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Critical Mentorship for Black Girls: An Autoethnography of Perseverance, Commitment, and Empowerment

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by

Krystal Huff

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A Black Girl and Her Mentors:
A Story of Perseverance, Commitment, and Empowerment

by

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DEDICATION

To all of my little sisters, my future little sisters, my future daughters, and their daughters:

this is for you.

Take this and absorb the Black girl magic when the world tries to make you forget who you are.

You are a queen, a revolutionary, a mother of nature and of the world.

Wear your crown with pride and don’t ever take it off.

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ABSTRACT

Critical Mentorship for Black Girls:

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Working class Black girls experience multilayered oppression informed by their triadic social identity that sits at the intersection of race, gender, and class in their lives and more specifically in their schooling experiences (Collins, 1986, 1989; Onyeka-Crawford, Patrick, & Chaudry, 2017). A variety of mentoring practices have been adopted among educators throughout the public-school system to remedy the impact of poor educational opportunities for Black girls. In contrast to the use of traditional mentorship practices that solely focus on the individual, critical mentorship seeks to engage and support the cultural, political, and economic contexts that positively shape the experiences and aspirations of Black girls and young women. To better understand this phenomenon, this deeply insightful autoethnographic study engages the following questions: (a) What were my particular experiences with mentors that prepared me to persevere in education in ways that nourished my commitment and empowerment? (b) What were the particular experiences with my mentors that assisted me in connecting with the Black girls that I have mentored in my work? and (c) What can my experiences as a Black feminist mentor of Black girls contribute to our understanding of critical mentoring? The application of Black feminism, Black girlhood studies, and critical mentoring frameworks found the following major themes to be critical in mentoring Black girls during childhood, adolescence, and the university years: (a) individual identity development, (b) development of individual voice, (c)

sisterhood and solidarity, and (d) conscientization and resistance. This dissertation offers key principles in mentoring Black girls, and recommendations for how to shift the larger approach of mentoring to better meet the needs of Black girls in childhood, adolescence, university years, and beyond.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I Can and I Will

I body of a woman

Vow to carry courage when fear comes

I will turn my struggles into triumphs

I will turn my wounds into power

After every fall I will rise like every sun I see

I am divine and filled with resilience

No challenge is too great for me

I am strong and worthy

I will find and speak my truth even if my voice shakes

I can and will fulfill my dreams

I can and I will reject anything that says otherwise

Jaynese Poole (2017)

I am a product of successful mentoring. As a first-generation college student raised by a single mother of six, my sisters and nonfamilial adults played a crucial role in my life. Having had tremendous Black female mentors throughout my life, I was exposed to new ways of thinking and living. I attribute the amazing experiences and success in my life to them. My first mentor was a young Black girl, she was not even a teen when she began to make life-altering decisions that greatly impacted my life. She was my best friend, my *othermother*, my hero, and my sister. Othermother is a scholarly term that was born out of the Black feminist tradition and

signifies the unique relationship of an older Black woman who serves as a caregiver and motherly figure to a younger person in a specific setting (James, 1993b). Nicole's invincible nature and her inclination to achieve what seemed to be the hardest goal to a timid 4-year-old little girl, climbing 6" tall trees and engaging in other physically and mentally challenging activities, allowed me to see the power and courage that little Black girls have. Nicole kept me safe on our daily journey home through a field of sunflowers taller than me and would take care of all of the domestic duties in the absence of my parents; we did not live with our dad, and our mother was always at work.

Her mentoring transformed from smaller heroic actions to standing up for me against children that would try to bully me, inspiring me and tutoring me to achieve academic success, and being a positive example when it came to boys and self-respect. Nicole helped me to graduate from my undergraduate school, reading and meticulously editing assignments such as my personal statement to my last research paper. Following in her footsteps as the second to attend and the first to graduate from college, I became her legacy, as well as my sisters who just completed their undergraduate and graduate degrees simultaneously in Spring 2018.

Ms. Smith was my next notable Black female mentor. She was my fifth-grade math teacher and was the first Black teacher that I had ever had. Her charismatic and lively approach to teaching made me love math and consider becoming a teacher. One of the ways in which she incentivized good grades was through issuing Monopoly money that we could later use to buy snacks. She occasionally set up a replica of a small store in her classroom, fully stocked with treats and delicious homemade pickles that we were able to purchase with our Monopoly money. I did not realize it at the time, but she taught me the value of the dollar and instilled a strict work

ethic in me. Ms. Smith was so proud when I was selected to give the commencement speech at my fifth-grade graduation and spoke often about my propensity to excel in college.

Later, Ms. Morehead became a formidable mentor for my older sister, my two younger sisters and myself, when we enrolled in the summer programs at the local non-profit. She played a pivotal role in our college-going legacy. Ms. Morehead helped us to find our first jobs; I was an accountant intern at the corporate location for the very nonprofit that my sisters and I were served by. Her commitment to us was profound: answering calls day in and day out regarding Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) applications and scholarships, paying for us to participate in field trips that exposed us to a new world, and continuing to support me by employing multiple youth whom I mentor. The field trips allowed me to understand that there were different qualities of life and that I was worthy and capable of having that. Further, she introduced me to the power of nonprofits, and I began to realize that the calling on my life was to work toward the empowerment of my community.

My othermothers and mentors have had a lasting impact on my life. Nicole taught me to challenge oppressive traditional gender norms, have confidence in being smart and sporty, and the importance of being brave. Ms. Smith introduced me to the idea of having authentic relationships with teachers, something that I had never truly experienced until I met her. She inspired me to consider science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), male-dominated fields like astronomy. It was her lessons that gave me the understanding of the value of a dollar. Finally, I return to Ms. Morehead again, because she was one of the first Black females to introduce me to the study of racism and systemic oppression, more generally. Besides marching

band visits to other high schools and communities, it was Ms. Morehead's field trips that exposed me more deeply to the varying levels of access and privilege in U.S. society.

Each of these powerful Black female mentors paved the way for me to pursue my education, develop into a self-loving and socially conscious Black woman, and pursue my calling as a passionate activist. The mentoring I received from the Black females in my life served to protect me and provide me with parenting and guidance as I transitioned from stage to stage throughout my life. My mentors supported and vouched for me, even when I was not able to do so for myself. They encouraged me and saw strength and brilliance in me that I did not know was there. Because of them, I became who I am today—an othermother, educator, and mentor to many young girls.

Through my own work as a mentor, I came to personally understand the extraordinary difference that effective mentoring can make in the lives of young Black females. Moreover, through my current and past work as a mentor, I developed a deep conviction that young Black females in our communities truly deserve the nurturing and support of othermothers who can hold space for them and have their back as they evolve and unfold academically and socially in the world. For this reason, I see my intimate and powerful experiences with both my Black female mentors and my young mentees as truly the inspiration for this study on Critical Mentoring of Black girls. At the heart of my practice has been a yearning to better support young Black girls to achieve their dreams. However, to do this more widely, we need to examine closely the experience of mentoring, with respect to what practices have enhanced the development of Black females and what do successful Black females recommend we do, in order to improve the mentoring experiences of young Black females in the future.

With all this in mind, this dissertation utilizes an autoethnographic method to explore the manner in which mentoring influenced, shaped, and determined my journey, as a poor, working class Black girl growing up in South Central Los Angeles. This story is important in that, through my personal and professional experiences with mentoring young Black girls, I came to realize that one of the key elements that allowed us to connect were the ways in which our histories of survival seemed to echo one another. Moreover, through a close examination of my own life and the mentoring experiences that have brought me to where I am today, along with some of my own experiences as a mentor of Black girls, I seek to identify those central principles that are associated with the effective mentoring of Black girls.

Statement of the Problem

Black girls continue to suffer from the longstanding ills that stem from institutional structures steeped in racism and capitalism—two major ideologies upon which this country was built. The historical criminalization of the Black female in America begins in bondage, having their bodies exploited for free labor, subjected to both literal and institutional rape to produce a labor force for the perpetuation of chattel slavery (Brown, White-Johnson, & Griffin-Fennell, 2013; Carter, 2003). After freedom was supposedly obtained with the emancipation proclamation in 1865, Black females were subjected to second class citizenship through the denial of their right to be educated, policies of the Jim Crow Era, and more recently, neoliberal hegemonic practices that often result in their continued oppression and even loss of life ("Killed by Police," 2017).

Oppressive institutional policies, moreover, result in limited life outcomes for Black girls, including criminalization and school pushout (Gorlewski & Porfilio, 2013; Morris, 2016),

increased involvement with social services such as the foster care system (C. F. Collins, 2015), and challenges with access to mental health services and other recurring institutional abuses (C. F. Collins, 2015; Love & Duncan, 2017). These violent practices have been justified through racialized definitions and demonizing depictions of Black females as hypersexual, belligerent, and angry (Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017). About this, Leonardo and Grubb (2013) asserted:

> Race is ultimately not about people's biological or genetic makeup, but how physical markers, such as skin color, are interpreted to mean something about human worth, intelligence, and respect. . . . These human evaluations are then organized into a hierarchical system wherein Whites are judged as superior to people of color. (p. 17)

To understand the issues and struggles that Black girls face, we must have an understanding of the social and material contexts that shape their lives. Black girls, born to Black parents, face unique struggles based on the systematic oppression that continues to plague their experiences and shape the material conditions of Black communities. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average income of a White American homeowner in 2016 was $89,757, whereas it was a mere $57,445 for Black homeowners (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017b). Black Americans only comprise 13.3% percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017a) of the population yet, they comprise 38% of prison inmates (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2017). Further, as of 2015, only 22% of Black Americans ages 25-34 held a bachelor's degree, and although Black females exceed the enrollment of Black males, Black females remain a small minority in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011; Ryan & Bauman, 2016).

Such debilitating environmental stressors have often led to depression, anxiety, and other untreated mental illnesses, which become more problematic due to the justified mistrust that

Black Americans have toward the U.S. health system (C. F. Collins, 2015). With these concerns in mind, this contextual discussion of the problem explores the complex social issues faced by black girls and the impact it has on the Black community. In addition, this discussion also provides a brief overview of efforts to eradicate these societal ills and empower young Black females.

Racialization of Black Girls

Racism has successfully been operationalized as a weapon of mass destruction against racialized people in the United States. For Black girls, however, the oppression that they experience in the world is unfortunately exacerbated due to the intersectional nature of their identities as both racialized and gendered beings (P. H. Collins, 1986, 1989; Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017). For example, one of the most prominent stereotypes ascribed to Black women and girls is the "mad" or "angry" Black woman (Cooley, Winslow, Vojt, Shein, & Ho, 2018; Griffin, 2012; Ivashkevich, 2017). Another stereotype that directly impacts the ways in which Black girls' sexuality is both perceived and performed is that of the "jezebel." Brown, White-Johnson, and Griffin-Fennell (2013) asserted that the image of the "Black Jezebel—a hypersexual, seductive and manipulative slave woman—has been one of the most pervasive and evolving images, not only influencing the socialization, but also the misperceptions and the blatant and distorted stereotyping of African American women today" (p. 525).

Unfortunately, these same misconceptions also impact Black girls due to the complex ways in which they are subjected to *adultification* and thus, treated far more harshly by schools and the juvenile justice system, as compared to their White female peers (Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017, p. 1). In the report, *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls'*

Childhood, released by the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez (2017), analyzed the adultification of black girls from a young age and the reasons why they are perceived as more adult than their White peers. More specifically, Epstein et al. (2017) defined adultification as

> the perception of Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than [W]hite girls of the same age—as well as its possible causal connection with negative outcomes across a diverse range of public systems, including education, juvenile justice, and child welfare. (p. 1)

Along the same lines, Park (2017) argued that such debilitating and damaging perceptions are tied to a deep history of racial discrimination in the United States and societal stereotypes projected on to Black girls from an early age.

Black families socialize young Black girls to resist these stereotypes (C. F. Collins, 2015). Hughes et al. (2006) defined socialization as the messages transmitted across generations about norms, expectations, beliefs, and values from within the culture. Moreover, the practice of socializing minorities to assimilate has historically been referred to as the process of Americanization (Troutman & Jiménez, 2017). Although Blacks girls are generally made aware of these misconceptions and are prepared for them by their families and the Black community, every facet of their lives continues to be deeply impacted by dehumanizing stereotypes and the unaddressed implicit biases that permeate mainstream society. This phenomenon is most evident in the educational system.

Education

The criminalization of Black girls is much more than a street phenomenon. It has

extended into our schools, disrupting one of the most important protective factors in a girl's life: her education. (Morris, 2016, p. 3)

The motives engendered by racialized capitalism also give rise to the criminalization of Black girls for profit (C. F. Collins, 2015). The structure of traditional public-school sites constitutes the prime conditions to enact this form of violence and oppression (Morris, 2016). In *Tough Fronts*, Dance (2002) builds on the past works of critical scholars, such as Giroux (2001), Delpit (1988), and Ladson-Billings (1995), who all have argued that education is not the great equalizer, as often purported to be. There is persistent inequality in the American public-school system; and individuals have been fighting against it since the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case and the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954 that led to school desegregation. One of the major arguments behind desegregation was that Black students were not getting access to social capital within Black schools. However, Morris (2004) asserts Black students still did not gain access to the plentiful resources of mainstream schooling enjoyed by their White peers, due to the manner in which Black students—including Black girls—were ostracized during their schooling experience.

Relatedly, following school integration, it was rare that Black students had culturally competent teachers in the classroom. A 2016 U.S. Department of Education Report, titled "The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce," found that more than 80% of the current teaching force is White. The cultural disconnect between White teachers and Black girls has provided the perfect breeding ground for hegemonic practices that seek to socialize them into the dominant culture (Troutman & Jiménez, 2017), as opposed to creating a context where black girls can become part of a critically informed youth citizenry (Darder, 2017, 2018b; Freire,

2000). The racializing class imperatives of the neoliberal context of schooling over the last three decades has led to a major push for high stakes testing, which disproportionately impacts working class students and students of color who are held accountable despite lack of access to adequate teachers and resources (Darder, 2012, 2017; Tuck, 2013).

Moreover, the impact of neoliberal educational policies of accountability have led to high rates of school pushout. The oversurveillance and policing of Black girls was also confirmed by Epstein et al. (2017), who found that "black girls are more likely to be disciplined for subjective infractions" (p. 10). This unjust treatment of black girls is consistent with a phenomenon better known today as the school-to-prison pipeline (Darder, 2012, 2017). About this, Morris (2016) argued:

> Some of the most egregious applications of punitive school discipline in this country have criminalized Black girls as young as six or seven years old, who have been arrested for throwing tantrums in their school classrooms, yelling and screaming at a teacher, and being disruptive to the learning environment. (p. 4)

Nearly one third of girls referred to law enforcement are Black girls, even though they make up only 16% of the enrolled student population (Morris, 2016).

Further, Onyeka-Crawford, Patrick, and Chaudhry (2017) found that Black girls were five times more likely than White girls to be suspended and, when they are suspended, they are not provided access to educational resources (Morris, 2016). Black girls are disproportionately retained and made to repeat grade levels. In 2013, Black girls were less likely than White females to have their cases diverted (Morris, 2016). This study also found that 28% of Black girls attend schools with no chemistry classes, 28.4% of girls attend school with no calculus

classes, and 18.6% of Black girls attend schools without physics (Morris, 2016). These academic barriers have made it difficult for poor working-class Black girls to successfully navigate and advance within the U.S. school system, which has negatively influenced their efforts and thwarted opportunities for their needs to be addressed effectively by educational institutions and social service agencies.

#Blackgirlmagic and Counter Narratives

> We are shape-shifters, superheroes, style-layers, soul scholars, truth seekers, sisters, healers, Holly Rollers, hotties, listeners, lovers, dreamers, divas, daredevils, doers of the damn thing-all at the same damn time. (Davis, as cited in Cooper, Morris, & Boylorn, 2017, p. 109).

Black girls, however, have not been passive actors in these oppressive situations, persisting despite a variety of obstacles. Despite their age, perceived naivety, or the assumption that they are unaware of their own realities, Black girls fight back (White, 2017). They continue to resist and labor to liberate themselves. P. H. Collins (1986) spoke of the struggle to be self-defined and to self-evaluate as activists, in order to define themselves as historical subjects, as full human beings, and reject debilitating definitions of "other." Young Black girls have used media to offer counternarratives and to challenge dominant narratives that fail to reflect their realities (Ivashkevich, 2017). The #Blackgirlmagic movement and resistance organized by Black female youth has been effective but is not structurally sufficient to make a sweeping transformative impact on the racism and sexism Black girls face each day. Yet, what their persistence loudly proclaims is that Black girls require that society invest in them as individuals and at the larger societal level. They have a right to opportunities that will assist them to prepare

themselves to work with others to eradicate the structural forces that have resulted in the longstanding oppression of Black females in U.S. society.

Interventions

A variety of interventions over the years have focused on addressing the deep educational inequalities that persist due to racism and economic inequalities. Most targeted interventions that address the shortcomings of education, however, do not specifically address the uniquely complex positionality and experiences of Black girls. Instead, the tendency of these interventions is to primarily focus on minorities as a whole (conflating all subordinated cultural groups), or Black boys in particular (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2016). Nevertheless, the programs are worth mentioning briefly here.

Culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy, for example, has become a widely used practice in the field of education to address the cultural disconnect between diverse students and the predominantly White teaching force. Ladson-Billings (1995) argued that academic success and cultural competence can converge in practices that allow Black students to tap into their cultural knowledge in order to learn. It has become so widespread that educators across the world attend conferences and trainings in order to become well-versed in the pedagogy. A few key examples of these include the 4th Annual Culturally Responsive Teaching Conference (whose keynote speaker was none other than the foundational scholar, Gloria Ladson-Billings), the Sealaska Heritage Institute's Our Cultural Landscape Culturally Responsive Education Conference, and the 19th International Conference on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and International Research.

Traditional youth mentoring. Mentoring is another widely used intervention for youth who are subjected to social, emotional, and financial oppression (Colley, 2003; Ford, Scott, Goings, Wingfield, & Henfield, 2016; Weiston-Serdan, 2017). Mullen (2017) argued that

> the traditional definition of mentoring refers to a one-way, long-term teaching relationship in a one-to-one situation whereby knowledge and wisdom are imparted by the expert to the mentee. The protégé, typically younger and less experienced, receives career support and psychosocial (e.g. emotional, cognitive) benefit. (p. 35)

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA), self-proclaimed as the nation's oldest one-to-one mentoring organization, was founded in 1904. The mission of BBBSA (2017) is to essentially support children that face hardships and difficulty with one-to-one mentoring relationships supported by an organization committed to changing children's lives for the better. The accountability statement on their webpage mirrored the traditional definition of mentoring:

> By partnering with parents/guardians, volunteers, and others in the community we are accountable for each child in our program achieving:
>
> - Higher aspirations, greater confidence, and better relationships
> - Avoidance of risky behaviors
> - Educational success. (Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, 2017, para. 4)

Unfortunately, many well-meaning traditional mentoring programs fall short of creating an empowering context for Black girls due to the manner in which they replicate a deficit view and one-size fits all model, which fails to address the unique experiences of Black girls. This form of mentoring is deeply entrenched in an ideology that posits young people as passive

participants in their mentoring relationship and incapable actors in contributing to the learning of their mentors (Clutterbuck, Kochan, Lunsford, Dominguez, & Haddock-Millar, 2017).

Critical mentoring. Critical mentoring (to be discussed more fully in subsequent sections), in stark contrast to traditional forms of mentoring, seeks to build upon the cultural capital of mentees, developing reciprocal relationships that empower them to be leaders in their lives and in their communities (Weiston-Serdan, 2017). Central to critical mentoring programs is the importance of engaging and taking into account the impact of the larger oppressive structures, such as racism, class inequalities, sexism, and homophobia that impact students' lives. However, despite the expressed intent and concern regarding issues of power, often issues central to Black girls are not addressed in substantive ways, leaving these unattended in the mentoring process. Hence, this study seeks to rethink critical mentoring from the standpoint of the experience of Black girls, with the intent to provide new knowledge and recommendations with greater specificity, in ways that will support the perseverance, commitment, and empowerment of Black girls in U.S. society.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

At the heart of this study is the assumption that critical mentoring, designed to meet the specific needs of Black girls, can have an empowering impact on their lives and the larger society. With this in mind, the overarching purpose of this research is to explore the power of critical mentoring through a deeply intimate examination of its impact on my life. The goal is to allow for my experience to demonstrate the powerful impact that critical mentoring can have on the lives of young Black girls, contributing to an intervention designed specifically from their unique experiences and needs as racialized and gendered subjects in this country. The vast

majority of interventions have focused on marginalized communities more generally or Black boys in particular. Hence this research intends to fill the gap in the literature concerning mentoring interventions specifically designed to engage the needs of Black girls.

Furthermore, as shown overwhelmingly, we remain devastated by poverty, police brutality, the prison industrial complex, and other deeply embedded forms of oppression. The many advocacy and organizing efforts that have emerged to address the needs of the Black population and other marginalized communities have failed to end oppression or even make a large enough impact on the lives of Black people. There is a need for a revolution in education fueled by empowered youth, who possess the power and know-how to push the envelope to the next level. Thus, the significance of this study is rooted in the themes that emerge, to develop principles and understanding that specifically speak to the successful mentoring experiences of Black girls and their potential as transformative subjects of their destiny.

On a micro level, widespread critical mentoring can potentially contribute to the personal emancipation, liberation, and activism of Black girls. On a mezzo level, this study can impact their family networks, friends, and may lead them to become activists in their communities and in their schools. On a national and macro level, these girls can go on to become women who will impact structural oppression, through the careers they choose, the research they undertake, or the causes they support during the course of their lives. Further, they can also have a macro impact through the young people that they decide to critically mentor in the future, creating a larger movement of critical action.

Research Questions

In honor of the amazing resilience and transformative power of young Black girls, and in direct response to the call to invest in them, this autoethnographic study is completely and fully dedicated to examining the experiences of a Black girl and her critical mentoring experiences. Giving breath and voice to my own lived experience as a poor, Black girl, I will use my experience of being mentored and of mentoring Black girls to explore the following questions:

1. What were my particular experiences with mentors that prepared me to persevere in education in ways that nourished my commitment and empowerment?
2. What were the particular experiences with my mentors that assisted me in connecting with the Black girls that I have mentored in my work?
3. What can my experiences as a Black feminist mentor of Black girls contribute to our understanding of critical mentoring?

Conceptual Framework

This dissertation utilizes an intersectional approach, in alignment with the conceptual framework that will be employed. Theories of Black feminism, Black girlhood studies, and critical mentoring (see Figure 1) all contain critical components that provide for a deep understanding of my mentoring experiences as a poor, working class Black girl. Black feminism serves to provide an important underpinning for this study, in that it centers the experiences of Black women as both raced and gendered beings in society. Black girlhood studies, as the next layer, adds a critical lens to examine the particular experiences of Black girls, specifically focusing on Black girls during their formative years. Finally, the last layer of this conceptual framework is that of critical mentoring, which provides mentoring principles rooted both in

research and practice, that positively impact the experiences of young Black girls. Together, these three lenses provide the conceptual framework that will be used to analyze the autoethnographic data. The following discussion provides a brief overview of each theoretical lens.

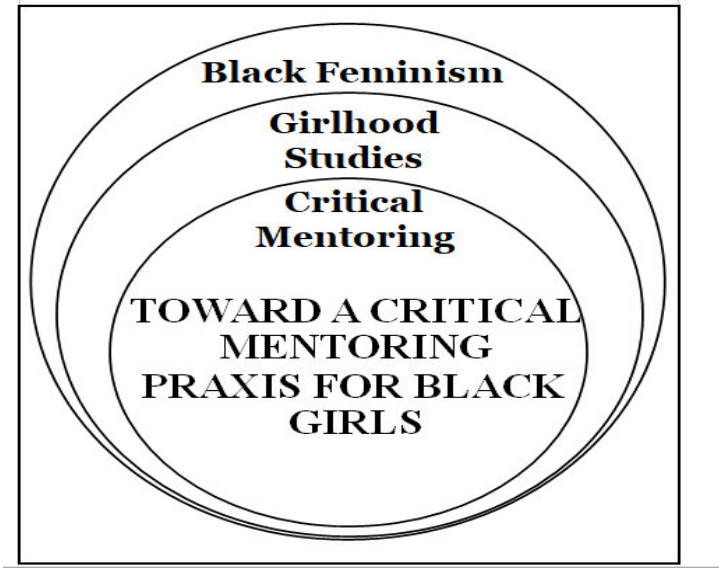

Figure 1. Conceptual framework diagram.

Black Feminism

The intersectionality of a variety of oppressions play a prominent role in the lives of Black females in America. With the context of Black feminism, Crenshaw (1989, 1991) defined intersectionality as the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's lived experiences, in relation to employment, education, social interactions, and all other facets of life. Thus, intersectionality is a critical component of any Black feminist framework. Black feminism, in stark contrast to White feminism and Black liberation movements, addresses the experiences of Black women that sit at the intersections of race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1991).

Crenshaw (1991) asserted that "the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intra group differences" (p. 1). Crenshaw (1989, 1991), Collins (1989), hooks (2000), and Madison (1993) helped to lay the foundation of Black feminism and used it to bring voice to the marginalized lives of Black women in America. The intent of Black feminism is to provide a multifaceted theoretical framework born of critique and the lived experiences of Black women (Collins, 1986; hooks, 2000). This allows the experiences of Black girls and women to become sources of legitimized knowledge (Collins, 1989; hooks, 1996; Madison, 1993), in the process of naming their own experiences.

Feminist Theory: From Margins to Center, a foundational text written by bell hooks (2000), has come to be used in many instances as a blueprint for Black feminist research. The work illuminates the racism deeply embedded in White feminist movements and provides a new framework that places the experiences of Black females as the center of the discourse. Hence, the works of Black feminist scholars has been employed as one of the central lenses through which this work was conceptualized, executed and analyzed, to allow the power of the Black females to emerge and inform how critical mentoring can be redefined for Black girls.

Black Girlhood Studies

> Why does pink persist? Why "sugar and spice and everything nice," as the old-fashioned, but still recited, verse goes? How do we define what it means to be a girl? (Lipkin, 2009, p. 13)

Girlhood studies delves into the ways in which girls are socialized into gender roles from birth, starting with the ever-present pink clothing at a girl's baby shower. About this, Lipkin

(2009) pointed out, “Girls’ studies is an academic field that specifically considers the experience of gendering girls, starting at the earliest moments of their lives and continuing into their transformation to young women” (p. 14). It applies a critical lens to the myriad tools used to socialize girls, including gendered language, toys, media and images of beauty, as well as one-to-one interactions from parents and other family members who make it clear what a girl’s place is, to name a few (Brown, 2009; C. F. Collins, 2015; Lipkin, 2009). The particular emphasis on their formative years lends insight into the lack of choice of identity made available to young people and girls, in particular. Blaise (2014) explained, “By privileging the girls' experiences . . . research challenges the assumption that social-emotional development naturally occurs or is an essentialized feminine trait” (p. 8). The subliminal and strikingly clear messages that girls receive throughout their lives shape them, engraining in them a deep oppression that manifests in their own self-policing.

Intersectionality also emerges as a central principle of Black girlhood studies through its examination of the ways in which race, class, gender, and age all collectively inform the identity of girls. It challenges the “normalized” or status quo experiences of childhood, which posit masculinity and boys as the norm (Blaise, 2014). Thus, this layer of the conceptual framework contributes to the purpose of this study in illuminating the voices and experiences of Black girls specifically and allows for the world to become aware of both the needs of girls and the unique struggles and joys that they experience during their formative years (Lipkin, 2009).

Critical Mentoring

Colley (2003) has argued, “The very word ‘mentor’ has acquired a mythical status, suggesting almost superhuman powers to transform the mentee in the face of all odds” (p. 1).

