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Black Resilience and Empowerment through Self-Affirming Self-Care at Predominately White Institutions of Higher Education

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BLACK RESILIENCE AND EMPOWERMENT
THROUGH SELF-AFFIRMING SELF-CARE AT PREDOMINATELY WHITE
INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The institution of higher education, especially predominately white institutions of higher education (PWIHE), perpetuates the subjugation of Black people through the existence of traditional societal ideologies, values, and practices that function with and reinforce racism as the norm. Limited research exists about self-care strategies that assist Black students with navigating PWIHE. The purpose of this study is to explore strategies of self-care that can assist Black students to more healthily and successfully navigate a PWIHE. This qualitative narrative study illuminates Black experiences, empowers Black voices, and validates Black truth while extracting and capitalizing on Black agency to generate knowledge for Black wellness and empowerment. The generated knowledge provides valuable insight into personal agency and strategies of self-care for Black students navigating PWIHE.

DEDICATION

This study was conducted and is presented in honor of our Black ancestors and those who

persist or desire to persist through Black self-love for individual and collective healing. I

see, feel, love, and am you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

White men created racism for power and capital gain (Coates, 2017). To suggest white male colonizers (many criminals exiled from their motherland) had insight to the centuries of harm this would cause humanity would be to give them too much credit (Hannah-Jones, 2019). The legacy of white dominance, however, potently persists in the current day as evidenced by the recent Trump administration (2016-2020) that deliberately and overtly capitalized on its perpetuation (Clayton, Moore, & Jones-Eversley, 2019). America has failed to address and, therefore, heal from a legacy of genocide and enslavement of people. The harm of this reality was intensified by a former president who denied engaging in racism while hurling racist language, behaviors, and legislation in plain sight, further fracturing humanity and obscuring a shared sense of reality (Clayton et al., 2019). I assert this fracturing contributed to racism being declared a national public health crisis by local and state leaders across the country, as documented by the American Public Health Association (n.d.).

The recognition of racism as a public health crisis highlights the sustained state of great racial unrest in this country. It also serves to acknowledge, inform about, and position this crisis for systemic action and change. This is exemplified in the actions of Louisville, Kentucky Mayor Greg Fischer. On December 1, 2020, he issued "an executive order declaring racism a public health crisis in the city" (Pitofsky, 2020, para. 1). At a news conference, he also provided the public with valuable insight about *why* the order was being issued, stating, "This order lays out in stark terms the societal, economic, physical and mental health impacts of racism on not just Black Louisville, but all the

people of our city" (Pitofsky, 2020, para. 2). Mayor Fischer's actions focused racism as a public health crisis, provided education about the adverse impacts of racism on individuals and community, and projected the need for collective care and concern in prioritizing and addressing racism.

While both Black and white Americans are adversely impacted by the current state of racial unrest, we, Black Americans, suffer the greatest. Grills, Aird, and Rowe (2016) find this to be the result of having to exist in a culture grounded in "lies of Black inferiority and white superiority" (p. 334). This existence does not occur in isolation and is collective and cumulative in nature, comprising both past and present-day individual and global experiences of racial injustice, predisposing Black people to psychological trauma. Additionally, the lies function to "seed implicit and explicit bias" (Grills et al., 2016, p. 337) that manifests racism and adversely impacts the psychological health of Black people. Ponterotto, Utsey, and Pedersen (2006) identifies five psychological consequences of exposure to racism: alienation (resulting from acculturating to white America), internalized racism (the process of adopting the racial stereotypes of white America), racial fatigue (the psychological toll resulting from constant exposure to and vigilance with racial threats), racial mistrust (apprehensive, defensive, and/or protective interpersonal dynamics with white people as the result of ongoing and/or cumulative experiences of racism), and racial trauma (psychological and emotional injury that results from various experiences of racial stress).

Racial stress is often chronic in nature and can "cause feelings of anger, anxiety, paranoia, helplessness-hopelessness, frustration, resentment, fear, lowered self-esteem,

and lower levels of psychological functioning" (Grills et al., 2016, p. 337). It can also adversely affect perceptions of self, quality of life, and ability to learn (Grills et al., 2016). Being that racial stress is cumulative, "exposure to the consequences of unexamined racism begins early in the lives of Black people and extends throughout the life span" (Grills et al., 2016, p. 337). According to the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014), "Black children represent 18% of preschool enrollment, but 48% of preschool children receiving more than one out-of-school suspension." (p. 1). Also, while representing 16% of student enrollment, "[Black students] represent 27% of students referred to law enforcement and 31% of students subjected to a school-related arrest" (p. 1). [Black students] also represent "32-42% of students suspended or expelled" (p. 2). These statistics evidence how racial stress can manifest solely from *existing* while Black in this country, adversely impacting functioning and reducing quality of life.

In addition to psychological harm, racial stress results in physiological harm by depleting "physical resources leading to a host of medical conditions that tax the immune, neuroendocrine, and cardiovascular systems contributing to hypertension, cardiovascular disease, respiratory problems, obesity, diabetes, and cirrhosis of the liver" (Grills et al., 2016, p. 337). Though the days of being subjugated and brutalized in the fields while providing free labor are perceived to be over -- these are not. The subjugation and brutalization of Black people continues, as does our role on the plantation which has shapeshifted to be current day hierarchal community systems and institutions, including the institution of higher education. As a microcosm of the larger society, the institution of

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higher education, especially PWIHE, perpetuates the subjugation of Black people through the existence of traditional societal ideologies, values, and practices that function with and reinforce racism as the norm (Wolf & Dilworth, 2015). According to Wolf and Dilworth (2015):

> This trend continues in higher education in the wake of this diversity era because the color-blind practices that many institutions use to determine policies and traditions fail to challenge existing racial practice and oppressive norms; but rather seeks to accommodate present inequalities and divisions by casting them in a positive light (Gotanda, 2000). Furthermore, such color-blindness only serves to mask the social, political, educational, and economic advantages availed to Whites over their non-White counterparts. (p. 682)

To brutalize means "to treat cruelly or harshly" (TheFreeDictionary.com, 2019). Thus, the subjugation of Black people in PWIHE *is* psychological and physiological brutalization.

Self-care is revolutionary for Black people because Black identities (individual and collective) have been systematically subjugated for centuries, effectuating degrees of internalized racism. On May 22, 1962, Malcolm X poignantly beaconed the impact of white supremacy culture on Black people when he spoke at the funeral service of Ronald Stokes (an unarmed Black man killed by police) and asked a Black congregation:

> Who taught you to hate the color of your skin? Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair? Who taught you to hate the shape of your nose and the shape of your

lips? Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of

your feet? (Malcolm X – Who Taught You to Hate Yourself?, 1962/2019)

The essence of Malcolm X's inquiries was uplifted by Lorde in 1988 when she wrote,

"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of

political warfare" (p. 131). Embracing self-care means embracing self-worth and

engaging in self-love, which can be a constant struggle for Black people, especially those

navigating PWIHE, because the forces of oppression are omnipresent in academia

(Salazar, 2009). Self-care is revolutionary for Black people because Black identities

(individual and collective) have been systematically subjugated for centuries, effectuating

degrees of internalized racism.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

While continuously experiencing implicit and explicit bias in PWIHE, Black

people, far too often find ourselves engaging in or being expected to engage in racial

equity work, which further alters our presence in these spaces and imposes inequitable

risk on us without the privilege of option. While Black people did not create and cannot

singlehandedly control the construct of white supremacy culture, we, as individuals, can

control many aspects of ourselves within this paradigm to maintain our personal power

and wellness (hooks, 2003). The purpose of this narrative study was to explore how

strategies of self-care can assist Black students more healthily survive and/or thrive at a

PWIHE. In this research, self-care is defined as the practice of using one's personal

agency (what one can control) to engage in action for self-affirmation, self-regulation,

self-preservation, self-empowerment, and wellness.

As a Black scholar born, raised, and educated in predominately white spaces, experiential knowledge encouraged this inquiry that yielded beneficial information for Black students navigating a PWIHE. Of critical interest to this inquiry were the following questions: 1) What are Black students' experiences navigating PWIHE? 2) What are Black students' experiences of pushing back on oppressive forces at PWIHE? 3) What are Black students' strategies of self-care that assist with more healthily and successfully navigating a PWIHE? The ability to conceptualize what one can and cannot control enables one to make informed decisions about how to best use one's energy to accomplish self-identified goals in a balanced and healthy manner. For Black students who are conscious of the state of affairs for Black people in this country, it can be tremendously empowering to maintain focus on what one can control (personal agency) as opposed to what one cannot control as a means of self-care and personal empowerment during this continued time of racial unrest (Goldberg & Crespo, 2003).

Significance of Research

This research is significant because it focuses Black people, a marginalized group, and expands knowledge about strategies of self-care for Black students at PWIHE, an area of limited research. By using narrative inquiry, this research illuminates Black experiences, empowers Black voices, and validates Black truth at PWIHE while extracting and capitalizing on Black agency to generate knowledge for Black wellness and empowerment. The generated knowledge provides valuable insight into personal agency and strategies of self-care for Black students navigating PWIHE.

Limited research exists about self-care strategies that assist Black students with navigating PWIHE. I conducted a Google Scholar search with the key words "Black students" and "self-care" and only 6 relevant research articles came forward that have been published since 2000. Using the aforementioned key words and date range (2000 to 2021), I also conducted an ERIC search that yielded 10 results with 1 relevant research article, an APA PsychInfo search that yielded 13 results with 0 relevant research articles, an ABI/Inform Global search that yielded 20 results with 0 relevant research articles, and a Social Services Abstract search that yielded 40 results with 2 relevant research articles. Expanding the search to "Black students" and "coping skills" yielded more results; however, for the scope of this research there is a clear distinction between Black students coping with racism and Black students intentionally and proactively engaging in self-empowering self-care strategies to navigate and resist racism. According to Clark, Anderson, Clark, and Williams (1999) and Harrell (2000), coping strategies can mitigate or function as a resource of protection against the negative effects of racism. Thus, I assert there is an implication with "coping" of *enduring* racism from the position of the oppressed. The juxtaposition of self-care then is to navigate the omnipresent reality of racism from the positionality and reality of personal empowerment for the purpose of self-defined liberation. The fact that racism is ever-present does not negate the fact that Black people are equal to all people and *able* function from a place of personal empowerment to uphold the dignity and truth of our humanity.

This study fills this gap in literature that tends to contextualize and explore the Black experience in relationship with or response to oppression without regard for the

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holistic experiences, truths, power, strengths, and abilities of Black people. Clearly, there is overlap, and, while this research does not suss out this overlap in its entirety, it can contribute to future research that does for the purposes of uplifting and empowering Black experiences while decentering, disrupting, countering, and challenging the status quo for the benefit of individual and collective racial healing.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This literature review commences with a brief overview of the history of racism in higher education as a manifestation of cultural racism. The history provided includes information about white supremacy and the abuse of white power in higher education. It also includes information about Black leaders and faculty members at PWIHE to intentionally deviate from the norm of traditional research (that strictly maintains a narrow focus). This approach is taken to maximize solidarity of Black experiences within PWIHE, hold power (PWIHE) accountable, and more accurately represent the culture of PWIHE that situates Black student experiences and voices. Appropriately contextualized, this literature review then explores Black students' experiences of racial stress at PWIHE. This section includes information about the racial objectification and commodification of Black students in higher education, manifestations and effects of racial stress, and racial trauma. This section also discusses race and racism as important social determinants of health because of the adverse effects of racism on the psychological and physiological health of Black people. This literature review then discusses self-care as a revolutionary act of resistance for Black people and concludes with synthesized research denoting coping skills that Black students are found to implement to assist their ability to more healthily and successfully navigate a PWIHE. A conceptual framework for the literature review is found in Figure 1.

History of Racism in Higher Education

As with American culture, the history of higher education is deeply rooted in white supremacy ideology (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). As cited by Wolfe and Dilworth

(2015), Wilder (2013) noted the first colleges founded in the British American colonies from 1636 to 1745 (Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, Codrington in Barbados, and Princeton University, formerly known as College of New Jersey) "were all weapons used in the 'conquest of indigenous people' and used alongside the rise of the African slave trade and slavery to sustain a network of college growth with the mission to expand White dominance" (p. 673). As the result and despite many litigious and legislative efforts to abolish segregation and increase educational access and equity for Black people (and other marginalized groups), white supremacy ideology persists in societal and institutional culture of higher education current day, consequencing multifaceted duress for Black people (Cole & Jacob Arriola 2007; Cooper, Mahler, & Whitt, 1994; Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2019; Grills, Aird, & Rowe, 2016; Gusa, 2010; Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015).

White Supremacy and Abuse of White Power in Higher Education

In his 2017 Presidential Address for the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), Dr. Shaun Harper exposes white supremacy and the abuse of white power in higher education (ASHE Office, 2020). Dr. Harper identified intentionally using his positionality, presidential platform, "to speak truth to power, to give permission to those…who have been powerless in the academy, and, hopefully, to ignite a paradigmatic shift in the study of higher education in ways that absolutely restores power to the people" (ASHE Office, 2020, 6:45). Harper highlights that higher education "was racist and exclusive" (ASHE Office, 2020, 9:55) from its inception and the persistence of white

supremacy in higher education is architectural, compositional, curricular, and editorial, amongst other forms.

Architecturally, Harper argues that the perpetuation of predominately white administrators and faculty in higher education evidences how white supremacy was woven in "the groundwork… laid for colleges and universities in the U.S." (ASHE Office, 2020, 10:49). Harper says it is the perpetuation of this whiteness that results in the compositional manifestation of white supremacy that sustains the power for white people to determine the culture, arrangement, leadership, governance, and organizational structure of higher education as well as the "metrics of deservingness" (ASHE Office, 2020, 12:15) for access to these institutions. Furthermore, Harper emphasizes the curricular ramifications of white supremacy in higher education results from white people maintaining the power to determine "what is worthy of being taught and learned, [and] whose voices, epistemologies, and histories are worthy of substantive, meaningful, deep integration into the curriculum" (ASHE Office, 2020, 12:31). This concentrated power also means that white people maintain the power to socialize or exclude content through editorial power. Harper states, "[White people and mostly white editorial boards] have a lot of power, the power to determine relevance, rigor, and what is publishable" (ASHE Office, 2020, 13:35). Harper's presidential address exposes some of the manifestations and consequences of white supremacy in higher education. It also exposes the perpetuation of white supremacy as an abuse of white power in higher education (Dennis, 2001; Grills et al., 2016; Gusa, 2010; Joseph, Janes, Badwall, & Almeida, 2020; Lee & Leonard, 2008; Museus, Ledesma, & Parker, 2015; Mustaffa, 2017).

