to power without a hardened heart.

The Need for Healing

The need for healing from a collective and individual space was important for me to explore because of my own experiences in the field as a school leader. I knew I was in need of healing, but I wondered about how other BWLs and whether or not I was alone in my need for healing. I define healing broadly, from the need for mental, physical, emotional, and spiritually rest to the need to heal from events that attempt to rob us of our sense of self. I view healing as a release from a memory or feeling that caused us pain.

From my own experiences, I know that Black women endure so much as we navigate society as the mules of world (Hurston, 1937/2006). Black woman school leaders are no exception, despite their positions of authority. I wanted to know if other Black women were in need of healing, just as I was. The purpose of asking the question from

both a collective and individual level was because Black women thrive in collective spaces that provide communal care (De Gruy, 2005; hooks, 2015b).

One of the intentions of my study was to invite Black women school leaders to name and define their experiences for themselves through counterstorytelling. I wanted to hear how they made sense of healing—an intentional diversion from the myth of Black women as superwomen who do not experience harm, or if they do, they heal quickly (Wallace, 1979). My rBWL participants shared that while they don't need to heal now, that they did go through a process of healing earlier, and they even shared how they had engaged in those individual and collective healing practices. They shared that they engaged in healing through redemption, releasing the hurt, leaning on spiritual practices, setting boundaries, and being with loved ones. I surmise that because rBWLs have had more time away from their work as leaders, they have been able to process their pain and move past that harm; the distance from their work might have provided the space needed for healing and moving on (French et al., 2020).

Regarding my cBWL participants, they are in the work now and have not had the chance to embark upon their needs of healing. In fact, none had considered or been asked about their need to heal from the gendered racism they experienced. Though they all expressed that meeting with other BWLs would provide a welcome support, none had made an effort to create a space for themselves like the rBWLs had done in previous decades. They also mentioned politics, not knowing how many BWLs existed in District X, and time as reasons why they had not reached out to fellow BWLs. Naming politics and a lack of time shows how cBWLs have internalized white supremacist culture (Okun, n.d.) and prevented them from seeking each other out as support. It is also a symptom of

how District X, in its ongoing financial struggles, had pitted principals against each other by fighting for limited resources.

Implications for My Research

When I began researching for my dissertation, I knew that I wanted my work to impact the field of educational research. Specifically, I wanted new researchers and scholar-practitioners to view my work as adding to the conversation of educational leadership from a new perspective—unearthing anti-Blackness in the field and also elevating the voice of Black women. Specifically, I believe my research adds to growing cannon of leadership that guides new and established leaders through new tools and ways of thinking about self, anti-racist leadership practices, and how to interrupt harmful learning experiences for students. My research extends current research by providing a new way to understand the experiences of Black women school leaders, as well as presenting relevant tools to transform the way that new leaders are trained, and the way established leaders are continually developed.

Much race-based educational research is focused on teachers interrupting systems of oppression in their classrooms, through methods such as curriculum and instruction, and preparing students to engage in the world (Alston, 2012; Bertrand & Rodela, 2017; Carpenter & Diem, 2013; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Furman, 2012). I intentionally focus my attention on school leadership because while all stakeholders are responsible for maintaining school culture, as school leaders it is our responsibility to create conditions where the work of enacting social justice is expected in our schools. There continues to be a gap in educational research that deeply examines this level of critical leadership (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012). Research has shown us many times that schools are

the place where the values of society converge. The beliefs we hold about race, class, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and other ways of being come together in how we teach, fund, and lead in our schools. For this reason, I argue the need for (re)imagining the field of educational leadership preparation and continued professional development of school leaders.

I believe Black women school leaders (from my study and from studies noted throughout my dissertation) have demonstrated the relentlessness it takes to combat systems of oppression as they converge in schools. Through learning on our legacy of resistance, engaging critical hope and acknowledging that healing is necessary, these become tools. These tools can be replicated by institutions as steps to be taken in the preparation and continued development oof school leaders. These tools are more than conceptual. If school leadership programs (university and district-sponsored) simply asked themselves the tough questions about the kind of school leaders they want to prepare and continually develop for our current context, they would find gaps in their curriculum, lack of diversity and inclusion. Some questions to consider:

- What are the beliefs held in our program about equity and inclusion? How are these beliefs maintaining the status quo of silencing leaders with intersectional identities?