Weiston-Serdan (2017) too critiqued traditional forms of mentoring, such as that outlined in Obama's My Brother's Keeper (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2016), in that it is deeply rooted in respectability politics, middle class values, and assimilation. This mainstream form of mentoring does not call for a decolonizing practice rooted in the disruption of oppressive systems. Weiston-Serdan (2017) further argued that traditional mentoring rooted in these principles "do not help the youth to address the systemic and institutional challenges of race, class, gender, sexuality, ableism, and so on" (p. 9). Thus, employing the works of critical race theorists to develop her definition of mentoring, Weiston-Serdan (2017) posited:

> Critical mentoring is the next juncture in mentoring practice-practice that challenges deficit-based notions of protégés, halts the force of protégé adaptation to dominant ideology, and engages in liberatory processes that trigger critical consciousness and an ongoing and joint struggle for transformation. (p. 1)

This approach to mentoring, which focuses on the positive identity development of non-dominant youth, is what is termed as critical mentoring. Critical mentoring seeks to build upon the cultural assets of mentees, developing reciprocal relationships that empower them to be leaders in their lives and in their communities (Weiston-Serdan, 2017). These mentoring relationships have been known to nurture empowering and inspirational relationships that equip students not only with the confidence to pursue higher education, but an understanding and know-how to navigate university environments and professional spaces more broadly.

Weiston-Serdan (2017) is considered the foundational scholar of critical mentoring as a community-based praxis, but there have been other scholars in the field of education who have explored related forms. Liou, Martinez, and Rotheram-Fuller (2016) spoke to the notion of

critical mentoring pedagogy in the classroom in ways that echo the liberatory and emancipatory characteristics of Weiston-Serdan's (2017) definition. More specifically, they defined critical mentoring as

> a framework that calls for mentors to assist mentees to make important decisions on their lives, and to successfully navigate a world complicated by social inequality, power relationships, and constant social, economic, and technological changes. . . . This critical mentoring pedagogy is a reciprocal and reflexive process between the mentor and the mentee to collectively foster a greater understanding of the mentee and their family's aspirational, navigational, and informational strategies, and to be empowered to resist and transform institutional structures instead of reproducing stratified social relations and power. (p. 105)

Further, Edwards-Groves (2014) examined the power of critical mentoring conversations between pre-service teachers and supervising teachers and found that they too used a reciprocal mentoring model, positing benefits to both mentor and mentee. Thus, works that have utilized some form of Critical Mentoring, all speak to the shift from traditional mentoring that is founded on a "banking" notion (Freire, 2000) of mentoring. Banking in mentoring practices manifests itself in the widely accepted belief that mentees are empty vessels to be filled by mentors, and that mentees have nothing to teach their mentors. As such, it is a vertical and unidirectional dynamic, where the mentor fills the mentee with information or knowledge and the mentee's job is to passively receive it.

In contrast, Weiston-Serdan's (2017) revolutionary approach to mentoring was developed by a practitioner scholar in collaboration with what she refers to as her protégés. Thus, this work

is rooted not only in research-based foundations but is inclusive of the very youth that participate in these experiences at Youth Mentoring Action Network, Weiston-Serdan's nonprofit organization. Another exceptional characteristic of her book on critical mentoring is that each section of the book concludes with reflection questions that practitioners, researchers, and communities can use in navigating critical mentoring as a praxis and making it accountable to those who are served.

Moreover, this approach to mentoring adopts the following definition for mentors: "adults dedicated to youth development work in which they foster long-term relationships dedicated to investing in young people and increasing their capacity for success [as well as] "recognizing and addressing . . . toxicity" (Weiston-Serdan, 2017, p. 1), such as the traumas and brutality that they face. This definition is starkly different from traditional definitions or descriptions about the role of mentor, which generally embody a sense of saviorhood in their perspective toward working with youth (Clutterbuck et al., 2017).

Weiston-Serdan (2017) further advocated the view that youth centrism, culturally relevant pedagogy, intersectionality, and being data-driven are crucial components of critical mentoring. Youth centrism is characterized as "making young people the absolute center of all planning, activities, fundraising, training, evaluating, and so on" (pp. 28-29). Further, she notes that "being youth centric means being explicit about partnering with young people to plan and implement programs as necessary" (Weiston-Serdan, 2017, p. 29). Weiston-Serdan (2017) best exemplified this notion of centrism through the mantra, "Nothing about us without us" (p. 29). In my literature review in Chapter 2, the intricate details of critical mentoring will be explored more fully, delving deeper into the principles of this approach to mentoring, as well as the manner in

which critical mentors, through their cultural knowledge and understanding of systems of oppression, function as significant cultural brokers (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983) in the lives of Black girls.

Methodology

Research is often revered as a neutral process with a distanced, objective, and dispassionate researcher at the helm, based on the false assumption that neutrality will somehow allow us to better represent our subjects to whom we supposedly have no relationship to (Spry, 2001). The critical assumptions I bring to this study reject this notion, because just as in my practice, I find that connecting with the Black girls I mentor means I must share my story. This methodology seeks to dismantle the barriers of traditional research approaches that position the researcher as an outsider from the phenomenon being studied. Thus, just as my lived experience informs my practice, my past lived experience also has, does, and will inform this research. This qualitative study will be conducted using an autoethnographic method that will allow me to closely examine my story of mentoring experiences from two important dimensions. First, through examining three phases of my lived experiences as a mentee, including (a) Childhood, (b) Adolescence, and (c) University Student; and, secondly, through my experiences as a Black feminist mentor of Black girls over the last decade.

Spry (2001) defined autoethnography as "a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts" (p. 710), asserting that it brings voice to the colonized body. It is interventionist in nature (Denzin, 2014), possessing the capacity to bridge the disconnect between the researched and the researcher, because it aims to contextualize the individual's own life with culturally relevant issues and to use this narrative as a mechanism to create awareness,

as well as “efficacy and healing in their communal lives” (Spry, 2001, p. 712). The personal nature of this methodology requires a great deal of honesty, authenticity, and vulnerability in order to produce the purposeful data needed to dialogically engage research questions effectively. And although there are many critiques of autoethnographies, Goodall (1998) argued that good autoethnography

> completely dissolves any idea of distance, doesn't produce “findings,” isn't generalizable, and only has credibility when self-reflexive, and authority when richly vulnerable. . . . When it is done well, we can learn previously unspoken, unknown things about culture and communication from it. (paper presentation)

Since the analytical reach or capacity of the research only goes as far as the researcher is willing to go, the role and impact of the researcher on the research is central to the method of autoethnography. In autoethnography, the role of the researcher is that of both subject and researcher. As Chang (2008) argued, “Authors are the main narrators, interpreters, and researchers of their personal experiences” (p. 65). It is the task of the researcher to comb through the intimate details of one’s life and determine those profound experiences that are inextricably linked to the questions that fuel the study. The researcher must therefore provide rich data, or text, and consistently maintain awareness of one’s own intentions in what is shared, in order to ensure the story is told is vibrantly and still contributes to liberatory research (Denzin, 1997). This aligns well with the chosen theoretical frameworks that center on the experiences and voice of one Black girl, while simultaneously providing a critical analysis of the structural forces that are the context for the lives of Black girls in this country.

Denzin (1997) described the emancipatory practice of analyzing one's own positionality through a critical lens of discovery in the following way:

> The author becomes the mirror to the world under analysis. This reflected world then represents the subject's experiences through a complex textual apparatus. The subject is a textual construction because the real flesh and blood person is always translated into either an analytic subject as a social type or a textual subject who speaks from the author's pages. (p. 5)

The translation of one's physical body—a raced, gendered, classed Black female—into a text, must accurately depict the experiences of that body in relation to its social location in the world. That is the true power of autoethnography, creating new narratives from the vantage point of the silenced. It is precisely this very personal aspect of autoethnography that lends it to scrutiny and thus, requires a careful and systematic process in the collection, coding, and analysis of the data.

Positionality

I am a mentor, but before that, I was and still am a mentee. Mentoring has played a profound role in my life and has, in many ways, laid the foundation for my current career and educational goals. Mentoring has also uplifted me during some of the most sorrowful moments in my life, creating hope in episodes of grave doubt, despair, loneliness, and abandonment. In honor of the critical tradition in which I am embedded, I am committed to embodying the vulnerability in sharing my story, in the hopes that others may heal from my pain (Freire, 2000).

For the past 15 years, college has been a focal point in my life and that of my sisters. I can still recall that day when my older sister Nicole, walked through the living room door and told my mother that she wanted to go to college. My mother, not having graduated from college

at the time, replied, “No you can’t go. How are you going to pay for that?” Now 15 years later, between the four of us that were raised together, we hold three bachelor’s degrees, two master’s degrees, and, later in 2019, one doctorate. It has been a long road getting here. Hence, my experiences as a Black girl, growing up poor and struggling, getting an education, and now working as a Black feminist mentor of Black girls inform deeply my positionality.

Limitations

Although autoethnography was born out of tradition committed to emancipation and empowerment, many scholars, such as Shields (2010) have argued that it is unfit to achieve these goals, since it fails to include the voices of the oppressed. Anderson (2006) and Coffey (1999) similarly have argued that autoethnographies have limited impact because of their self-indulgent nature. In response, Kahl (2011) countered this view by arguing that autoethnography, in fact, privileges the engagement of deep data that emerges from researchers whose voices have generally been silenced and oppressed. Starr (2010) has also refuted this notion, positing that intentionally focusing on the self can catalyze the recognition that personal experiences are inextricably linked to larger systemic issues, thus inspiring liberatory practices that aim to transform oppression. Hence, rather than being a limitation, the complexity of my positionality compels me to speak about the struggle of my own experiences in service of those who have yet to discover their own pathway to liberation. We travel this pathway together, and I hope that my grounded perspective and ability to articulate my personal journey will forge connections grounded in empathetic solidarity. In this way, we can better understand the actual struggles and needs of Black girls and work to transform the mentoring they receive.

Delimitations

This study homes in on the experiences of a specific subset of a very diverse marginalized population. Black girls are oppressed both due to their gender and their race. However, many more are subjected to a deeper layer of oppression due to their class status (Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017). This study aims to address the unique experiences of a poor Black girl, raised by a single mother who often had to rely on public assistance to care for her family (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017b). Further, it also speaks from the position of a young Black girl who attended some of the worst performing schools, in one of the worst performing school districts in the nation. It is for this reason that the use of Black feminism and Black girlhood studies will potentially allow for a deep interrogation of the systems that worked together in the life of this one Black girl and can speak to how varied forms of oppression and microaggressions can show up in the lives of others.

This dissertation focuses on the role that critical mentoring played on my life growing up as a poor Black girl. The assertion, rooted directly in personal experience, is that critical mentors served as cultural and opportunity brokers (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983; Weiston-Serdan, 2017) for me and other Black girls of similar means, building much needed connections to social, cultural, and many times, economic capital (Carter, 2003). Thus, this research operates from the standpoint that critical mentoring is a transformative practice due to the impact that it has had on my life and that of my mentees.

Definitions and Key Terms

Black girls. Black girls of African ancestry, whose lineage contains that of enslaved Africans in the United States of America, particularly those that are considered low-income and have been marginalized throughout their lives.

Critical mentoring. "Critical mentoring means that mentors act as opportunity brokers to help young people access resources and extend their networks in ways that will assist them to overcome the often-daunting obstacles they face getting through school, into college, and a career, helping them to focus on the means to transform their communities rather than abandon them" (Weiston-Serdan, 2017, p. 41).

Cultural broker. "The term cultural broker is used to convey the idea of links between the mainstream culture in a pluralistic society and the various subcultures. This broker must be an expert manipulator of cultural symbols, information, and people" (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983, p. 119). Further, Gentemann & Whitehead (1983) asserted "the cultural broker not only carries out communication functions, but he or she is also important as a role model for those of the ethnic community who aspire to participate in mainstream activities" (p. 119).

Liberatory. An act or way of thinking that contributes to the liberation of oneself and one's community (Darder, 2012, 2017). Central to the notion of liberatory is the need to consciously create conditions that support the process of empowerment for self and others (Darder, 2015).

Mentor. "Adults dedicated to youth development work in which they foster long-term relationships dedicated to investing in young people and increasing their capacity for

success [as well as] recognizing and addressing . . . toxicity" (Weiston-Serdan, 2017, p. 1)., such as the traumas and brutality that they face.

Oppression. The systematic denial of equal access to material resources in a capitalistic society where money and wealth are privileged over all else.

Othermother. An older Black woman who serves as a mentor to younger Black women and, in many ways, serves as an informal surrogate mother through providing nurturing support. James (1993b) argued that this concept has "roots in the traditional African world-view and can be traced through the institution of slavery, developed in response to an ever-growing need to share the responsibility for child nurturance" (p. 45).

Organization of Dissertation

Five chapters comprise the format utilized for presenting this study. A brief description of the chapters follows:

Chapter 1 provided the foundation for this study, through introducing the issue this research aims to address, the research questions, a brief overview of the conceptual framework and methodology, and other pertinent points to orient the reader to this purpose and significance of the study.

Chapter 2 explores the broad field of mentoring as it relates to Black girls through a review of the literature. More specifically, it examines experiences of Black girls and women through the exploration of the Black girlhood studies and Black feminism, then broadly addresses the literature concerning the mentoring of Black girls. It concludes with a discussion of Critical Mentoring and how this intervention can better inform the mentoring of Black girls.

Chapter 3 provides a discussion of the methodology, and more specifically the use of autoethnography. This discussion provides a description of the research design, including the approach for data collection, coding, and analysis of the data.

Chapter 4 presents the data generated from my mentoring experiences through my positionality as a poor, Black girl in America during three critical stages of my life: childhood, adolescence, and during my university experiences. It also presents stories of my own mentoring experiences in working with Black girls.

Chapter 5, the concluding chapter, provides a discussion of the interpretations and analysis of the data presented in Chapter 3, through the conceptual framework of the study. Finally, this conceptual analysis informs conclusions, a list of implications and recommendations for the critical mentoring of Black girls within a context of social justice practice. Lastly, some thoughts about future research in the field are briefly discussed and a final epilogue is included that speaks to the experience of the researcher in conducting this study and its impact.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last decade, there has been an abundance of literature that has examined the needs and well-being of Black males. Unfortunately, this level of attention to the well-being of Black girls is far less found in the literature, despite the reality that improving the lives of Black girls is just as important. In fact, Brooks (2014) wrote:

> According to several reports, Black girls tend to battle greater stressful life events than any other group. For instance, the Girl Scouts' 2013 State of the Girls report found that Black girls are more likely than any other racial or ethnic group to: have a poverty rate that is double that of White girls, live in single-parent households, have a teen birth rate two times the national average, report being hit by a boyfriend, and be overweight or obese. (para. 5)

As discussed earlier, the lives of working-class Black girls are deeply afflicted by the ravages of racism, sexism, and poverty. In the midst of gross social and material inequalities, they also undergo a process of personal development that often differs considerably from that of students from the dominant culture. They engage very different questions about who they are and what they need. For instance, White students express a desire to learn about the racism of others, whereas students of color want to learn why they have been oppressed and subjected to racism (Tatum, 1992). Yet, such differences are often invisibilized, ignored, or negated within the context of mainstream mentoring programs within schools and communities. The consequence is that Black girls, who are more prone to experience trauma than other adolescents (Weiston-Serdan, 2017), may not receive the support and encouragement they require in their lives.

Keeping all of this in mind, this study seeks to better understand and articulate the critical mentoring needs of Black girls, who continue to endure the micro and macroaggressions of multifaceted oppression, given the intersectionality of racism, sexism, and, in many cases, classism in their lives. Two important bodies of literature are discussed here, namely Black feminism and Black girlhood studies. Both emerged to address the intersectionality of oppression experienced by Black women and girls in mainstream society. Black girlhood studies emerged from the Black feminist influence on traditional notions of girlhood studies. This chapter, therefore, draws connections between the literature on Black feminism and Black girlhood studies to provide a basis for examining and critiquing the literature on mentoring of Black girls, in ways that will inform the analysis of the autoethnographic data collected for this study and help me to think through salient recommendations that will enhance the critical mentoring practice with working class Black girls. Moreover, the literature discussed in Chapter 2 will assist me in thinking through and identifying necessary principles for a critical mentoring praxis for Black girls.

Racial and Gendered Socialization of Black Girls

Given the socialization of Black girls, it is crucial to rely on the frameworks of Black feminism and Black girlhood studies to better understand and contextualize their experiences. These frameworks center the lived experiences of Black women and girls, calling into question the often-naturalized markers of race and gender, in addition to providing effective strategies for problematizing the manifestation of oppression in our lives. Adolescence is arguably a challenging developmental period for all youth. Cognitive changes and increased independence,

expectations from family and friends, and physiological shifts all come to a head during this period (Brittian, 2012; Buckley & Carter, 2005) in young people's lives.

In addition to these challenges, Black female adolescents are forced to navigate racism, sexism, and classism to also develop coping mechanisms to resist the impact of forces tied to an intersectionality of oppression. With this in mind, Brittian (2012) argued that the identity development of Black youth is comprised of salience, centrality, regard, and ideology:

> Salience refers to the meaning that one makes out of being Black in varying social situations. Centrality refers to the extent to which people define themselves by race. Regard is defined as positive or negative feelings about one's racial group; included in this category is both one's opinion's (i.e., private regard) and one's perceptions of how society views one's racial group (i.e., public regard). Lastly, ideology refers to attitudes and opinions about how one's racial group should behave in society. (para. 30)

This speaks to the manner in which the identity of Black youth, including Black girls, are largely impacted by the ways in which they are perceived and treated within institutions and within the larger society they must navigate for their survival (Darder, 2012). Therefore, the socialization and development of working-class Black girls must be understood as a more complex phenomenon than that of their White peers.

Black racial identity (BRI) was studied intensively during the early 1980s until the early 1990s. DeCuir-Gunby (2009) stated, "BRI can be described as the attitudes and beliefs that an African American has about his or her belonging to the Black race individually, the Black race collectively, and their perceptions of other racial groups" (p. 103). She further asserts that there are four major types of BRI: (a) developmental, (b) nationalistic/ worldview, (c) reactions to

racism, and (d) multidimensional. The myriad of studies on BRI demonstrate complexities of identity development that both Black youth and adults face. In response, DeCuir-Gunby (2009) outlined the stages of each type of identity development, detailing the name of the instrument used to measure the components, dimensions, or subscales (see Table 1).

The works of Helms and Cross are also considered seminal to this study, which is often referenced in studies on Black identity development (Cross, 1971, 1978, 1991; Helms, 1990; Helms & Parham, 1996). Cross's (1971, 1995) theory posits that BRI is developed on a continuum between negative and positive attitudes toward BRI. As shown in the table below, the stages begin with precounter—a pro-White and anti-Black identity—and ends with Stages 5 and 6: internalization-Black nationalist and internalization-multiculturalist. These final two stages reflect a deeper level of racial consciousness, and the latter is arguably more receptive to or accepting of all cultures (Cross, 1971, 1995; Cross & Vandiver, 2001; DeCuir-Gunby, 2009). Similarly, Buckley and Carter (2005) found that Black girls who have a more positive BRI had overall greater self-esteem, lessening the harmful impact of traditional gender norms.

Stevens's (1997) work examined the psychosocial development of Black girls, in particular, indicating three key aspects associated with their development:

1. The development of coherent meanings of triadic socialization experiences;
2. the development of bicultural competence while sustaining connection to family/ fictive kin; and
3. the negotiation of strategies of resistance for self-liberation to counteract racial victimization and gender devaluation. (p. 152)

Table 1

DeCuir-Gunby's Measures of Black Racial Identity

Type	*Instrument Name*	*Components/Dimensions/Subscales*
Developmental	Stages Questionnaire (Cross & Vandiver, 2001)	1. Pre-encounter assimilation 2. Pre-encounter anti–Black 3. Immersion-emersion intense Black involvement 4. Immersion-emersion anti–White 5. Internalization Black nationalist 6. Internalization multiculturalist
	Developmental Inventory of Black Consciousness (Milliones, 1980)	1. Preconsciousness 2. Confrontation 3. Internalization 4. Integration
	Racial Identity Attitude Scale (Parham & Helms, 1985a, 1985b)	1. Pre-encounter 2. Encounter 3. Immersion 4. Internalization
Nationalistic/ worldview	Black Personality Questionnaire (Williams, 1981)	1. Pro–White 2. Anti–Black 3. Anti–White 4. Pro–Black 5. Pan–African 6. Third World
	African Self-Consciousness Scale (Baldwin & Bell, 1985)	1. Awareness of African identity and heritage 2. Ideological and activity priorities placed on African/Black survival, liberation, and proactive/affirmative development 3. Activity priorities placed on self-knowledge and self-affirmation/ collective African survival 4. Posture of resolute resistance toward "anti–African/Black" forces and threats to African/Black survival
Reactions to racism	Cultural Mistrust Inventory (Terrell & Terrell, 1981)	1. Education and training 2. Interpersonal relations 3. Business and work 4. Politics and law
	Acculturative Stress Scale (Williams-Fournoy & Anderson, 1996)	1. Racial anxiety 2. Ethnocentrism 3. Received racism 4. Perceived racism
	Perceived Racism Scale (McNeilly et al., 1996)	1. Frequency of exposure to types of racist incidents 2. Emotional responses to perceived racism 3. Behavioral coping responses to perceived racism Domains: employment, academics, public, and racist statements

(continued)

Table 1 Continued
DeCuir-Gunby's Measures of Black Racial Identity

Type	*Instrument Name*	*Components/Dimensions/Subscales*
Multidimensional	Scale of Racial Socialization for African-American Adolescents (Stevenson, 1994)	1. Perception of education 2. Awareness of racism in society 3. Appreciation for spirituality and religion 4. Promotion of Black heritage and culture 5. Appreciation of extended family involvement 6. Acceptance of child rearing
	Multidimensional Racial Identification Questionnaire (Thompson, 1994)	1. Physical 2. Cultural 3. Sociopolitical 4. Psychological
	Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997)	1. Salience 2. Centrality 3. Ideology 4. Regard

Note. This table indicates the myriad studies on Black racial identity development, indicating the complexities under which Black people experience and perceive racialization. Reprinted from "A Review of the Racial Identity Development of African American Adolescents: The Role of Education," by J. T. DeCuir-Gunby, 2009, *Review of Educational Research, 79*, pp. 107-108. Copyright 2009 by American Educational Research Association. Used with permission.

These aspects, particularly the triadic or intersectional socialization experience, provide important insights into the fact that identity development for Black adolescent girls is vastly different from their gendered and racialized counterparts. Along those lines, the lack of cultural understanding at the hands of educators and administrators who are not conscious of or ignore the harsh realities that Black girls must navigate in their lives can lead to their being stereotypically categorized as boisterous, confrontational, and combative (Stevens, 1997).

However, in many instances, Black girls are affirming a sense of self and resisting the commonly held beliefs that they and their lives are unimportant. For example, the traditional gender socialization of girls restricts their voice and physical presence in encouraging them to be small and silent, particularly in the presence of males. However, due to the traditional ways in

which Black girls have been socialized in ways that mainstream culture views as historically masculine, such as holding the same role in the fields as slaves and then later as breadwinners, when Black men were unable to find work, we have found pride in our identities that incorporate traditionally masculine role expectations (Buckley & Carter, 2005), countering Bourgeois Eurocentric images and expectations of femininity.

However, researchers (Cooley et al., 2018; Griffin, 2012; Ivashkevich, 2017) have noted that stereotypes that have arisen for Black women throughout the years, including those of the strong Black woman, have had both positive and negative influences on the identity development of Black girls. Although one study has revealed the positive impact of positive racial identity on the academic outcomes of Black girls (Whaley, McQueen, & Oudkerk, 2017), what cannot be ignored is that some Black girls may internalize these stereotypes in problematic ways, which causes them to develop poor opinions of their own identity and abilities, falling victim to the phenomenon of the school-to-prison pipeline through their association with gangs (Brittian, 2012). In similar ways, these stereotypes can impact their decision to drop out of schools because they do not believe themselves capable of succeeding in college. Hence, dehumanizing stereotypes that call into question Black girls and Black women's femininity, or their ability to live up to their prescribed gender role, can overwhelmingly contribute to the reproduction of large-scale inequalities noted earlier (C. F. Collins, 2015). This points dramatically to the significance of creating mentoring programs for Black girls that critically engage the manner in which the forces of oppression impact their socialization and, therefore, their sense of identity and social location in the world.

To further problematize the binary of Black versus White and boy versus girl, Kertzner, Meyer, Frost, and Stirratt (2009) and Patton and Simmons (2008) argued that the social wellbeing of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals is further strained by heterosexism. They argued that on top of minority stress for Black female youth and Black adults, in particular their experiences with heterosexism, sexism, and internalized heterosexism have been found to cause additional distress. Due to the repressive nature of traditional schooling, Black females are often forced to repress their expression of nonbinary gender identities (Torres, Harper, Sánchez, & Fernández, 2012). For Black girls, the additional layer of oppression can be quite challenging, causing some to retract or act out in ways that allow for greater likelihood of interaction with the school-to-prison pipeline (C. F. Collins, 2015; Sánchez, Esparza, & Colón, 2008).

Black Feminism and Black Girlhood Studies

Given that the central focus of this study revolves around the lives and experiences of Black girls and their mentoring needs, this section sheds light on the relationship between Black feminism and Black girlhood studies and, thus, their important contribution to any effort that seeks to develop an effective praxis for the critical mentoring for Black girls.

Black Feminism

Black feminism was born out of the political agenda of Black women who often found their experiences ignored by the movements of White women and Black men. The traditional politics of feminism took the stance of liberating women from mainstream gendered oppression that did not allow for them to participate equality in any other part of society other than the household (Brewer, 1993). For example, the first wave of feminism between 1890-1920, largely informed by the experiences of middle-class White women, dedicated its energy to the right to

work and the right to vote (Taylor, 1998). For Black women, many of whom already served as the primary breadwinner because the historical nature of their husband's positionality did not allow for them to find work, their concerns went largely unnoticed and unaddressed.

Hence, traditional feminism failed to tackle the issues of racism and classism, both salient features in the lives of Black women (White, 2015). About this P. H. Collins (2015) asserted:

> Racist stereotypes of the strong, superhuman black woman are operative myths in the minds of many [W]hite women, allowing them to ignore the extent to which black women are likely to be victimized in this society, and the role [W]hite women may play in the maintenance and perpetuation of that victimization. (p. 15)

This emerging critique of traditional feminism, coupled with the burgeoning consciousness of Black women abolitionists, made for a critical foundation of Black feminism (Taylor, 1998). P. H. Collins (2015) also argued that White feminists often do not understand the "interrelatedness of sex, race, and class oppression" (p. 15) or acknowledge its impact. Thus, Black feminism emerged to bring the lived experiences of Black women from the margins to the center of feminism, particularly in looking at the intersectionality of their identities and subscribing fundamentally to the ideology that the personal is political.

The second wave of Black feminism emerged out of the Civil Rights Era, more specifically during 1954-1965 in which the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and the Civil Rights Acts were signed into law (Taylor, 1998). Black women found themselves deeply embedded in the core of resistance movements against racism simultaneously, as they recognized that White feminists would not stand with them. Yet, they often were silenced in those movements, facing sexism and harassment in well-known organizations such as the

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), with infamous leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. (Brewer, 1993; Taylor, 1998).

Here it is important to note that although there was hidden and blatant sexual harassment and abuse at the hands of Black men in civil rights organizations, Black women generally stood strong in serving as pillars to the overall community through their efforts. Peoples (2008) spoke to this forced condition asserting: "Black women's location at the intersection of a variety of identities necessitates that they be able to work with communities that at some point or another they may have to struggle against on another issue" (p. 44). Thus, Black women have struggled in both feminist and Black liberation efforts. Taylor (1998) argued that the Civil Rights Era was marked with Black women facing abandonment and betrayal from Black men for their pursuit of White women, as well as a shift toward a national agenda for the Black Panthers that led to the tokenism of Black women and denial of their critical roles within these political efforts. The setbacks faced did not thwart the advancement of Black women, however, leading to one of their major successes in rallying and organizing to elect Shirley Chisolm, the first Black woman, to congress (Taylor, 1998).