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Black Leaders and Faculty Members in Higher Education

The fact that Black people continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions at PWIHE is revealing. Wolf and Dilworth (2015) reported that throughout the country in the 1990s Black administrators were "exiting the academy as fast as they entered… due to inhospitable campus environments, isolation, alienation, marginalization, unrealistic role expectations, limited advancement opportunities, feelings of powerlessness, tokenism, and the lack of mentoring and sponsorship" (p. 675-676). When studying racial climates in higher education, Harper and Hurtado (2007) found that poor racial climates (racism) on campus results in negative experiences for students of color that contribute to the cultural taxation experienced by administrators of color at PWIHE, of which there are few. This results in an ongoing dilemma for administrators who are functioning within the same poor racial climate without a system of support to empower their voices and protect their positions. Consequently, for fear of retaliation from the dominant institutional culture, they refrain from engaging in advocacy and, instead, provide individualized support to students, which, inevitably, serves to perpetuate the wheel of white supremacy in higher education. The disproportionate representation of Black administrators in PWIHE reveals a racially hostile culture and lack of adequate infrastructure to support Black faculty and students navigating the same culture.

Akin to Black administrators, Black faculty are also disproportionately represented in PWIHE. According to Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017), "despite stated commitments to diversity, predominantly white academic institutions still have not increased racial diversity among their faculty" (p. 557). Among full-time professors in

the United States in the fall of 2018, 75 percent were white (40 percent males and 35 percent females), 6 percent Black (3 percent male and 3 percent female), 6 percent Hispanic (3 percent males and 3 percent females), and 12 percent Asian/Pacific Islander (7 percent males and 5 percent females). Professors who were American Indian/Alaska Native and of two or more races made up less than one percent each (NCES, 2020).

Multiple persistent barriers exist that contribute to faculty of color being underrepresented in higher education, but the root cause of these barriers is racism. Museus et al. (2015) present six themes of racialized experiences that might contribute to faculty of color's underrepresentation in higher education: (a) racism in the academic pipeline (racial inequity in recruitment, hiring, career development, promotion, and financial compensation), (b) racial resistance to faculty authority and expertise (overt and covert racism that results in students challenging faculty of color's authority and expertise, discrediting them, and resisting learning), (c) racial hostility in the classroom (faculty of color experience more hostility and disrespect in the classroom and low teaching evaluations, which adversely impacts their chances for tenure), (d) racial scrutiny of faculty research agendas (research agendas focused on diversity are scrutinized and publications in progressive journals, as opposed to mainstream journals, are less beneficial to faculty of color's tenure and promotion success), (e) racial taxation from excess faculty service (faculty of color are disproportionately summoned to spend a greater amount of time engaging in service to institution than white faculty), and (f) racial marginalization and isolation among faculty of color (as a numerical minority, faculty of color are vulnerable to racism that results in patterns of exclusion).

A study conducted by Edwards and Ross (2018) addressed the persistent problems identified as concerns for Black Faculty at PWIHE that result in lack of success. While these findings do not identify "racial resistance to faculty authority and expertise… [or] racial hostility in the classroom" (Museus et al., 2015, p. 60) as expressed concerns for faculty of color, these do uphold the remaining themes presented by Museus et al. (2015) and contribute to the body of knowledge about Black faculty experiences at predominately white institutions of higher education. Edwards and Ross (2018) found, in ranked order, the concerns for Black faculty to be: (a) lack of mentors; (b) covert politics that impede Black faculty's ability to feel secure in the opportunity to attain tenure/promotion at PWIHE; (c) little guidance about the tenure process; (d) social isolation and (e) difficulty being viewed and received by colleagues as equal; (f) inability to speak one's opinion; (g) infrequent occasions to assume leadership and (h) limited opportunities to participate in decision making; (I) little guidance about the workplace and (j) pay inequity; (k) excessive "Token" committee assignments; (l) campus-wide failure to retain Black faculty; and (m) research is viewed as trivial and is discounted. The themes highlighted by both Museus et al. (2015) and Edwards and Ross (2018) evidence the incessant nature of racism in higher education that contributes to the underrepresentation of faculty of color. These findings are supported by Villalpando and Bernal (2002) who, through analysis, contest the traditional institutional justifications for the lack of progress of faculty of color by revealing data that holds the institution of higher education accountable for inhibiting their success in the academy. This "data suggests that, while many complex factors have influenced the lack of progress for

faculty of color, most of the responsibility lies on the racialized structures, policies, and

practices that guide hiring, retention, and promotion" (Villalpando & Bernal, 2002, p.

260). As such, Villalpando and Bernal (2002), contend the findings call for "higher

education to correct the policies and practices that exclude and devalue faculty of color"

(p. 260).

Black Students' Experiences of Racial Stress at PWIHE

Racial objectification and Commodification

Black students are sometimes lured to PWIHE through efforts of strategic

diversity plans that function to present the guise of valuing diversity. Wolf and Dilworth

(2015) found that

> rather than address climate, leadership structures, or the impact of campus
>
> policies on minority students as a means of creating a more inclusive
>
> environment, some colleges and universities have resorted to quick fixes to attract
>
> students… Specifically, some institutions have chosen to intentionally
>
> misrepresent themselves through the use of brochures, data manipulation (e.g.,
>
> defining racial categories), websites, magazine ads, and other materials in an
>
> attempt to portray themselves as those that embrace diversity in an effort to attract
>
> ethnically and racially diverse students. This masking strategy is unethical
>
> because it is an attempt to efface an exclusionary past—and to some extent—
>
> present conditions of PWIs. (p. 683)

This masking strategy transcends "unethical" and is manipulation, objectification, and

commodification of Black people to meet white needs (diversity quota), which is racism.

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This practice clearly exemplifies how implicit and explicit bias perpetuates institutional racism--the racial violence experienced by Black stakeholders (Buncombe, 1973).

Racial Stress

In addition to experiencing stress typically associated with being a student of higher education, Black students experience racial stress that is cumulative in nature and can manifest racial trauma (heightened psychological and physiological responses to racial stress) (Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017). Cooper, Mahler, and Whitt (1994) found the typical stress Black students experience in common with their white peers to be "leaving home, adapting to a new environment, making friends, adjusting to more stringent academic standards and performance, time management, and varying financial concerns" (p. 20). Unlike their white peers, Black students contend with additional "stressors and situations" (Cooper et al., 1994, p. 20) that comprise "low or lack of same race peers and professors and situational encounters with overt, subtle and/or perceived racism" (p. 20).

Being a numerical minority at PWIHE can result in psychological distress for Black students that manifests from feelings of isolation, pressure to represent *all* Black people, responsibility to function in a capacity that dispels negative stereotypes of Black people, and exclusion (lack of belonging) (Griffith, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017). The psychological distress can be further intensified by campus racial climates that result in Black students "being stared at, stereotyped, or treated unfairly" (Griffith et al., 2017, p. 117).

Additionally, Griffith et al. (2017) found the inequitable treatment that cultivates racial stress for Black students to be underrepresentation in academic spaces, continual encounters with unintended racial insults/racial microaggressions (e.g., comments from white professors and peers implying Black people are unintelligent and monolithic, being excluded from or marginalized in study groups, being ignored or having comments dismissed in class, and loss of individuality due to white majority's lack of ability to acknowledge Black people's within-group heterogeneity, etc.), and intentional discrimination (e.g., harsh questioning about hair hygiene practices, exclusion from fraternity parties, being referred to as the N-word, being overtly subjugated and/or treated differently by professors, being animalized by peers on anonymous social media platforms, etc.). Griffith et al. (2017) found "intentional discrimination" to be particularly "troubling" for Black students "when professors were the perpetrators" (p. 127). Racial stress experienced by Black students at PWIHE evidences hostile and inequitable educational experience due to cultural and institutional racism (Truong & Museus, 2012).

The inequity and, subsequent, racial stress experienced by Black students at PWIHE denotes harm (Cooper et al., 1994; Griffith et al., 2017; Truong & Museus, 2012). "Overall, students reported that cumulative race-related stressors caused them to feel anxious, hopeless, excluded, irritated, and outraged" (Griffith et al., 2017, p. 127), adversely impacting their self-esteem, mental health, physical health, sense of belonging, and degree completion. Griffith et al. (2017) reported that "even when Black students are successful, race-related stressors may exert a psychological toll; for example, high-achieving Black students report constant pressure to prove their intellectual ability,

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despite having a history of academic success" (p. 117). Truong and Museus (2012)

concur and identify other consequences of racism-related stress to include low self-

esteem, humiliation, depression, anger, headaches, nausea, tunnel vision, back pains, loss

of appetite or overeating, shortness of breath, chest pains, weeping, difficulty

concentrating, lack of motivation or productivity, sleep deprivation, fatigue, and

perseveration on racist encounters long after these occurred (e.g., days, weeks, months,

and/or years). The aforementioned research illustrates how racism manifests race-related

stress and has negative psychological, physiological, and academic implications. The

research also shows that "toxic campus racial climates have a negative relationship with

college adjustment, persistence, and baccalaureate degree completion" (Truong &

Museus, 2012, p. 226-227).

Racial Trauma

Truong and Museus (2012) "define racism-related stress as the emotional,

physical, and psychological discomfort and pain resulting from experiences with racism"

(p. 228), and they "use the term *racial trauma* to denote severe cases of racism-related

stress" (p. 228). Carter's (2007) work distinguishes that "although trauma is a form of

stress, it is distinct in that it is a more severe form of stress understood in terms of both

the nature of the stressor(s) and the type of reaction to the stressor(s)" (p. 18-19). To be

clear, the nature of the stressor that manifests trauma is individualized and determined by

the impacted person's perception of the experience and impacted person's cumulative

racialized experience (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Carter, 2007; Ponds, 2013;

Williams et. al, 2018). This means trauma can manifest from an experience with racism

and/or be the result of the cumulative experience of personal and/or vicarious experiences of persistent racism. The types of reactions that evidence racial trauma include, but are not limited to hypervigilance, avoidance, memory difficulty, confusion, depression, anxiety, feelings of anger fear, shame, and humiliation, headaches, body aches, insomnia, and numbing or disassociation (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Carter, 2007; Williams et. al, 2018). Not all people who experience racism-related stress will experience racial trauma and not all people who experience racism-related stress or racial trauma will develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Williams, 2018).

Harrell (2000) defines racism as a toxin "that runs through the veins of society [that] has yet to find an antidote. Racism can traumatize, hurt, humiliate, enrage, confuse, and ultimately prevent optimal growth and functioning of individuals and communities" (p. 42). The impact of racism can result in psychological trauma that manifests post-traumatic stress disorder (Carter, 2007; Carter, Mazzula, Victoria, et al., 2013; Harrell, 2000; Truong & Museus, 2012). In a study conducted by Himle, Baser, Taylor, Campbell, and Jackson (2009), Black people were found to be "at greatest risk of developing PTSD at any age before approximately age 60" (p. 585), signifying a notable mental health disparity. The experienced psychological trauma "occurs when an event, series of events, or circumstances are experienced as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and have lasting adverse effects on the person's functioning and well-being (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014)" (Williams, Metzger, Leins, & DeLapp, 2018, p. 243). The lasting adverse effects evidence the cognitive, behavioral, and affective reaction(s) to the traumatic experience

that denote PTSD, "a highly disabling condition that tends to elicit pervasive and maladaptive avoidance behaviors associated with the traumatic experience" (Williams et al., 2018, p. 243). The maladaptive avoidance behaviors are implemented in an attempt to regulate anxiety and protect the person from further real or imagined danger (Carter, 2007; Harrell, 2000; Truong & Museus, 2012; Williams, 2018).

Many people who experience racial trauma will experience a natural reduction of symptoms. For others, however, intrusive thoughts and feelings related to the traumatic experience present so strongly that they actively engage in avoidance tactics to disconnect from the traumatic experience, which only serves to intensify the frequency of the intrusive thoughts (Williams, 2018; Carter, 2007). This is an important distinguishing factor between racial trauma and PTSD. For a person's cognitive, behavioral, and affective response to meet the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.) criteria for PTSD, the response must specifically lead to symptoms of intrusion (reexperiencing), avoidance, negative mood & cognitions, and physiological arousal (Carter, 2007; Williams, 2018).

Race and Racism as Social Determinants of Health

The impact of racism on Black people manifests mental and physical disorders (illness) that contribute to racial disparities in health. According to Ramaswamy and Kelly (2015):

> The link between racism and health is a matter of life and death. In the United States, Blacks are more likely than Whites to die during infancy as a result of preterm delivery, and during adult life are more likely to have HIV, hypertension,

and diabetes, and to die from breast or prostate cancer… The pathways to these

health inequities are layered and complex—the organization of the health care

system, patient behaviors, health care providers' biases—all have been used to

explain the relationship between race and poor health outcomes. (p. 285)

Racial health disparities exist because of racism, making racism a notable social

determinant of health. According to World Health Organization (WHO) (2021), social

determinants of health are "the circumstances in which people are born, grow up, live,

work and age, and the systems put in place to deal with illness" (para. 1). These

circumstances are shaped and perpetuated by social, economic, policy, and political

factors that are impacted by institutional racism (Ramaswamy & Kelly, 2015).

Institutional racism is defined as "the structures, policies, practices, and norms resulting

in differential access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by race" (Jones,

2002, p. 10). As such, "institutional racism forms a critical basis of all of the social

determinants of health" (Ramaswamy & Kelly, 2015, p. 285). As a biproduct of cultural

racism, institutional racism is engrained in social structures and economic systems in

ways that adversely impact Black lives outside of the scope of what individuals can

control, resulting in racism being "recognized as an important social determinant of

health (SDoH) and a key driver of health inequities" (Johnson, 2020, p. 1). While the

overall health of the country has improved, racial, and ethnic disparities in health and

health care persist for people of color, resulting in them being "less likely to receive

routine medical care and face higher rates of morbidity and mortality than nonminorities"

(American Medical Association, n.d., para.1).