- When Black, Indigenous and leaders of Color enter our leadership program, how are they supported, made to feel welcomed and reflected in the curriculum we teach?

- How well are we preparing our students to engage issues of equity (race, gender, sexuality, neurological and physical divergence, gender

expression, linguistic diversity, immigration/citizenship status etc.)? Are

we ready to receive feedback on this and make the changes necessary?

Let the answers to these questions be the first steps to a necessary equity-audit of school

leadership programs. Equity audits serve as a first step towards exposing inequity in

systems and structures, as well as a first step towards rebuilding. I would argue that most

school leadership programs in the U.S. need to be rebuilt to reflect the current context we

are currently living in. If school leadership programs are not reflecting diverse

perspectives in their programmatic structure, are not teaching preservice leaders how to

critically engage as a school leaders with diverse populations, as well as how to plan for

self-care in this work, then they are further contributing the problem (Alston, 2012, 2015;

Fullan, 1998; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2014; Theoharis, 2007).

Conclusion

When I call for (re)imagining, it is a call for Black women to be listened to, to be

leaders in the (re) formation of the field of educational leadership. I am not calling for us

to bear the labor of this transformation, as we have done in every major social movement

(Carruthers, 2018). The wild seeds of BWLs deserve to grow and flourish, and this

cannot happen without welcoming soil, access to nourishment, and belief. School leaders

are more than principals—they are community cultivators and voices of authority that

have the power to either propel or derail a child's future. If our goal is to completely

transform our schools, then we must do something different, we must be explicit and

unapologetic in our focus and our commitment to equity (Carruthers, 2018). This means

educational leadership preparation and professional development programs must develop

new curriculum that centers the lives those who are Black, queer, women. and disabled

(Carruthers, 2018), critically analyze how systems of oppression converge and proceed to murder the spirits of BIPOC children (Love, 2019), and develop meaningful systems and structures that aim to engage children as whole, and as facilitators of their own learning of the world and the word (Freire, 1970; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005; Camangian, 2015; Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012). To do this, school leaders must be trained as activists and be ready and prepared to engage in the work of critical leadership. The field of educational leadership can learn so much about activism as school leaders by studying, collaborating, reading, and citing the work of Black women.

Octavia E. Butler, Afro-futurist scholar, wrote a book called, *Wild Seed*, which shares the story of Anyanwu, an African woman who was born with the power to shapeshift into objects and various lifeforms. She frequently changes her form to protect her family and village. Like Anyanwu, I believe Black women are wild seeds, shapeshifting into whatever is necessary—mother, auntie, or custodian—to meet the needs of students in their roles as school leaders.

Ms. Kelly shares,

I pot more than 200 plants a year to give to the teachers at schools. I know they gonna kill half of them. I just took one teacher six, 'cause my grandson said, "Mr. Andres doesn't have any plants in his room. Could you give him some, Grandmother?" So, I said, "If you will help me, I'm gonna bring them to the school." But it's like all these plants right here, that little clipping right there started from something this size [Ms. Kelly points to size of her index finger]. Ms. [Brown] died last Saturday. She was a teacher at [Caston High School] She gave me that plant right there, I call it the mother plant. Well, that plant and its clippings, have done this [Ms. Kelly, points to multiple plants throughout her home], And I got it in 1977 as a gift.

The metaphor within the name of my dissertation comes from Ms. Kelly's quote. She kept a plant that started as a gift alive since 1977, and she gave its clippings away as gifts. She continued to give, knowing that most people would kill the plant, but she still gave.

Ms. Kelly did the same with her time, spirit, and life to better the lives of children and teachers in schools. This is critical hope materialized and personified. This is a metaphor and example of the promise of Black woman school leaders.

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