The next wave of feminism came about in the 1990s. After the dissolve of the Black Panthers, Black feminists began to come together on a larger scale to contribute to the foundation for the academic field of Black feminism, making a substantive effort toward creating counterhegemonic spaces in the academy for their work. Stanlie M. James (1993b) took this on and sought support from her Afro-American studies department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to hold a multidisciplinary Black Feminist Seminar on May 20-22, 1990. James

(1993b) affirmed, “One outcome of this first seminar was our decision to work together on an anthology that would represent an interdisciplinary approach to Black feminist theorizing” (p. 2). This was crucial because just as in the practical application of protest and resistance, the academic fields that centered the oppression of Blacks as racialized beings and women as gendered beings failed to sufficiently incorporate the experiences of Black women (Brewer, 1993; Guy-Sheftall, 1993).

Thus, Black academics rejected the additive approach and committed to the field of Black feminism. Spelman College, founded in 1881 in the basement of Friendship Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, was crucial in defining the role of universities in empowering the voices and experiences of Black women (Guy-Sheftall, 1993). They paved the way by developing a women’s studies curriculum centering the experiences of Black women, developed a Women’s Research and Resources Center in 1991, added Afro-American and women’s studies as a core requirement for all students, and collaborated and participated in the National Black Women’s Health Project (Guy-Sheftall, 1993). Black feminism thrived over the last century, with historical accomplishment within the abolition, civil rights, and post-civil rights movements. The efforts and commitments of Black women throughout those time periods were tested both by mainstream society and by White women and Black men. Yet, Black women continued to forge spaces for themselves, where our identities, conditions, and concerns were not only honored, but seriously engaged—culturally, politically, and intellectually.

Black feminism emphasizes then the vantage points of Black women, seeking to understand and analyze the world from the starting point of our diverse narratives. Collins (1989) stated, “Living life as Black women requires wisdom since knowledge about the dynamics of

race, gender, and class subordination has been essential to Black women's survival" (p. 758). King (2007) referred to this as "multiple jeopardy," adding class to the "double jeopardy" that Black women already experience, as both gendered and racialized beings (Beale, 1970). Black women navigate the world with a level of consciousness that extends beyond what Du Bois (1903) called *double consciousness*. This triple consciousness includes an understanding of the colonizing gendered world in which we must operate, where our racial and gendered positionality cannot be separated from the political economy, in which these forces are inextricably linked (Darder & Torres, 2004; hooks 2000).

The transformative nature of Black feminism is rooted in five major tenets: (a) the existence of a Black female standpoint and an understanding of the world as being experienced through intersectional oppression, (b) the assertion and understanding that there is diversity in the experiences of the Black female, (c) connectedness and collective consciousness, (d) meaning of self-definition and self-valuation often manifested through the telling of narratives, and (e) interdependence of both thought and action (Carter & Hart, 2010; P. H. Collins, 1986, 1990, 2015). Together, these tenets allow for Black feminist scholars to bring breadth and depth to our understanding of Black women's experiences.

Black females' standpoint and intersectional identity. As has been noted earlier, Black women walk through the world often with three markers of oppression that define the ways we are perceived, treated, and even presented to the world. Our race, gender, and many times, class come together to define our lived experiences, often resulting in dismal living conditions and poor financial outcomes. On another note, Black women also continue to be trailblazers, working to break down the barriers that hinder our progress and surpass the expectations forced onto us.

Diversity in experiences. This tenet is a full adaptation of intersectionality, acknowledging that there is power in difference and, thus, diversity of experience. Within the Black female community, there are similar lived experiences as racialized and classed beings, but also different life circumstances, upbringing, access to opportunities, familial ties, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other factors that contribute to widely varied experiences. These nuanced experiences and identities problematize the notion that there is one "Black female experience," creating room for Black feminism to address all forms of diversity within the Black female context. Further, Black feminism recognizes the need to embrace diversity of all females in our struggle for liberation (McKay, 1993).

Connectedness and collective consciousness. Connectedness is the meaningful connections that Black females have with one another due to understanding each other's positionality, or what Darder (2018b) called, our shared subaltern sensibilities in the world. This understanding contributes to a sense of collective consciousness that is developed through sharing, relating to, and understanding one another's histories and the lived experiences of oppression we must navigate.

Self-definition and self-valuation through narratives. Black females develop their own self definitions and self-valuations to reject stereotypes perpetuated throughout society and create new ways of knowing themselves (Taylor, 1998).

Interdependence of both thought and action. Much like critical mentoring, there exists a call to action embedded in the ideology of Black feminism that calls for application of research to practical liberation efforts. P. H. Collins (2015) argued:

> Revolutionary ideology can be created only if the experiences of people on the margin who suffer sexist oppression and other forms of group oppression are understood, addressed, and incorporated. They must participate in feminism movement as markers of theory and as leaders of action. (p. 163)

The tenets of Black feminism converge as a powerful framework to support conditions for true justice and freedom for Black women. Grounded in these tenets, Filomina Chioma Steady (1993) considered the two major long-term goals of Black feminism as:

1. Freedom from oppression involving not only equity but also the right of women to freedom of choice and the power to control their own lives within and outside the home.
2. The removal of all forms of inequality and oppression through the creation of a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. This means the involvement of women in national liberation struggles, in plans for national development, and in local and global strategies for change. (p. 95)

Though Black women have made incredible strides, we are far from achieving these goals. We must continue the work, and that includes preparing Black girls to continue to expand and evolve in their sense of empowerment.

Black Girlhood Studies

This study draws upon Black girlhood studies to speak to the experiences of Black girls during their childhood and adolescent years and provide insight into what Black girls experience and need to thrive in their lives. About this, Wright (2016) stated:

> As raced, gendered, and youthful figures, black girls occupy a space of in-betweenness, like the figures Hortense Spillers labels "not yet" subjects: they are not yet citizens and not yet women. In the nineteenth century, black girls possessed little social authority and virtually no property, insignia, rank, or role. Yet in the sources I explore, some of them rejected roles as victims and chose to view themselves as capable and committed to surviving their circumstances. (p. 10)

There are varying views about the origins and beginnings of Black girlhood studies (Brown, 2009; hooks, 1996; Gaunt, 2006; Wright, 2016). Two seminal works have identified the convergence of Black feminism and Black girlhood studies as theoretical and conceptual frameworks for Black girls. Each approach is distinct from the other, as the more recent one (Wright, 2016) is the product of an interpretive study, drawing upon the beginning of Black girls' literary presence in this country to create a genealogy of Black girl's studies. However, the other—research by Ruth Nicole Brown (2009, 2013)—is a conceptual framework designed with the very population it aims to empower, thus centering the experiences of Black girls within a praxis approach that is critical to Black girlhood studies.

Wright (2016) argued that Black girlhood studies has been in existence since the early 19th and 20th century, in the efforts of writers who sought to bring the voice of Black girls to their writing. Wright further asserted that their discussions largely situated Black girls as victims and that male scholars, in particular, wrote about girls in a "two dimensional" way that aligned them with the goals of Black advancement. By contrast, women were committed to bringing about a more nuanced understanding of Black girls. Wright's work pulled from primary sources such as newspaper editorial sections and other documented stories of Black girls from the past to

the contemporary moment. Wright successfully demonstrated that Black women writers have historically shed light on the little-known experiences of Black girls. These efforts, alone, helped to bring to light a Black girls' framework.

In contrast, Brown (2009, 2013) used her Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) process to embody her conceptual framework and also as a frame for the discussion of the needs and values of Black women and girls. About this, she stated:

> SOLHOT is about Black women and girls redefining a way of being together that makes it possible to celebrate ourselves and to see ourselves worthy of celebration. In this way, SOLHOT is about celebrating something new out of the old--a hip-hop idiom that never gets old. (Brown, 2009, p. 55)

This amazing concept, group, celebration, or phenomenon creates space for us to be seen. It is absolutely crucial that we have spaces like this during a time when Black girl's and women's voices too often remain invisible and not valued at a time when our bodies are most commodified, consumed, and made hypervisual in popular cultures (Brown, 2009).

The SOLHOT process, while difficult to define but transformative for the women and girls involved, provides a clear example of the foundation of hip-hop feminism. About this, Peoples (2008) argued:

> The birth of hip-hop feminism might be best understood as a means of reconciliation and reclamation on the part of young black women in the U.S. trying to create a space for themselves between the whiteness and/or academically sanitized versions of university-based feminism, where most first encountered a conscious naming and exploration of feminism, and the maleness of the hip-hop culture that most grew up on. (p. 26)

With this in mind, hip-hop feminism aims to empower young girls and women with the means to question the information that they are digesting in hip-hop, developing a similar critical consciousness from the 60s and 70s, creating dialogue between female consumers and males and the larger community. Here it is important to note hip-hop feminism commits to the same objectives and principles as past waves of feminism, yet it is further emphasizing the importance of remaining dynamic, to better represent and address the contemporary experiences of the current generation, using hip-hop as a vehicle to create dialogue among a generation highly influenced by hip-hop. One of the important aspects that hip-hop feminists address, for example, is the growing overrepresentation of Black girls in the prison industrial complex (C. F.Collins, 2015) and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Along those lines, Brown (2009), a hip-hop feminist, has been critical of mainstream girlhood studies, arguing that it is a watered down, pop version of "girl power" that has deteriorated into the simplest terms, turning the wearing of pink as an emblem of girl power. By contrast, Black girlhood studies/hip-hop feminism creates meaningful spaces for musical, lyrical, and dance expression for Black girls and women to experience and express love, while simultaneously gaining a deeper understanding of our worlds. For Brown (2009), hip-hop feminism allows for self-love by allowing us to tell our stories. She described the power of this movement as follows:

> When we begin to think about how the narratives created by us in SOLHOT counter or collude with popular messages and stereotypes about Black girls and women, critical revelations about working with Black girls simultaneously rise to the surface and infect our deepest sensibilities. (Brown, 2009, p. 24)

Together, Black feminism and Black girlhood studies offers then a critical framework for this study that allows for the critical characteristics of Black girls' experiences to emerge, be more accurately identified, and better understood, by providing an avenue for Black girls to give voice to their own experiences, celebrate their identity, and develop a consciousness of their positionality in the world (Brown, 2009, 2013; Wright, 2016). Hence, Black feminism and Black girlhood studies are employed in combination to address the lived experiences of Black girls and women, aligning with the autoethnographic approach of this study.

Traditional Mentoring as Cultural Invasion

Since the aim of this study is linked to developing a more nuanced and critical understanding of mentoring, it is helpful to briefly note the history of this concept within its mainstream articulation. Mentoring, therefore, must be understood as having deep roots in early informal apprenticeship relationships rooted in Europe. Mullen (2017) addressed the historical evolution of these apprenticeship relationships, which were rooted in a patriarchal ideology of mentoring, emerging in the middle ages. Garvey (2017) pointed to the philosophical evolution of mentoring, arguing that mentoring is often referred to as having a longstanding history because researchers cite the word "mentor" in the classic work, *The Odyssey*.

The next and perhaps second most prevalent piece of literature in the field of mentoring is a seminal work on mentoring entitled *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978), wherein the authors argue that mentoring is a relationship rooted in love and trust, and quite possibly one of the most "developmentally important" (p. 97). Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee's (1978) deep discussion about the history of mentoring demonstrated the importance and impact of mentoring relationships. However, the focus of early

ideas about mentoring are clearly rooted in a perspective that has placed White males and their development at the center of the discourse.

Hence, reference to hooks' (2004) notion of the "imperialist, [W]hite supremacist, and capitalist patriarchy" (p. 17) provided a suitable description of the problematics that have historically shaped ideas of mentoring, even for youth. The view, as noted about, has been generally anchored upon Eurocentric values that privilege individualist, objective, decontextualized, reductive, and linear conceptualization of human beings and the world (Darder, 2012). As a consequence, the gendered, racialized and classed meanings associated with mentoring have served to perpetuate the interests and wealth of the most powerful in society. Simultaneously, the cultural worldviews of those deemed other have been systematically erased and their voices silenced. Unfortunately, such forms of epistemicides (Paraskeva, 2011)—literally the death of knowledge—have been the outcome of assimilative or White-centered educational forms of mentoring, even in the case of mentoring youth of color, despite mainstream efforts to address their needs.

Youth mentoring, which began to expand in the 1990s largely due to the Big Brothers Big Sisters program (Colley, 2003), is an example of a well-intentioned mentoring program that has, for the most part, used an assimilative strategy of mentoring, which engages Black girls and other youth of color through a predominantly White middle-class perspective. As such, mainstream mentoring programs have enacted what Paulo Freire (2000) called "cultural invasion," an approach that imposes the values of the dominant culture onto urban youth. In many ways, this approach communicates from a deficit lens, perceiving these youth as

possessing a lack of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and, thus, negating the strengths Black girls bring to their lived experiences in schools and communities.

Garvey (2017) argued that many forms of mentoring are fundamentally rooted in social control of urban youth and are invested in the social gain of large corporations within the ethos of capitalist society (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). In fact, Weiston-Serdan and Daneshzadeh (2016), in critiquing the anti-Blackness in mentoring, argued:

> There is a call to action, a request for mentors to engage in providing support systems for these young people, but that call to action is couched in friendly discourse about respectability. The call often focuses on helping young people make "right" decisions, helping them dress well, helping to cultivate the resilience we think they'll need to survive in this America. This mentoring ignores systemic inequality, but it also encourages mentors to engage in a process to "un-other" Black youth and it all smacks of a certain anti-Blackness. (para. 2)

The consequence here is that traditional or formal mentoring programs that target Black girls often approach the process as that of having "to fix" or "to save" them rather than working to identify the manner in which their strengths can be mobilized toward their social and academic success (Weiston-Serdan, 2017). These programs often reproduce the same culturally subtractive, banking model approach that schools employ in failing to acknowledge the wealth of cultural knowledge that Black girls possess (Darder, 2012; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Freire, 2000; Inzer & Crawford, 2005).

Mentoring Black Girls and Women

Despite the problematic nature of mainstream mentoring approaches, there is a body of literature that examines the mentoring of Black girls. Overall, we see that mentoring has been beneficial at all levels, bridging the gap between Black girls and women and their non-oppressed peers, and also providing opportunity for social economic mobility. In addition, we also see that many mentoring programs designed specifically for Black girls have a component that emphasizes cultural identity development and awareness of social positionality. This section reviews the existing literature on mentoring of Black women and girls in three parts—childhood, adolescence, and during college years and beyond—providing contextual and literary background for the lived experiences that will be explored during those time periods in my own autoethnography.

Mentoring in Childhood

Many scholars argue that parents are a child's first mentor. They assert that the parents provide the emotional, social, and nurturing support that is often sought in academic and professional settings (Johnson & Snider, 2015). Mentoring at this age, for example, looks very different for some, as this is precisely when Black girls begin to notice race. They are introduced to the experience of microaggressions and racism through their teachers, friends, and even sometimes family members and community. They are also experiencing gender socialization, learning how to be a "girl," and encouraged to take up feminine passions, such as dolls and cooking versus sports and science. Unfortunately, there is a dire need for additional research on the mentoring experiences of young Black girls during their childhood years. Much of the

mentoring research on Black girls focuses on experiences of adolescence and higher education (Johnson & Snider, 2015).

There is an organization that specifically addresses the experiences of poor Black children collectively. The National CARES Mentoring Movement (2014) is an organization that

> is a pioneering community-galvanizing movement dedicated to alleviating intergenerational poverty among African Americans. It offers Black children in low-income families and unstable communities the social, emotional and academic supports they need to unleash their potential and graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college or vocational-training programs and 21st-century careers. (para. 1)

The organization is dedicated to instilling "hope, critical thinking skills, racial pride, and a love for learning and wellness in mind, body and spirit" (National CARES Mentoring Movement, 2014, para. 3).

There are also organizations, such as Black Girls Rock (2018), that celebrate both Black girls and women, but young Black girls are virtually invisible in the mentoring literature. There is much literature on the mentoring experiences of young Black boys (Kunjufu, 2013; The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2016). However, research on mentoring Black male children ignores the identity of Black girls and is thus ill-equipped to capture the specificities of their experience. Thus, the understanding of these mentoring relationships will be highly informed by the research on female adolescent and adult mentoring experiences.

Mentoring Black Female Adolescents

As we see from the identity development literature, adolescence is a very complex time for Black girls, as compared to their mainstream White peers. As noted earlier, Stevens (1997)

argued that the identity development of Black girls includes three key aspects: (a) triadic socialization, (b) bicultural competence, and (c) resistance. Thus, mentoring programs for Black girls at this period in their development must be sensitive to the difficulties faced in their lives. However, because many Black girls are involved in arguably race-neutral mentoring programs, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (2017), many Black girls find themselves in programs that subscribe to respectability politics as a means to improve their outcomes, which encourage them toward academic achievement and a limiting of risky behaviors.

In contrast, there are mentoring efforts that recognize Black cultural capital (Carter, 2003) and deliberately tap into that. For example, programs such as SOLHOT (Brown, 2009), discussed previously, incorporate a hip-hop feminist and Black girlhood studies approach in transforming mentoring into something more complex, which Brown (2009) asserted is beyond mentoring. In fact, SOLHOT is an excellent example of critical mentoring for Black girls, rooted in self-identity, self-love, and minimal policing of the physical body of Black girls. However, programs like this, that are truly emancipatory in nature, are still few and far between and seldom receive the attention they warrant within mainstream discussions of mentoring.

Historically, school or community-based mentoring programs in which Black adolescents have been involved have many of the same goals: (a) better grades, (b) improved academic identity, (c) fewer risky sexual behaviors, (d) less substance use, (e) higher levels of feeling that they belong in schools, and (f) lower crime rates (Holt, Bry, & Johnson, 2008). Natural mentoring relationships (Hurd, Sánchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2012; Reynolds & Parrish, 2018) that Black females seek out at this stage, however, incorporate more of the components highlighted in the SOLHOT program, wherein Black girls are taught to understand the larger

social and institutional factors contributing to their positionality in the world, as well as how to navigate the contexts of their lives and maintain positive identity in the face of the many stereotypes imposed upon them (C. F. Collins, 2015; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Torres, et al., 2012). Natural or informal mentoring tends to last longer and is built on a foundation of a relationship rooted in respect and connectedness, which is arguably more beneficial to mentees (Inzer & Crawford, 2005). Nevertheless, given the absence of these programs nationwide, there is still a great need for developing a revolutionary mentoring praxis for Black adolescent females—a praxis that integrates critical principles of mentoring along with a rootedness in the history, culture, and lived experiences of Black girls in the United States.

At the root of natural mentoring is intergenerational dialogue (Bean & Rigoni, 2001; Morrison, 2015). The nature of critical mentoring relationships, specifically for Black girls, stands on the foundation of a relationship between a younger Black girl and an older Black woman. Generett and Welch (2018) argued that "there have always been traditions of passing down powerful knowledge and information that detailed ways of being that form the next generation" (pp. 1102-1103). Furthermore, they asserted, "Educational systems are important sites of intergenerational dialogues" (Generett & Welch, 2018, p. 1103), which means that the school site should be the primary place where Black girls can identify mentors. However, due to the predominantly White teaching force that often perpetuates mainstream detrimental views, Black girls are forced to identify mentors outside the academy. Black female mentors can fulfill this role for Black girls, guiding them to reach their goals in spaces that have not historically welcomed them, such as higher education and K-12.

The phenomena of intergenerational dialogue between the LGBTQ community was also explored through an emancipatory lens. Authors discuss the disconnect between younger and older generations of LGBTQ communities. Morrison (2015) argued that this is due to a myriad of reasons:

> a partial list of this gaps' many triggers: a missing generation lost to AIDS; rapid sociopolitical change and the attendant experiential differences that overshadow generational similarities; mainstream culture's distortion of queer history; and television and film representations that depict gay elders as predators to be feared. (p. 227)

In other words, older generations feel that the younger queer generation has taken on mainstream, predominant ideals of "homonormativity" that yet again marginalize people of color, causing a disconnect between theory and lived reality. Even though these studies found this process of dialogue to be challenging, it is still humanizing in nature, because LGBTQ communities of all generations are naming their worlds and offering space to be seen and heard (Darder, 2012; Freire, 2000; Weiston-Serdan, 2017).

Mentoring Black Females in the Academy and Beyond

The isolation that Black women face directly impacts their college experience and career advancement. For example, a study that examined the role of mentoring in the lives of Black female administrators found that it was difficult for Black women to obtain mentoring crucial to the advancement of their careers and, as a result, they relied on their families for support, who often did not possess the social capital that they needed to progress (Crawford & Smith, 2005). The benefits of mentoring young Black women at this level includes greater confidence in their field, higher self-esteem, efficiency, greater satisfaction in schooling, and the feeling of better

performance in both careers and in school (Booker & Brevard, 2017; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Patton & Harper, 2003). One major critique of the mentoring that Black women receive at this level is that it is assimilationist in nature, conditioning Black women for socialization into White, middle-class ideals and, therefore, does not draw on their cultural strengths and the power of their lived histories.

So, although there are many mentoring programs and relationships that focus on or acknowledge identity, the vast majority of these programs focus on training young Black women on how to successfully navigate hegemonic systems and bureaucracy to become successful. Sánchez, Esparza, and Colón (2008) found that mentors with higher educational levels were correlated to higher academic performance of students. Thus, mentors directly serve as opportunity brokers, helping to provide academic guidance where families may be unable to do so. However, mentoring relationships that only focus on academic outcomes are limiting in nature. In contrast, Johnson-Bailey, Lasker-Scott, and Sealey-Ruiz (2015) are among the scholars who have directly addressed the lived experiences of Black women, examining what they believe to be Black women's literacies. They argued that Black women are most fit to mentor other Black women because of the "special skills and practices that will allow both parties to interpret their environment through their lived experiences are necessary for success" (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2015, p. 2). Patton and Harper (2003) also discussed the importance of Black women having mentors who understand their intersectional identities and the complex ways in which their multilayered identities play out in their lives. What becomes obvious from these works is the need for the social and material conditions of Black women to be understood, if their mentoring is successful.

There is much research about the mentoring experiences of Black girls and women. Some focus on assimilation for success, while others focus on the importance of cultural awareness, socialization, and the positive development of their sense of being. There is a need for a revolutionary mentoring praxis that focuses on expanding these aspects and further developing the connection between critical mentoring for Black girls and their process of empowerment in the world. Black girls need a mentoring praxis rooted in the understanding of intersectionality of Black female identities, that questions the commonsensical hegemonic practices governing our lives. Further, this praxis must contribute to a collective consciousness that leads directly to active resistance of oppression as well as transformative possibilities. What Black women and girls need is critical mentoring rooted in historical and cultural traditions that calls forth a commitment to justice through working to shatter the cyclical and generational dynamics of oppression that persist in schools and society.

Foundational Principles of Critical Mentoring

This section provides a discussion of critical mentoring as it is currently defined in the literature. The purpose is to provide a clear understanding of the principles that underlie a critical mentoring approach and to identify what is missing or what is needed to develop a critical mentoring approach that could effectively respond to the needs and issues that working-class Black girls face in schools and out in the world.

Weiston-Serdan (2017) argued that critical mentoring is different from traditional forms of mentoring in that it is "augmented by a critical consciousness, one that compels us to take action, one rooted in ancient tradition but remixed for new youth living in a new age" (p. 1). It is, however, difficult to understand the origins of critical mentoring without understanding the

critical principles that inform this perspective. Here is where Weiston-Serdan's (2017) excellent work on critical mentoring, which focuses primarily on practice, can be served by greater theoretical articulation. Hence, the discussion here draws from Darder, Torres, and Baltodano's (2017) critical pedagogical discussion to consider the theoretical foundation that informs critical mentoring. As such, the principles of critical pedagogy rooted in critical theory provide a useful approach here. These critical principles include: (a) cultural politics, (b) political economy, (c) historicity of knowledge, (d) dialectical theory, (e) ideology and critique, (f) hegemony, (g) resistance and counter-hegemony, (h) praxis: the alliance of theory and practice, and (i) dialogue and conscientization. The following considered these principles from the standpoint of critical mentoring.

Cultural Politics

Similar to critical pedagogy, critical mentoring is committed to the development of a relationship of mentoring that supports the empowerment of culturally and economically marginalized youth. Critical mentoring thus transcends traditional mentoring that inculcates youth into mainstream values, by advancing democratic principles that lead to social consciousness and connection to their cultural identity (Darder, 2012). This principle is evident when Weiston-Serdan (2017) built upon Ladson-Billings' (1995) framework of culturally relevant pedagogy to advance a critical mentoring approach that is committed to building academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness.

Political Economy

Critical mentoring engages questions of the political economy, adopting the belief that "public schools serve to position select groups within asymmetrical power relations that replicate

the existing cultural values and privileges of the dominant class" (Darder, Torres, & Baltodano, 2017, p. 10). This component aims to challenge policies and practices in schools that reproduce class inequalities and racism in alignment with critical mentoring's social justice commitment to support mentees in building critical consciousness about the material conditions that shape their lives. This is prevalent in critical mentoring practices as mentors commit to serving as community brokers, empowering young people to "overcome daunting obstacles" and "transform their communities rather than abandon them" (Weiston-Serdan, 2017, p. 41).

Historicity of Knowledge

Critical mentoring acknowledges that knowledge is historically constructed, informed by the historical dynamics and context in which young people are embedded. Thus, critical mentoring recognizes mentees as historical subjects of their lives. Moreover, critical mentoring encompasses an understanding of youth experiences as specific to the time period in which they are living, and yet also recognize that the current historical moment is deeply anchored in the histories of community survival that young people bring to their relationships to the world (Darder, 2017). Hence, despite the fact, for example, that slavery was abolished in the 1800s, the trauma associated with the historical legacy of slavery continues to manifest in the lives of Black girls, particularly given the manner that Black females are perceived and treated in U.S. society (DeGruy, 2017).

Dialectical Theory

Critical mentoring disrupts systems of oppression through "embrac[ing] a dialectical view of knowledge that functions to unmask the connections between objective knowledge and the cultural norms, values, and standards of the society at large" (Darder et al., 2017, p. 10). Here

the emphasis is recognizing the manner in which critical mentoring reinforces an epistemology that rejects positivists notions that perpetuate individualism, objectification, an ahistorical view of human beings, decontextualized knowledge, and universalism (Darder, 2012, 2017, 2018a).

Ideology and Critique

Darder et al. (2017) argued that "ideology can best be understood as a societal lens or framework of thought, used in society to create order and give meaning to the social and political world in which we live" (p. 11). Youth develop an understanding of how ideology translates into their lived experiences and how dominant ideologies contribute to structural oppression. This also speaks to a critical reading of power that seeks to create liberatory relationships and conditions in the interest of democratic life. With this view at the core, critique supports mentoring relationships that support mentees in questioning the conditions in which they live and asking how it is that the present conditions came to be as they are (Darder, 2012). Through this process, mentees are involved in a critical process of naming and understanding their world and condition what changes are needed to improve the well-being of their lives and communities.

Hegemony

According to Darder et al. (2017) "hegemony refers to a process of social control that is carried out through the moral and intellectual leadership of a dominant sociocultural class over subordinate groups" (p. 12). Critical mentoring integrates an exploration of hegemony to question commonsensical notions, practices, and policies associated with gender, race, class, and other social constructions, which function to sustain the interests of the ruling class. From this standpoint, critical mentoring seeks to understand and engage the conditions of young people beyond psychologized notions of individual deviancy and, instead, from the standpoint that the

conditions young people are facing in their lives are directly linked to the larger structural inequalities and the forces of oppression that shape their educational opportunities or the lack of them (Darder, 2012).

Resistance and Counter-Hegemony

The concepts of resistance and counter-hegemony are vital to any critical understanding of social phenomenon and the struggle to transform it (Darder et al., 2017). Critical mentoring resists hegemonic arguments such as the cycle of poverty and or broken windows, as well as critically engages youth in rethinking their academic and social difficulties through incorporating a theory of resistance. By moving beyond an individualistic and objectifying understanding of the conditions young people face, critical mentoring can create the conditions for young people to question their realities and resist oppressive conditions. By so doing, critical mentoring supports relationships with youth that nurture and cultivate conditions for their empowerment and liberation (Darder, 2012, 2017).