Self-Love – A Revolutionary Act of Resistance

Black people have not been acculturated to love, even like, ourselves, and this makes engaging in self-love a revolutionary act of resistance that upholds our integrity and dignity as human beings (hooks, 2003). This means that beneath the imposed racial stress resides a powerful source of personal agency that when activated by self-esteem can manifest self-care in a manner that is personally empowering and liberating. hooks (2003) states that

> … the politics of race and racism impinge on our capacity as black folk to create self-love rooted in healthy self-esteem, sometimes in an absolute and brutal manner. Yet many of us create healthy self-esteem in a world where white supremacy and racism remain the norm. Clearly, being victims of racism does not imply that we cannot resist in ways that are an expression of healthy self-esteem. (p. 21)

The first part of hooks' sentiment denotes how racism can manifest internalized racism that serves to mentally and spiritually incarcerate some people in the constraints of white supremacy ideology and incapacitate them from achieving their self-defined liberation. The brutalization of this sentiment is reflected in the following words of Maya Angelou (1993): "The plague of racism is insidious, entering into our minds as smoothly and quietly and invisibly as floating airborne microbes enter into our bodies to find lifelong purchase in our bloodstreams" (p. 121). Angelou's words uplift the incessant nature of racism and insight to inevitable impact. The later part of hooks' sentiment reminds or awakens Black consciousness to the power resources inherent in our beings to rise above

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the lie of white supremacy through self-love that manifests healthy self-esteem and ways of being. This sentiment reverberating the essence of Angelou's (1978) poem "Still I Rise" about the Black experience in white America:

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?

Why are you beset with gloom?

'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells

Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high,

Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?

Bowed head and lowered eyes?

Shoulders falling down like teardrops,

Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?

Don't you take it awful hard

'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines

Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,

You may cut me with your eyes,

You may kill me with your hatefulness,

But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?

Does it come as a surprise

That I dance like I've got diamonds

At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame

I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain

I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise. (p. 43-44)

Like hooks, Angelou's sentiments confront the lie of white supremacy and serve to uplift Black consciousness about our birth given greatness, equality as human beings, and intrinsic power (generated from self-love) to rise above the lie for the purposes of our own survival and liberation. In addition, Angelou's sentiments remind Black people that despite the imposed constructs and conditions of white supremacy, we are survivors from a legacy of survivors and maintain the capacity to rise in and for our own light and right. For Black students at PWIHE, research upholds hooks' (2003) and Angelou's (1978) sentiments, finding Black students who focus on personal agency to affirm and nurture their self-esteem while engaging in self-determined actions to meet their needs tend to persist while navigating PWIHE (Bentley-Edwards, Agonafer, Edmondson, & Flannigan, 2016; Cooper et al., 1994; Truong & Museus, 2012).

Strategies of Black Self-Care at PWIHE

Cooper et al. (1994) studied the racialized educational experiences of Black undergraduate and graduate students at five predominately white institutions of higher education in the Midwest. They found "that successful Black students appear to have developed *survival kits* or coping mechanism(s) that go beyond initial and typical student responses to college to further aid in their integration into academic and social life" (p. 20). Cooper et al. (1994) and other researchers found these coping mechanisms include:

- family support (Cooper et al., 1994);

- strong interpersonal connections with Black peers (Bentley-Edwards et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 1994; Quaye, Karikari, Allen, Okello, & Carter, 2019; Truong & Museus, 2012);

- *only* socializing with Black peers (Cooper et al., 1994, Griffith et al., 2019; Quaye et. al., 2019);

- religion and spirituality (Bentley-Edwards et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 1994; Truong & Museus, 2012);

- independently reflecting on/processing race-related stressors (Griffith et al., 2019; Truong & Museus, 2012);

- selectively and strategically seeking support from another person of color to process race-related stressors (Griffith et al., 2019; Truong & Museus, 2012)

- working harder, persisting, achieving as resistance (Bentley-Edward et al., 2016; Griffith et al., 2019; Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Smith, 2003; Truong & Museus, 2012);

- caring for their bodies (Cooper et al., 1994; Griffith et al., 2019; Quaye et. al., 2019);

- accessing on-campus resources (e.g., multicultural centers) (Griffith et al., 2019; Quaye et al, 2019);

- selectively educating white friends (Griffith et al., 2019);

- identifying allies and advocates (Grills, et al., Griffith et al., 2019);

- avoiding racist environments (Quaye, Karikari, Allen, Okello, & Carter, 2019; Truong & Museus, 2012);

- preparing for racist encounters (Truong & Museus, 2012);

- seeking mental health treatment (Quaye et. al., 2019; Truong & Museus, 2012);

- advocating for peers of color (Truong & Museus, 2012);

- relieving stress through hobbies (Cooper et al., 1994; Truong & Museus, 2012; Griffith et al., 2019); and

- speaking up/seeking intervention/strategic maneuvering/documenting and filing complaints (Salazar, 2009; Truong & Museus, 2012).

Capitalizing on personal agency to uphold individual and collective Black worth utilizes and nurtures healthy self-esteem for Black students to assist with surviving and/or thriving at PWIHE. Hooks' (2003) says, "Our continued survival as African-American people . . . demands that we care for our souls so that we can be whole and complete. If we begin with self-esteem our success is assured. Well-being will be our destiny" (p. 20).

In their autoethnography, Nicol and Yee (2017), chose "to exercise [their] scholarly power to centralize making meaning of [their] experiences to construct new knowledge" (p. 136). As faculty of color navigating a PWIHE, they perceive that in addition to the physical aspects, "self-care practices emanate from a place of self-love that also has emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions" (p. 134). For them, this expansive use of the term self-care is vital to the expression of their experiences in higher education and the "need for 'radical self-care' among antiracist, feminist teachers" (p. 134). They describe radical self-care as "embracing practices that keep [them] physically and psychologically healthy and fit, making time to reflect on what matters to [them], challenging [themselves] to grow, and checking [themselves] to ensure what [they] are doing aligns with what matters to [them]" (p. 134). They consider this self-care as "radical" because it requires them to focus on self within the construct and toxic culture of white supremacy. In essence, they take their power back from the lie of white supremacy and use their personal power to function in a self-determined way to uphold their inherent equality, value, and worth as human beings and members of the academy. To explain further, Nicol and Yee (2017) state:

> We consider this self-care 'radical' because it fundamentally alters how we make choices about allocating time, money, and energy for ourselves personally, at home, and at work and seeks to revolutionize our workplace practices. Practiced faithfully, 'radical self-care' involves owning and directing our lives and choosing with whom, how, and how often we engage in our nested, interconnected worlds

so that we can be unapologetically ourselves in the face of unrelenting pressure

and expectations to be otherwise. (p. 134)

In line with aforementioned trailblazers (i.e., Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou, and hooks),

Nicol and Yee (2017) perceive their definition of self-care for women of color, inside or

outside of PWIHE, as revolutionary and transformative because self-care comprised of

self-love is perceived as necessary "in order to deal with the daily onslaught of racism,

sexism, homophobia, and class oppression" (p. 134). Nicol and Yee (2017) also

acknowledge the value of radical self-care to be self-sustaining resistance to the status

quo.

      While Nicole and Yee (2017) are faculty of color at PWIHE, they are navigating

the same racially hostile, toxic, and oppressive environments as students, which makes

the knowledge generated from their study relevant to this research. The concept of radical

self-care *is* the self-affirming self-care that is central to this research. Self-affirming self-

care is the practice of using one's personal agency to engage in action for self-validation,

self-regulation, self-preservation, self-empowerment, and wellness. Self-affirming self-

care is actualized through self-love that energizes and focuses personal power to function

to uphold self-worth, authenticity, individualism, and racial integrity in the midst of

omnipresent oppressive forces. It is a proactive state of being functioning as self-

affirming resistance.

Theoretical Framework

      This research was conducted and analyzed through the lenses of Critical Race

Theory (CRT) and Emotional Emancipation Theory (EET). CRT evolved, draws, and

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extends from a foundation in law, radical feminism, sociology, history, and ethnic studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Though initially utilized in critical legal studies, the concept of legal indeterminacy was borrowed and, over time, applied to other disciplines. In law, the concept of legal indeterminacy is "the idea that not every legal case has one correct outcome. Instead, one can decide most cases either way, by emphasizing one line of authority over another, or interpreting one fact differently from the way one's adversary does" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 5). This concept foregrounds the power of perspective, which is derived from people's experience, to contribute to the concept and reality of multiple realities, or, regarding matters of race and racism, that the white way of perception and conceptualization is not the only or right way. There are five tenets of CRT: (a) the centrality of race and racism, (b) interest convergence, (c) the social construction of race/challenge to dominant ideology, (d) the notion of intersectionality in and commitment to social justice, and (e) the centrality of voices of color and their experiential knowledge (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). For the purpose of this study, these tenets are used to inform the analysis and discussion of participants' racialized experiences and strategies of self-empowering self-care at a PWIHE.

EET acknowledges the more than 400 years of subjugation of Black people as the result of the lie of white superiority and Black inferiority, and it foregrounds Black people's ability to liberate themselves individually and collectively from this lie (Grills, 2016). According to Community Healing Network (n.d.), emotional emancipation

means complete freedom from all toxic ideas about the inferiority of Black lives,

Black intellect, Black culture, Black values, Black hair, Black skin, and other

Black physical features. It is the freedom to see ourselves as the beautiful,

lovable, intelligent, capable, and worthy human beings we are; freedom to see

ourselves beyond the negative stereotypes that have burdened and limited us for

centuries. Emotional emancipation is complete freedom from the emotional

legacies of 600 years of dehumanization. (para. 5)

EMT mobilizes self-love, utilizes personal agency to prioritize and uphold oneself and

wellness, and maintains personal power over (or reclaims personal power from) the lie of

white supremacy and Black inferiority. Emotional emancipation "requires admitting that

all Black people are, to one degree or another, victims of the lie" (Grills, 2016, p. 338)

and possess the power and ability to function in a self-determined manner that uplifts the

truth and dignity of their humanity without regard for whiteness.

According to Grills (2016), the tenets of emotional emancipation include: (a)

complete freedom from the lie of Black inferiority (and the negative stereotypes

associated with the lie) and upholding of the truth of Black humanity, (b) acquisition of

power and identity, and (c) healing the historical trauma of 250 years of enslavement. In

this study, these tenets are used to inform analysis and discussion of participants'

racialized experiences and strategies of self-empowering self-care at a PWIHE.

Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework for Strategies of Black Students' Self-Care at PWIHE
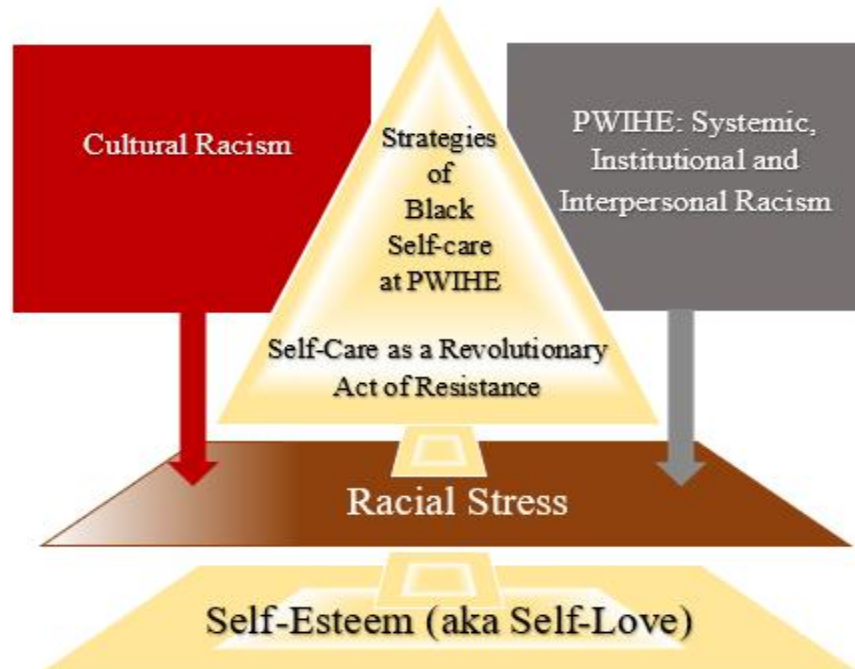
This Conceptual Framework (see Figure 1) displays the oppressive forces of cultural, institutional, and interpersonal racism present in PWIHE that manifest racial stress and harm to Black people within the institution. Beneath the imposed racial stress resides a powerful source of personal agency that when activated by self-esteem (aka self-love) has the capacity to manifest self-care as a revolutionary act of resistance, personal empowerment, and self-defined liberation.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

The qualitative tradition of narrative inquiry was utilized to focus and elicit marginalized experiences of Black graduate students attending the same PWIHE at the time of this study. The information gathered documents their lived experiences and serve as resources to expand knowledge and meaning making related to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Units of analysis for this study are individual Black students actively enrolled in graduate courses at Mountain View University (MVU) at the time of the study. This study generated knowledge about their experiences of racial oppression, efforts of resistance (pushing back on oppressive forces within the institution), and self-care strategies.

Narrative Inquiry

We are all stories in progress, and stories are a vital life force and resource. Clandinin (2006) says it is through the living, telling, and talking about stories that "we create meaning in our lives as well as… enlist each other's help in building our lives and communities" (p. 44). Narrative inquiry capitalizes on "the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 68) and functions to enhance understanding of individual experiences (or group experiences) and of individual experiences (or group experiences) in relationship to others and the world around them. The generated knowledge from narrative inquiry assists with finding solutions for problems that ail us individually and collectively.

Narrative inquiry is utilized in this study because it permits the "slowing down of lives" (Clandinin, 2006, p. 51) so there is room for pause in order to identify and analyze

the narrative structures that characterize individual, social, and institutional experiences. Through narrative inquiry, the invisible and/or ignored experiences of marginalized and minoritized Black graduate students at MVU, a PWIHE, are focused, valued, heard, validated, uplifted, and made visible. Thus, this narrative inquiry permitted the exploration of Black graduate student experiences at MVU and provided the framework to make meaning of these. This meaning making contributed to the body of knowledge about Black graduate students' individual and shared experiences at MVU and provided information about the culture, practices, and/or norms of the institution (from their Black experiences and perspectives) that impact these experiences. This information provides valuable insight into the racial climate at MVU and strategies for change that would create a more racially equitable educational system. Most importantly, with respect to the central focus of this narrative inquiry, the information generated from this research (that was conducted by, with, and for Black people) produced a collection of proactive self-affirming and empowering self-care strategies for Black students' utilization.