Praxis

Critical mentoring is understood as a form of liberatory praxis in the interest of democratic life (Freire, 2000). Darder et al. (2017) asserted that "all theory is considered with respect to the practical intent of challenging asymmetrical relations of power and transforming the fundamental sociopolitical and economic structures that reproduce inequalities" (p. 13). Through this liberatory praxis, critical mentoring uses "a culturally relevant way to do evaluation because it includes the community, makes data pertinent, and makes data useable" (Weiston-Serdan, 2017, p. 73). Culturally relevant evaluation within a context of critical mentoring

challenges traditional systems of evaluation that uphold hegemonic beliefs and practices that function to the detriment of oppressed populations.

Dialogue and Conscientization

Drawing on the work of Freire (2000), critical mentoring is rooted in a process of dialogue and conscientization. This points to

> an emancipatory educational process that is above all committed to the empowerment of students through challenging the dominant educational discourse and illuminating the right and freedom of students to become subjects of their world . . . committed to the development of critical consciousness, or as Freire termed it, "*conscientização*." (Darder et al., 2017, p. 14)

More to the point, dialogue is the human means by which mentors and mentees enter into critical conversations about their lives and the world in ways that build greater social consciousness among both the mentor and mentee. Moreover, this requires that mentors engage young people with respect, faith, and love, in ways that also build solidarity and a sense of working to change the world together as *revolutionary partners* (Darder 2018a; Freire 2000).

These principles come together in order to create an emancipatory mentoring praxis that allows for the power and consciousness of youth to be harnessed for their empowerment and that of their communities. Although critical mentoring is designed to address intersectional oppression, there is a need to engage the oppression that Black girls face at the intersections of race, gender, and class with greater specificity and focus. It is this fundamental concern that is the impetus for this study.

Toward a Theory of Critical Mentoring for Black Girls

This chapter has sought to demonstrate the need for a more nuanced theoretical understanding of critical mentoring praxis, in an effort to produce a theory of critical mentoring unique to Black girls. This literature review has engaged the critical theories of Black feminism, Black girlhood studies, and critical mentoring to consider the specific mentoring experiences of Black women and girls. Many traditional perspectives argue that the purpose of mentoring is for acceptance, assimilation, or mobility. This, wittingly or unwittingly, has often led to the exclusion of Black women and girls. To counter this tendency, there is a need to provide opportunities for Black girls to not only gain access to inner circles, but to use their knowledge and understanding to transform those structures that betray their dreams.

This study argues that a critical mentoring praxis that is focused specifically on the lives of Black girls can assist us to break down structures of exclusion, by working to dismantle policies and practices that betray the dignity and cultural wisdom of Black girls and create relationships and mentoring contexts that can transform the hegemonic structures that perpetuate racial, gender, and class inequities. As such, there is a need for a mentoring praxis rooted in critical pedagogy that also incorporates Black racial and gender identity development, inextricably linked to the overall identity development of Black girls.

As we have seen through the literature discussed in this chapter, the stereotypes imposed on Black girls can directly contribute to overrepresentation in suspensions and later the prison industrial complex, poor racial identity, lack of social agency and disempowerment, as well as untreated mental health issues. Thus, key components of critical pedagogy, including dialogue and conscientization as well as resistance and counter-hegemony are crucial in developing

empowering mentoring practices for Black girls. Critical mentoring for Black girls must then seek a critical approach—in both theory and practice—that can create the conditions for the empowerment of Black girls and support the evolution of political consciousness, which can assist us to resist the desire to fit into a system that was never created for us. In this way, Black girls can learn to love ourselves and to embrace our humanity in all its dimensions, as we actively work to resist systems of oppression that exclude us from society.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study, focused on the mentoring of Black girls, has used autoethnography as a means to engage this phenomenon—linking the rich data collected from my individual story of being mentored and mentoring Black girls to the larger experiences and conditions of inequalities and the impact of these on their daily lives. Thus, this study aimed to forge connections with the reader that are grounded in empathetic solidarity, such that readers will reflect on their own positionality and be inspired to take action in the service of social justice. The very nature and intent of this methodological approach is transformative, in that it moves us to understand in more intimate terms the manner in which intersectional conditions of oppression impact the lives of Black girls in the United States. Permission was obtained for the use of the names within the autoethnography, pseudonyms have been applied to those of which permission could not be obtained.

Research Questions

Given the primary purpose of my research—to uplift the experiences of Black girls whose truths are invisibilized by dominant cultural narratives—and my commitment to utilizing my own narrative as a Black woman to elucidate the shared experiences of Black girls, this methodology and its emphasis on the political nature of self-reflection directly aligned with my research goals (Spry, 2001). As such, autoethnography supported me in critically exploring the following questions:

1. What were my particular experiences with mentors that prepared me to persevere in education in ways that nourished my commitment and empowerment?

2. What were the particular experiences with my mentors that assisted me in connecting with the Black girls that I have mentored in my work?
3. What can my experiences as a Black feminist mentor of Black girls contribute to our understanding of critical mentoring?

Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

Scholars have noted that autoethnography is rooted in ethical responsibility, cultural connectivity, conscientization, emancipation and that, as described above, it is directly aligned with recognizing the political nature of personal experiences. Moreover, scholars have expressed that the purpose of autoethnography and its potential benefits rest in its dedication to connecting micro instances to macro implications, which serves to complexify the existing discourse and disrupt the dominant narrative (Starr, 2010). These principles correspondingly aligned with the critical frameworks of Black girlhood studies (Brown, 2009; C. F. Collins, 2015) and Black feminism (Collins, 1989; hooks, 1996), which were examined earlier.

This methodology, therefore, served to center my own experiences as a racialized and gendered subject in a country where these two identities dominate our lives. Furthermore, due to this study's particular focus on the mentoring experience, the conceptual framework of critical mentoring influenced its overarching design. Weiston-Serdan (2017) posited that "critical mentoring is the next juncture in mentoring practice—practice that challenges deficit-based notions of protégés, halts the force of protégé adaptation to dominant ideology, and engages in liberatory processes" (p. 1). As such, my conceptual framework underscores the relevance of utilizing a qualitative approach and more specifically autoethnography, in examining personal experiences with the intent of elucidating a liberatory mentoring praxis for Black girls.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is deeply embedded in critical traditions that center the voices of those who have traditionally been marginalized. Given this fundamental alignment with social justice efforts, critical scholars argue that autoethnography reveals the political nature of personal experiences (Kahl, 2011). In this way, autoethnography simultaneously critiques and transcends traditional norms of research practices that expect researchers to disconnect from what fundamentally motivates them to engage in research: themselves (Spry, 2001). As such, autoethnography supports researchers in utilizing personal experiences as sources of data and encourages a wider analysis of seemingly individual narratives by directly engaging the cultural and systematic forces that to a large extent shape everyday experiences. Kahl (2011) posited that, in doing so, autoethnography serves as "a form of transformational scholarship, [one] that encourages us to slow down and critically consider how hidden beliefs and assumptions contribute to our own relations to power" (p. 1929).

Kahl (2011) cited one of the method's foundational Norm Denzin (1997), who has expounded upon this point by stating that autoethnography requires the "turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self-experience occur" (p. 1929). This recognition of how personal experiences are embedded within specific cultural contexts and power relations is echoed by Starr (2010), who has asserted, "autoethnography mirrors the postmodern overlap of embedded understanding in its exploration of the multiple layers of identity, the meanings associated with them and the contexts in which they occur" (p. 2). Thus, autoethnography serves

as a liberatory research method by foregrounding an examination of lived experience within larger systems, which impact the development and expression of a particular social phenomenon.

Research Design

This study was conducted utilizing an autoethnographic approach that allowed for me to closely examine my own lived experiences with mentoring. The following provides a description of the research design that was executed for the collection of my data.

Data Collection

The autoethnographic data was collected from two vantage points. First, through an exploration of three phases of my own experience of being mentored during (a) childhood, (b) adolescence, and (c) as a university student. Second, from deep reflection on my experiences as a Black feminist mentor of Black girls over the last decade. This process began with the creation of a timeline of significant mentoring experiences throughout my life, in order to begin to recall relevant memories that link to this study. I then partook in an exercise outlined in Chang's (2008) work—*Autoethnography as Method*—that allowed me to hone more deeply in on the mentors that have had the greatest impact in my life. This exercise called for a reflection utilizing the following prompt: What mentors, in order of importance, have made significant impact on my life? I then thoroughly described my mentoring experiences with each mentor, with the intentional focus toward their impact, and considered the ways in which they influenced me.

Similarly, I examined my stories of mentoring Black girls and developed categories that most represented what I experienced with the girls and what they communicated to me about their experiences in working with me. Upon completion of data generation, I organized both datasets according to emerging themes, principles, and overarching issues raised, in order to

allow for ease in coding and analysis. As is not unusual when employing an autoethnographic method, this process was not linear; rather, it consisted of continuous data collection, data management, and data analysis and interpretation to allow for emergent layers of depth to unfold (Chang, 2008).

Coding, Decoding, and Analysis

Given the critical research tradition that supports the exploration of personal experiences in the context of political structures, even the varied practice of analyzing the data can be understood as a decolonizing act, which is rooted in an emancipatory intent (George, 2012; Kahl, 2011; Spry, 2001; Starr, 2010). In order to ensure that the analysis lived up to these expectations, the lenses that comprise my conceptual framework, previously discussed, were employed to analyze the nature of my own experiences and my experiences mentoring Black girls. This analysis was conducted with respect to the manner in which systems have impacted and continue to impact my mentoring experiences—both as mentee and mentor—as the subject of this study. Black feminism and Black girlhood studies center the experiences of Black girls and explore them through a critical lens that challenges sexism and racism (Brown, 2009; P. H. Collins, 1989, 2015; hooks, 1996; Madison, 1993). The specific style and practice of mentoring was analyzed through the lens of critical mentoring, which focused on "liberatory processes that trigger critical consciousness and an ongoing and joint struggle for transformation" (Weiston-Serdan, 2017, p. 1). Thus, the principles of these lenses guided the analysis of personal data, which is presented and analyzed in the subsequent chapters.

The components of each framework were reviewed after initial coding in order to capture the four overarching themes that emerged throughout the study: (a) individual identity

development, (b) development of individual voice, (c) sisterhood and solidarity, and (d) conscientization and resistance.

Limitations

Although autoethnography was born out of a tradition committed to emancipation and empowerment, many scholars argued that it is unfit to achieve these goals. In response to such critiques, Kahl (2011) noted that scholars, such as Shields (2010), critiqued autoethnography saying it "exhibits low power in terms of offering an original explanation of how to rid the world of oppressive power" (p. 410). Shields (2010) also contended that this approach can be unreliable because the voices of the oppressed are absent, although it supposedly seeks "to speak for the anonymous masses, the down-trodden, and the marginalized when, by definition, presenting the critical autoethnographer's lived experience in academic advantages and privileges *only* the critical autoethnographer" (cited in Kahl, 2011, p. 1930).

Kahl (2011) argued that the position taken by Shields (2010) reflected a limited understanding of the transformative power inherent in leveraging privileges (particularly in relation to the oppressed) in service of the greater good. So, although I, as someone with access to higher education, experience a certain degree of privilege, this does not negate my ability to speak to my experiences rooted in marginalized identities. Rather, this consciousness of the complexity of my positionality compels me to speak in service of those who have yet to discover their own trail to liberation. We travel this pathway together, and I hope that my vantage points and ability to articulate this personal journey will illuminate the path for critically understanding the conditions Black girls face and their mentoring needs.

Anderson (2006) and Coffey (1999) further argued that autoethnographies have limited impact because of their self-indulgent nature. Starr (2010), however, refuted this notion, and instead posited that intentionally focusing on the self can catalyze the recognition that personal experiences are inextricably linked to larger systemic issues, thus inspiring liberatory practices that aim to transform oppression. Starr (2010) further noted, "Autoethnography must maintain impact, where it speaks to the overall effect of the text on an emotional and intellectual level and the ability of the text to inspire or motivate the reader to some form of action" (p. 7). This summarizes well the fundamental intent with which autoethnography has been employed in this study.

CHAPTER 4

KRYSTAL'S STORY—

IGNITING THE FLAME THROUGH CRITICAL MENTORSHIP

I was raised in low-income, working class communities and attended schools that were negatively impacted by this reality. Further, my racial and gender identity, as a young Black girl, exacerbated my poor experiences in schools, largely because of the ways in which stereotypes and criminalization pervade the systemic treatment of Black girls. Hence, this autoethnography speaks intimately about this reality and my life experiences of being both mentored and of mentoring young Black girls within a variety of contexts, including home, school, and our community. My story is organized here chronologically and reflects the experiences that I consider to be significant to my development and my understanding of the kind of mentoring relationships that are key in the lives of Black girls today.

My First Othermother

The beginning of my life was essentially peaceful. I was a pretty happy child. The first memory I have is of my older sister and me. We are sitting in front of a TV that is on a small wooden table, and Nicole is sitting on the floor. I do not remember what we were watching, but I know that I was wearing my favorite pajamas that had pink on them, sitting in my pink chair, holding my teddy bear. This was familiar, something that always happened, Nicole and I, alone together watching cartoons on television. For as long as I can remember, I never felt scared around Nicole. She was so brave. We would play outside, often I was playing in the sandbox or with my dolls, and Nicole was climbing trees or something else that seemed so out of reach to

me. Nicole was my first role model, teacher, and mentor. So many of my earliest memories of her were of bravery and taking care of me.

That would be one of the safest, most secure, and joy-filled times of my life. Our relationship was simple—I knew that Nicole was older and wiser. The early lessons that she taught me about girlhood and family really formed the ways in which I engage with my sisters and other women and girls. To me, growing up in an all-female household allowed me to be raised without any sense of inferiority to men and minimal belief in traditional Western gender roles. Nicole was my superhero, she seemed invincible, and though I looked up to her, she was so humble. Her humility is something that remains today. Although many of my younger childhood memories were primarily with Nicole, that began to shift as our family grew.

A year or two later, my younger sister, Charmaine, was born, and about three years later, my baby sister, Vanessa, was born. Our mother was the primary caregiver. Our fathers were minimally involved. Charmaine's father and stepmother would come to pick her up maybe one or two weekends a month. They would sometimes take Vanessa with them—Vanessa has never met her father. My father would come and pick Nicole and me up possibly every other weekend for a visit. We would watch cartoons all day, eat waffles and gourmet sandwiches with onions and tomatoes (mom never made them like that), and he would give us $1.00 each to visit the corner store. We were so excited about this part of the weekend, we would walk to the store all by ourselves, and we always purchased a pickle, Lucas (lime-flavored salt), and candy; Nicole's candy of choice was the original Nestle's Crunch Bar and mine was Starburst. She still loves chocolate, and I still hate it. I felt so independent during those walks to the store.

My relationship with my father never really bothered me much. I felt like he was the fun parent, so I would look forward to seeing him. My mom was very strict. I do remember feeling as if he felt that taking us was a duty and not a privilege, because it was rare that he spent time with us. Whenever I think back to how those weekends would go, the most impactful memories were the rituals that Nicole and I created and the food we would eat. Our father never did anything like take us to the park or a museum, and we only met two of his sisters that I can remember. It was as if we were not fully a part of his life, and he was not an integral part of ours. He was not even just a babysitter, because he would not sit and watch TV with us. I just remember him sleeping upstairs, while Nicole and I were downstairs watching Nickelodeon and Saturday morning cartoons. I spent so much time with Nicole during those days. She was the one who I would tell if I was hungry or tired. She made sure that I picked out my clothes and that I brushed my teeth. She was more than a big sister to me when we went to his house, she was my othermother. It was this dynamic that informed the relationship that my sisters and I have with one another.

The Elementary Years

The later part of my childhood was fraught with upheaval and severed friendships and familial relationships. In third grade, my family experienced a traumatic event that led to our fleeing to Texas in hopes of being reunited with my mom's family in Los Angeles. My mom had been having paranoid visions of one of our good friend's older brothers. This was one of the defining moments in my life, at the time. It really marked a drastic shift in my life and in my schooling. I had a great childhood, and I loved school—the garden in which my friend and I

would grow pumpkins, Ms. Fitts and her arts and crafts, and all my classmates. But when this traumatic incident happened, many of my school memories were virtually lost.

We were living in a large low-income housing development in Austin, Texas, and there was a family that had five boys. My mom was convinced that the eldest had lustful desires for us and that he was trying to break into our house to act on his urges. We were no longer able to play with our friends, and we were rarely allowed to go outside. I do not recall if my mom ever spoke to their parents about what she thought was going on, but she acted immediately. This was truly the first time I could remember feeling unsafe and scared, particularly scared of men and boys. We all tried to stay calm under the circumstances, because we could tell that my mom was truly disturbed by what she thought had happened, but we were young, confused, and desperately desired to have things return to normal.

Her motherly instinct to protect us led to a few weeks of sleeping on pallets made of a few blankets on the hard, cold floor in the living room. We were very young when all of this was happening. Nicole, the eldest, was only 10 or 11, I was seven or eight, Charmaine, four or five, and Vanessa was only one or two. We had no real comprehension of what was happening. My mother would always tell us to stay away from the windows and make sure that we were fully clothed, but she never spoke directly to us about what was happening. I think that she spoke more to Nicole because she was older, and she felt that our friend was primarily focused on her. These are really the only memories that I have during this traumatic time. I cannot recall going to school or visiting my father or anything. I just remember feeling scared, scared for myself and my sisters, worried and scared for my mom because she seemed worried and was not getting any

sleep, and scared for my friend. He had never done anything to us, so I was not sure where my mom's suspicions were coming from.

This period came to a screeching halt when my mother called the police. She ran outside with a wet face towel and said, "See, this has his scent on it. He was in our house, and he raped my daughter." I was shocked to my core to hear her say that, and I wondered if he had done anything to any of my sisters. The police were calm, and they walked near my frantic mom as she raced in and out of the apartment; then they handcuffed her. This was a bit blurry too, I remember seeing her in a white jacket and an ambulance, but I cannot remember if they put her in the ambulance or the police car. I do not remember if we went to the station or if her friend Robin, whose home we often slept over, immediately took us, or if they took us to the police station and our fathers got us from there. I remember always feeling so protected and safe because my mom was so strong, and she provided for us. But to see her yelling, screaming, and powerless as the police forced her out of the apartment, I started to feel fearful.

This led to a major rupture in our family. Everything that was normal and regular to us was turned upside down. Charmaine and Vanessa stayed with Charmaine's father and stepmother for a while, and Nicole and I stayed with our father. I think this went on for about a month. I recall the first time that my dad took us to go see our mom; we went to this hospital, and the walls were light pink and other pastel colors. We sat down in the waiting area, and then a nurse brought our mother out. She did not seem like herself. She seemed distant, sluggish, and she had very low energy. It was like she was a completely different person from the strong, busy body, loud mother that we knew. She was happy to see us, but she was speaking slowly and slurred most of her words. I asked Nicole when we left why mom was behaving that way, and

she said that the hospital gave her medicine. She said that the hospital was a mental hospital, and that mom was there to get better. During this time, Nicole was the only person who was honest with me about the situation. I felt like, even though I was a child and was younger than her, that she respected me and felt that I deserved to know what was happening in my life. When my mom returned, she was committed to getting us out of Austin and taking us to Los Angeles where she assured us we would have aunts, an uncle, and many cousins with whom to play, grow, and bond. My mom never spoke of that incident again, and we knew better than to mention it.

The hardest part of leaving Texas was not being able to say goodbye to my friends and my dad and realizing that I may never return. But Nicole was there, modeling how to be a big girl and adapt. This was one of the most important lessons that I learned from Nicole: no matter what, just keep going. She truly embodied the survivor mentality of rolling with the punches, even at that young age, and not letting anything slow her down. She was so mature and made every effort to protect us from uncertainty and the deep sense of loss that often surfaced as we adjusted to our new reality. Looking back, I do not see how I could have gotten through that experience or the long Greyhound bus ride to Texas without Nicole. She was my strength and courage during one of the scariest times of my life as a girl.

From Texas Clay to Palm Trees

When I left Texas, I left behind what was familiar. I had two best friends, I was doing great in school, and I loved my teachers. When the decision was made to leave, I was not even given enough time to say goodbye to my school community. Everything that I had come to know, and love began to fade away as our cold, smelly, and almost terrifying Greyhound bus

drove further and further away from my hometown of Austin, Texas. It was surreal to realize that I would probably never see my dad again, and not being able to say goodbye to him since, despite many assurances, he never came to the bus station. The visit the week before we left was the last time I ever saw him. I was 11 the last time I heard his voice and 22 when I said my final words to him; a nurse held the phone to his ear, but he was incapacitated and nonresponsive.

Arriving in Los Angeles felt like a slap in the face. All the family that my mother told us about were nowhere to be found. The only person who met us at the train station was my mother's brother. The first four months or so were a daze; from sleeping on the floor in her brothers' house to a hotel on Imperial Highway in Inglewood. I was tired, bored, sad, confused, and longing for my old life, even just the smallest semblance of something familiar. It took a while, but we were enrolled in school, and I knew that this was exactly what I needed to feel at home again. I was nervous that I would be behind my classmates since we had been out of school for a while, but Nicole assured us all that we would be fine.

School in Los Angeles

The 109th Street Elementary school was not at all like GoValley in Austin. These kids were mean, they did not play fair, and they were all so short and small. I remember thinking how different they were; but to them, I was different; a nine-year-old Black girl who was already five-feet, four-inches tall when many, if not all of them, were still under five feet. I felt like a small woman towering over them. By fourth grade, I started my period, and because of my October birthday, I was the oldest in my class. They teased me about everything there, and their cruelty made me self-conscious about my womanly curves, my (at the time) athletic height, my acne, and my "accent." I got into fights and did not have many friends when I started. One girl,

Ashley, always made fun of my wide and round nose. This came to a head one day when we were standing in line outside of the classroom waiting to go inside and she put her hand in my face, so close that it touched my nose. That was neither my first nor last fight at 109th Street elementary, even though I had never been in a fight in Austin. In many ways, my teachers became my companions, and I spent many lunch breaks in the classroom.

Nicole had a similar experience. She attended Markham middle school, one of the worse and most violent middle schools in LAUSD. She absolutely hated that school. She was teased every day, even on her walks home from school, and there was a boy who tormented her regularly who was extremely cruel. I remember her having multiple conversations with my mom about how terrible that school was and receiving little to no support. She would often come home and go directly to our room without speaking. When we would talk about how school went, we really bonded over our parallel experiences. Similarly, we were both determined not to let anything stop us from excelling academically. We spent time venting and processing our terrible days, and then we would get to work. We always did all our homework.

Nicole, served as my primary mentor at the time, and she did not give up. She maintained a high GPA, played viola, violin, and bass in orchestra, and went on to graduate and go to high school. Her courage and perseverance modeled for me the successful strategies to deal with the difficult situations to which I was exposed. She had teachers who were not challenging her, a principal and other school disciplinarians who did not demonstrate concern for her well-being, and she was so far ahead because of the schooling that we received in Austin. When we spoke of our schooling experiences, I do not recall her ever saying that she missed our old schools. I just

remember her encouraging me to not let anything or anyone stop me. One of her strongest characteristics was her ability to not dwell on the past and just focus on the present.

Like Nicole's experience, another major difference between GoValley and 109th Street was the level of rigor. My third-grade classmates were learning things that I learned in first and second grade. I always finished my work early and was so bored in class. I had the same teacher for third and fourth grade, and she made every effort to challenge me. I remember her giving me a book to practice my cursive, although the other students were not learning that yet. To this day, my sisters say that my cursive mirrors textbooks, and it is because I literally taught myself cursive with the use of that book. I felt that I had adjusted by the time I entered fifth grade. I was playing kickball and basketball, my best friend Veronica and I were very close, my mom allowed me to go over to her house, and I was excelling academically. But I still missed Austin. I missed my old school and the garden where I grew the largest pumpkin in the neighborhood, I missed my friend Michael and his granddad's famous oatmeal raisin cookies, and I missed the small-town neighborhood, because Los Angeles felt so big and impersonal.

My Othermother at 109th Street Elementary

Ms. Smith, my fifth-grade teacher, made me feel like I belonged. She was the first Black teacher I had throughout my entire education, both in Austin and in Los Angeles. I spent many lunch breaks with her, just embracing all the positivity and love she exuded. She loved math, she loved Teletubbies, and she loved teaching. She was unapologetically Black and had that older Black woman humor that could relieve even the harshest tension. There was a certain kinship I felt with her that I had not felt with any other teacher. I knew that my other teachers felt I was bright and that I would be able to go to college, because they would often tell me so, but I feel

like Ms. Smith connected with me more deeply, and our conversations were not surface level. She told me things about herself, her life, and her family. She was open, and she shared when she was not feeling good or if she had a particularly good morning. I was more than a student to her, I was a mentee, and, in many ways, she was my othermother. She encouraged me to do my best in everything that I did and to really think outside of the box as I considered topics for my class projects.

Ms. Smith even encouraged me to serve as the commencement speaker for my fifth-grade graduation ceremony, and she helped me to write my speech. When she first approached me about giving the speech, I was a little nervous because I did not like speaking in front of large groups of people, especially because my classmates had continuously teased me about my Texas accent. But she insisted that I do it because I had worked so hard to get all fours (which were As in elementary school), and she felt that I deserved the recognition. I was the only Black student to give a speech at the commencement ceremony, and the school was roughly 50% Black and 50% Latino. She made it clear that, as a Black girl, I should be standing up there with every other student because I worked hard and achieved a great deal of achievements.

Ms. Smith's mentoring had a major impact on my life. I loved seeing a Black woman who was just so smart and loved math and science. She really made me want to teach. I had never felt quite as comfortable with one of my teachers before. Over our summer breaks, while the other children played outside and at the park, my sisters and I played school and I, of course, was the math and science teacher. Ms. Smith challenged the stereotype that Black women must be hard as a rock. She was open about loving the kids show Teletubbies. As a girl, she made me feel like I could do anything that I wanted to. There was a different type of freedom, intellectual

curiosity, and confidence that was fostered in her class. She was really the first person who ever made me feel like I wanted to consider education and teaching as a possible career. Ms. Smith was also a no-excuse kind of woman. She saw my potential and held me to nothing less. There was an unspoken rule, I felt, as one of the two smartest kids in the class and one of the Black girls: I must participate in certain award activities and excel in all that I do. She challenged the status quo of Black students not being represented among the students who excelled, and she resisted the generally accepted notion that we just were not as smart. It was her class that allowed me to envision myself as a Black female scientist.

When I went to visit her almost 15 years later, she immediately recognized me. She embraced me the same way that a family member would who you have not seen in years. She looked almost exactly the same. She had that same humor—I cannot remember what joke she told, but I do remember thinking that some things never change. We caught up, and I told her about my endeavors at school. I had already been accepted to Loyola Marymount University (LMU), and I may have been taking my first class. She reminded me of a school project that I did that was an investigation of the school irrigation system. I cannot recall exactly what the goal of the project was, but I remember examining water fountains and developing a report with recommendations for the school. I had completely forgotten about that project, but she shared that, after 15 years, she still shares my project with her class as a model. Even at the age of 27, I was giddy with the idea that one of my favorite teachers used my project to teach other students. It made me feel seen, heard, and respected.

One of the most endearing characteristics of Ms. Smith is her authenticity and openness. In catching up, she was honest about the experience that she had been having at 109th. She

shared that the demographics had shifted drastically, and there were so few Black students. She shared that the new principal was racist and that the parent group was not inclusive toward Black students and rarely addressed their needs. Her entire career had been at that school, and she at one point desired to retire there. But, the racism and lack of respect had become unbearable. I was sad that she had that experience but was so proud to see that she did not tolerate it. I respected and appreciated the fact that she was honest with me about her experience as a Black woman at that school and happy that she trusted me enough to share her critique of the school. I understood and connected with her around that issue. Having heard her share about ways she advocated for Black students in predominantly non-Black spaces reaffirmed both my research and career choice. I often hear from colleagues and friends who have left positions for similar reasons, but for some reason this profoundly impacted me because I was her student. I know what environment she intentionally created for me, as I was working to become who I am as a student and a scholar, but her resistance and comradery with Black students will never go unnoticed.