Data Collection

The data collection method was audio recorded semi-structured one-on-one interviews. The semi-structured interviews provided a framework (in the form of questions) for evoking information related to the purpose of the study and the flexibility "to follow unexpected leads that [arose] in [the] course of the interview" (Glesne, 2011, p. 134). Four interviews were conducted with each of the participants over the timespan of a year and a half (from 2019 to 2021). Three of the four interviews conducted with each participant transpired in person or via video conferencing. Interviews were

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transcribed and member checks conducted following each interview to ensure accuracy of the transcripts and reliability of the data. The third interview with each participant transpired via text, email, and/or phone dependent upon participant needs to address questions or to clarify information as these arose during analysis. While the interviews evoked challenging and complex emotions for participants, these might also have served as an emancipatory experience for them throughout the process of having their marginalized voices centered, valued, heard, and documented (Glesne, 2011). The Interview Protocol is found in Appendix A. Participant confidentiality was protected via the use of pseudonyms in the data collection process (no identifiable information was collected). Audio recordings were stored in a locked file cabinet behind a locked door until transcribed (using pseudonyms) and immediately destroyed after. An approved IRB is on file for this study.

The interviewing process was limited to four interviews per participant to adhere to my perception of best practice when considering the best interest of participants who are already overexposed and overextended at a PWIHE. The interviewing approach acknowledged and demonstrated respect for participants' bandwidth and was designed to reduce adverse effect by maintaining flexibility with respect to participants' individual needs related to time, place, and mode of interaction. While I perceive interviews for this research could have an emancipatory impact for participants, I also perceive these interviews to replicate and contribute to participants' overburdened experiences at a PWIHE, which evidences risk of harm. To minimize this risk, the four-interview approach with demonstrated respect, acknowledgement of bandwidth, and flexibility was

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strictly adhered to. This researcher conducted Google Scholar and APA PsychInfo

searches using the key words "effects of research" and "Black students" that yielded no

relevant results on the effects of research on Black students at a PWIHE.

Context and Participants

The setting of the study was Mountain View University, a PWIHE situated in the

northeast region of the United States. Of the 13,144 students enrolled at MVU, 1,599

were graduate students. There was low racial-ethnic diversity among the graduate student

body. White students comprised 71.17% of the population, with Black students

accounting for 2.8%, Asian students at 5.25%, Hispanic students at 6.38%, American

Indian or Alaska Native at .31%, Native or Pacific Islander at .06%, multi-ethnic at

3.38%, international at 8.38 %, and unknown at 2.4% (Institutional Data, 2020). The

racial-ethnic diversity of faculty at the university (not specific to the graduate program)

was 90.1% white, 2.28% Black, 5.45 % Asian, .05% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander,

and 1.41% multi-ethnic (Institutional Data, 2020). Access to the setting was obtained

through researcher and student affiliations with the university. Four Black participants

(graduate students) were recruited by convenience sampling. The researcher asked

participants to describe their experiences and self-care strategies for navigating

predominately white institutions of higher education.

Each individual participant served as a unit of analysis for this study. A unit of

analysis is "a single undivided entity upon which [a researcher] direct[s] [their] analysis

and express[es] the qualities [they] perceive in that element" (Chenail, 2012, p. 266).

Once individual participant qualities (Black student experiences at MVU and self-

affirming self-care strategies) were determined, these were analyzed across the sample to reveal patterns within the sample to enhance understanding of qualities (Black student experiences at MVU and self-affirming self-care strategies).

The participants self-identified as Black, were active graduate level students at varied points in their masters or doctoral programs and ranged in age from young to middle adults. Developmentally one participant grew up in a predominately Black community and attended predominately Black educational systems until graduate school when she attended a PWIHE, one participant grew up in a predominately white community and has only attended predominately white educational systems throughout her educational career, and two participants grew up in predominately Black and Hispanic communities and attended predominately Black and Hispanic educational systems until college when they attended predominately white institutions of higher education prior to participating in this study. All participants were female and raised by biologic Black parents within the context of Black family culture. Additionally, all participants self-identified as being "woke" during the interviewing process. Participant level of racial awareness was not a condition of the sample and was a result. A brief introduction of each participant follows. Some information has been changed to protect anonymity. The pseudonyms *Harriet* [Tubman], *Mahaila* [Jackson], *Angela* [Davis], and *Ida* [B. Wells] were assigned to honor the legacy of Black women leaders.

Angela

Angela is a 36-year-old self-identified Black woman. She was raised primarily by her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother who resided in the same home, and

while her father was present in the home, she defines his presence in her life as being

"absent." Angela was raised in a predominately Black community and attended

predominately Black educational systems until graduate school when she had her first

experience at a PWIHE. Angela attended MVU as a doctoral student and withdrew after

the first year due to "the racist classroom environment and lack of a robust curriculum."

She reported not holding value for being in a space or obtaining a diploma from an

institution that didn't serve her. Angela stated, "They were going to get a benefit of my

intellectual labor, and it was like why burden or even break my spirit for this piece of

paper from somewhere that doesn't appreciate or empower me." As a racially conscious

Black woman, Angela experienced the racially toxic environment at MVU to be

frustrating and exhausting. She resented the lack of racial consciousness of her professors

and the expectation that she would provide the racial equity content for classes without

regard or respect for the emotional labor it required. Angela determined her level of

engagement with racial equity work at the institution based upon her needs within the

context of what was occurring in the environment. Angela stated she participated in the

study "to help." She spoke to the importance of Black narratives being recorded and to

these being critical contributions to research. She declared that until the state of affairs

for Black people in higher education is acknowledged, "no one is ever going to be

welcome. We are just going to sacrifice the most marginalized and minoritized people for

the sake of the institution." Angela hopes the research "makes people more aware and

lends a voice for the people who have been unheard."

Harriet

Harriet is a 27-year-old self-identified Black woman. She was raised by single Black mother in a predominately Black and Hispanic community with "a low percentage of white folk." She experienced predominately Black and Hispanic educational environments until college when she attended a PWIHE. Harriet reported she initially experienced "culture shock" in graduate school at MVU and assumed the role of observer because the culture and environment were foreign to her. Consequently, she said she struggled with how to be her "authentic self in a space that [she didn't] really understand." She also reported struggling to find community and a sense of belonging, but with time she was able to find this within the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) community. Harriet reported that she did not feel seen and acknowledged by the institution other than being "seen as a part of that one percent." Harriet identified valuing her voice and being mindful about how she engaged her voice because she hated "the stigma of the loud Black woman or the angry Black woman," which is "not who [she] is." Harriet identified using her voice, speaking her truth, and, at times, speaking with fire. Harriet stated she participated in the study because she thought it was important to share her narrative in an "unapologetic manner" and felt that this study "created a space that she [could] be and feel safe and confident in naming [her] truth." Her hope for the research is Black empowerment at PWIHE. She said, "I think we are at that moment now where we are upturning what PWIs are and not upholding them."

Ida

Ida is a 35-year-old self-identified Black woman and single mother of two elementary school aged children. She was raised by a single Black mother in a predominately Black and Hispanic community, and she attended predominately Black and Hispanic schools until college. Ida's experiences in higher education have been exclusively at predominately white institutions, and she is currently pursuing a master's degree at MVU. Ida reported she attended MVU out of convenience and financial necessity and stated, "If I would have had the opportunity to pick exactly where I wanted to go to graduate school, it would not have been [at MVU]." Ida identified the pernicious nature of white supremacy as the cause of her dissatisfaction with the institution. She informed that engaging with racially uninformed white professors is a form of "psychological warfare." Highly aware of the racialized dynamics in her educational environment, Ida identified as asserting boundaries with or disengaging from this "noise" as a means of self-care. Having experienced a PWIHE previously, Ida stated she entered the program "knowing [she] would have to figure out how invested [she] was going to be in teaching folks or… getting what [she needed] to get out, and it was the latter." Ida stated she participated in this study because the issue of racism is "bigger than [she is], and it was [her] way of showing up for [her] people."

Mahaila

Mahaila is a 46-year-old self-identified Black woman. She is married to her high school sweetheart, and they are the parents of three children. Mahaila was raised by a single Black mother in a predominately white community and attended predominately

white educational systems throughout her educational passage from kindergarten through graduate studies. Mahaila reported her experience growing up in a predominately white society and attending predominately white schools served as a "conditioning" for her that assisted her preparation for attending a PWIHE. She stated, "I think my experience is sort of a continuation of what my life has been, and, I would say that I show up as authentic as I can be." Mahaila's engagement in racial equity work in her experience at MVU was an organic part of person and extension of her values. She presents and identifies as being highly racially aware and informed, and she experiences this as a responsibility and burden. Mahaila stated she participated in the study to "uplift voices that aren't represented completely in our scholarship and in schools," to tell "stories that aren't told," and to uplift [me] as a Black woman researcher in [my] scholarship." She hopes the research will "help Black people who may be interested in pursuing an education in a predominately white institution to get a sense of what that is like or if they are in it to have validation for their experiences." She also stated the research provides "an opportunity for institutions and educators to understand their impact" and serves as "launching… for further research around what it means to create more equitable educational environments."

Data Analysis

Data collected for this research was obtained through four semi-structured one-on-one interviews with each participant. The semi-structured approach provided the opportunity to directly and indirectly gather data related to the purpose of the study (Glesne, 2011). During and after the data collection process, I wrote memos documenting

observations, ideas, reflections, and questions. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) explain the utility of memos to be "a rapid way of capturing thoughts that occur throughout data collection, data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, conclusion testing, and final reporting" (p. 96). Glesne (2011) adds that memo writing serves to free the researcher's mind, allowing "for new thoughts and perspectives" and the analysis to be more "rich, thorough, and correct" (p. 189).

Following data collection, I cleaned the data (removed personally identifiable information) and inserted pseudonyms to adhere to best ethical practice in qualitative research by ensuring participant confidentiality and protection from harm (Creswell & Poth, 2011). I then transcribed the clean data verbatim and synthesized it to enhance my general understanding of the information gathered. While synthesizing the data, I made notations of observations and/or questions in the margins of the document. This process permitted me to begin to make connections within the data to assist with the coding process and to document clarifying questions for member checks. The clean and synthesized data was then submitted to participants and member checks were conducted to ensure the reliability of the data.

Using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, I formed and assigned codes for the data revealed in the literature review (a-priori codes) and data that emerged from the interviews (in-vivo codes). Miles et al. (2014) define codes as "labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study" (p. 71). The codes were used to "retrieve and categorize similar data chunks so [I could] quickly find, pull out, and cluster the segments relating to" (p. 72) the research question.

The codes, representing data chunks, then assisted with further analysis and conclusion drawing.

Thought units were coded in this study. This means I identified thought units and assigned a code that represented the focal point of each thought unit (Miles et al., 2014). Once codes were assigned for each thought unit, I grouped these codes into "a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs," known as pattern codes (Miles et al., 2014, p. 86), to assist with revealing the often-interrelated categories or themes, causes/explanations, relationships among people, and/or theoretical constructs.

After writing margin notes and assigning pattern codes, I summarized initial findings in a memo. Miles et al. (2014) finds analytic memos to be "one of the most useful and powerful sense-making tools at hand" (p. 96) because these "go well beyond codes and their relationships to any aspect of the study – personal, methodological, and substantive" and assist with enhancing meaning making and knowledge production related to the data within a "bounded context" (p. 100). Through the use of cross-case analysis, I assessed generalizability to understand how data is "qualified by local conditions" and "develop more sophisticated descriptions and more powerful explanations" (p. 101) of the findings as documented in and assisted by the analytic memos.

I continually reviewed, compared, revised, and relabeled codes as necessary to maintain conceptual and structural unity (Miles et al., 2014, p. 82). According to Miles et al. (2014), "Codes should relate to one another in coherent, study-important ways; they should be part of a unified structure" (p.82). The implementation of the aforementioned

process ensured I was coding accurately and minimized the opportunity for coding drift. Additionally, member checks were conducted to ensure reliable and valid results.

I utilized the confirmed patterned codes that resulted from being clustered around common ideas, themes, and categories to further analyze the data, interpret the results, relate the themes to the conceptual framework, display and compare the data, and refine themes as needed. Member checks were conducted to ensure and confirm accuracy of the results. The interpreted results were presented as assertions (declarative statements) and propositions (inductive findings) as evidenced and predicted by the data (Miles et al., 2014). Appendix B provides a complete list of defined codes (themes) that emerged from the data.

Trustworthiness and Validation Measures

Researchers are human beings first, and, as with any profession, we bring ourselves to work. Bringing ourselves to work means we bring our conscious and unconscious biases with us that impact our worldview and our work, even when we are in denial about this, hide behind institutional policies and practices that justify our biased functioning and impede our accountability, and/or assert our best effort(s) against being impacted by our biases. As a Black woman raised, educated, licensed (as a clinical mental health counselor), and employed in a predominately white society, I possess astute awareness of the ever-present impact of conscious and unconscious racial biases and critical insight to how these biases uphold and, thus, perpetuate the status quo at the detriment of racial equity.

As a person, a licensed clinical mental health counselor, and a researcher, I value integrity, authenticity, and forthrightness. Unlike other researchers who actively work to mitigate their biases, I do not. I accept that these exist and do not believe that efforts to mitigate these are effective in research because of the pervasive and insidious nature of biases. Instead, I focus on preserving the integrity of the sources of knowledge in research by maintaining my integrity in the process of sharing *their* authentic truths, synthesizing data, and reporting objective (data) and subjective (interpretive) results in a forthright manner. I do not perceive a proclamation to be actively engaging in action to mitigate biases equates to biases being mitigated and, therefore, that this traditional research strategy contributes to the problem of systemic "isms." Thus, my approach intentionally fails to try to emulate the historic "masters" of qualitative research and serves to liberate myself and my work from the systemic oppression inherent in traditions.

Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) denote confirmability, reliability, authenticity, transferability, and utilization as key components of trustworthiness in qualitative research. Confirmability was established in this research through explicitly described methods, detailed sequencing of data collection and process, conclusions linked to data, researcher transparency about values and biases, and the preservation of data. Reliability was established to ensure the integrity of the research through the implementation of questions that were clear and congruent with the study design, disclosure of researcher's status within the site, maintenance of parallelism across data sources (participants, contexts, and times), specification of construct of analytic theory,

detailing of data collection protocols, member checks, triangulation, and colleague

review. Authenticity was established by maintaining the purity of participants' narratives,

uplifting their experiences and truths, and demonstrating value for their contributions and

expertise throughout the research process by conducting critical member checks and

engaging with them as cocreators of knowledge to ensure the data presented is authentic

and real. Authenticity was reinforced through content-rich descriptions, linking of data to

existing literature and research, identification of gaps in literature, triangulation of data

sources, and colleague review and feedback to ensure forthrightness of the data.

Transferability was established to determine the generalization of data to other contexts

through the identification and discussion of study limitations, presentation of general

characteristics of participants, and the inclusion of contextualized thick descriptions of

participant experiences and behaviors. Finally, utilization was established through the

direct, accessible, and stimulating presentation of the findings for potential users to

expand meaning, contribute to the existing body of research, and, potentially, serve as a

resource for Black empowerment while resisting the status quo for the betterment of race

relations and humanity.

Limitations

Due to the small sampling size, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to

other Black graduate students. This may be especially true for international or first-

generation Black graduate students obtaining their education in America who may have

different racialized experiences than Black graduate students who were born and

socialized in the United States of America. Selection bias is also a limitation of this study

due to the fact that I interviewed fellow Black students that I had access to and perceived

to possess racial consciousness and willingness to share.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Narrative inquiry, as a qualitative research methodology, is dependent upon the generosity of participants to share their stories. As arguably the most marginalized group in higher education, I acknowledge the enormous value of the contributions made by participants in this study because as the old adage goes—to ask someone to share their story is to ask them to relive their pain. While the purpose of this research was to generate knowledge about Black resilience and empowerment through self-affirming self-care strategies at PWIHE, it was also important to explore data that exposed painful racialized experiences to reinforce the significance of this research. It is my intention as a researcher to pay homage to participants and their emotional labor by accurately representing and memorializing their stories in a thematic manner that uplifts their authentic experiences and voices.

As described in Chapter 3, participants partook in four interviews over the timespan of a year and a half (from 2019 to 2021) to produce the primary source of data for analysis in this study. Interview duration was 45-120 minutes with a mean of 73 minutes. The interviewing format was semi-structured to create a personalized atmosphere for participants, explore relevant topics and experiences that may inform the research, and ask clarifying questions.

At the beginning of the first meeting with each participant, I played "Ella's Song," a freedom song written by Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon that serves to uplift, honor, memorialize, and pass on the words of civil rights activist Ella Baker (Johnson, 1988). The song was utilized at the commencement of this study for grounding

purposes—to connect the past with the present, establish a racially informed and safe interviewing atmosphere, and to acknowledge mutuality of experience between researcher and participants.

After hearing "Ella's Song," participants were asked to reflect upon their thoughts and feelings related to the song prior to being asked to reflect upon their own experiences as Black beings at a PWIHE, as depicted in the Semi-Structured Interview Protocol located in Appendix A. The provided interviews were subsequently transcribed, checked by participants to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the transcribed data, coded, analyzed for themes, and merged with sample themes. The generated knowledge about Black graduate students' experiences navigating a PWIHE, pushing back on (resisting) oppressive forces at a PWIHE, and engaging in self-affirming self-care strategies at a PWIHE was then interpreted through critical race and emotional emancipation lenses. The final analysis is presented with supporting data using the thematic approach across participant narratives.

Ella's Song

Hearing this song evoked a variety of participant responses. Angela reflected on the song's relevance in the current day and how it provoked her to further contemplate Black women's silent suffering. She stated, "Black women are still trying to save Black men, in a way, but we are also suffering, and we don't talk about that. So, we put the needs of others before our own." She reported she had been "thinking about this a lot lately – how Black women always stand up for Black men, but Black men don't always do the same."

Ida identified that the song corroborated her own challenging experiences, stating,

"It validates how exhausted I am. Every day is a battle in one shape or form, and it is the

reinforcement of not resting when your cup is empty." She indicated that the song

highlights the continuation of the struggle, stating, "It's a reassurance that we still have

work to do, and we will continue to have work to do." Regarding her experience at MVU,

Ida reported the song illuminated the static nature of the problem of racism. She stated,

"It's the constant— just walking down the hall, to the dining hall, or walking on campus -

there is always this hyper-awareness of me and them, and it is exasperated." She

disclosed being incapable looking at another person "without placing a contrast" on their

"identities and experiences." She stated feeling like she was "surrounded by it all of the

time."

Harriet stated the chorus ("We who believe in freedom cannot rest") resonated

with her most because of the enduring nature of racial equity work. She stated, "It makes

me think of the constant achievement piece or the working harder to get to that place

where freedom is equitable and equal to all people." Harriet also reported how she thinks

"a lot about the idea of resiliency through that and how those who believe in freedom will

do everything they can, will sacrifice everything they can, to get to that place."

Mahaila's reflection resounds the sentiments of the other participants and remarks

about the exhausting path to racial justice that is endured to obtain racial equity. She said

the song makes her think about "freedom" and is "reflective of the quest for racial justice

and how it's a journey that is exhausting…is something that we maintain no matter what

and at what cost…" The impact of this cost, she said is something we, as Black people,

"are always trying to manage…, but it feels like it is something that there is no out, like it's a requirement." When reflecting on the song in relationship to her experience at MVU, Mahaila denoted the inequity of her experience as a Black student and many of the challenges she encounters. She stated:

> I would say that as a Black student in a PWIHE, at every juncture you don't just participate in class and accept it at face value because there is always harm that comes up, there is always something that doesn't reflect your experience. So, it almost feels like I spend so much time being disruptive in class because I have to spend so much time stopping the professor or one of my student colleagues to challenge a point of view. If they're saying that this is the way, it is like, well, whose way? Or, this is widely accepted – Well, who widely accepted that? And, who established it so that could be widely accepted? And, at what cost? And who wasn't included and why weren't they included? Right? All this dissecting that has to happen just to get past slide one of a professor's presentation whereas my white colleagues in class are just sitting there and accept it as if it is truth, and, you know what? It is truth to them. That is how they are conditioned. That is the systemic condition and the problem. That is white supremacy. Of course—they have been conditioned to believe that the truth that they hear in their classroom is truth and fact, and, as we have a quest for freedom, we can never just "accept" because there is always something in our experience that tells us otherwise. And if we are willing to not rest, right? We could rest if we weren't doing what the song said—If we were just sitting there going through the motions, and I can't say

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there haven't been times when I haven't done that. That is self-preservation, but so much of the time it isn't that. It's like I come to class, I'm exhausted from all of the ways I have had to show up in this way in my work environment or my personal life, and then I have to come and do that work in class too. So, it is exhausting, but it's a journey that there is no option.

Hearing Ella's song evoked varied and often overlapping thoughts for participants. Angela's reflection of the timeless, selfless, and silent suffering of Black women is echoed in Harriet's sentiments about the tremendous sacrifice experienced in racial equity work and Mahaila's sentiments about "the cost to self" of racial equity work. The aforementioned sentiments are also evidenced in Ida and Mahaila's lived experiences that denote the exhaustion experienced as the result of the constant struggle for racial equity. Ida and Mahaila's experiences highlight the constant nature of the struggle for racial equity and the visceral and visible contrast of experiences for white students and Black students at MVU. Finally, Mahaila extrapolates further to denote the contrast of experiences is ever present for her in the predominately white learning environment because there is continual conflict between the educational content (as well as the presentation and discussion of this content) and her experiential knowledge and worldview as a Black being. This sharing also highlights the emotional labor she employs and the perpetual risks she takes to challenge the knowledge constructs of white supremacy that she is inundated with and that do not serve her. The statement Mahaila makes about the environment being "their classroom" evidences the exclusion she experiences as a Black being in a predominately white space. Furthermore, as a way of

self-preservation, Mahaila discloses her intermittent and intentional disengagement from her environment and the toxicity of white supremacy culture.

Black Students' Experiences Navigating a PWIHE

Participants reported experiencing a range of interrelated racial stressors at MVU. These experiences included prevalence of racism and an inequitable educational experience due to racially uninformed professors, invisibility, unmet educational needs and extra scholastic labor, emotional labor and burden, and no compensation.

Prevalence of Racism

Consistent with the literature review (ASHE Office, 2020; Dennis, 2001; Grills et al., 2016; Gusa, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2009; Lee & Leonard; Joseph et al., 2020; Museus, 2015; Mustaffa; Ponterotto et al., 2006; Quay & Harper, 2014; Wolf & Dilworth, 2015), all four participants explicitly reported experiencing racism continuously at MVU. While discussing the topic of avoiding racist environments as a strategy of self-affirming self-care, Harriet acknowledged engaging in said behavior when she is *aware* of an environment being racist. She explained, "I think sometimes you don't know until you're there. When I was interviewing institutions, people [at MVU] said, 'Yes, it has social justice as the forefront,' and it wasn't until I entered that I knew it was a racist system." Due to Harriet's misguided perception of MVU, she identified experiencing "culture shock" and assuming the role of observer within the institution because the climate "was something [she] was very unfamiliar with." She also identified struggling with being her authentic self "in a place [she] didn't understand." Harriet said she would contemplate, "Am I being my authentic self or am I being the person people

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want me to be?" Harriet's experience of unexpected culture shock at the institution and internal conflict with how to maintain her authenticity within the white-dominant culture evidences the prevalence of racism on campus.

Like Harriet, Angela encountered a racialized culture at MVU that was different from what she expected. She said, "My experience here at MVU, has been interesting because MVU touts itself as this progressive, social justice space, and I was expecting more than what I received." Harriet and Angela's experiences uphold the findings of Wolf and Dilworth (2015) that cited intentional efforts on behalf of college and universities to mask their campus' racial climates in an effort to diversify the student body and learning environment. Angela reported she experienced racism continuously at MVU because of her mere presence at the institution as a Black being. When reflecting on her class participation, Angela said:

> I could ask a simple question like is the sky blue or what is the weather like and people are going to just receive it different because of how I look. I think it is constant. It's just levels of severity, but I think it's constant because people pause or people think of different ways to respond because I am a Black woman in how I look – I am not ambiguously Black, so people have reactions to me speaking to them a certain way or asking questions. Just the fact that I question.

Angela's experience denotes how she experienced racism interpersonally and in a way that reinforced her marginalization. Similarly, Ida expressed how the "omnipresent" culture of campus racism manifested her experience of marginalization:

There are ways of being let known that I am not part of – that I am different

whether it is in the classroom or someplace else on campus. When I am outside of

my circle, that is mostly people of color, it feels very different. It feels very

racialized. It is definitely racialized.

The constant experience of feeling othered on campus resulted in Ida being hyperaware

of her Black presence at a PWIHE. She stated:

For me, it is the constant . . . just walking down the hall, to the dining hall, or

walking on campus - there is always this hyper-awareness of me and them, and it

is exasperated. I cannot look at another person without placing a contrast, the

contrast of our identities and experiences. It is like being surrounded by it all of

the time.

The hyperawareness of her Black presence and surroundings on campus evidences a

symptom of trauma, hypervigilance, according to Bryant-Davis & Ocampo (2005), Carter

(2007), and Williams et. al, (2018). Also, the hypervigilance evidences a racially hostile

climate that is negatively impacting Ida's educational experience.

The prevalence of racism at MVU is multidimensional, meaning Black students

are consistently and, often, simultaneously impacted by many levels and forms of racism.

Mahaila's reflection and connection with Ella's Song captures this well. She stated that

"as a Black student in a PWIHE, at every juncture you don't just participate in class and

accept it at face value because there is always harm that comes up." As will be evidenced

throughout this document, the harm that comes up can result from Eurocentric course

content, interpersonal interactions with racially uninformed professors and/or peers,

racialized social dynamics, efforts to resist oppressive forces, etc. One result of this harm, as shared by participants, is exhaustion. During her first interview, Angela shared her experience of exhaustion: "I have been sitting with the point that I have contemplated transferring because it is exhausting, and it shouldn't be, and I shouldn't have to pay to be disrespected or invalidated just for someone else's learning experience." Angela's sentiments speak directly to the objectification and commodification of Black students at PWIHE to meet white needs, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Racial Stress and Inequitable Educational Experience

All participants reported they experienced racial stress and an inequitable educational experience due to racially uninformed professors, invisibility, unmet educational needs and extra scholastic labor, emotional labor and burden, and/or lack of compensation. These findings align with studies conducted by Buncombe (1974), Harper et al. (2009), Harper and Hurtado (2007), Gusa (2010), Jones and Reddick (2017), Joseph et al., 2020, Moore et al. (2019), and Museus et al. (2015) that found Black students experienced racial stress and inequitable educational experiences in higher education due to racism.

Lack of Racially Conscious and/or Culturally Competent Professors. In this research, racial consciousness is defined as the ability to acknowledge one's own race, the races of others, the racialized dynamics of privilege and power, and the importance of race in human interactions. Cultural competence is defined as the ability to understand, respect, consider and appropriately respond to and/or engage with experiences, values, attitudes, and beliefs across cultures (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2005).

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As such, all participants reported their professors' lack of racial consciousness and/or cultural competence contributed to their racial stress at MVU. While Harriet experienced the professors in her program to be racially conscious, she did not experience them to be culturally competent because of their inability to actualize their awareness in the classroom environment. She said, "I feel like my professors were racially conscious, but they did not and do not understand or know how to hold students (white students) accountable to their racist attitudes." Without the skillset to identify and process "racist attitudes," professors are incapable of demonstrating allyship to Black students and equitably facilitating cross cultural groups. Thus, the burden of the impact of their ineptitude falls on Black students.

Ida's experience with professors denotes an absolute disregard for race in curriculum development and classroom instruction. She shared an experience with a professor that resulted in her dropping a class she strongly desired to take because she was so deeply disturbed by his monolithic presentation (in educational content and attitude) of white male supremacy. Clearly affected, she stated:

> The professors do not bring the racial narrative to the classroom. It is either
> glossed over or not addressed at all, and they don't take feedback well either. This
> program is pretty old, and I expect that these issues have come up previously
> given the history and the folks that have come from this program. The fact that it
> has still not been addressed and every class is bringing it up is problematic. I find
> myself trying to navigate who am I actually going to have to meet with, what
> class am I going to take, and what class I am not going to take based upon the

professor and knowing their syllabus is focused on white men in power. So, it's

like, the class looked fricken awesome, and I would have loved to have taken

it… but it was evident that with the books and the professor there was not a

commitment to engaging people in a diverse way and having those deeper

conversations. I ended up dropping that class very quickly.

The levels of impact addressed previously are palpable in Ida's story. In alignment with

Harriet's story, Ida endured the consequences of having racially and culturally inept

professors. Her story also reveals how she, unlike her white peers, had to factor in (and

potentially investigate) the racial and cultural competence of prospective professors in the

course selection process in order to mitigate harm to herself.

Angela's story concurs with Ida's. She described her professors' cultural

competence as "nonexistent," and she found this to be frustrating and troublesome.