Middle School

Overall, one of the primary things I remembered feeling when I was in middle school was that adults do not care about Black kids. We had so many substitutes who never bothered to learn our names. Many of them seemed convinced that we were intellectually incapable of learning and often vocalized it. Further, many of us girls noticed the looks we would get from some of the men on campus who saw us beyond our innocent years. At times it felt like we were anything but students; they treated us as if we were irrelevant, grown women, or violent criminals. The procedural practices of shutting down the campus and calling the police due to a singular fight

made me feel like we were always one step away from jail. The officers who would come were not the friendly type. They had batons, handcuffs, and guns. It was as if they already knew that we were going to jail and that it was only a matter of time. The psychological toll this took on us often resulted in behavioral problems and resistance toward school. For me, it resulted in rebellion—not academically, because I did not compromise my grades for anything—but I would voice my disdain for our treatment as often as possible.

I attended Samuel Gompers Middle School during my entire time in middle school. My older sister, Nicole, went to Markham and had a terrible experience, so my mother sent me to Gompers instead. Like 109th, Gompers was in a low-income community in South Central Los Angeles. There were lots of fights, and we would often be on lockdown because the administration was either trying to keep someone off campus or a fight had broken out. Nonetheless, I felt pretty settled in middle school. I played clarinet in marching band, so I had a very close-knit set of friends with whom I would spend most of my time, and I was a straight-A student. I loved school, specifically marching band, so I liked that my mom had to drop me off at school early. Our band instructor would give us points every time we practiced before school, during lunch, or after school, so by the time I reached seventh grade, I had the highest number of points, and I became first chair clarinet. I had some great teachers and experiences at Gompers Middle School, but I also had several problematic and troublesome situations.

The Bite of the Gompers Bulldogs

Middle school was the first time that I remember being exposed to blatantly racist teachers and staff. In elementary school, my third- and fourth-grade teacher was great, and Ms. Smith, my fifth-grade teacher, was one of my mentors. I noticed in middle school, they began to

talk to us as adults. We heard insult after insult from disgruntled staff who would call us "stupid" and "retarded," they insisted that we would never go to college, and they proclaimed that we would never amount to anything. One of my sixth-grade teachers, a Latino man, seemed to strongly dislike me. We had assigned seats in his class, so I sat in the front next to one of no more than three White students in the entire school. She was blonde, and she stuck out like a sore thumb in a sea of Black and Brown students. Mr. Martinez gave her a lot of attention, asking her if she understood the assignments, allowing her to leave the room and go to the restroom when she wanted, and would always pick up her quizzes or tests last so that she could have more time to work on them. She would often ask me for help with classwork because I did well on my exams. Somehow, Mr. Martinez would only notice when I responded to her and often sent me out of class or publicly reprimand me: "Huff, stop talking and do your work." This was really the first time that one of my teachers made it clear that he disliked me. It made me feel like no matter how smart I was or how much effort I put forth, it just did not matter. I began to see how racism played out in school, and I felt like no matter how sharp I was, I was still just a disruptive little Black girl who Mr. Martinez hated to have in his class.

There was another major incident that happened in eighth grade. My eighth-grade English class was taught by a permanent substitute. His name was Mr. Wright, and he was nice, but we could tell that he was in over his head. He was unprepared and did not show any initiative in trying to teach us. The class ended up being student-led, primarily by me and sometimes two other students. One day, Mr. Wright informed me that he was going to be out the following day, and he asked for my assistance in getting the class started. The next day, I left my favorite class early, my third period band class, to greet the substitute. I said, "Hello, my name is Krystal Huff,

and I am a student in this class. I am sort of a student assistant, and Mr. Wright wanted me to let you know that the lesson plan is in the desk drawer and that I can start the roll sheet." As many substitutes did, even substitutes of color, he decided to make an example of me and exclaimed:

> Excuse me, I am the teacher and you are the student. You are not going to tell me when to teach. Besides, there is no reason to teach any of you anyway. All of you girls are going to end up pregnant before you graduate, and all of you guys are going to end up in jail before you turn 18.

Deeply angered, but not surprised by his response, I responded:

> Excuse me, but this is an Honors English class, and you are speaking to the Valedictorian. I am probably more qualified to teach this class than you anyway—that's the reason why you are a substitute, because you can't get your credentials.

Then I wrote the assignment on the blackboard and told the class that I would be back. I stormed into the Principal's Office, passed her assistant who stood up abruptly in an attempt to stop me, and told the Principal what happened. I told her that if that is how he felt about us, he should not get paid to just sit there. The substitute was let go.

Home Life in Upheaval

Meanwhile, my home life during eighth grade was in upheaval. We were evicted from our apartment, which led to us temporarily living in a shelter on Manchester Avenue and Broadway Avenue. The impoverished area was stricken with prostitution, drugs, and other illegal activity. My two younger sisters were in elementary school, I was in middle school, and Nicole was in high school. I was responsible for picking up my sisters from school and taking them home on the bus. This was one of the first times that a traumatic event was taking place in my

life and Nicole was not there every hour of the day to take care of us. This newfound responsibility was unnerving at first, but I had witnessed Nicole get us through so much when we were younger, so I knew I could do it too. It was a challenging time, and even though I never expressed my nervousness and fear directly, Nicole would encourage me anyway. It was like she just knew what I needed to hear.

The shelter was very unsafe. We would leave and come back and could tell that someone had been messing with our things, since we did not have our own room, and the locks on our closets were easily manipulated. There was another large family that had the privilege of living in the private room, so we were stuck living in the common area with three bunks that were not even right next to each other. It was not until a month before we left that the other family moved out and we got their private room. Their rules were not conducive to the realities of our conditions at that time either. If we arrived after 6:00 p.m., we would not be able to eat dinner, even though they were illegally charging us rent. Furthermore, they turned off the lights at 9:00 p.m., and there was no study area for students. This was particularly challenging for me because I babysat Charmaine and Vanessa until Nicole got back. She arrived much later because her school was much farther away by bus.

I spent many nights staying up late to complete my homework on the floor in the bathroom because that was the only place where the light was still on. Nicole made it very clear that we do whatever needs to be done to do well in school. So, with her encouragement and my determination, I maintained a high GPA. Later that year, once we had moved into a new apartment and everything was settling, I was waiting for my final report card that would determine whether I would be the valedictorian of my middle school class. I was so anxious and

excited—I remember that day so vividly. I was lying on my bed in my new room that I shared with Nicole, reading for school, legs crossed in the air, and my mom came into the room. Without a word, she threw an open envelope at me and walked out. I grabbed the envelope, knowing that it was from the school, and quickly ripped the paper out. Before I even read my name, my eyes looked straight down the paper. It was straight As! I was the first Black valedictorian in years (there were two of us; the other was my friend, a Latina girl that was also in marching band with me). The graduation ceremony was one to remember. I won the Martin Luther King, Jr. Award, the Perfect Attendance Award, the President's Award (signed by Bill Clinton), and I gave the commencement speech. By the second time my name was called, and I walked to the podium to receive my award, the entire audience stood up to cheer for me. My sisters were not there because my mom did not think they should miss school. So, I celebrated by getting a two-piece chicken tender meal from Church's Chicken and watching my mom boast and brag about me to her mother. My grandmother and I never had a close relationship. She had a terrible relationship with my mother, and, for some reason, she could never remember my name. That was one of my happiest moments, and I wished I could have shared it with my sisters.

Nicole's Mentoring

Nicole demonstrated what it meant to have a voice with adults. She advocated for better schooling and did not stop until my mom agreed to transfer her to another school because she asserted that she deserved better. The narrative that she told and that guided her life and ours was that we deserve the best and we will fight to get it. Nicole demonstrated her opposition to the stereotypical assumptions placed on us. Nicole would encourage me and sit with me when I

needed to do my homework. She was proud of my accomplishments and made me feel seen. Despite the poor treatment that I received from some of my teachers and permanent substitutes, I excelled. Nicole would always make sure that I did my homework and would help me if I did not understand. When you are a young person in a situation like this, it is confusing. Being a star student, receiving no recognition from your parent, having your life turned upside down without explanation: It is a lot to take in. It was more manageable for me because I was not experiencing it alone. I had my sisters, and more specifically, I had Nicole who would talk us through a lot of what happened. She was always willing and open to answer any questions I had. She shared that a lot of what was happening was out of my mom's control because it is hard being a single mother making little over minimum wage. She explained how the money that she made was not enough to take care of all of us and keep the apartment that we stayed in, and that we went to the shelter because we lost the apartment and needed help. It was her perspective that allowed me to understand what poverty is and how it impacts our lives. She also taught me that sometimes, no matter how hard one works, there are powers that make it very difficult for any progress to be achieved. Her willingness to explain what was happening put me a little at ease, but it was really watching the way she handled everything that was going on that had the greatest impact on me.

Despite Nicole's experience at Markham and Washington Prep—the bullying, sexual harassment, and damaging experiences with teachers (she was in high school while I was in middle school)—she never questioned her intelligence. As young adolescents, we all struggle with self-esteem and self-image during middle school and high school, but Nicole had a humble self-confidence about her that I always admired. When we spoke of the experiences that we had of older men yelling obscenities from down the street, and boys making crude jokes about body

parts in school, she made it clear that she did not gain confidence from that. Even when peers would "clown" us because we could not afford name brand clothes, even though many if not all students that attended our schools qualified for free or reduced lunch, she was unmoved. As a dark-skinned Black girl (my sisters and I would say that she was literally the same color as her favorite candy, the Nestle Crunch Bar), attending schools where students included complexion in their joke repertoire, she recognized her natural beauty and she graciously demonstrated that to us. During a time that boys and men tried to hypersexualize me, and girls would only compliment my hair when it was in fake braids, and school staff would literally call me stupid or say that I belonged in special education, Nicole showed me just what it meant to be a dark-skinned, smart Black girl from South Central Los Angeles. Our conversations about how Black women were portrayed in music videos, how teachers underestimated not only us but all students in our classes, and her advice on homework helped to ground me.

Ms. Morehead's Mentoring

Another person who had a major impact on me during middle school (as well as early high school and later in my 20s) was Ms. Morehead. She was Nicole's case manager and mentor at the local nonprofit in our community. Nicole enrolled in their summer program before me, because she was older. I think I started participating when I went to Locke, my ninth- and tenth-grade years. We attended their summer programs, went on field trips, met and made friends from other schools throughout Los Angeles, and Ms. Morehead even helped us to obtain our first jobs. She was so warm and would always tell us how proud she was of us every time we would show her our report cards and other accomplishments. She would just take us to lunch and talk to us about nothing and everything at the same time. She also talked to us about college. In fact, I

remember one day I was sitting in the living room and Nicole came home from school. My mom was in the kitchen, so Nicole walked close to the doorway and told her that she was going to college. My mom said, “You can’t go, how are you going to pay for that?” Nicole insisted that she was going and told my mom about the FAFSA and financial aid. She said that Ms. Morehead and our college counselor at school would help her to complete the application and apply for scholarships. I often wonder where my sisters and I would have ended up were it not for Ms. Morehead’s encouragement. She was real about the struggles that the Black community faces, and she was a tell-it-like-it-is kind of person. She celebrated our victories, and within each celebration, she would encourage us to do more. She provided a fun and safe space when Nicole and I wanted and sometimes needed an escape from our home life.

Both Nicole and Ms. Morehead made me feel loved and appreciated. They encouraged me to focus on school regardless of what was happening outside of school. Ms. Morehead’s warmth and humor made that nonprofit one of our favorite places to be. Her forthright discussions about inequality stuck with me into college and beyond. We stayed in touch and she facilitated my obtaining a position with that very same nonprofit in 2016. Even though it was not the best job, I was proud to serve my community through the same organization that helped me. As far as Nicole goes, she made it clear that nothing would stand in the way of whatever we wanted to do—that included money.

High School

The Fight Culture at Locke

My high school experience was similar to middle school. I attended Alain LeRoy Locke High School with all my friends from Gompers. Locke was one of the worst performing schools

in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and, after I graduated, they were taken over by Green Dot charter schools because of their failure to meet the requirements of the District improvement plan. I had terrible, negligent teachers who often expressed their disdain for the school and for the students. There were also police officers present who would often arrest students on campus. I was involved in a few fights, because fighting was unfortunately part of the school culture. One fight was provoked by a girl in my ninth-grade health class after she insulted and spat on me. The teacher called campus police. The police took me to the office, and I immediately began arguing with the principal, saying that my rights were being violated and that I demanded to speak to my mother. I told my mom that I was being held against my will and that I was arrested (I was a bit dramatic back then—I had not been arrested or even handcuffed). The principal assured my mom that I was not going to be arrested. I advocated that I was defending myself and that I could not be sent home because I had a football game to attend as a band member. I was not suspended, but the other girl was expelled. I always found it interesting how the same voice that often led to being kicked out of class prevented me from being suspended or expelled. But the contentiousness and struggles at Locke persisted, until a hateful incident against me precipitated an opportunity for my transfer to Washington Preparatory High School, a school far better suited for me.

Washington Preparatory High School

I often wondered what my life would be like if I never transferred to Washington, and further, if I never initiated the transfer myself. My mom was always so busy as a single parent that my sisters and I knew there were some things we just had to take care of on our own. I am still not sure that my mom knows the real reason I got myself transferred. Nicole transferred

from Locke to Washington, and she went on to college. I knew that if I wanted to follow in her footsteps, I had to get myself out of Locke. Washington was a low-performing school as well, but they had more Advanced Placements courses and an internally ranked marching and jazz band. I knew that I needed to advocate for myself to make sure I was not tracked onto a non-college going path. It got to the point where my counselor would summon me from class before he finalized my class schedule to confirm that I agreed with my classes for the next semester.

The support that I received from my counselor, my honors and AP teachers, and band and Spanish teachers at Washington Prep set the foundation for my future. They gave me and my close-knit group of 10 friends release time to the college office, provided letters of recommendation, and my 11th-grade English teacher took the time to teach us how to write at a college level. Overall, Washington was a much better situation for me, but it too had its faults. I remember when I was in 11th grade, they had put up a fence around the eating area to lock us in during the nutrition and lunch periods. A senior advocate made it his mission to get that taken down, and after a long fight, he was successful. I was aware of the poor state of our school because I had the opportunity to visit multiple schools through marching band. Our school was so poor that we could not have night games because we could not afford the lights. But schools like Banning High School not only had lights, they had Advanced Placement courses in multiple languages that Washington did not even offer.

There was an additional peculiar situation regarding a science class in which I enrolled. Looking back, I often wonder if I would have chosen to pursue a STEM career if my passion and interest had not been extinguished by false promises and poor planning in one of my classes. I was so excited to take a marine biology class in 11th grade because, at that time, I was thinking

about becoming an astronomer and was interested in science. The school was so under-resourced that our teacher was relegated to using a standard tenth-grade science book that only had one chapter on the topic of marine biology. We had an empty fish tank that the teacher insisted would be filled with exotic marine life but never was, and we were also promised field trips that never happened. The dismal conditions in some of our classes were truly concerning, and even at that age, I wondered if they would let something like that happen in wealthier neighborhood schools.

Mentoring Experiences

The mentoring that allowed me to get through that time period was informed by witnessing Nicole's experiences and how she managed the challenges that she faced in school. Nicole would come home and talk about her schooling experiences with me. She led me to see how important it was to have a healthy outlet when you hate your school and to remain productive no matter what the circumstances were. She told me about how few resources Locke had and how one of her classes was taught by a variety of substitutes on the bleachers of the outdoors football field. She let me know that sometimes, even though we knew we were not bad kids, fights are inevitable at these schools, and that we must survive. She also led me to see that what she was experiencing did not define her. She would do whatever she had to do to foster her ambition and protect her future. Knowing that she went through the same things and still ended up being the first person in our family to go to college—she attended the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)—affirmed in me that I could do the same thing. Nicole is simply brilliant: Her conversation was always so advanced that my younger sisters and I used to joke that she was an encyclopedia. Nicole was the mentor who directly modeled how to make it through a terrible situation and come out of it with success. I borrowed from her courage when I

would get fed up or start to question whether I was prepared to succeed in college. It was truly her display of courage, resistance to projected stereotypes that Black girls from our community would never amount to anything, and her bravery to just go for it that really informed my actions at Locke, Washington, and beyond.

Also, Ms. Morehead provided the safe space I needed when I dreaded going to a school ripe with violence and struggle. It was her nurturing approach that categorically reaffirmed me and allowed me to know that there are many adults who work in education and other social services because they believe in youth and want to see us succeed. That was huge for me, because even though I had some amazing teachers throughout my time in LAUSD, there was a part of me that really started to believe that the world hates Black youth. I remember being so disheartened the first time a teacher disliked me and could not care less if I did well in his class. But, by the time I got to ninth grade, it was normal to me. I saw many teachers, substitutes, and staff as barriers to as opposed to key participants in my success.

Ms. Morehead's kind gestures of picking us up to have conversations over lunch, absolutely refusing to allow us to believe that we could not attend college because we could not afford it, and generally serving as our cheerleader allowed for us to receive much needed encouragement and nurturing. She often alluded to how other communities and schools provided more opportunities to young people and, because Watts was predominantly Black and Latino, we were not afforded those same opportunities. Her relationship bridged the gap for us and gave us access to knowledge about college life and other information that was not readily available to us. In this way, both Ms. Morehead and Nicole provided me with a sense of stability, comfort,

inspiration, and the support I needed to successfully navigate high school and prepare for college.

University Student

My Undergraduate Years

I attended the University of California, Riverside (UCR), for my undergraduate career. I was so excited to follow in the footsteps of my older sister and go off to college. Navigating the academy seemed easy at first. I did not experience as much of a culture shock as I did when I would visit Nicole at UCLA, because there was a large percentage of Black and Latino students. Further, UCR was in a low-income area of Riverside, with the ever-familiar Food 4 Less and Dollar Tree stores within walking distance. My first quarter GPA was low, but I attributed that to getting acclimated to college and having to take a computer science class. The most challenging thing about UCR was sitting in lower division ethnic studies and women's studies courses with conservative students who were not afraid to share their racist, sexism, and classist ideologies. I also had a supervisor that seemed clueless about her privilege as a White woman who said the most offensive things. That experience came at a time when I was consistently being triggered by classmates happy to repeat every stereotype and racial slur they had ever heard about Black people and other minorities. Nonetheless, I did well at UCR, and it was truly because I developed an amazing support system, which was important given that I was a first-generation college student, and this was the first time I was living on my own.

My first undergraduate mentor. Rena was my first mentor at UCR. She was an Academic Advisor in the Undergraduate Academic Advising Center for the College of Natural and Agricultural Sciences, where I was a student assistant. Rena was a gorgeous dark-skinned

Black woman who is over six-feet tall. She was the epitome of Black beauty, and her confidence exudes into the world. She would rock her heels and did not mind that she was often the tallest in the room. She was one of the first dark-skinned Black women that made it clear that she knew that she was beautiful, and I always loved and respected that about her. This was around the time that we started to see a major shift in the media's representation of Black women. If Black women were present, they were either extremely light-skinned or they were visibly mixed with curly hair. Rena was clear in her belief that other people's stereotypes and projections would not define her. She was unapologetically herself, and unapologetically Black. We had multiple conversations about people "trying" us and how she would gladly shoot one of the infamous Rena stares at them. Having these conversations and her supportive insight during this time was vital, especially as I attended classes where students would seemingly intentionally provoke me with racial and sexist slurs and then claim I was angry. We would joke about it, but then I would ask serious questions about how she navigated spaces that are so hostile toward Black women.

She helped me navigate microaggressions that I experienced from non-Black coworkers at UCR. She spoke to me about the importance of protecting my professional reputation and only listing people as a reference if one can trust them 100%. She championed education and would express her confidence in my ability to succeed in graduate school. She often shared her passion for supporting Black students and paying it forward. But beyond that, she eagerly stepped in when I shared that I had decided to apply to Boston College and a few other programs. She was happy to write a letter of recommendation and reviewed other application materials. Our relationship spans my entire higher educational career, so when I returned from Boston and I experienced a few spells of unemployment, she was there. She was such a devoted mentor that

when I called her in despair after having major issues with one of my landlords and needing a place to go, she said “come meet me.” I believe we went out to dinner and she told me that I could move into her house until I got back on my feet. She trusted that I was doing the best I could to find a job and never made me feel unwelcome or irresponsible. When I was living with her, even though I saw her as one of my mentors, she would introduce me as one of her friends when she would have company over.

One of the most impactful things about our relationship was how open and honest she was. She was one of the few people with whom I really felt comfortable discussing my former 9-year-long romantic relationship. She even supported and guided me through one of the hardest breakups of my life, the friendship with my former best friend of over 10 years. The wisdom that she offered about maintaining my own identity no matter who I am with or what is happening in my life and staying focused on my goals really offered the confidence and affirmation that my decision to end both relationships was the best thing for me. She treated me as a peer, opening up about her life and the relationships that she was navigating both personally and professionally. I am always so happy to see her, and I make it a point to let her know when I will be near or in Riverside, so that we can catch up. She calls or texts to check in on me, and she continued to mentor me as I began my career in higher education. Rena taught me the importance of having a mentor in college and beyond. She has been my teacher, cultural broker, friend, othermother, and mentor. Her support allowed me to sustain during my lows and excel to greater heights during critical times in my personal and professional development.

Dr. Okofu’s mentoring. Dr. Okofu was another Black female mentor who helped mold me into the scholar activist I am today. She/they taught the first women's studies class that I ever

attended; in fact, her/their class was my introduction to the world of critical studies that centered the experiences of gendered and racialized peoples. This was the first time that I saw myself as a subject of a class—it was mind blowing. Further, Dr. Okofu was the first Black professor who I had at UCR. I do not think it is a coincidence that her/their class was the first class where I felt seen and that my identity was affirmed as a source of knowledge. She/they was/were also the first teacher with whom I ever talked about their identity as a LGBTQPIA female. She said that many people call her/they a woman, but just because she is a female does not mean that she is a woman or that she likes men. Her radical approach of calling out the biases and assumptions that students held was stimulating and refreshing. She was amazing and always challenged the racism and classism that came into the room. I wanted to become a professor because of her.

Dr. Okofu connected with me on a deeper level, and I would often tell her after class how thankful I was that she addressed some of the students in the manner that she did. We bonded, and a close friend that I met during her class and I began to meet regularly. I remember the way she called me by both my first and last name in a musical tone—it became a term of endearment. Dr. Okofu insisted that we consider graduate school. She said that we wrote like scholars and that we should really nurture that gift. She spoke to us about the importance of legitimizing disciplines such as women's studies by majoring in them, and we both did just that. She was so committed to our success that she approached my friend and I about developing a student organization for women's studies students. This led to the formation of the Women's Studies Student Association whose mission supported scholarly pursuits and activism. She encouraged us to conduct research and apply for a research grant to present our research at a conference across the country all the way in Connecticut. Her commitment was so strong that she literally

helped to fundraise for us to attend that conference; we desperately needed the financial support, since only I was awarded a travel grant, and it was a mere $300. Our relationship did hit a major snag over a misunderstanding, but Dr. Okofu's radical approach and love kept our relationship alive. A year or two after the small incident, Dr. Okofu wrote an amazing letter of recommendation for my master's program application.

My mentors during my undergraduate career opened my eyes to inequality. In a bureaucratic institution of higher education whose claim to fame was the fact that UCR was the most diverse UC and the fourth most diverse school in the nation, the undertones of anti-Black racism often reared its ugly head. But, Dr. Okofu and Rena created spaces where I felt safe and loved. They provided the conditions that allowed me to own my Black woman-ness and understand not only the power, but the responsibility, that comes with gaining access to capital such as a bachelor's degree. Their impact later informed my career choice of working to serve underserved communities in the social service sector. Their mentoring was truly transformative in my life.

Graduate School Years

I went out of state for my master's degree program, all the way to Boston, Massachusetts. My mother was so upset at me. I had a great cohort and very supportive teachers, but the overall environment of Boston was not for me. I was homesick, and I missed the weather, the Mexican food, and my sisters. During this time, Rena would often call to check on me, and Lyz, one of my mentees from Boston College, would offer solace during that culturally deprived period. She provided a piece of home when I felt disconnected. I quickly returned to Los Angeles after staying a few additional months for a job that I loved dearly. After completing my master's

degree, I experienced displacement and was forced to work temporary jobs, including one in a factory. Eventually, I landed on my feet. After a few small jobs, I began working with the community nonprofit that was my safe-haven during adolescence. Ms. Morehead, my mentor in high school, supported me in getting a job there.

I often visited the program next door that had a dynamic leader and othermother who was truly a change agent in the community. Susan was a mover and shaker and got things done! As an older Black woman, she had children my age and would often say, during our hour-long talks, that she would love to have a daughter like me. I admired her and was elated that she was so supportive and proud of me. One day she discovered that my supervisor was obstructive toward me and advocated to have me transferred to her department. My first few months working there were some of the most fulfilling times in my professional career. In fact, Susan was so invested in me that she wrote one of my letters of recommendation for my doctoral program. She taught me that it was possible to view a supervisor as a mentor. I felt respected, trusted, and loved. It was amazing to have a sense of faith and support from a supervisor. It made me step up and really take risks in creating new programs and initiatives. However, the positivity formerly expressed took a turn when an irreconcilable conflict related to my job and doctoral course schedule erupted. When Susan refused to support my doctoral program as had been agreed, I had to walk away from the job and take a leap of faith.

Mentoring during the Doctorate

The doctoral journey is arguably one of the most challenging educational experiences that very few ever undertake, and even fewer complete. The social, emotional, and physical toll that it takes on one's life to achieve this accomplishment is unlike any other. As a doctoral student, I

had to isolate myself from friends and family, miss or only partially participate in critical life changing moments and celebrations, and I was forced to make sacrifices on every level and in every facet of my life, from work to my romantic relationship. It was a grueling feat to attempt to put life on hold even though life never stops. So, during my most hopeless moments, my mentors, once again, kept me going. They saw the finish line and me crossing that stage even when it felt impossible at times. Rena, as previously shared, is one of my mentors who has been in my life for over 10 years now. She continued to support and encourage me throughout my doctoral journey. Vanessa, Rochelle, and Dr. Darder all helped me through this tough period in my life as well, affectionately standing by my side and even literally carrying me at times.

Rochelle's mentoring. Rochelle was brilliant and was knowledgeable of the special education process that would allow students to be better served through their individualized education plans (IEPs). Although I was her supervisor at a previous position, our relationship began as a more reciprocal one because she invested in my success, as I did hers. Her first career was with the Los Angeles County Office of Education, where she advocated for diversion and other less punitive approaches that were less detrimental to young people and their education. She applied the knowledge from her experiences to training me on those policies and procedures. The job that I held was for a clinical social worker and my master's degree was in educational leadership, so the support and guidance that she gave me helped to fill my skill gaps. She is an older Black woman who is a single parent of four children around my age. She deeply loved and supported them and went above and beyond to identify resources for their schooling and other endeavors.

Rochelle used that same approach with her students, and later, with me. When I left that job and moved on, she would often call to check on me, and I frequently visited her at her home. Further, when things turned sour, Rochelle answered every phone call of despair, patiently listening to my frustration and disappointment, and she always found a way to encourage me. She would often tell me how proud she was to see a young Black woman pursuing her doctorate and that I better not let anything get in my way. Her direct and nurturing approach was just what I needed to get through the heartbreak that I had over the wrong that I experienced at an agency so dear to my heart. Rochelle gave me strength, confidence, and radical support during that pivotal moment in my life.

With the support and encouragement from Rochelle, as a first-year doctoral student, I made the decision to explore the possibility of serving the community in a different capacity: from the context of higher education. Dr. Antonia Darder, my doctoral mentor and dissertation chair, fully supported this shift and hired me on as a research assistant. It was a challenging time financially, but it was the best thing I could have done in support of my studies. The new-found time allowed me to explore higher education as a field. I served as a teaching assistant and gained experience teaching master's-level students, and I had the opportunity to serve in LMU's Office of the President. In addition, the new flexibility gave me time to pursue national service opportunities with associations for higher education. I served as the Junior and Senior Newsletter Editor on the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) Graduate Student Council, and I also served as a policy associate, producing reviews of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) for the University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA). I was also selected as a UCEA Barbara Jackson Scholar, which provided mentoring and opportunities to attend the

annual UCEA and AERA conference for two years. Ultimately, the experience turned out to be one of the best things that could have happened for my development and ultimately helped me to obtain my current post in higher education. Having mentors who were willing to listen and extend support and resources assisted me at a moment when I had started to fall. Their mentoring made the difference.

Vanessa's mentoring. One of the most impactful mentoring relationships that has allowed me to get through recent physically and mentally challenging experiences has been the relationship that I have with my baby sister, Vanessa. Her presence in my life has nurtured me when contending with personal and professional hardships. Vanessa is seven years younger than me, and she is adorable. She is one of those women that still look like an adorable high school sophomore even though they are in their early 20s. I often joke that she is everybody's little sister because everywhere she goes, everyone affectionately calls her by her nickname, Nessa—even her supervisors. She has had her own difficulties, which made for a challenging experience during her undergraduate studies, and more specifically during her final year, which was my second year in my doctoral program. After both of us experienced multiple challenges with unstable landlords and roommates, we decided it would be best for us get an apartment and live together. We were both in a crucial period in our schooling—she was in her final year, and I was in my dissertation-proposal-writing phase. It was a bit of a financial strain, but it was better than gambling with unfamiliar and unpredictable living situations.

Nessa and I had our routines down. Although we were both busy, we spent a lot of time together. We often had competing music preferences, since she thought I was out of touch with music, and I felt like all of her music sounded the same, but that was often a conversation starter

that led to a common understanding. One of our shared tasks was working out at the park about 15 minutes away from our apartment in Inglewood. During one of our trips, Nessa was practicing on the tennis court, and I was running around the park, when I ran down a small set of stairs and my left foot landed improperly, causing my foot to literally bend completely inward. I was horrified when it happened, and I immediately called to Nessa, but she was listening to music through her headphones, so I sat down and looked at my ankle. It looked fine so I hobbled over to the tennis court and starting a few upper body workouts. Nessa walked over and I told her what happened, and she said, "We should go home Krysy." She often calls me Krys or Krysy.

After a nap and having elevated and iced my foot, I woke up in severe pain. I was nervous, worried, and frustrated because I knew this could cause a major inconvenience at my new job that was not ADA compliant or accessible and for my proposal. Nessa calmed me down and reminded me that I was able to walk on it before the swelling, so it was probably not broken, but that we should go to the hospital immediately. I appreciated her voice of reason during my time of panic. She drove me to and from the hospital while I was in excruciating pain, and she literally lifted me up the stairs to our second-floor apartment when I returned from the hospital. That was a stressful time for me as I tried to continue to contribute to an organization with an inexperienced executive director who relied heavily on me for structure and stability and as I tried my hardest to complete my dissertation proposal on my timeline.

Nessa was my rock. We both supported each other in doing our school work and talked through our issues at work. There were so many times that I came home needing to vent and

Nessa, who manages stress so much better than I do, was always ready and willing to process my experience with me and offer transformational advice.

Nessa helped me stay focused and reminded me of my innate power as a Black woman with an ancestry enshrined in strength and triumph, as her big sister who she looks up to, and as a scholar who has worked hard to achieve academic goals. We talked so much during that time, and she shared with me that it was not until we lived together as grown women that she had ever seen my stress and vulnerability. She shared that she had always seen me as a super strong woman who was unmoved by the things that life threw at me, and it was new to her to witness the emotion and tears that came during some of my trying times. I often tell her how much I love her and appreciate her, but it is hard sometimes to really articulate to someone the impact they have on us. She helped to ground me, brightened up some of my darker days with her famous and often sarcastic humor, and provided a nurturing love that filled me when I felt depleted. Nessa, my baby sister, was also an othermother who steered me when I was at my wits-end. When I questioned whether I had what it took to finish my doctoral program, she had an undying faith in me and fed me from that faith, helping me to internalize it and produce action. I recall one conversation that we had during the last year in my program when I moved to San Diego to begin my new job at the district office. She told me that despite all of us going off to college, she still somehow felt that we would always struggle, like our lives were destined to be a struggle. But then she asked me, "How do you feel, with your new life coming together, having money and not having to worry about your finances, having a nice job and an amazing boyfriend that is so supportive?" I responded, "It's about time," but we both knew that that small statement meant

so much more, such as, “We deserve this.” She is one of the mentors who helped me get here, and I will never forget that.

Dr. Darder’s mentoring. Dr. Antonia Darder is another one of those rare mentors who serves as an othermother to me. She is the true definition of a mentor. Her intuitive nature makes it so that no one is able to gloss over a difficulty, hardship, or any challenge they are facing. She is direct, emotionally connected, empathetic, deeply intentional, and loving. I first met Dr. Darder during one of my first two classes in my doctoral program at Loyola Marymount University. I was immediately drawn to her because of her raw, direct, and critical teaching style. There are very few professors, or educators in general, for that matter, that truly speak their minds and directly challenge students, whether they are self-declared critical activists, well-intentioned liberals who are ultimately doing more damage than good, or the blazingly bold problematic students so steeped in their privilege that they even feel empowered to challenge a passionate activist with a 40+ year long track record of change in education and social and economic liberation work. Dr. Darder is one of those few. Even though I was stressed and overwhelmed, as most doctoral students are their first term, I lived for her class. The inhumane violence that erupted during my first semester, and the heightened attack on Black people by the police, left me feeling angry and sad to see how nonchalant some of my social justice-oriented coworkers and classmates were about it. But Dr. Darder created space for the anger, pain, confusion, heartbreak, debate, love, despair, and hope. Her class was truly a place that I looked forward to going, yearning for the challenging conversations and discussions on the captivating and deeply rich literature.

Our frequent conversations after class played a powerful role in my life, and the relationship that we developed over the only six-week class period blossomed into a powerful mentoring relationship for me. In fact, when I was working at my childhood nonprofit, and my supervisor began to harass me at work, making disparaging comments and ultimately refusing to support my approved adjusted schedule for school, I sought advice from Dr. Darder. Just like Rochelle, Dr. Darder inspired me to take a leap of faith and get out of that situation. She helped me to realize that I should not live my life in fear, and that I should navigate through the world with a deeper sense of care and respect for myself. No matter what I bring to her, be it smiles, tears, happiness, or sadness, she holds space for me. She would share her experience in navigating similar relationships, and let me know, that as a Black woman, that is something that will never go away. As a lighter skinned Puerto Rican woman, she too experienced a kind of racism that slammed doors in her face and left her often experiencing damaging microaggressions and overt racist attacks.

She understood the deep anger that develops when one constantly experiences antagonism and the draining reality of consistently having to resist new barriers in both their personal and professional life. She knew the internal battle that many of us Black women have within ourselves, pondering whether or not our harassment was somehow warranted, or if it really was that our aggressors had their own internal racism with which they needed to deal. Dr. Darder told me to never, never let anyone make you believe that you are less than what you are, and to understand that we do not provoke, nor do we permit, the hatred that is enacted on our minds or bodies. Her philosophy on life as it relates to equity and justice helped to ground me even during the most challenging moments in my doctoral program. I was elated when I was

given the opportunity to serve as her research assistant, and I looked forward to the group meetings I had with my other cohort members.

Her unique approach to mentoring graduate students is one for which I will always be thankful. She has us meet as a group—more in a counsel circle—and we always start with a check-in. Dr. Darder makes it clear that she cares about the entire person, not just the academic student. Those circles hold tears of mourning classmates, the fear that some of us faced as we experienced life threatening health scares, they hold love and all of my updates about my beloved boyfriend Jonathan, and they provide a space for us to be completely honest about where we are and how we are feeling in our process. It is frightening, speaking from experience, to have to tell your dissertation chair that you do not understand, that you are scared, that you may not be able to do it, or that you simply cannot focus. But Dr. D. always walked the thin line of making us feel comfortable in sharing and being real and direct with her thoughts and her expectations of us. She supported every initiative that I brought her way, from failed attempts to secure a research grant, to successful attempts at running for national office, to applying for professional development opportunities outside of the university.

She has an amazing sense in reading if you are not saying something, and you better believe she will press you until you just "get real." I remember a conversation that I had with her when she read an earlier iteration of my dissertation research conceptualization. She directly said to me:

> You can't take the easy way out in this. You have to do the work. I know you, you are just like me, you are a survivor, so you know how to get around things and get things

done. But you will not be able to do that with this. You will struggle, you will be challenged, and it is going to be hard. But you have to do it. You have to do the work. She made it explicitly clear that she saw my talent and knowledge, and that she felt it was her duty to truly foster it. Another major characteristic of Dr. Darder that has such a profound impact on me, even at this stage in my life and career, is her affectionate nurturing. She hugs me every time I see her and will often say, "I love you." It is an amazing experience to have a mentor share their love for you.

Dr. Darder witnessed one of my darkest moments during my doctoral program. In my final stretch in completing my dissertation, I moved to San Diego to start a new position. My mom's health quickly deteriorated during the month that I was transitioning out to San Diego in December, and by the time I was fully moved in and adjusted, I found myself going back to Los Angeles every weekend to care for her. The week that I met with Dr. Darder and my classmates in January was truly a struggle. It was only two days after a grandmother, who I felt I never knew, passed away. I attended a funeral and listened to all of my cousins whom I would not recognize if I saw them out in public because I was so disconnected from them. I realized that, years later, that could have been me and my children, showing up to my mom's funeral mourning a woman that my children never even knew. Sitting there, listening to so many other grandchildren call her a loving caring grandmother and role model, I realized I was looking into my child's future if I did not change the cycle of dysfunction in my family. The circle in January 2018 held the pain and anger that I felt in having to sacrifice part of my future to build the life that I want. Even through the tears and trembles of mental and emotional fatigue, I heard Dr.

Darder say that there was no doubt in her mind that I would finish my dissertation. She invited me to go and take care of my family and assured me that she knew I would be fine.

Reflecting on my many mentors, I realize that I am literally the person I am today because of all these powerful women. They housed me, guided me, reprimanded me, coached me, tutored me, and loved me. My mentors, my othermothers, literally treated me like family and provided me deep relationships that I so needed at different moments in my life to get me through challenging situations. More importantly, I recognize that their wisdom, affection, and commitment all have informed the ways in which I engage my mentees as a Black feminist mentor.

My Experiences as a Black Feminist Mentor

Mentoring is often revered as one of the most valuable practices in developing the network and access to otherwise unattainable resources, particularly in the lives of Black girls, and more specifically during some of the most critical times in their lives. For example, while I was a graduate student at Boston College, I worked at a TRIO program. In this capacity, I assisted with the mentoring of youth of color who had just recently entered college. A few of them were Black women with very similar backgrounds and experiences to my own. One of the most important aspects of my job was to coordinate a mentoring program that was designed to pair an undergraduate student with a graduate student for the purpose of exposing and encouraging undergraduate students to pursue graduate school. One of the requirements was that the undergraduate student demonstrate interest in graduate school and that the mentor have time to invest in the mentee. During my time as a graduate assistant there, I connected with a lot of students, but Lyz was one who stood out.

Mentoring Lyz

Lyz was a young Black woman whom I met while coordinating a mentoring program as a graduate student at Boston College. The mentoring program was designed to support and foster an interest in graduate school by pairing undergraduate students with current graduate students. Just as the other students in the program, Lyz completed the application and indicated that she intended to apply to a graduate program. When she came to my office for the interview phase, I immediately felt a kinship with her, as her mannerisms reminded me so much of my baby sister. The purpose of the interviews was to reconfirm their interest and find out more information to pair them with a mentor that best matched their educational and career aspirations. I began, just as with the other students, by asking Lyz if she was interested in graduate school and she said, "I don't know, maybe." I jokingly said, "Okay, so I will just write that you are interested, because you already completed the paperwork and you showed up for the interview." She laughed and agreed. Lyz loosened up a bit throughout the remainder of the interview, and I let her know that she could reach out to me if she needed anything. I followed up with her a few weeks later to inform her of her mentor match, a young White male graduate student enrolled in one of the education master's programs who, from his application, appeared to be a critical activist and very passionate about mentoring.

I would regularly check in with all of the mentees to inquire about their experience in the program. When I reached out to Lyz, she informed me that she was having difficulty getting in touch with her mentor. She was feeling discouraged and, as many if not all mentees do when they are ignored, she felt neglected. She reached out consistently receiving no response, and her mentor had not attended the first mentoring event we planned. I contacted him directly, and after

multiple failed attempts both by phone and email, he returned my call, apologized for his lack of responsiveness, and informed me that he was going through a lot and was no longer able to participate in the program. I thanked him for letting me know, but I also reminded him of his responsibility, as someone who identified himself as a mentor, to communicate with his mentee regardless of whether it was good or bad news. He apologized, and we decided that, at that point, since he had not established a relationship with Lyz, I should reach out to her.

Concerned that this news might discourage Lyz, I set up a meeting to inform her in person. This was a delicate situation as she was not sure she wanted to pursue graduate school, and I did not want this to deter her any further. When I shared the news, she was not surprised and seemed as if she had seen it coming. I let her know that I absolutely believed she could go to graduate school and that I would be happy to be her mentor. She had already shared with me her experience as a Black woman majoring in business in a predominantly White and affluent school. She had been having a very poor experience in her classes, particularly because of the hostile and distant treatment that she received from her professors. She worried that her GPA was too low and that she would be unsuccessful in obtaining letters of recommendation from her professors. In our regular conversations, either at the office, her dorm, or around campus, Lyz often spoke of the racism that undergraduate students of color, particularly Black students, experienced on the campus. The average student was a White, upper middle-class student, fully living in their privilege and making it known that they did not want Black people in "their world." Unfortunately, many of the faculty shared the same sentiment.

Although this made Lyz question whether she could get admitted into graduate school, it did not cause her to have insecurities about herself or her abilities. Lyz made it clear that she was

aware of her power as a Black woman and that she knew her intelligence, her potential as an educator, and her ability to connect with students was not reflected in her GPA. She shared that the structural issues that Black students face at Boston College were due to larger issues of racism and sexism. Her commitment to disrupting this reality and challenging the pervasive racism that Black students faced was evident in the work she did on campus. Lyz was a power house. Not only was she enrolled in the TRIO program that I ran, but she worked for the Thea Bowman AHANA and Intercultural Center. She worked both as a student advocate and a resident assistant. It was clear she had a passion for education and supporting Black student success in college. I was so inspired by her, and we shared our love and respect for each other's Black girl magic.

I persuaded her to believe she could go to graduate school, regardless of the relationship with her professors, and to act accordingly. I encouraged her by consistently telling her the strength, intelligence, passion, and commitment I saw in her. There were students who would need her, and I let her know, like me, sometimes you are just meant to do it, so you have to do it. It took a little convincing, but she would come and visit me during the tutoring hours that I supervised at Learning to Learn, and we would talk about different programs and schools. I let her know that many education programs truly value diversity and experience, so, regardless of her GPA, I wanted her to know she would be competitive in the admissions pool. We had to, however, be strategic about the letters, so I encouraged her to obtain letters from staff with whom she had worked in lieu of two letters from faculty. I shared that it was more important for her to receive recommendations from those whom she trusted and who could truly speak to the light that she brings into students' lives instead of from a faculty member who had not invested in her.

Despite the barriers she faced and the fear of rejection that had built up, she decided at the beginning of December that she would apply to graduate school. We sat down, went through the application requirements for the three programs she selected, and developed a project plan with deadlines to manage all her applications.

During Christmas Break in 2012, I was already back in Los Angeles to visit family, but Lyz and I were in constant communication about her applications. On Christmas Eve, I finished the edits to her statement of purpose, and, by the end of the month, she had submitted all three of her applications. In my experience as a mentor, I found that many Black students have experiences where their schools do not set them up for success, and the blatant racism and microaggressions from faculty and staff discourage them from pursuing a future that they have been called to or that they desire to pursue. So, just like me and many other Black students, Lyz sought support from a supportive service, my mentoring program, because the primary educational experience did not address her needs or foster her passion and potential.

I, unfortunately, had a similar experience where my assigned mentor in a structured mentoring program offered at my middle school only showed up for the initial meeting. But, since my mentor never fully dropped from the program, the school never replaced her. I attended all the on-campus meetings in the third-floor library by myself, hearing about all of the great relationship-building trips that the other students in the program were doing with their mentors. That was also during the period when I had just settled into a new apartment after having lived in a shelter for a few months. I did not want Lyz to have that same disappointment, frustration, and the self-questioning of “why me” or “why not me” that I felt, especially during one of the most

challenging times of her academic preparation. I saw her for the amazing person, educator, and mentor she was, and I wanted to support her in taking her career to the next level.

In that process, I must acknowledge that Lyz also mentored me. As the only domestic minority in my cohort (all of the students of color were international students and did not understand the complexities of the experiences that Americans of color had in schooling), I often felt that my experience was not truly understood, so I deeply appreciated the critical conversations I had with Lyz. She was an advocate on campus and was engaged in activities for resistance. I saw myself in her. As a graduate student, I was really disconnected from the university, so the only way I really knew what was happening on campus was through my mentoring work with students. Lyz and my other mentees were the main reasons why I felt connected to that campus. She told me about Black affinity spaces out in the larger Boston community that I so desperately longed for, which became a crucial resource for my mental health as I struggled to deal with the culture shock of life in Boston. She even taught me how to care for my natural hair during the harsh winter weather. My hair thrived in Los Angeles because of the heat, but it could easily break off in Boston winters. Further, her humor was infectious. This shared quality immediately connected me to Lyz because I too love to laugh and love people that make me laugh. Our relationship helped us both through trying times at Boston College. I am forever grateful for the dual-mentoring role I experienced with her at that time, and I am happy to see her enjoying her professional life after successfully completing her master's in higher education at her school of choice, Boston College.

Mentoring Jasmine

One of my first mentoring relationships that I had when I returned to Los Angeles from Boston was with Jasmine. I met Jasmine in 2015 when I was taking the African-American Board Leadership Institute Training at LMU's law school. I had recently been elected Board President of Leadership through Empowerment, Action, and Dialogue (LEAD) Inc., a youth empowerment organization that offered a social-justice oriented, project-based education in Los Angeles. I was new to the position, and to board governance overall, so I sought out training to be of better service. On the second day of the institute, I noticed a group of Black youth walking around campus, so when I saw two girls during a bathroom break, I asked them what program they were involved in on campus. They looked much younger than college students, so I assumed they were in high school. They informed me that they were in a program for future lawyers and that they both wanted to go to law school. I responded affirmatively and let them know that I would be happy to help them get there, offering my personal business card that listed my cell phone number.

A few weeks later, Jasmine reached out, and we began communicating regularly. She was a very intelligent young woman, and it was clear that she had lived a sheltered life and that her mother was very supportive of all her activities and schooling. I was happy to see that she had such an amazing support system, and I wanted to ensure that I helped to broaden her horizon and expand her worldview to understand how others live and the responsibility that we have to ourselves and our communities to be successful. Our initial conversations primarily consisted of me sharing about myself. She was very shy, so it took her a while to warm up, but I sensed that she enjoyed our conversations because she continued to call. I wanted her to see the possibilities

in her future, so I invited her and her family to LEAD's grand opening. There I met her mother who was so excited that I had started a relationship with her daughter, and she shared that she was very proud of me as a young Black woman who had accomplished so much. I thanked her and let her know that I was so proud of all that both Jasmine and her son had accomplished and that she is an amazing mother. Following this event, I encouraged Jasmine to participate in activities and other exciting professional development opportunities that would support her pursuit of law school.

In the mentoring process, I shared many resources with her, one of which led to her obtaining her first internship as an intern for The Music Center in Downtown Los Angeles. This was a very competitive internship, as the interns get to interact with professionals from the music and arts industries and compensation is provided. I had been having regular communication with Jasmine for months before I shared this opportunity with her. We had a solid foundation in our relationship, and I felt that she was ready and responsible enough for the position. We developed her resume, practiced interviewing, and discussed professional etiquette numerous times. Both her and her brother were offered the internship, and they accepted, among less than 10 others. But, just like with all youth, and everyone at any given stage in their lives, there were some challenges. Although, by my definition and understanding, I was doing everything I could to be a good mentor, I would receive reports from her supervisor that she and her brother were showing up late, or not at all, and sometimes were not wearing socks with their uniforms. Jasmine and I discussed the importance of always showing your best self and being aware of how we are being perceived as young Black women. I shared some experiences that I had of being underestimated or trying my hardest but still receiving little to no support, guidance, or faith from some

supervisors and teachers. Sometimes I felt as if these conversations may have fallen on deaf ears because there was no improvement after a few weeks of these discussions. I often wonder if Jasmine did not take heed to what I shared because she could not relate to the experiences I shared—experiences rooted in racism, sexism, and sometimes, more specifically, classism.

We had, nevertheless, a strong relationship, and I hope that the networks, support, and opportunities that I provided her were helpful to her in achieving her goal. She was admitted into college and did indeed attend. In her email updates, she let me know that she had been fulfilling her definition of success. But our relationship was strained after we had a direct conversation about her behavior at the job. At the time, I thought that my approach was best in sharing how amazing it was to have an internship with The Music Center and that her supervisor was only asking for small and basic requirements, such as arriving to shifts on time and being in full uniform. Despite the strain that navigating that experience put on our relationship, we did keep in touch, and she later applied to the internship with the Mayor's Office that I told her about.

My experience with Jasmine taught me a lot about mentoring and my understanding of how to mentor Black girls, particularly those who have not had a similar economically deprived upbringing. I also learned that it is important to constantly check in with your mentee about their expectations of you as a mentor and of themselves. Sometimes they may not be ready for some of the opportunities we think are the perfect fit, and Jasmine was not. We kept in touch, however, every now and then, and she would reach out when she needed last-minute help to complete an application or something for school, and I helped whenever I could. I have no doubt that Jasmine will be successful in her life and that she will find a mentor with whom to connect, someone who

can foster greater trust to be supported and guided on her journey. The lessons I learned from this relationship informed all the others.

Mentoring Nessa

Another one of the more impactful mentoring relationships that I had was as my baby sister's mentor. As previously shared, Nessa is one of my mentors, but due to the reciprocal nature of our relationship, she is also one of my mentees. Of my three sisters, Nessa was the one who always disliked school. Even when my sisters and I would "play school" over the summers, Nessa was disinterested and often defiant toward the expectations that Nicole and I set for her as mentors. We often felt she just really might not go to college, since she was so convincing in communicating to us that college was not for her. The reality is that this is true for some, and college does not necessarily have to be everyone's path. But, in knowing Nessa, I felt that her disinterest in college was related to her less-than-great school experiences in K-12. As the youngest of four, my sisters and I knew that it was hard going to the same middle and high schools that we had attended. She would often mistakenly be called one of our names and was constantly compared to us by our AP, Honors, and even marching band teachers. Knowing my sister, she is a bit stubborn and cannot be told what to do. I understood that this was her journey and that my sisters and I could not pressure her to be what she did not choose.

Nicole, Charmaine, and I had numerous conversations with Nessa, often initiated by her, about what her next steps would be when she graduated. She had the desire to leave home, which was a motivator for all of us, and she was sure that she did not want to have to continue working minimum wage jobs. She understood, too, that education was one of the tools that could change our economic and social life outcomes. So, in June of 2014, Nessa graduated and went on to

attend South Los Angeles University (SLAU), and we were delighted. It is important to note that Nessa's decision was truly made on her own. I found that she began to identify herself as a student, like the rest of us did, and shift her thinking from the belief that a high school diploma was her minimum education requirement to the bachelor's being her self-determined standard.

As she began to move forward, I also shared with Nessa that college is not like middle or high school. College is the opportunity to explore the world with a new sense of freedom and with a level of financial stability that we had never had prior to attending college. I shared that, for me, it allowed me to learn who am I, gain experience managing responsibilities on my own, and gain an understanding of the various forms of oppression that were a part of our lives for so long. I told her that she would finally be able to take a class where she heard from authors who look like us talking about our lives and our struggles. It is an awakening if we proactively seek out courses and professors that center us. In writing this section, I wondered what exactly made Nessa decide to go off to college. To this question, she responded, "I decided to go to college for the money. I knew a high school diploma wouldn't make anything. Didn't wanna work in a fast food restaurant all my life." We laughed, and I replied, "That's the reason all of us go. We are sick of being broke!"

Once the decision was made, Nessa also decided that she wanted to live in the dorms, so she moved out of my mother's house. Just as the rest of us, she struggled to acclimate to college. It was a new experience with more freedom but also with more responsibility, which is often difficult for youth who have never lived away from their parents. But, with Nessa specifically, she is intelligent, artistic, and sharp, but she also tends to doubt her ability and did not fully realize her intelligence, potential, and power. I saw it in her, not only as her big sister, but also

because I had the opportunity to work with her at three different nonprofits and had read some of her school work. She is a brilliant, skilled, and a very sharp young woman who has strong self-motivation to achieve whatever she desires.

Even though my mom, sisters, her teachers, and I saw her intelligence, potential, and talent, she had to discover that for herself. I offered support and advice and was always ready to help or just talk whenever she called, but I was also intentional about not pressuring her on things, such as getting involved on campus and engaging in professional development opportunities. As her older sister who loves her dearly, I would just make suggestions, some more strongly than others. I knew that this was the approach that worked best with Nessa, because she had to get beyond her subtractive schooling experiences that did not celebrate many innate talents that Black girls have.

Eventually, Nessa warmed up to the idea of being involved on campus, as she and her roommates began to settle in. They all became involved in organizations devoted to supporting and empowering Black students, and I encouraged and supported this by attending or sometimes even serving as a speaker. It was so powerful to see her undergo that same awakening that led to my critical lens toward education and the world more generally. Even though she became more involved on the campus and was balancing a part-time job, she still found her course load overwhelming. There were a few times where she was nervous about her performance and felt she was not having the best experience with teachers because of their lack of comfort with or investment in Black students. I remember multiple conversations of listening and talking through her experiences as her anxiety naturally rose. She thought that my other two sisters and I always

excelled, and she felt embarrassed about not doing as well. I could feel her stress, disappointment in herself, and the fear of judgment expressed when we spoke.

I remember, so vividly, one conversation we had about her assumptions of how my sisters and I performed in college. It became clear to me that we may have never truly shared just how hard it was for us to adjust to college. Nessa was surprised to find that Nicole, Charmaine, and I all struggled in transitioning to college. I let her know that the schools we went to in the LAUSD did not adequately prepare us but, unlike many other first-generation college students, she had us to help her. I shared, in detail, my experiences of struggling at UCR: adjusting to the new freedom of setting my own schedule, balancing a job, receiving lower grades than I had ever received in high school, and obtaining less than a 2.5 GPA my first semester.

I also told Nessa that I was nervous from the beginning because I started after Nicole who struggled to finish, and we all knew Nicole was the genius of the family—smart as a whip and has the vocabulary of an English professor. I also struggled with cultural things, such as becoming more aware of the language that I used in class and how many of my classmates did not understand some of the lingo that I used from my neighborhood. Speaking out in class was something that I had to prepare myself for, especially when discussing racially charged topics. I assured Nessa that we all went through it and continued to battle spouts of self-doubt. I told her, continuously, that we are all capable of being successful in college and that she too would succeed. I told her that systemically we were not set up for success, and that this country has a history of both legal and blatant racism against Blacks in the United States, so college was not initially designed to be culturally relevant, inclusive, or supportive toward us. Fortunately, Nessa found her support system on campus, which included her group of scholar friends and mentors,

and she and I talked more regularly. We grew much closer during this time and helped each other through a lot of obstacles to achieve our goals.