I felt if instructors, faculty, or professors are holding space about social justice,

diversity, or inclusion type topics, that [they] should have some experience with

holding a room and rerouting individuals or having a goal with the point you are

trying to pull out of your classroom setting. I feel the curriculum includes reading

racist things or things that center white supremacy, and, when I am in a classroom

of people with everyone thinking it is normal or having no problem with it, I'm

one a few people to say, "Hey, this was actually racist" and having to go back and

forth with classmates about why this is racist or explaining. That cognitive

dissonance that my classmates have, I don't feel like I'm the one that should be

navigating that. I think my instructors should be pushing them or, after we read it,

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say, "Hey, why did you feel comfortable reading this? The point in assigning this

was X, Y, and Z." The instructors are not tying the fact that people are being

triggered by the material... Why should I have to read this if there was no point to

it? So, that is the main thing that has been bothering me. The fact that instructors

cannot hold space or they haven't taken the training to know they can't hold

space. I think that's what has happened… They didn't have to push the

envelope because they didn't have people in the room that was going to call their

card. They didn't have people in the room that was going to hold them

accountable for promoting or perpetuating white supremacy in education.

The impact of Angela's professors' lack of cultural competence presents as being

magnified in the class she focuses because its premise is social equity. Even in this class,

she did not experience reprieve from having to read racist material (without explicit

purpose or a critical lens), confront racist ideology, engage in the emotional labor of

educating her peers, and share space with her historic oppressors without protection.

Another layer for Angela is that she is aware of her white professor's positionality in the

space and their obtainment of that positionality without adequate qualifications. On an

institutional level, this renders harm. An unqualified professor in a space designed to

center social equity demotes the importance of social equity while simultaneously

exposing the institution's performative diversity mission statement. A class that should

have been a safer place for Angela yielded more harm to her because the expectations she

had for the class were, understandably, replaced with resentments.

Mahaila's experience reverberates with other participants' experiences with one caveat– she witnessed movement. Through the constant labor of Black women in her program who challenged course content, lack of racial consciousness of professors and peers, and ways of knowing and being, she witnessed emerging racial consciousness and cultural competence in her professors who were predominately white women who centered white feminism and white patriarchy as the voices of authority. Mahaila explains the evolution of emerging change:

> Like authorities in these arenas are a bunch of white people and particularly and mostly white men? And having to push back on that. I think earlier on [in my program] that piece was really important. I mean it was important all the way through, but it kind of shifted as we engaged in the work and authentically reacted to the material that we were being presented with or the idea that we were being presented with. It became more at times that the professors were bit more careful about what they were presenting. So, they did have more diverse perspectives of our wishes in the learning environment...

While Mahaila did not classify her professors as culturally competent, she did perceive that her professors were open to guidance, learning, and change, which benefitted the slight evolutions she witnessed.

Invisibility. All four participants identified being and feeling invisible in the orchestration of white supremacy in their graduate programs. Harriet illustrated with a juxtaposition of experiences related to Kwanza:

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I think of Kwanza as something that is really important within my community and
hometown. There was a lot of religious respect in that regard and navigating the
importance of Kwanza, and at MVU it is really not discussed. It is on a flier, but
no one really sits down and has a discussion, so it is a really passive way of
acknowledging Blackness, and I think about that a lot in terms of how that is
really not supporting me. It is kind of acknowledging me but not giving me the
care.

For Harriet, having a valued tradition "mentioned on a flier" was experienced as
superficial acknowledgement of the holiday without the demonstration of value and care
for it with respect to its meaning to Black people. The experience of the flier might also
have had a more harmful impact on Harriet than a helpful one. When asked directly about
the impact of the experience, Harriet responded:

I think the impact of that is the independence piece of that, that it is on me to
create those communities and create that affinity because the institution won't do
that for me, and I think that is a double edge sword because these are my wants
and needs and how I would like to have a community; however, from an
institutional standpoint, the time isn't there, the capacity isn't warranted, it's not
their thing. I think it's difficult to say that we support all students in a way that is
just like, "Oh we see you and that's it. We don't really want to dive deeper into
what it means to be Black on campus."

The invisibility of personhood and culture is a significant component of the
marginalization Harriet experiences at the institution. This experience reinforced for her

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that she and her holistic needs as a Black being are not a priority to the institution. Reflecting on whether she feels seen at the institution, Harriet responded, "It's difficult. Seen an acknowledged? No. Seen as in a part of our Black culture? Yes— seen as part of that one percent. I think for the most part it is best to say no."

For Ida, Mahaila, and Angela, their invisibility was revealed to them through their educational experiences at MVU. Each definitively spoke about being inundated with white ideology, authoritative knowledge, curriculum, and practice and how they behaviorally countered this for their own wellness. While expressing discontent about curriculum that fails to pertain to her personhood, experience, and needs, Ida stated, "We are accounted for and graded on shit that is irrelevant at times. I've had to tune some of that stuff out and get what I need because naturally the program doesn't apply to me as a Black woman." As evidenced, Ida's invisibility within the institution resulted in a loss of valuable time, energy, and labor as she endured the implementation of the Eurocentric curriculum and, concurrently, sought external resources that better met her needs.

When delineating the boundaries she established for her wellness at MVU, Mahaila extrapolated on her experience of invisibility:

> You are inundated right, so to care about yourself means that you push back on the weight of the system. So, for me, it is telling myself that I matter and my life matters, and, because of this, that, no, I am not going to overdo this or, no, I am not going to accept this or, no, I am not going to allow that. So, you make better choices versus it being a free-for-all for you because half of the time people don't

see you cause you are a Black woman. They don't value you. They don't hear

you. You are invisible, so you have to make your presence and value known.

Mahaila's voice demonstrates value for herself in an educational system and process that

does not consider or exhibit value for her. Additionally, the educational system and

process renders her invisible and bypasses her voice until or unless she asserts the

additional labor to make "her presence and value known."

Angela reported her experience of invisibility evidences her marginalization and

inequitable educational experience at MVU. Consequently, she reported she ultimately

withdrew from the university to uphold her own value, worth, and wellness. She stated,

"…being in a space that doesn't serve me… it was like why burden or even break my

spirit for this piece of paper from somewhere that doesn't appreciate or empower me."

Angela's invisibility resulted in loss for both the institution and her. The institution lost a

valuable resource of character and knowledge and Angela lost a process started. She did

not enroll in a doctoral program at MVU to terminate the effort a year later. The culture

of white supremacy perpetuated an institutional culture that rendered her invisible, and,

ultimately, resulted in her withdrawal from the institution.

Unmet Educational Needs and Extra Scholastic Labor. All four participants

identified experiencing unmet educational needs at MVU and having to exert extra time

and labor (beyond that of their white peers) to obtain resources to better meet their needs.

The unmet educational needs resulted from the prevalence of white supremacy and lack

of cultural competence within the institution that rendered diverse people and needs

invisible. Harriet stated:

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There is a catering to white folks, to how they learn, and that puts me at a disadvantage. Because when I have to go look for the knowledge that I don't know [that fits my Blackness and my Black experience], I am basically paying for an institution to do nothing for me as I search for what I need.

Harriet's experience mirrors Ida's. As discussed previously, Ida reported about how she had to produce knowledge and be assessed on the production of said knowledge for material that didn't apply to her *while* seeking resources to "get what [she] need[s]." She also identified how the extra labor that resulted from her unmet educational needs includes the labor required to push back on the Eurocentric course content and advocate for assignment modifications so that she could obtain and apply external resources that better served her needs.

Mahaila's experience aligns with other participant accounts. She reported that in order to better meet her educational needs as a Black woman she had to employ extra labor, stating:

…because I was there I had to do work in order to get what I needed out of it academically. So, content wise, I had to get my own resources because the institution wasn't doing it for [me]. When I arrived, no one said to me that we were going to read bell hooks . . . They said here is [white male and female authors].

Like Ida, Mahaila's story also speaks to how she engaged in extra labor to challenge the perpetuation of white supremacy and Eurocentric content in her program as a means to have her educational needs better served:

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One thing we have been able to do in our [program]… is challenge the ways of

knowing in the learning environment to… find avenues for doing the coursework

and doing the readings in a more affirming way. So, in other words, not just,

"This is what my white professor provided to me … so I must follow through with

that, but to… challenge it in a way that offers opportunity to do it in a way that is

more affirming."

Mahaila reported the consistent labor she and other Black women in her program exerted

to challenge white supremacy and Eurocentric content proved beneficial because it

allowed them "to introduce new ways of knowing, new thinking, and new opportunities

for sharing the learning as opposed to the monolithic way." While beneficial, it is critical

to highlight that the change resulted from Black students' unmet educational needs and

the extra labor they employed to advocate for this change. Finally, Mahaila spoke to the

lack of Black mentors at MVU that contributes to her unmet educational needs:

I am thinking about one particular faculty member who really has to bear this

additional emotional labor of managing students of color, Black students, outside

of what they are responsible [for]. In [addition to teaching] and managing their

programs, they also have this whole other burden of trying to manage students.

So, while I may be one student that feels like I may be able to rely on that faculty,

they also have all of the students of color who are relying on them because they

are just one of a handful of available faculty of color that students can go to. Yes,

so that is tough. I really don't feel that I have a mentoring relationship with any

faculty member, no faculty member of color.

Mahaila's story reverberates the stories of other participants about the ways in which their educational needs are unmet a MVU and how they have the burden of extra labor to engage in actions to have their needs better served. She also describes how the lack of Black mentorship within the institution is yet another way in which her educational needs go unmet.

Emotional Labor and Burden. All participants identified expending emotional labor in educational settings at MVU and feeling burdened by this. Angela described how she was required to read material that didn't apply to her, seek alternative resources to better meet her educational needs, and then infuse this information in the classroom for the benefit of white people. She stated, "Okay, I'm doing all of the readings but then I have to still pull in my own skill set or knowledge set to bring it to class in a way that is carrying the class." She then reflected on an experience with a white professor of a social justice class:

Don't choose to teach a class about social change if you are not ready to talk about race cause all other oppressions are based off anti-Blackness. So, if you are not ready to talk about race, then you should double guess teaching the class. Why are you the authority on now teaching this class, and, in this process, me, as the student, I am bringing things to your attention, and I'm teaching you? That is too much. Or, you expect me to teach the class or do that labor in class… like I'm more valid because it's my lived experience, but you not understanding the emotional labor it takes on me to do that when, at the end of the day, those people are not listening to me because whatever I say is not valid until the instructor says

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it is valid. Like not understanding that power or positionality. I think that is also something that irritates me, so it gets to the point I don't feel like I should have to say anything. Like, I'll say something because I am pissed off to that point, like, "Hey it's exhausting" or "Hey, you need to be doing this on your own…".

The inequitable expectation of Angela's labor (by white professors and peers) is also reflected in Ida's story when she withdrew from a course. She said that after reading the syllabus and meeting the professor she decided not to continue because it would have taken too much emotional labor to make the class a safe and applicable experience for herself. When reflecting on and denouncing the white patriarchal supremacy evidenced in the syllabus, she posited a rhetorical question, "And I have to do all of this uplifting for everyone in the fucking class including the professor?" Angela and Ida's stories evidence the burden of emotional labor in their experiences as Black students at a PWIHE.

Mahaila reported she shows up to classes ready to dismantle white supremacy and influence more equitable ways of knowing and being in the educational environment. She stated:

> I also feel a duty to be in that space and to sustain, and it doesn't always feel like that is doable at times, especially when you are exhausted, but I also feel like I'm not the first Black being to enter that space. There were those that came before me, and they sustained so I can be here, and, while I am here, I will sustain for those Black being that come behind me will have a better chance.

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Mahaila negotiated the expectations of her to provide racial equity education in her courses by functioning from a place of duty. Mahaila's commitment to endure through times that did not always feel "doable" evidences the burden she experienced.

No Compensation. Three of four students identified the inequity inherent in the expectation of them to diversify the learning environment for the benefit of their white professors and peers without compensation. After highlighting all of the ways in which white people expected her to contribute her diverse knowledge and perspective to the learning environment, Ida shook her head, grimaced her face, and empathically said, "No thanks. Pay me for that shit. Like give me the coins for that."

Angela and Mahaila's experiences coincide with Ida's with one addition. Not only did they perceive they should be paid for their intellectual and emotional labor that served to benefit white people's education, they also did not feel that it was just for them to be paying for education (in a manner equal to white people) that failed to equitably meet their needs. Angela stated, "I don't feel I should have to do that [labor] unless I am getting academic credit or some type of compensation for it" and "I shouldn't have to pay to be disrespected or invalidated just for someone else's learning experience." In alignment with Angela's sentiments, Mahaila explained:

> At the base, me just showing up, they should pay me to be there because then they have paid for the Black person's face on their website that they use for advertising. So, that is low hanging fruit. My showing up, I should be paid for that. Not only did I show up, but I [demonstrated exceptional scholastic ability and scholarship on my own accord that is beneficial to the institution]. Also, if I

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did not "show up" to that class and only white colleagues were there, there would

probably not be a whole lot of questioning (other than maybe a person or two here

or there) about what information people were getting and where it was coming

from. That work happened because of the presence of Black women in [the

program]. That is the point that I am making. It is not equitable for me to do all of

that labor, so like showing up, pushing back, and educating without being

recognized for it or compensated for it. So, for me, knowing that I paid for my

education, it is not equitable.

Hoffman and Mitchell's (2016) study validates the findings in this study. They

conducted research on a large public university and found the institution failed to utilize

power differentials to further the diversity mission. Instead, its administration expected

"minoritized students to do the, largely uncompensated, work of advancing equity even

though administrators [were] primarily responsible for instituting institutional change

through policy implementation and resource allocation" (p. 285). This means that by not

engaging in diversity work beyond performative measures, the administration forced

"uncompensated students to advocate for their own health and wellness in a system that is

by and large stacked against them" (p. 285).

Resisting Oppressive Forces

All participants described resisting oppressive forces at MVU in their own unique

ways based upon what they needed to sustain in the environment— both short and long-

term. The findings in this study overwhelmingly support the results in Jones and

Reddick's (2017) study that found Black student activists at PWIHE "displayed strategic

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methods of working within the system" (p. 215). While participants in this study were not leading racial justice movements on campus, they were leaders in their own right who developed strategic methods of resisting oppressive forces throughout their educational experiences, which contributes to credible racial justice efforts and movements on campus.