Nessa often expressed her happiness about my being involved with her school activities, such as the Naturally Beautiful Hair Show, an event designed to celebrate the natural beauty of Black women and to help educate others who may lack an understanding of our hair and culture more generally. Although she sometimes expressed her embarrassment, she loves the public affection and verbose cheers that I bring to every one of her activities. It is one thing to tell someone the potential that you see in them, but it is another to show it by showing up for them: Actions must match the spoken word. It has been a challenging time in Nessa's life—finding her own way in the world, exploring her career interests, and living on her own. But she knew that she could call me if she needed anything, from encouragement, to her favorite meal at Chipotle, or to reviewing a paper.

Nessa graduated last year with a bachelor's in communication, and I was so proud of her. I saw the maturity and self-confidence she had gained, the critical understanding of the world that allowed her to begin to define herself without the status quo and hegemonic beliefs projected onto her. Also, and perhaps more importantly, I witnessed the love that she developed for herself and the Black community in general. I am in awe of the young woman she has become. As I look back, this personal and mentoring relationship is one of the most impactful relationships of my life, we helped each other through a lot, and I learned so much about mentoring and about life with her.

Mentoring at South Los Angeles University

My involvement in Nessa's activities on campus also laid the foundation for other relationships. I had the opportunity of developing impactful relationships with multiple SLAU students. In my time there, as is often the case, I found many initiatives and support for Black men or minorities generally, but the same targeted attention was not afforded to Black women. I knew a lot about the culture because of Nessa, so I was knowledgeable of a lot of the programs and initiatives. They had a personal and professional development program for males of color, which was an effort to prepare young men of color and, historically, predominantly Black men, for success in the world. There were other programs offered to low socioeconomic students, such as Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS) and Summer Bridge, and they had a Women's Resource Center, but there was nothing that substantially addressed the unique needs and experiences of Black women. In the time that I was there, I heard of only one program specifically for Black women, but it was more of a support group and did not have actual programming or a budget as the male mentoring program did. This could largely inform the reality of the many student leaders on campus that were men, as there was generally more visibility for Black men and, as it appeared, more support. It became apparent to me that Black women desired mentorship, particularly from another Black woman, when I launched a professional development series in The Rose Black Resource Center (referred to as the BRC by SLAU students and staff).

Mentoring Tamyra

Tamyra was one of the Black women with whom I worked when I conducted the Toro Professional Development Series at SLAU. The goals of the program were geared toward

helping students get accepted into graduate school or obtain career-aligned jobs. Tamyra was a freshman when she enrolled and, although she wanted to be a social worker to help youth and their families, she was majoring in biology with an emphasis on cellular and molecular biology. She was already engaged in EOPS, had a mentor and a resume, and already had a job. She was one of the more advanced students when it came to her professional portfolio. I shared with her how proud I was of everything she was doing. In addition to her being a well-rounded student, she was such a bright, kind, and personable person who demonstrated a true willingness and desire to learn. When I held my initial meeting with her, she informed me that her goal in enrolling in the program was to obtain a job that better aligned with a social work career. Because she was a freshman, we did not focus too heavily on graduate school, but I let her know about the graduate school and licensure requirements for that field.

Tamyra quickly became one of the most active students in the program. She checked in with me every week, and she maintained her commitment to all the deadlines that we set in her professional development plan. I was impressed with how quickly she progressed in completing her application materials and fulfilling the requirements of the program, so I connected her to one of my mentors for job placement. Ms. Morehead, as previously mentioned, still oversaw the same youth programming at the nonprofit that helped me to obtain my first job. That connection resulted in her obtaining a position at a local university, and her job duties were in alignment with her career goals. It was an amazing professional development opportunity, and it was one that was not offered to most youth enrolled in the employment program. Tamyra was exceptional. Once she began working, I would see her less frequently due to her work schedule, but our relationship extended beyond the program, because she would often need to contact me

outside of my scheduled time at SLAU. I gave her my cell phone number and told her that she could call me any time.

Tamyra contacted me regarding concerns she had about her relationship with her supervisor. Her supervisor was very demanding and seemed to only offer criticism instead of positive reinforcement. Tamyra was so nervous that she was not doing well because she only received negative feedback when something did not go as her supervisor wished. Once she called me because she was told that she had not properly completed a task related to an event. This was a difficult situation because her supervisor provided no training, so she only received guidance and feedback from a coworker. It was a stressful situation for anyone, but particularly for a new professional at a new organization. It caused Tamyra to be anxious, question her ability, and struggle to develop a sense of confidence in her professional identity.

I shared with Tamyra that I had had many experiences like this with multiple supervisors. I let her know that the reality is that it is rare to find an effective, empathetic, and well-informed supervisor who knows the job that they are supervising well enough to train anyone on how to do it. In my experience, few people ever receive actual training on how to be an effective and supportive supervisor, and even fewer become experts on their own. Further, they may be new to the field and lack institutional knowledge to provide support. Because of this, I learned to be very self-sufficient in teaching myself new skills, seeking out resources, or identifying people who could mentor or train me on what I cannot figure out on my own. I also told Tamyra that it is very important that she take time to learn the culture and politics of the organization and that she should not give full trust to anyone initially. Relying on someone else's feedback that did not come from her boss is something that I advised her against. Further, I let her know that she needs

to learn to adapt to her supervisor's style. I shared my process for working with my supervisors, particularly those who are difficult or inaccessible, such as creating her own agenda and sending notes from meetings to confirm her understanding with her boss afterward.

Although the majority of our conversations centered around her professional goals, I also had transparent conversations with her about what she might face as a Black woman in professional settings. I shared my experiences and sought to protect her from being caught off guard by some of the microaggressions and cruelty that Black women face in the workplace and in our everyday experiences. I told her to err on the side of only having coworkers at work and friends outside of work to maintain healthy boundaries. I let her know that we are perceived differently, so things such as our speech, hair, and clothes are held to higher scrutiny than others. I also let her know that it is crucial, particularly at the beginning of your career, to know your worth and set boundaries. Because she is such a nice person, she often saw the best in people. I did not want to shift that, but I did caution her that she had to be careful in work settings. Office politics and culture inform the ways in which people relate to one another, and even if there is a natural connection, there are different dynamics that we must heed in the workplace.

Although my time in running the professional development series was short, as it was designed to be only a ten-week program, Tamyra and I developed a great foundation for our relationship that was built on respect and mutual encouragement. It was a challenging time for me when I was conducting the professional development series, as I was juggling four assistantships and three national commitments, applying for grant funding, and still doing coursework. I would sometimes be a little drained when I arrived to SLAU, but Tamyra was one of the students who rejuvenated me instantly. She made me feel like I had purpose and

grounding during a time where I was floating and had varying commitments and multiple entities and people to which I was accountable. The connection we developed seemed to be largely due to the innate connection that many Black women have with one another. She was always so happy to see me, and I her.

Mentoring Devin

Devin was another young Black woman whom I mentored during my time at SLAU. She was a senior, majoring in psychology, and she was working toward becoming a social worker. It was late in the school year, so she had already applied to the social work program at SLAU when she enrolled in the professional development series. Although her application was submitted late, she shared that her GPA was not as competitive as she would have liked. She was active on campus in the Black Student Union and the Organization of Africana Studies. She was a transfer student from Riverside, but I do not recall if she was involved in any supportive programming there.

She was so bright, and, in her interactions with her peers, I could see that she would make a great social worker, as she genuinely cares about people. I recall one time that I was in the BRC and another one of her classmates was preparing for a test related to nursing. She supportively served as his patient and talked him through how to better care for female patients, offering information and suggestions in his approach to their physical engagement. I would see her almost every time I came to the BRC, but she did not need much help from the program, since she was awaiting the admissions decision from SLAU. The primary project that we worked on together was her application for a Master of Social Work (MSW) training program at the County of Los Angeles. We did talk about the lack of resources available to our communities

and the need for more service providers that understand the social and emotional realties of economically deprived communities. We also spoke of the very clear lack of investment in Black women on that campus. Our critical conversations were fulfilling for me and, I believe, informative and affirming for her.

In June of 2017, I received an email from Devin informing me that she had not been admitted into the MSW program. Further, it would be a while until she heard back about the county MSW position as well. This was after the professional development series had already concluded. She was devastated and scared, unsure of her next steps. I assured her that she would be fine and that this additional time would allow her to diversify her options during the next admissions period. I also let her know that I took a year off before my master's program and that it was one of the best decisions I made. I told her that I understood the fear and anxiety that she was feeling and that she would be okay, as was I. Since she had moved back to the Inland Empire, about two counties from LA, I told her that the first thing we should focus on is getting her a job that related more to social work. I sent her a few websites, and I also asked her to send over her cover letter. I sent her a text message a few weeks later, and she let me know that she had been working on a few applications. Almost a year passed and, although I had followed up every few months or so, it was hard to get a status update.

That following year, on the day of Nessa's Black graduation ceremony, Devin walked down the bleachers and found me in the gymnasium. It had been over a year since I last saw her in person, so I immediately stood up and turned around to give her a hug. She told me that she just wanted to thank me because she got accepted into the MSW program at SLAU, and she was offered the county MSW training program position. But that was not even her best news! She

told me that the county was going to pay for her entire program, and she began to cry. I immediately felt the tears welling up in my eyes, and I just hugged her. I told her that I was so proud of her. She said that I was right about things happening for a reason and that she was so grateful for my help. I assured her that it was absolutely her own doing that made this happen. I told her that she is smart, capable, and deserving. We both thanked God as we hugged and cried in celebration together. Devin was one of the mentees who came into my life for a short period of time but who made such a huge impact on me. It was so rewarding to see her life come together.

The women I mentored at SLAU were looking for someone to connect with on campus. They wanted someone who understood their cultural references and their unique experiences as Black women. They were not interested in programs that were checklist oriented. They wanted programs that were holistic, long-term, and goal-driven. I think it is quite telling that in Devin's time of need, she reached out to me and the coordinator of the Black Resource Center and not the university's Career Center. The critical approach that was taken in working with these women allowed for walls in communication to be broken down. The relationships that we had made it so that Tamyra and Devin knew they could just be themselves with me—fear, tears, and all. I looked forward to going to the BRC twice a week, listening to music they would sing to, and all the gossip they would share about dorm life. I felt at home in the BRC and saw myself in the students whom I served. Because of the way they welcomed me, the BRC felt like a supportive and home-like environment, filled with my own little sisters and brothers. The work was sometimes difficult, and there are challenges with everything, especially with life-changing and

critical work. I had a partner in supporting these students, Shontae, another one of my mentees, and we learned just as much from them as they did from us.

Mentoring Shontae

Very few people talk about the challenges, disappointment, and pain that come with mentoring. But mentoring is an emotional thing—it is a relationship, and just like any other relationship, both people desire to give and take. This was something with which I struggled with Shontae around. When I worked at Community Center, although I had a terrible experience in general, and a very disheartening experience with one of my former mentors, I still loved my last team. I supervised two AmeriCorps College and Career Ambassadors. They were young, dynamic women of color who were passionate about serving their communities. They were so happy to be working in Watts, and they made it clear that they were excited to be working with me. I loved our tiny team. We were responsible for building up an entire College and Career Corner that met city-funded regulations with less than two months to roll it out. We were new to the department, I was new to the organization, and we were under resourced and overcommitted. None of us had been trained, but we were expected to get it done. As the supervisor, that is what I ensured happened. It is important to note that I was responsible for a larger team later in this role, and I fostered amazing relationships with them as well, but for the purpose of this study, I am focusing on Shontae and Veronica, the two College and Career Ambassadors.

Our first major project was throwing a Super Saturday event designed to support high school students in completing their FAFSA applications. Knowing that this was Veronica's and Shontae's first professional position, I was intentional about the tasks that I assigned, the roles that I gave them, and the amount of time we spent together. I talked with them about my thinking

process on how to determine priorities, build strategic community partnerships, and how to supervise interns. I wanted them to get as much out of that experience as possible so they could go on and be competitive for positions elsewhere. That was precisely what happened with Veronica. She just blossomed during our time together, and she really embraced the community activist side of herself. She was so dynamic, smart, ambitious, and driven. Initially, since she and Shontae were so inseparable, and many of their tasks were completed together, it was not apparent just how shy Shontae was and that she often stepped back during outreach activities and other things. Once Veronica left, Shontae and I spent much more time together. We were each other's support system during a tumultuous time in our department. Our relationship deepened, and I relied more on her to complete higher-level tasks, as I adjusted to my new doctoral program.

I was committed to making sure that she went into a career opportunity upon completion of her AmeriCorps term. I encouraged her to challenge herself and move past the fear of public speaking. I shared stories of how I made myself go after things without overanalyzing or second guessing. There was a shared understanding that there was work that needed to be done, and we were in the position to do it. Our discourse often included our positionality in the world as Black women more generally, the privilege that we gained in going to college, and the obligation of coming back to Watts to create avenues for empowerment. We knew what it meant to our community when we conducted outreach and shared that we grew up in Watts and were products of community schools. Our shared identities converged in a way that informed the amount of time, effort, and energy we gave to our clients. We wanted to connect our community to the same resources that we had enjoyed. My mentoring with Shontae, specifically around her career,

centered around her desire to continue to serve under-resourced communities. We tailored her resume and cover letter to the social service field, and I would often send her job leads. Months after I left that position, I was still in constant communication with her. Unfortunately, Shontae's position ended before we could secure another position.

Luckily, an amazing opportunity came to me while I was conducting the professional development series at SLAU (as I have discussed earlier). Because of her desire to support Black youth, I contacted her to see if she could possibly volunteer with me. We discussed the importance of not having major gaps in her employment history and the best practice of participating in continuous professional development opportunities to remain competitive for employment. Soon after we launched the series at the BRC, the department informed us that they were able to secure a small amount of funding. Although this would have been a huge help to me at a time when I was juggling four different research, teaching, and graduate assistant positions, making no more than $15 per hour, I felt that it was only right to give Shontae the entire $4,000 stipend. I felt like I failed her in not being able to get her an amazing entry-level position with a nationally recognized nonprofit like I had with Veronica. I had taken on a responsibility that was not mine, and it was, unfortunately, met without the necessary desire to pursue opportunities.

When the series ended, months would go by without any response to my text messages or emails. I continued to send job leads and text her about opportunities. Sometimes I would receive responses months later after the opportunity was no longer available. It was a hard decision to make, but I had to realize that Shontae was not ready. I could not force her to do anything or continue to try to decide what was in her best interest. It took me awhile to process that experience. I strongly believed that as a Black woman who is a product of successful mentoring

that naturally any young Black girls with whom I am connected would desire those same relationships and experiences. But I learned so much from this experience. It challenged my perspective on mentoring, which was largely informed by my belief that Black girls can do any and everything they want, that more doors need to be opened, and that older Black women have an absolute responsibility to open them, in that we are responsible for making sure they are successful. But the nuanced nature of mentoring means that sometimes, even when you do not think you have made the impact that you hoped to see, a young person's impact on us and what we learn, despite the disappointment, is important to our praxis. I believe that the lessons I shared with Shontae will stick and hopefully will one day come in handy. But, as a Black feminist and critical mentor of Black girls, I recognize that my role within a mentoring relationship is not to make someone do what I think is best for them, but it is more about building the relationship and sometimes just being there when they are ready. In this sense, I realized that my role as a mentor has not been to save anyone, but rather to create the conditions for these young Black women to learn to do for themselves when they are ready.

Summary

The mentoring experiences explored here, from both the perspective of mentee and mentor, resoundingly demonstrate the crucial role that mentoring has played throughout my life, as both a Black girl mentee and as a Black feminist mentor. The unique nature of these intimate dialogic relationships are the reoccurring instances, discussions, and experiences that are meant to pave the way for an analysis and discussion of important themes and issues that must inform critical principles for a critical mentoring praxis for Black girls. The following chapter looks at these dimensions through the material of this autoethnography and the literature discussed earlier

in an effort to also provide recommendations that can potentially shape the future mentoring experience of Black girls in our communities.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For generations, Black women have been successfully mentoring Black girls to develop positive self and cultural identity by engaging in collective efforts toward liberation and ultimately facilitating the development of a consciousness that empowers us to resist hegemonic practices rooted in racism, sexism, and classism (Darder, 2015, 2017, 2018b; Weiston-Serdan, 2017; Wright, 2016). Often, neither the mentoring needs of Black girls nor the mentoring practices of Black women are acknowledged within mainstream discourses of mentoring. Thus, our distinct, nuanced, and highly complex practices rooted in the unique literacy of Black women (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2015) need to be captured and shared with educators and others who desire to see Black girls succeed not only in school, but also in understanding that they are worthy of whatever vision they have for their lives—spiritually, emotionally, professionally, and socially.

Thus, autoethnography, in alignment with the frameworks employed, was adopted here to identify the intricate components of the critical mentoring that Black women have intuitively provided to Black girls historically, with the goal of supporting Black girls in a world that is not designed to nurture their talents, goals, dreams, culture, or identity (Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2008). As is evident from the autoethnography presented in Chapter 4, my mentors did just that by serving as othermothers who stood in the gaps to provide nurturing affirmation and support. As cultural and opportunity brokers, and by literally opening doors that allowed for access to higher education and to the world of service, I now am privileged to do the same for the Black girls who I mentor along the way (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983; Weiston-Serdan, 2017).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the major themes that emerged from the personal stories I have shared in my autoethnography of the three educational phases in my life—childhood, adolescence, and during my university years—as well as my own mentoring practices. The analysis is conducted with the conceptual insights gleamed from Black feminism, Black girlhood studies, and critical mentoring. The chapter then offers recommendations for epistemological shifts and practical approaches for how to best incorporate a critical mentoring praxis with Black girls into all forms of mentoring, including those related to educational practice and policy. Next, it offers implications for the theoretical, practical, and political applications of these practices in the lives of Black girls and racialized, gendered, and classed peoples more generally. It then briefly explores opportunities for future research with the hope to expand the emerging field of critical mentoring for Black girls. Lastly, the chapter concludes with final thoughts and conclusions related to this study.

Emergent Themes

The emotional intelligence that Black girls have cannot be taught in a course. It has been passed down century after century. In this way, our mentors help us to tap into that ancestral knowledge related to our survival. The mentoring stories reveal this to be core to Black girls and a dimension ignited through the mentorship of Black women that is related to our survival (Collins, 1989; James, 1993b; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2015; Patton & Harper, 2003). By middle school, we have learned experientially what it means to be a Black girl in this country, especially if we are low-income. By early adulthood, many of us have developed a stance on how it feels to be Black, which leads to adopted identity politics that can range from pro-Black to a full adaptation of ethnocentrism or internalized racism (Brittain, 2012; DeCuir-Gunby, 2009). What

is repeatedly apparent from the autoethnographic material is that an unspoken understanding was felt and deeply experienced with my mentors and mentees, rooted in what Darder (2018b) terms our shared subaltern sensibilities, which leads here to the transformative impact they had in my life and that I aspire to have on the lives of my mentees. My mentors, for example, seemed to accurately sense when there were times I needed to vent and curse at the world, while other times I needed to cry and be held, and even the devastating times when it was too much for words or tears, and I needed a safe space to sit in silence. The analysis of these collective experiences highlights a dialogical relationship between four major emergent themes: (a) Individual Identity Development, (b) Development of Individual Voice, (c) Sisterhood and Solidarity, and (d) Conscientization and Resistance.

Individual Identity Development

Supporting positive racial, gender, and class individual identity development was an important factor in every stage explored in a Black girl's life. Crenshaw (1991) communicated the need for this work, developing identity politics that do not conflate or ignore intragroup difference. As outlined by the frameworks employed, mentoring practices focused on identity development are comprised of the following components: (a) Black females' standpoint and intersectional identity, (b) diversity in experience, and (c) historicity of knowledge. For example, Rena, one of my mentors during my university years, tapped into the shared experiences we have as Black women, while also acknowledging our differences informed by our upbringing, lived experiences, passion, and dreams. As a Black girl accustomed to having people that look like me in my classes and, less frequently, as teachers, it was helpful to have Rena as a mentor as a I navigated a space that was less reflective of my community. Her presence and shared

sensibilities had a powerful impact on my identity development during that formative period of my life, as I have also had on the Black girls whom I have mentored over the years.

Development of Individual Voice

Further, Black girls undergo a process of naming their world, and their oppression, after gaining an understanding of their positionality as it relates to their race, gender, and class identity in this country (P. H. Collins, 2015; Freire, 2000). Thus, the second major theme that surfaced throughout this autoethnography of my mentoring experiences and the literature explored was the development of individual voice. The conceptual framework employed identifies the subcomponents of voice as (a) self-definition and self-valuation through narratives, (b) musical expression, and (c) counter narratives. This is evident in my story, especially when I speak of Nicole mentoring me in developing my voice, rejecting commonsensical notions of inferiority, density, and disassociating from the criminalization projected onto me during my middle and high school experiences. It was through witnessing her self-advocacy that empowered me to advocate for transferring to a high school with more resources and greater preparation for college acceptance and retention. Later, my own mentees spoke of a similar experience with me, as I worked to bring the lessons I had learned from Nicole to my mentoring of Black girls.

Sisterhood and Solidarity

The third and perhaps most pronounced theme that emerged was Solidarity and Sisterhood, which really addresses the nature of the relationship between the mentor and mentee. To this point, Darder asserted that "our most powerful self is the self that is connected" (personal communication, December 3, 2018). Black feminism, Black girlhood studies, and critical mentoring collectively identify (a) connectedness and collective consciousness, (b)

interdependence of both thought and action, (c) redefining the ways we relate to and celebrate one another, (d) praxis: the alliance of theory and practice, (e) cultural politics, and (f) a reciprocal relationship as the components of the solidarity and sisterhood fostered through mentoring Black girls. This brings to mind the relationship that I have with Nessa, in that it is a true testament to this theme, particularly when I think about the ways we saw each other through some of the most challenging times in our education. One of these times led to Nessa literally lifting me up on her back and carrying me upstairs to the second-floor apartment we shared when I could not walk due to a severe ankle sprain. She is consistently one of the first people whom I contact when there is a major development in my life, be it a celebratory occasion or an obstacle. Our connection continues to ground me, and I am sure it supports her in her life developments. This same dynamic has been experienced with some of my other mentors who assisted me when I was struggling. The dynamic was echoed, too, in the story of my relationship with Black girls whom I have mentored when they needed someone to take them under their wing.

Conscientization and Resistance

The final emergent theme that captures the essence of the nature of critical mentoring for Black girls is Conscientization and Resistance. This is the stage wherein Black girls develop a critical understanding of the world rooted in the multilayered understanding (King, 2007) and shared sensibilities that Black women share with one another (Darder, 2018b), and that understanding translates into resistance. This theme is inclusive of (a) questioning their realities of oppression, (b) political economy, (c) dialectical theory, (d) ideology and critique, (e) hegemony, and (f) dialogue and conscientization, as described in the conceptual framework. A powerful example here is when Dr. Okofu facilitated my Black feminist enlightenment period,

nurturing me as I digested the material and began to form consciousness toward the oppression that I had experienced and my own complacency in it. Dr. Okofu went beyond just sharpening my perception. She and several other of my mentors ignited my activist flame through consistently encouraging me to engage in acts of resistance in various arenas, from student groups to the conference circuit.

These emergent themes are interconnected in the lives of Black girls and are in constant dialogue with one other, developing a strong sense of self and community consciousness as they strengthen in connection to one another. For clarity and ease of practical application, this discussion is organized by time period to clearly identify the critical components of mentoring Black girls during (a) childhood, (b) adolescence, (c) at the university, and (d) the practices I use in my own mentorship of Black girls. It is important here to note that these four major themes are ever evolving in the lives of Black girls and are intimately engaged in a dialogic relationship with one another (Darder, 2018b).

Key Principles in Critical Mentoring of Black Girls

The following seeks to articulate the key principles related to the mentoring of girls in childhood, adolescence, and the university years, corresponding to the categories used in developing my autoethnography.

Mentoring Black Girls during Childhood

As revealed in the mentoring experiences I explored, Black girls begin to engage in the first component of Brittian's (2012) identity development theory—salience—during childhood. Salience "refers to the meaning that one makes out of being Black in varying social situations" (Brittian, 2012, p. 182). In their communities, Black girls may be socially situated and connected

with peers and family members around shared cultural sensibilities as it relates to shared racial, gendered, and class identity (Darder, 2018b; Stevens, 1997). However, in schools, Black girls begin to receive damaging messages that they are different: more adult, less intelligent, and, many times, that they are *less than* their peers of dominant racial and gendered backgrounds. This often results in criminalization and the silencing of the experiences of Black girls during this critical developmental period (C. F. Collins, 2015; Dance, 2012; Darder, 2012). Critical mentoring is a crucial intervention at this stage as it can intervene in Black girls developing healthy racial, gender, and class identity, developing their individual voices, beginning to engage in activities of sisterhood and solidarity, and moving toward conscientization and resistance of oppression (P. H. Collins, 2015; Weiston-Serdan, 2017). Further, it supports Black girls in tapping into their inner power: the power that has elevated us above the brutalities of racism, sexism, and classism that attempt to disable our humanity.

There are four key principles that must be present in mentoring practices for Black girls during childhood. The first key principle addresses individual identity and voice development, which lays a foundation for solidarity and conscientization. Black girls need mentors who demonstrate a deep understanding and radical love for the Black female identity and Black culture (Darder, 2017; Weiston-Serdan, 2017). For example, Ms. Smith served as my example of someone who truly embodied self-love. Our warm conversations included her connecting with me around her interests, sharing her belief that the visibility of Black girls in various arenas throughout school was important, and her culturally informed humor that made me feel as if I was in conversation with a beloved family member. Such critical responses in the mentoring relationship intervene against the internalization of anti-Blackness (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009;

Stevens, 1997) and Westernized mainstream gender ideologies that demonize the traditionally considered masculine traits of being opinionated and standing up for oneself that Black people have historically taken pride in (Buckley & Carter, 2005).

The second key component addresses voice development and increases the propensity toward sisterhood and solidarity. Black girls need mentors who explicitly encourage their identity expression and voice through participation in rigorous and celebratory academic events, as well as musical and extracurricular activities (Brown, 2009). Ms. Smith helped me to formulate and fully embrace my scholar identity at a very early age. She further challenged me from shying away from the visibility of special honors, such as serving as the commencement speaker for my fifth-grade graduation. She instilled the belief in me that, as Black girls, we must proudly engage in these activities, communicating that we are capable of the task and worthy of recognition. Nicole started the legacy of my sisters and my musical involvement. She played the viola, violin, and the concert bass; Nessa, Charmaine, and I followed in her footsteps, playing the bass drum, flute, and clarinet respectively. Band, too, became part of our academic identity, allowing for an outlet and a creative way to express ourselves. It was critical for me to have mentors who opened up my thinking toward these activities that later became some of the most impactful experiences during my K-12 career.

Third, mentors must provide a safe space for Black girls to express themselves freely through play and performance, free from the imposition or ascription of demeaning or belittling stereotypes that help to silence them (Brown, 2009, 2013). Ms. Smith created a classroom culture devoid of restrictive mainstream gender ideals, where Black girls, and her as a Black woman, felt empowered to share her love for science inquiry, general playfulness, and a love for the kid's

cartoon Teletubbies. These radical spaces, as Weiston-Serdan (2017) and Brown (2009, 2013) described, can lead to a strong sense of both individual identity and a deeper shared sensibility of Black sisterhood and solidarity.

Finally, and arguably most important, mentors must engage in ongoing emancipatory dialogue with Black girls, rooted in authenticity, around gender, race, and class, and the ways in which they converge and contradict one another in the lives of Black girls (Freire, 2000; Weiston-Serdan, 2017). On this, Brown (2009), foundational scholar of Black girlhood/hip-hop feminism, argued that such deep dialogue can lead to critical revelations about working with Black girls, infecting our deepest sensibilities about what Black girls need that can ultimately result in critical consciousness and resistance (Collins, 1989, Darder, 2017; Freire, 2000; hooks, 2000). This ongoing dialogical approach allows for the promotion of diverse identities within that of the Black female identity and empowers Black girls to contextualize the messages that they receive and to reject them as ultimate truths (Freire, 2000). When this deep work is done in relationship with intentionality, radical love, and commitment, all four major themes of mentoring Black girls are successfully fostered, thus creating opportunities for liberation at the individual level and, relatedly, conscientization and resistance by and for the collective (Darder, 2017).

Mentoring Black Girls during Adolescence

Adolescence is a challenging period where youth undergo physiological, cognitive, and shifts in their responsibilities within the family (Brittian, 2012; Buckley & Carter, 2005). However, in the mentoring stories shared, and as several reports indicate, Black girls tend to encounter greater stressful life events than any other racial or gender group (Brooks, 2014). This

forces Black girls to engage with notions of racism, sexism, and often classism to which their male and White peers are not subjected (Tatum, 1992), and this often goes unacknowledged by mainstream schooling or traditional mentorship (Weiston-Serdan, 2017). Black girls can begin to develop negative regard for their racial identity and group, subscribe to ethnocentric beliefs (Brittain, 2012; DeCuir-Gunby, 2009), begin to resist in negative ways, or they may shut down and accept defeat, both of which make them more susceptible to the school-to-prison pipeline and poor life outcomes (Brittian, 2012; C. F. Collins, 2015; Love & Duncan, 2017).

According to Black feminist scholar, Collins (1989), "Living life as Black women requires wisdom since knowledge about the dynamics of race, gender, and class subordination has been essential to Black women's survival" (p. 758). Thus, those who mentor Black girls must have an understanding of the triadic social identity markers that impact Black girls during adolescence to support individual identity development rooted in understanding and respect for one's own identity, culture, and community (Brittian, 2012; Cross, 1971, 1995; Stevens, 1997). For example, although Nicole was a great student, like me, she found herself in classrooms with no books, permanent or frequent substitutes, and was often told that she would never go to college. This particular experience was due to the reality of triple-layered oppression that Black girls often face, also referred to as multiple jeopardy, such that our identity as poor Black girls make us more likely to attend schools with adults who treat us like belligerent criminals rather than vibrant students (C. F. Collins, 2015; King, 2007). Nicole's example of maneuvering through these experiences was crucial in helping me to understand that talking back, defending myself, and sometimes being defiant in response to ridiculous claims and allegations from adults was not my identity. Rather, she allowed me to see that I was a bright student in a poor school

with disengaged educators. It was her presence in my life at that time that permitted me to witness the inherit inner strength that young Black girls have, which taught me that we have power sourced from within.

A second key principle is engaging in dialogue with adolescent Black girls and offering historical understanding of how the multilayered oppression took form throughout our history and process how it surfaces in their current lived experiences (DeGruy, 2017; Patton & Harper, 2003). Ms. Morehead was my othermother who began explaining oppression and connecting my schooling experiences with larger systems of oppression, thus helping me to garner insight from what she showed me: that some schools looked different and had greater access to resources in other communities. Ongoing dialogue in the mentoring relationship, as it did for me, helps to address this historicity of Black female identity, while simultaneously building a sisterhood and collective consciousness (Darder et al., 2017) rooted in an understanding of collective experiences of racism, sexism, and classism. Furthermore, the affectionate and loving approach to mentoring, as previously described by Weiston-Serdan (2017), Brown (2009), and Darder (2012), must be fully adapted to combat the hatred, distance, and fear-filled treatment that Black girls receive in their schooling experiences and in the larger world (Epstein et al., 2017; Gorlewski & Porfilio, 2013; Morris, 2016). Ms. Morehead provided that affection, demonstrating that adults in positions to help or empower youth can connect with Black girls on a human level and have a desire to do so. Mentors who unveil the punitive, detached, and brutalizing conduct of more ill-informed teachers and staff help Black girls to stay connected to school in the face of ongoing trials.

Finally, the ongoing celebration of Black females that Brown (2009) described through Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) is key in supporting individual identity development, sisterhood, and resistance for Black girls during adolescence. This celebration allows Black girls to shed the dehumanizing practices that make up that of K-12 education in low-income communities (Whaley et al., 2017). Nicole's mentoring demonstrated this beautifully; ensuring that she acknowledged my accomplishments in eighth grade, demonstrating a pride in her own academic achievements, making it clear that she found no comfort in the sexualized comments from boys and men, but rather knew that she was a beautiful Black girl, worthy of respect and acknowledgement of her full identity as opposed to only her physical appearance. Nicole's celebration of herself and me as Black girls in our full imperfect, multidimensional being informed my relationship toward academic excellence, as well as my racial, gendered, and class identities. These principles, when employed collectively and dialogically with adolescent Black girls, can support positive individual identity development, voice, sisterhood and solidarity, and ongoing conscientization and resistance by intentionally working toward the elimination of oppression altogether (Steady, 1993).

Mentoring Black Girls at the University Level

The issues that Black girls face at the university is compounded and often exacerbated due to their exposure to new groups and cultures, particularly in environments that invite critical inquiry and sometimes foster mainstream narratives that are damaging to the positive identity development of Black girls and women (P. H. Collins, 2015; Darder, 2012; Guy-Sheftall, 1993; Love & Duncan, 2017; White, 2015). Further, this is the stage for many Black girls to begin engaging in the workforce, which is often a brutal place for those who proudly maintain their

cultural identity through visible markers, cultural language, and the continued adoption of characteristics socially defined as traditionally masculine, dominant, and aggressive (Buckley & Carter, 2005; Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017).

The stories in my autoethnography explored these phenomena, highlighting the experiences of myself, Lyz, and Nessa, who needed support in navigating predominantly non-Black universities steeped in anti-Black racism. Supporting the development of one's voice at the university level is critical, because it is preparing us for what we have to deal with for the rest of our lives: navigating spaces that have historically been antagonistic toward or closed off to Black girls. Here we must understand the subtle microaggressions and games that are played in provoking us so that we may not succeed or thrive (Beale, 1970; White, 2015). We need supportive yet challenging Black women who teach us how to use our voice both academically and as activists to provide counter narratives and our own definitions of self. This type of encouragement facilitates our understanding of our identity, voice, and strength that powerfully equips us to excel despite our conditions. Further, we need constant reassurance that our language and our knowledge is a cultural fund of knowledge that must be shared with the world to shift the commonsensical beliefs about Black girls that pervade every facet of society (Bourdieu, 1986; Carter, 2003; Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983).

Key principles in mentoring Black girls at the university include ensuring that Black girls have access to Black female mentors with a positive Black racial identity (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009), more of an association with Black female notions of womanhood that support the necessary practices of speaking up in seminar-style classes at the university (Cooley et al., 2018; Griffin, 2012; Ivanshkevich, 2017; Whaley et al., 2017), and an understanding of the ways in which the

political economy manifests into class oppression for working class Black girls (Darder & Torres, 2004; hooks 2000). Rena's important wisdom in negotiating how and when to address microaggressions and discrimination present at my university was critical to my success. She talked me through her process in evaluating situations to determine better courses of action for considering the impact that the decided-upon action could have on my relationships with my supervisors, professors, and classmates. I then shared this wisdom with Lyz, in her pursuit of her bachelor's degree and her master's in higher education. This principle inherently supports positive identity and voice development as well as consciousness during an often-tumultuous experience in a predominantly White or non-Black space.

The next key principle in mentoring Black girls in the university is linked to ensuring that Black girls have access to mentors who can serve as cultural and opportunity brokers in connecting Black girls to resources, opportunities, and social capital that opens doors that are predominantly closed to minorities and women (Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983). Grassroots approaches to obtaining and then sharing access to social capital is a historical practice within the Black community, and it fosters sisterhood and resistance (Bourdieu, 1986; Carter, 2003; Cooper et al., 2017). Dr. Okufo's mentoring practice was steeped in a commitment toward my liberation and academic advancement. She not only shared with me that she saw my potential to attend graduate school, she went above and beyond in supporting the creation of a student group that allowed for visibility on campus, radically supported my participation in professional conferences through reviewing a funding application and fundraising to cover additional conference expenses, and providing a liberatory space in her classroom that challenged dominant thinking and oppressive conditions. Dr. Okufo made graduate school and a career in education

accessible to me. As my story shows, I adopted her approach in working with my mentees in creating opportunities and developing paths toward their educational and career goals.

Finally, due to the unique nature of the university experience that often physically and mentally disconnects Black girls from their family, home life, and cultural norms, it is imperative that mentors support their acclimation versus assimilation and success in mainstream contexts such as workplaces (Hughes et al., 2006). Essentially, mentors must have the propensity to recreate spaces, cultural customs, and social norms that are familiar to us when these are absent from the new social climates in which Black girls are situated (Brown, 2009, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Peoples, 2008). My mentors intentionally created an environment that was comfortable and familiar to me. Rochelle would affectionately refer to me as "sweetie" and always gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek when I visited her. Rena greets me with the "hey girl" that you say to a friend, and Nessa regularly encouraged me to participate in activities on her campus that celebrate Blackness. The university years serve as the primary time when Black girls learn to navigate predominantly non-Black spaces, often alone, and the ongoing struggle that we experience in maintaining positive racial, gender, and class identity in the face of hegemony and White supremacy (Booker & Brevard, 2017). This is a difficult time for many, and it is arguably the most important time for Black girls to have access to critical mentors whose shared sensibilities inform the ways in which they radically love, celebrate, guide, and teach Black girls (Darder, 2018b; Darder et al., 2017; Weiston-Serdan, 2017). It is from these experiences that I developed my own mentoring praxis with the goals of fostering unwavering love for the Black female identity, working toward freedom from oppression (Steady, 1993), and facilitating Black advancement (Wright, 2016).

Lessons Learned from My Own Mentoring Practice

My autoethnography illustrates that my mentoring practices were highly informed by the mentoring experiences I had with my mentors. Thus, I adopted the nurturing and affectionate approach of othermothering (James, 1993b): building deep communal relationships rooted in honesty and radical love (Darder, 2012) that allow Black girls to experience relationships that they may have in their home lives. For example, the relationship that I developed with the Black girls I mentored at the universities extended beyond the confines of program hours. Our engagement included collaboratively engaging in positive identity events such as the Naturally Beautiful Hair Show, profound discussions about our common ancestry and collective experience in this country, and in the jokes that intimately build connections between our respective home communities and our larger Black community. Lyz and I spent time outside of my job—I would visit her dorm room, and we would discuss anything from our hair to her next steps after graduation. Further, I intentionally engage in discussion that promotes the understanding of Black females' standpoint, intersectional identity, and the reality that there is a diversity in our lived experiences as Black women (Blaise, 2014; Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; hooks, 1996). My autoethnographic recollection of my relationship with Nessa demonstrates the importance of understanding that there is a diversity in lived experiences even between four sisters who grew up together. Although we were all raised by a single mother, attended most of the same schools, and even engaged with many of the same teachers and community advocates, we all experience the world in our own unique ways. Relatedly, I make myself available and commit to support my mentees' positive racial, gender, and cultural identities, their pursuit of their personal and professional goals, and I am there as they brave the

harsh realities of life (Darder, 2012; James, 1993a; Weiston-Serdan, 2017). This is a practice that surfaced in all of my mentoring relationships and the mentoring experiences I shared earlier.

More specifically, some of the tangible practices that I employ with my mentees include: (a) fostering personal outlets through our one-on-one discussions and in writing prompts, (b) supporting their participation in conferences and activist organizations on campus more broadly, and more communally, (c) and encouraging them to think about long-term, sustainable practices to engage the community about the issues they see facing Black girls and women. This includes considering the field of education, politics, law, or social services to have a platform from which to promote liberation. Devin was one of my mentees who made it clear that she wished to serve the community, so I supported her process in pursuing a social work career by sharing and reviewing her application for a social work internship. She applied and was accepted, and the program pays for the MSW program that she began in Fall 2018.

My mentoring praxis is research-informed, drawing upon the revolutionary scholarship of Weiston-Serdan (2017), Darder (2012, 2017, 2018a), and Collins (1989, 1991). As such, it is also dialogical and dialectical in nature, couched in a sisterhood/feminist approach that is rooted in a true commitment to wanting the absolute best for Black girls, preparing them for whatever will come, and preventing their demise and further suffering. Accordingly, the recommendations gleamed from this study are aligned with this ethos and my own critical practice.

Recommendations

Given the highlights of this autoethnographic study, if mentoring is to be relevant and beneficial to Black girls, the following six recommendations should be adopted and put into place by mentoring programs to ensure a critical mentoring praxis for Black girls. These

recommendations should also provide a basis for rethinking mentoring policies with respect to the lives of Black girls within schools and communities.

1. Recruit Black females to mentor Black girls.
2. Identify Black females who are prepared and equipped to be othermothers and who are always willing to commit and be available to Black girls (James, 1993b).
3. Mentoring must be viewed as a relationship rooted in critical dialogue, and mentors must have positive self, cultural, and community identity with a deep level of critical consciousness that they can tap into as they support the individual identity development and consciousness of Black girls (P. H. Collins, 1986, 1989, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Weiston-Serdan, 2017).
4. Additionally, and this is crucial for all Black girls, but particularly for those who are subjected to low-income realities, provide mentors who have successfully navigated neighborhoods, work places, and cultural spaces different from their own (Reynolds & Parrish, 2018). This will provide insight into successful strategies that Black girls can model, and it will also allow Black girls to gain access to much needed community and cultural brokers.
5. Further, on a broader and perhaps more theoretical scale, there must be a more intentional conceptualization and approach toward mentoring that allows for mentees to connect with and identify their own mentors. When Black girls connect on their own, it is more likely that the relationship will stay alive and thrive. Relatedly, homegrown mentors should be viewed as the ideal mentor for Black girls, as they have had similar experiences as those whom they mentor and can certainly model

how to best address the adversity that they will experience (Reynolds & Parrish, 2018). More to this point, the term homegrown mentors, in this context, refers to Black women who lived the majority of their formative years in the same neighborhoods as the girls whom they mentor. They, therefore, experienced many of the same phenomena, such as similar school experiences and comparable home-life circumstances, ultimately developing a level of culturally-informed consciousness born of their communities. Thus, their formation, critical perspectives, and commitment are inextricably linked to their upbringing and communal knowledge. This requires immense intentionality, but Black girls deserve the time and energy that it takes to find mentors to whom they can truly relate (Brooks, 2014).

6. Finally, schools in general need to view every staff member as an educator and critical mentor by engaging them in trainings and practices that will allow for them to be effective in mentoring Black girls, as Black girls predominantly attend schools where there are few people, if any, who look like them (Weiston-Serdan, 2017). Everyone who is expected to mentor Black girls must intentionally commit to understanding the dialogic processes of individual identity development, individual voice, and the need for solidarity, conscientization, and resistance (Darder et al., 2017).

In addition, due to the emotionally challenging and triggering nature of this deep work, the following recommendations are offered to Black females who mentor Black girls.

1. It is essential that Black females who mentor Black girls have their own mentors to support them and facilitate the process of healing any reopened wounds.

2. Sometimes, the trauma that Black female mentors have experienced themselves still needs to be addressed; thus, Black female mentors must seek spiritual, professional, and/or some form of culturally responsive counseling that allows for them to continue to draw strength from the challenges and difficulties they have faced so they can move beyond it.
3. Black females must be intentional about maintaining healthy boundaries for their social, emotional, and financial well-being. Because critical mentoring is rooted in critical dialogue, mentors are empowered in their vulnerability (and are not subjected to presenting themselves as all-knowing and always composed and unemotional beings). This quality supports greater intimacy in relationships.
4. Further, Black females must recognize when they need support in supporting Black girls. The communal approach to critical mentoring allows for sisterhood and connectedness, drawing on the power of having the community help carry the pain and challenges, as well as engaging in communal celebrations of identity and achievements.
5. Finally, Black female mentors must maintain a balanced life style. This includes having a nutritious diet, engaging in physical exercise that allows one to let off steam and the anger that can build up in hearing the wrong being done to our girls, maintaining healthy relationships with family and friends so that their lives are not consumed with any one aspect, and having smaller and regular self-care practices to celebrate the hard work that is being done for the people.

Implications

Autoethnography serves to bring understanding to the multilayered and multifaceted epistemology that is pervasive in our lives and to provide room for counternarratives that juxtapose dominant narratives, thereby working to shed light on the connection between micro instances and macro implications (Starr, 2010). In the case of this autoethnography, although this was an exploration of a singular, poor, working-class Black girl from South Central Los Angeles, the personal experiences that I outlined are the manifestations of larger systems of oppression that impact Black girls as a collective. Thus, the themes discussed have theoretical, practical, and policy implications for Black girls in K-12 education throughout the United States.

Theoretical Implications

One of the major implications of this work is that whenever Black girls are the topic of discussion or academic field, their voices must be centered. Weiston-Serdan (2017) best exemplified this notion of centrism through the mantra, "Nothing about us without us" (p. 29). Thus, Black girls must walk hand in hand with researchers and practitioners who wish to facilitate emancipatory and liberatory practices that impact the lives of Black girls. For this to become a widely accepted principle, the field of mentoring as a whole must shift to view mentoring as a reciprocal relationship. This requires a broad-scale acknowledgement and acceptance by scholars of the ways in which mentors gain and learn from their mentees. Once the understanding of mentorship as a reciprocal practice is expanded, traditional forms of mentoring may be enhanced in recognizing that mentees are active participants in these relationships and that their mentors need to value them as teachers and partners in this work (Freire, 2000; Weiston-Serdan, 2017).

Implications for practice. Due to the popularity of mentoring, this is a great opportunity for educators and practitioners as a whole to consider deeply what the true purpose of mentoring is and how programs should be designed to support that. Employing critical mentoring as a lens through which to develop and invest in Black girls will allow mentors and mentoring program directors or coordinators to be committed to not only watered-down mainstream notions of social justice, but true liberation rooted in emancipatory practices (Darder, 2015; Darder & Torres, 2004). According to Steady (1993), "This means the involvement of women in national liberation struggles, in plans for national development, and in local and global strategies for change" (p. 95). Understanding the importance of resistance and counterhegemony, dialogue and conscientization, and the deep knowledge of the intersectional experiences of Black girls will allow for more impactful relationships that can help support Black girls in their pursuit of their own liberation.

Policy implications. Morris (2016) and Gorlewski and Porfilio (2013) argued that oppressive institutional policies rooted in stereotypical depictions of Black girls lead to poor or limited life outcomes for Black girls (Leonardo & Grubb, 2013; Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017). In a capitalistic society where students are conditioned as future workers and/or consumers (Bowles & Gintis, 2011) instead of partners in their own critical and ideological development (Freire, 2000), and where many Black and Brown students are tracked into a free labor force through the school-to-prison pipeline, it is no wonder that many Black girls do not receive the nurturing and care they need to succeed in school (Love & Duncan, 2017). Mentoring has largely been invested in as a practice on a national level to help remedy a situation that requires complete dissolve and rebirth.

With this understanding of the burden placed on underfunded, poorly staffed, and minimally programmed mentoring programs, it is imperative that policymakers take a thorough look into the practice of mentoring and how we, as a country, define it and invest in it. They would do well to receive training from critical scholars like those who mentored me, who understand the intricacies of critical engagement and the impact it has on Black girls. More tangibly, an investment in critical mentoring that teaches Black girls about radical feminist leadership can help develop revolutionaries, like civil rights activists Harriet Tubman and Ella Baker, to apply their knowledge and liberatory knowhow to the ills of the nation (Love & Duncan, 2017).

Future Research

The budding field of critical mentoring is ripe with areas for future research. In alignment with the focus and emergent themes of this research, there are several future research endeavors that can support and expand the understanding and praxis of critical mentoring for Black girls. A participatory action research project that fosters and simultaneously examines semi-organic or natural mentoring relationships between Black girls and Black women would allow for greater depth in the exploration of the liberatory relationship between mentors and mentees. An approach that would also deepen the understanding of critical mentoring is conducting research projects that individually focus on childhood, adolescence, and the university years. A deep dive into each developmental period of Black girls' lives would shed light on the intricate details and principles of supporting Black girls at each stage through critical mentoring.

Likewise, a longitudinal study that examines the impact of critical mentoring over time would bring both depth and breadth to the field of critical mentoring for Black girls.

Additionally, at the core of critical mentoring for Black girls is a commitment toward conscientization and resistance (Darder et al., 2017). Thus, rich qualitative studies on the critical mentorship of Black girls by Black women in activist organizations would offer insight into more intentional strategies used for resistance. In addition, and in particular alignment with the Black feminist components of intersectionality and diversity in experience (McKay, 1993), there is a need to understand the mentoring practices and formation of affluent Black females who mentor or aspire to mentor working-class Black girls. Studies examining their experiences as they relate to their cultural and class identity development and development of consciousness toward the issues afflicting working-class Black girls will expand the field's potential to more effectively prepare diverse Black female mentors. Finally, as this dissertation shows, Black girls are often one of few or the only in spaces, classrooms, organizations, and communities other than their own. Consequently, we must understand the possibilities and limitations related to non-Black and non-female critical mentors for Black girls.

Conclusion

In the words of Michaela Angela Davis, as noted earlier, "Black girls are shape-shifters, superheroes, style-layers, soul scholars, truth seekers, sisters, healers, Holly Rollers, hotties, listeners, lovers, dreamers, divas, daredevils, doers of the damn thing-all at the same damn time" (as cited in Cooper et al., 2017, p. 109). I would also argue that Black girls are powerful—they are change agents who have an amazing sense of bravery; strategic acumen; knowledge; adaptability; propensity to persevere; deep confidence that withstands hate, neglect, and opposition; and radical love for a world that generally does not love them back. Black girls are understanding, loving, and forgiving, and most importantly, we advocate for everyone. As career

women, Black girls often take a Black feminist approach to their work, understanding the importance of connectedness and solidarity, particularly for those of us who have been called to serve (Collins, 1989). We serve our communities as principals, congresswomen, bank tellers, and executives, senior directors of nonprofits, teachers, mothers, church leaders, librarians, and lawyers. In almost any profession that supports the well-being of the community, a Black woman has most likely broken the glass ceiling to serve in that capacity or one of us is working on it now. It is saddening, almost enraging, to think that we have all been dis-serviced by the one system that is supposed to prepare us for these critical roles—the K-12 educational system—and that we are compelled to engage at least until the age of 18. This dissertation has been an exploration of the experiences that Black girls have in the K-12 educational system in the United States.

The problems that we face, as explored in Chapter 1, demonstrate the ways in which schooling has become a manufacturer of hegemony and one of the most damaging forces for the socioemotional well-being and identity of Black girls (Darder, 2015, 2012). We experience adultification during our most innocent years as society more generally perceives and treats us as less in need of protection and nurturing than our White female peers (C. F. Collins, 2015). We are demonized—I was criminalized, harassed, torn down, neglected, and forced to fend for myself in a system that was designed to keep us in the lowest class of society from its inception and that continues to shut doors in our faces. I could have been one of the 33% of Black girls that was referred to law enforcement or subjected to the racist practices that lead to Black girls being five times more likely to be suspended (Morris, 2016; Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017). I was one of the little Black girls who was told that I was stupid, that I belonged in special education, that I

would end up pregnant before I graduated, or that I just did not matter. I went through the phase of wondering why the world hated me, my sisters, my family, my people. Even in my adult years, I wondered if my life, regardless of the promise and ongoing success that I had, was doomed to dismal conditions and economic suffering. The warfare on my identity, my intellect, my beauty, and my very humanity rocked me to my core as I continued to absorb the impact of gut-wrenching hegemonic violence.

But, as shared in the deep autoethnographic recollection in Chapter 4, there were consistent people in my life—powerful Black female mentors—who continued to stand for me when I was discouraged: a little Black girl who offered protection, a mentor who saw my light and did everything to protect it from the world that sought to blow it out, the Black woman who would laugh and say, "Girl, we all experience that," and all of the mentors who loved me unconditionally, as if I were their sister, daughter, or best friend. That is how we have historically survived this country, hiding our humanity from our masters, tending to our wounds, and nursing each other back to health after heinous rape and floggings. Now in postcolonial and neoliberal United States, the manifestation of our slave masters has changed. We now find ourselves licking our wounds after working our fingers to the bone to take care of four children on a minimum wage salary just to have recent college graduates, less than half our age, be hired and trained by us to be our own supervisors. Our teachers, who sometimes unconsciously or consciously spend less time with us in class, show glimpses or blatantly display their fear of us by jumping as we approach them; or bankers, who continue to redline us, even after we have broken economic glass ceilings and have completed more education than anyone in the White

family who has owned the bank since they opened during a time when we were slaves and not considered human beings (Brown et al., 2013; Carter, 2003).

In my experience, only Black women truly understand the singe of having a less competent White person grill you on the expertise that you not only have studied and obtained terminal degrees in, but literally have developed over the span of 10+ years. Only Black women know how we feel when we, as *naturalistas*, receive compliments on our hair the few times that we get fake braids instead of wearing our afro or vibrant and extremely moisturized kinky twists that bounce back every time you stretch them out. We know the underhanded message of hearing the ever-favorite, "You are so articulate," compliment. And, we also know just what it takes to hold our temper as someone asks, "What sport do you play?" on a college campus, or "What do your parents do?" to determine your class, background, and very worth as a human being. Black women have suffered from racism, sexism, classism, and all in the form of law, direct and blatant actions, and microaggressions. Collins (1989) argued that Black women have developed a wisdom regarding how to navigate schools, work spaces, and communities that look vastly different from where they grew up, since this knowledge base is essential to our survival. But this is still new to young Black girls, whose innocence the world begins to prey on and is often eliminated as early as elementary school (C. F. Collins, 2015).

In my case, I began to realize early on that adults were not too fond of Black girls. That led to my longing for and clinging to the Black women in my life who understood what I was experiencing and who lovingly supported me as I was attacked in the world. My mentors were critical in getting me through the battles that I faced. Their unique approach in mentoring me literally shaped the trajectory of my life. As explored in Chapter 4, my mentors saw me through

many things and uplifted me to new heights. Thus, it is important to hear the perspectives of racialized, gendered, and classed beings who can speak directly to what we experienced and shed light on the interventions that worked for us. This autoethnography made room for our stories to be told to capture the wisdom that Black women use in mentoring Black girls.

Being Black, female, and poor working-class makes one susceptible to the ugliest ills of U.S. society: racism, sexism, and classism. These systems work together to create a unique form of oppression for Black girls that traditional mentoring programs lack the capacity to effectively address. It is our duty as educators and leaders for social justice to give our young people a fighting chance, and although there has been much success with traditional mentoring programs whose goals are to socialize and assimilate youth of color, traditional mentoring does not attempt to address the very systems that cause the need for mentoring in the first place (Weiston-Serdan, 2017). Critical mentoring addresses the root cause of poor educational and life outcomes for Black girls. The epistemological approach allows for both mentors and mentees to be conscious of their positionality in the world and how to actively push back against the systems that make the taken-for-granted privilege obvious to all. Black girls possess the power to expand our economy through new business, create new medicines and cures for the world, develop research that expands our thinking, and help to reinstate a sense of respect and love for humanity that this country would do well to embrace. It is time to invest in some of the brightest minds in our futures. This call to action is for everyone.

EPILOGUE

One of the most influential people in my life is also one of the people with whom I have struggled the most. People often credit my mother for the success of myself and my sisters. That has always truly bothered me and forced me to struggle with how to bring her into this study. It was not until I attended my mom's mother's funeral, that I realized why. I am my mother's child. The only difference between the lives that we are living is critical mentoring. See, she too had an estranged and hostile relationship with her mother, and parents are always your primary example of parenting. So, the very things that I struggle to understand and tolerate, are the same things that led to my sisters and I attending a funeral, seeing cousins and family members for only the second or third times in our lives, and hearing all of their amazing stories about my mom's mother. She was a grandmother to them, a friend, a counselor, a mentor, and an othermother. Unfortunately for me, she was my mom's mother who never knew my name.

I understand now. I also understand that my passion, determination, and fight come from my mom. I faced one of the ultimate tests in trying to complete this dissertation; having to step away from a family crisis, as my sisters scrambled to obtain and maintain care for my mom whose health drastically deteriorated within a matter of weeks, three months before this dissertation was defended. But thanks to my sisters, who as shared, have been my mentors and othermothers, they stepped up so that I could step back and complete this important work. This dissertation is truly a testament to the power of critical mentoring and the radical love of committed, loving, supportive, and inspirational mentors—as much within our families, as within our communities.

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