Existence as Resistance

Two participants (Angela and Mahaila) specifically identified their existence (or presence) at MVU to be an act of resistance to white supremacy. Angela stated, "I feel like my existence is just like pushing back, honestly. I feel that resistance when I go into class. I just carry that with me when I go into spaces." Angela could feel the tension white people projected that resulted from her presence in spaces. She also reported about how white professors and peers in her courses responded to her differently than they did to each other or presented as though they didn't know how to respond to her. Finally, she talked about how she used her voice to affirm and uphold her identity as a Black woman in those spaces:

> I know here people like to say "people of color" instead of just saying I am a
> Black person because people don't want to admit that saying Black or Blackness
> is not palatable to them. So, I try to make it an effort to tell people to refer to me
> as a Black woman because it makes people more comfortable to like wash away
> Blackness when they say "person or people of color." I'm a Black person, so that
> makes people uncomfortable here because I think they are worrying about the
> idea [of Blackness], but I'm like—people of color is used when you are referring

to a group of people of multiple racial identities, so Black and people of color is

not interchangeable. So, I try to get adamant about this because Black people

experience the world a specific way, which is different from other communities,

but people don't acknowledge that.

Angela's sentiments explain how her Black existence serves as resistance at MVU and

how claiming and asserting her identity serves to impact whiteness in a way that holds it

accountable with regard to her presence

Mahaila stated, "I feel like being a Black woman pursuing a terminal degree is

that – pushing back, an act of resistance, and so showing up is an act of resistance." With

showing up, she talked about holding "the burden of representing blackness in the

environment." The burden of representation results from her commitment to racial equity

and the responsibility she feels as a person to ensure Black people are acknowledged,

considered, and treated with care in the learning environment. To do so, she always has to

be on, aware of racialized content and dynamics, and willing to engage in the risk of

conflict that results from the expression of her knowledge and truth. Mahaila explained

that the way she shows up provokes people "to reconcile" that she is in the space and to

have some accountability as the result of this. She said, "I am in the room, and they're not

just going to talk about gender issues. They are going to talk about race too because I am

there. Whether they bring it up or I do, it's gonna come up." Angela and Mahalia's

persistence to be present, share space, and/or take up space by asserting their authentic

selves in the racially exclusive and toxic environment at MVU exemplifies their existence

as resistance.

Confronting Racist Ideology and Practice

Three of four participants identified active engagement in confronting racist ideology and practice in courses at MVU. The fourth participant (Ida) explained that she intentionally did *not* do this for her own health and well-being, which will be evidenced in the section *Or Not* that follows.

Mahaila reported about an experience where she was confronted with being required to read and reflect on white male voices as the "authorities of knowledge" even prior to attending the first class or meeting her professor or classmates. The material failed to be applicable to her as a Black woman and she exposed the inequity of this experience in the required written reflection and publicly in class. Mahaila stated she said something to the effect of:

> Hey, this book that you are asking me to read about these two very privileged
>
> white men who are demonstrating leadership, what leadership means, and how I
>
> should behave as a leader [in this area] doesn't resonate with me as a Black
>
> woman because if I behave in those ways I am going to be seen (because Black
>
> women experience harsher criticism) as too aggressive or this or that in social
>
> constructs.

Mahaila's conflicting reality with that of the predominately white environment alerts and informs about the exclusion and inequity of her experience in that space which provides an opportunity for change.

Angela expressed that if she is emotionally or psychologically triggered by what is occurring in her environment, she addresses it directly. Another way she talks about

confronting racist ideology within the learning environment is to intentionally invoke the labor that necessitates her being unreactive to the intentional ignorance of her white peers. She said:

> I already know who I am, so whatever [white people] do to me is not going to break me or crumble me. So, the fact that I am in that mindset here, like you are not going to do this to me, that upsets [them] even more because their intention was to shake me or to break me in some way, and I don't shake. They're like, "Oh how the audacity." It's just a lot. When that power differential or that friction happens, I am just there.

Angela denotes how her strong sense of self and diverse strategies of engagement in response to white people's ignorance permits her to maintain her personal power and use this in a manner that affirms her dignity, equality, and best interest as a person.

Harriet reported she is contemplative with respect to how she engages with resisting oppressive forces because of the stereotypes of Black women. She expressed that she takes time to reflect upon the purpose of her words and the potential impact of these to determine her strategy of engagement. She said if she is sharing her narrative, she asks herself, "What do I want my words to do and what do I want my narrative to say?" While thoughtful and intentional about her manner of engagement, Harriet also reported that she primarily speaks her truth in white spaces, stating:

> For the most part, when I show up in white spaces, I do speak my truth, and I do speak what I see, and if that rubs you the wrong way, we can engage in that dialogue, but I am going to tell you what I see. I create a boundary with how that

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comes out. I hate the stigma of the loud Black woman or the angry Black woman.

That is *not* who I am. If it just so happens that I have a little more fire in my

voice, it is because I care, it is my passion, it is my power.

Harriet identified speaking her truth and speaking with her fire as liberating experiences

for her. She also made it abundantly clear that she would not be willing "to forget [her]

authentic self to make [white people] comfortable."

Mahaila's engagement in actions that confront racist ideology and practice at

MVU extends from her values and sense of responsibility, or duty, to humanity. Having

been raised in a predominately white community, she identified being conditioned to

contend with the racialized environment of MVU. She said, "I come to the space with an

experience that has conditioned me, so I'm like more prepared to be in the space." She

stated that she relied on past experiences to inform her present actions against racial

inequity and injustice. Mahaila explained that when systemic issues arise, she tries to

make change on that level, and when behavioral issues arise, she calls out the behavior

and moves on. When addressing issues, Mahaila identified erecting boundaries to impede

internalization of these and enhance her ability to move on. She also identified moving on

as an important component of her personal power and self-care. Finally, Mahaila denoted

ways in which she pushed back regarding her own needs that the environment failed to

consider or meet. She said she has parameters and expectations of engagement with white

people, decides how she will engage with assignments, how long she will take breaks

dependent upon her needs in relationship to the environment, and, at times, if she will

engage at all with what is being asked and/or required of her. She said:

I felt like the stakes in terms of the punishment that could come from me making

these bold moves… could happen… It is higher stakes for me personally and my

well-being if I don't do that. So, when you balance those two things there is

nothing you can do to me that would be worse than if I went forth and did what

the system is trying to get me to do.

Mahaila's engagement with white supremacy culture was a normalized experience in the

context of her life experience. This enabled her to be present with it in a way that was

uninhibited, informed, and empowered.

Or Not

All participants reported intentionally choosing *not* to confront racist ideology and

practice as a means of resistance. For three participants, this was an intermittent, strategic

choice that prioritized their self-care. For one participant (Ida), this was a primary manner

of resistance that permitted her to maintain boundaries and personal power while

inhibiting exploitation of her energy, knowledge, and skills to meet white needs. In light

of the aforementioned, all participants acknowledged considering their own wellness and

capacity in any given moment or on any given day to direct their choices. At moments

when she was low on energy, Angela said she dodged until she "[could] retreat and

reenergize to come back." Similarly, Mahaila identified her intentional disengagement

from resistance as "self-preservation." When in a space that was racially violent with

white people "filling" the space, Harriet stated, "I don't need to be a part of that space

and take that in and internalize it. So, for me, disengagement is also an act of resistance."

Though Ida's primary goal was to maintain mental and emotional distance from "their

show" because "[she didn't] have time for it," she also acknowledged that any involvement in her educational environment was dependent "upon where [her] energy was on any particular day."

Strategies of Black Self-Care

Strategies of Black self-care are the self-affirming actions developed and proactively implemented by participants to assist their ability to navigate the racially toxic environment of a PWIHE in a more empowered, healthy, and successful manner. These actions are implemented from a place of self-love using personal agency to uphold self-worth and wellness. In this study, self-care is perceived to be distinctly different from coping in that it is implemented proactively and intentionally and "influenced by a variety of individual characteristics, including self-efficacy, locus of control, knowledge, skills, and values" (Richard & Shea, 2011, p. 256). This distinction is reinforced by Brucato and Neimeyer (2009) who wrote, "Self-care is seen as a preventative measure against stress, whereas coping is viewed as an individual's adaptive response to stress or difficulties" (p. 269). For self-care to be sustainable for Black people, I assert that the *actions* have to be implemented in a manner that is proactive, preventative, self-affirming, and empowering. If coping is implemented as an adaptive response to race related stress, it merely contends with the immediate and is a short-term approach to self-regulation. Exposure to race-related stressors is lifelong and cumulative in nature (Grills et al., 2016). If Black people exclusively "cope" with race related stressors, they are functioning from the static reactionary position of the oppressed, which is disempowering and harmful.

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Black people are worthy of more than "coping" with racism, we are worthy of our inherent liberation. To actualize this truth, we must realize that the greatest affirmation we can get is from ourselves and then continuously mobilize and transform self-love into self-affirming and empowering self-care to mentally emancipate ourselves from the lies of white supremacy and Black inferiority. We must own our liberation and right to exist in environments that are free of racism, and when environments fail to uphold this right, we hold the right to take up space and assert our truths proudly, confidently, and unapologetically as a means to get our environmental rights and needs met.

The aforementioned is discussed to underscore the purpose of this study and the groundbreaking results that follow. Though ambiguity exists with the implementation methods of prior research that denote "coping" skills for Black students' navigating predominately white institutions of higher education, this research remains relevant to this study and is utilized for comparative analysis.

With consideration given to the discrepancies in implementation methods (proactive versus reactive engagement in action), 62% of the data revealed participants utilized self-care strategies that coincided with previous research. These included: affinity spaces (family, Black, and BIPOC), purpose and persistence, speaking up, personal reflection time, hobbies, and religion and spirituality. The remaining 38% of the data revealed new knowledge about self-care strategies and included: self-love, self-affirmations, boundaries, disengagement, and intentional navigation of whiteness. A subheading followed by an asterisk (*) indicates an area of new knowledge.

Affinity Spaces

In this research, affinity spaces (a.k.a. counter spaces) are defined as safe spaces and places where people feel safe and connected though shared experiences, qualities, interests, or goals. The types of affinity spaces participants identified engaging with as a means of self-affirming self-care were family affinity space, Black affinity space, and BIPOC affinity space. At times there is overlap based upon the racial composition of one's family and close friends.

Family Affinity. Three out of four participants discussed how they maintained strong connections with their biologic families and relied on their families for critical support throughout their educational experience. Family contact provided participants with intimate connection, a sense of belonging, shared experience, racial affirmation, and safety – supports generally denied to them at a PWIHE. These results correlate with Cooper et al.'s (1994) findings that indicate "continued extensive contact with a parent (usually a mother)" (p. 20) to be a helpful coping mechanism for Black students.

Mahaila identified feeling empowered and sustained by her family throughout her doctoral experience. She stated, "I rely on the strengths that I gain from my family and intimate community of people who are like me, look like me, and are me in order to be able to enter a PWI and be okay." Mahaila also provided intimate insight into her experience of family as a proactive, self-affirming, self-care strategy:

> They have their own experiences when they are out in the world too, so they also
> can relate to what I am saying and also, you know, have a love for me that really
> fills me up. So, part of it is someone who knows what I am saying when I am

explaining what my experience is because they have their own and they get it and can dissect and dialogue about that. The other part of it is to not have to do that with these folks. This is a space, kind of an affinity space, where I can be and just be myself. I don't have to consider myself as a Black being in a space and just a being and that is it. There is no consideration about that. It is just who I am. So, everything we are doing in that space is replenishing because it is the opposite of what it is like at school where you have to be in that space and also have to contribute because of the fact that you are Black and having an experience that is not reflected in your learning environment or a learning environment that renders you or your experiences invisible, whereas in your home environment, you are visible, everyone's visible. It's not because I stand out. It just is that there is a safety and you can just be.

Mahaila identifies how her family affinity space provided her with the opportunity to simply *be*, a place where she was safe, visible, valued, accepted, and understood as a whole being without having to engage in extra emotional labor to explain herself or justify her ways of knowing. As the result, Mahaila experienced her family affinity space as "replenishing."

Similar to Mahaila, Angela identified her "go tos" as "[her] mother and then [her] sister" and the time shared with them as an "escape" from her experience at a PWIHE. Reflecting on her engagement with her mother, Angela released a big smile followed by a short, assured, and playful laugh before stating:

I do talk to her more as a mother. She has been around a long time, so, as she say,

she knows how to deal with white folk. So, she like, "They don't change. They

stay the same wherever you go." My mother gives me those type of strategies.

Angela identified how family support via communicating with her mother provides her

with the comfort of experience and strategies of support to "deal" with navigating the

racialized interactions and dynamics with white people. Her mother's sentiments, from

her own lived experience, may also be providing Angela with encouragement to focus on

herself and guidance to maintain low expectations of white people as a form of

protection.

Black Affinity. All participants identified the value, need, and benefits of

participating in Black affinity spaces. They identified their participation in Black affinity

spaces as being vital to their well-being, corroborating previous research conducted by

Bentley-Edwards et al. (2016), Cooper et al. (1994), Griffith et al. (2019), and Truong

and Museus (2012). Participants described experiencing visibility, acceptance, belonging,

meaningful connection, support, access to helpful resources, and empowerment through

their affinity experiences, resulting in rejuvenating feelings of fulfillment and liberation.

All of the Black affinity spaces participants engaged with were created by them or within

the Black community both on and off campus. None of the participants engaged with

institutionally sanctioned spaces for Black or BIPIC students because they perceived

these spaces to be geared towards meeting the needs of undergraduates, the Latinx

community, and/or white supremacy.

Harriet discussed how her affinity group experiences were "stellar" and

explained: "Having a voice and also sharing our voices in that way is just fulfilling and

liberating for me. To know that I am not alone in this, but then to see what other people

are doing for their self-care." Harriet's words illustrated the sense of meaningful

connection and belonging she experienced in affinity spaces and the benefits of these

(being heard, validated, and having access to helpful resources through shared

experience, fulfillment, liberation, and empowerment).

Angela identified Black affinity spaces to be a critical component of her proactive

self-care regimen. She said these spaces provided her life with reprieve from white

people (and whiteness) and fulfillment through meaningful, rejuvenating connection.

For me, I always have to retreat to Black spaces to offset the energy, whatever

that energy may be when I am in a white space -- constantly being hyper seen yet

unseen at the same time is exhausting… So, when I need to recharge, I try to go to

Black spaces, whether that be my friend groups, when I travel, or when I do

things with my historically Black sorority. I have to recharge.

Angela's sentiments provide information about the racial climate at MVU and the

resulting "energy" she felt as the result of the negative social interactions and dynamics

she experienced with white people. These sentiments also provide greater awareness of

the underlying cause for Angela's need to retreat to Black affinity spaces and the value of

these spaces in her life.

Black affinity spaces were essential for Ida because these offered her shared

experience, understanding, and informed guidance. When reflecting on people in her

Black affinity spaces, Ida stated, "Some of them have gone through the process… so they have the experience of having to see through the bullshit or the noise that encompasses going through the program… and they have been able to guide me in that process." In addition to being provided with "in community" connection, understanding, and guidance, Ida identified she experienced happiness and improved mood as the result of her engagement in Black affinity spaces, stating, "I feel joy and a lot of laughter when I am with Black people."

BIPOC Affinity. Three participants identified establishing strong interpersonal connections with BIPOC peers as a means of self-affirming self-care. Participants explained that socializing with peers of color both in and outside of the African diaspora increased opportunities for connection, understanding, support, and a sense of community. These findings uphold the results of studies conducted by Griffith et al. (2019) and Truong and Museus (2012) that found establishing relationships with peers of color to be a coping strategy used by Black students at PWIHE. According to Griffith et al. (2019), Black students selectively chose "to confide in those who they thought could understand their experiences. This was based on the person sharing a marginalized racial/ethnic identity, their outlook and values, or knowledge of the types of experiences the person went through" (p. 128).

In this study, Harriet identified how the low enrollment rate of BIPOC students at MVU can make it difficult for BIPOC students to establish a sense of community. Therefore, she explained, it became an important self-care strategy for her to establish

strong interpersonal relationships with other people of color as means to cultivate the

intimacy of connection, community, and belonging that she needed.

Mahaila's experience reinforces Harriet's and identifies how establishing strong

interpersonal relationships with other students of color within the classroom environment

served as a source of comfort, validation, and empowerment for her. She explained:

I have relied on other people of color, not just Black people, within the learning

environment for support. . . . What I was able to do was build a small kind of

cohort within my [class] where we would connect outside of the classroom, where

we would dissect the materials and work on projects collectively. That helped me

not only to feel safer within my learning environment, but to feel validated for

what was coming up for me within the learning environment and also to be a

better student. Because, in those spaces, it was less like the classroom

environment where we are able to work on work the way I would love for our

classroom environment to be, but our classroom environment cannot be because

there are a lot of contradiction to what our existence is as a group. In the

classroom environment you are constantly coming up against information that

doesn't reflect you or what you believe and experience as a Black person. So, it is

important to be outside of the class with other Black people or people of color

who can help you to talk through the experience, and it feels more relatable.

Mahaila highlights how establishing connection and ongoing collaboration with other

people of color in her classroom environment permitted tailored focus of course content

in a way that best met their diverse needs. She also explained how this collaboration of

people of color served as sources of support and affirmation in a way that was validating and meaningful.

Participation in affinity spaces was an important mechanism of self-care for participants, as these spaces afforded them with a sense of psychological, emotional, and interpersonal connection, belonging, and safety not generally afforded to them in the mainstream environment of PWIHE. Affinity spaces also provided opportunities for participants to feel fulfilled, replenished, and recharged as they persisted towards their educational goals at a PWIHE.

Purpose and Persistence

All participants identified focusing on their purpose and engaging in persistence as means of self-affirming self-care and personal empowerment. Griffith et al. (2019) found their study participants worked harder and persisted as a self-care strategy to "disprove negative stereotypes" (p. 129). The data in this study supports the theme of persistence as a self-care strategy for Black students at PWIHE and contributes to the field of knowledge related to the purpose of implementing this strategy. The purpose and method of implementation shifts from an outward focus (to prove other people wrong), as evidenced in the Griffith study, to an inward focus (to affirm and empower self), as evidenced by the data in this study. Moore et al.'s (2003) study found the engagement in persistence "manifested into positive vigor in spite of adversity" (p. 67).

In this study, Mahaila explained that her persistence was reinforced through maintenance and activation of her personal power and boundaries. She said,

I have a historical experience that allows me to not be shocked and taken kind of

aback, like taken down if you will, forced out of school. So, I maintain my power

because I don't internalize behaviors of white people in that space.

Mahaila denotes how life experience had prepared her to maintain healthy distance from

white people's racial ignorance (that which she cannot control) by maintaining focus on

herself *and* her personal power to persist (that which she can control) while not

internalizing the behaviors of white people but instead, intentionally ignoring,

discounting, or rejecting these as a means of self-preservation and self-care.

Angela's method of persistence is to utilize her personal power that is grounded in

liking herself (self-love) as a shield of protection to withstand "hyper-white or oppressive

spaces" as a means of self-affirming self-care. Angela shared:

[Liking myself] gives me a strong foundation because I know how I am going to

react or what I am going to do prior to engaging in these hyper-white or

oppressive spaces. I already know who I am, so whatever you do to me is not

going to break me or crumble me. So, the fact that I am in that mindset here, like

you are not going to do this to me, that upsets a person even more because their

intention was to shake me or to break me in some way, and I don't shake.

Harriet's experience reinforces the previously shared experiences and summarizes

this section well. She stated she persisted by maintaining focus on her purpose: "I came

for this one thing, and I want to be greater than what I came for. This is about me. This

institution fails me at times, but I am not going to fail me." Here, Harriet explicitly

expresses how her institutional presence was about her achieving her educational goals

and although the PWIHE failed to meet her needs, she engaged her personal power to persist to bring her goals to fruition.

Speaking Up

In alignment with the findings of Truong and Museus (2012) who studied "doctoral students of color who have experienced racism and racial trauma in the context of their doctoral programs" (p. 233), all participants expressed how speaking up permitted them to express their thoughts and feelings while challenging the ways of knowing and making their invisible truths visible. For example, when responding to racialized triggers, Angela stated, "I verbalize cause I felt something so, therefore, I am going to say something." In this quote, Angela denoted her refusal to be complicit with racism occurring in her environment, and, thus, if something was said or done that made her feel uncomfortable, she spoke up to confront the racism as a means of self-care. Angela's speaking up also presented as a self-affirming action that upheld her Black truth and dignity as a human being. Mahaila explained that speaking up for her was an effort to mitigate the harm rendered in predominately white learning environments in that she spoke up to resist oppressive forces by challenging the ways of knowing. Harriet's experience of speaking up denoted her voice as an instrument of her liberation:

> Growing up, I wasn't able to have a voice for myself. I felt like there were a lot of times where, in my educational experience, I said this is what I want to say and the teacher says oh you are saying this, and I'm like well no, and they're like well I'm older than you and I'm a white being, so what I'm saying goes. So, I'm so tired of that. Seeing that growing up, I was like well if that is what your

interpretation is then I guess that is right, and it is not. So, being able to speak my

truth and speak with my fire is liberating for me.

After having experienced a lifetime of her Black truths being erased and contorted by

white teachers to meet white needs, Harriet explained how speaking *her* truth in *her* way

was a liberating act of self-affirming resistance.

Speaking up presented as self-care in the process of resisting oppressive forces.

Participants reported about the constant lack of racial awareness of their professors,

peers, and in their educational content. Participants described how they often felt

motivated by ethical responsibility to speak up to resist the perpetuation of racist

ideology for themselves, the greater good of the classroom learning, and the betterment

of humanity. Mahaila reflected on her educational experience:

I would say that as a Black student in a PWIHE, at every juncture you don't just

participate in class and accept it at face value because there is always harm that

comes up, there is always something that doesn't reflect your experience. So, it

almost feels like I spend so much time being disruptive in class because I have to

spend so much time stopping the professor or one of my student colleagues to

challenge a point of view. If they're saying that this is the way, it is like, well,

whose way? Or, this is widely accepted – Well, who widely accepted that? And,

who established it so that could be widely accepted? And, at what cost? And who

wasn't included and why weren't they included? Right? All this dissecting that

has to happen just to get past slide one of a professor's presentation whereas my

white colleagues in class are just sitting there and accept it as if it is truth, and,

you know what? It is truth to them. That is how they are conditioned. That is the

systemic condition and the problem. That is white supremacy . . . It's like I come

to class, I'm exhausted from all of the ways I have had to show up in this way in

my work environment or my personal life, and then I have to come and do that

work in class too. So, it is exhausting, but it's a journey that there is no option.

Mahaila's reflection evidences her constant exposure to and navigation of racial harm in

the educational environment. Her speaking up liberates the discontent she feels with the

racial harm and challenges the ideology of the status quo. After expressing her truth, I

inquired if Mahaila could clarify what she meant when she said "show up in this way,"

and she responded, "Show up meaning ready to fight against the injustices, to fight to

dismantle the systems, ready to fight to dismantle the ways of knowing of what is

presented to us, ready to challenge that – to deconstruct these frameworks." Mahaila's

response captures the burden she feels as being a Black face in a white space and the

emotional labor and risk involved with speaking up. It also captures her need to express

herself a means of self-care in that her speaking up infuses white spaces with her Black

reality, making these feel slightly more equitable and the educational experience slightly

more sustainable. Lastly, participants expressed feeling frustrated with and burdened by

being *the*, or one of the, only student(s) to continually challenge the status quo because of

the inherent risk in doing so. Mahaila explained that educating

is part of the burden of being a Black person in a predominately white learning

environment. It is an additional burden that becomes a responsibility that you

don't have say in. You have say in if you respond or not, but for someone who is

"woke" and trying to not be harmed in the learning environment it becomes

important to speak and, you know, that can be tricky because you are quite often

challenging faculty who have taught that same lesson multiple times before you

got there. You know, well recognized, supported, and loved, and uplifted faculty,

so that can be hard, but it does become a responsibility. It does become a part of

your learning environment. There is no – I am going to enter this white learning

environment and sit back and not have the burden of having to teach in that class.

It becomes part of the territory.

Again, in the previous quote, Mahaila illuminates the burden, responsibility, importance,

challenge, and risks of speaking up as a Black being at a PWIHE, how this becomes "part

of the territory" of the educational experience, and how inequity is inherent in this reality.

It also illuminates the power of speaking up as a force of protection (self-care) in a

racially hostile environment.

Personal Reflection Time

Since the experience of racism is ever-present for Black students at PWIHE, three

of four participants identified taking alone time to reflect on race-related stressors to be a

beneficial form of self-care. These findings align with previous research conducted by

Griffith et al. (2019) and Truong and Museus (2012). In their study, Griffith et al. (2019)

found "many students reported that the first thing they did after experiencing a race-

related stressor was to process the event on their own. Processing involved 'replaying a

situation that might have occurred,' 'working through it,' or 'writing about it'" (p. 127).

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The three participants who reported engaging in personal reflection time also identified journaling to sometimes be a part of the reflection process for them.

Mahaila remarked about the value of personal reflection as a self-care strategy: "I have relied really *heavily* on my down time, my personal time, to just think in my safe, quiet space." While engaging in personal reflection time, Harriet shared how she incorporates self-affirmations:

I take a timeout and talk about the greatness that I want for myself. I also look in terms of racial identity and say you are going to be that Black woman in that space and that is okay – You are going to claim your time. You are going to speak your truth and purpose, and I talk through that, especially going into predominately white spaces. . . . In terms of the anxiety piece as a Black being within a PWIHE, it's also about navigating that I cannot change the perspective of others, but it is how I react to those, and having this conversation with myself is really important.

From retreating to the safety of isolation (Mahaila) to utilizing alone time to intentionally engage in self-affirmations (Harriet), personal time was reported as being an essential component of self-care for participants, a time where they regained a sense of calm, balance, and rejuvenation.

What is equally important for understanding the role of reflection as a self-affirming self-care strategy is Ida's contrasting approach. She stated she intentionally asserted her personal power to *not* reflect on racialized experiences in isolation. She said,

I tend to just block it away. I don't give it too much energy because I am so

depleted—Like, I'll see it, and I may think about it for two seconds, but I don't

intentionally sit with it. I'm like I just got to get through. This is not going to get

any better. So, part of that is the noise that comes up that I just need to quiet down

because if I read too much into it it'll just make things harder.

This is significant because there is not one way of being or doing that is in the best

interest of *every* Black person. Black people are not a monolith and what may be in the

best interest of one may not be in the best interest of another. What is of critical

importance is the power and self-affirmation that comes from the self-identification of

needs and use of personal agency to uphold these needs. Though different, Ida's approach

to self-affirming self-care is perceived to be just as powerful and useful as the other

participants' approaches because she is intentionally functioning in a self-determined

manner and not permitting white supremacy culture to consume her.

Hobbies

All participants identified their engagement in hobbies to be a beneficial self-care

strategy that assisted with alleviating race-related stress. Harriet shared:

For me, meditation is really important. Taking time out to just forget all of the

things that may occur-- forget the anxiety and fears, that one thing that one person

did that I can't get over. Cooking is a really important thing for me in wellness. I

feel like as soon as I make something healthy with my hands that I am literally

putting goodness within my body. I'm a writer, and I love writing and being able

to brain dump to navigate all of those feelings and emotions is really great for me

to do. I go for walks. I am a fan of the sun, and I love being able to feel my

feelings in the sun and with nature. There will be moments when I am walking

outside, and I feel the need to cry, so I cry and feel that sun and feel nature be

with me, and I cycle back to myself. Cleaning is something - Decluttering my life

is like reworking that and my mindset.

Like Harriet, Mahalia finds refuge in cooking and being with nature. She also enjoys

gardening, working out, playing basketball, taking care of her houseplants, and interior

decorating. Ida and Angela also identified taking care of their houseplants and gardening

as hobbies that are important components of their self-care. These findings coincide with

studies that found Black students experienced relief from race-based stress through their

engagement in hobbies (Bentley-Edwards et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 2004; Truong &

Museus, 2012).

Religion and Spirituality

All four participants identified engaging in religious and/or spiritual practices as

effective means of proactive self-care. Mahaila identified her engagement in religious and

spiritual practices to be "really important" to her:

I think my religion and spirituality go hand in hand, but I think I've been leaning

more into my spirituality and really connecting more with my ancestral roots and

thinking more about where I come from and my people. Really good focusing on

my chakra energies. I think for me grounding myself to the earth—camping,

gardening, and stuff like that has been a part of my spiritual journey. So, for me, it

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has sustained me through all of the things that are happening around me in the

world inside and outside of like a PWI.

Mahaila's voice evidences how spirituality served grounding and connective purposes in

her life that assisted with fusing her past (ancestors) with her present (the world around

her and herself). Similarly, Ida reported engaging with Afrocentric spiritual practices

through meditation, yoga, and connection with other Black women:

> I link up with 12 women virtually. We have a women's circle, and we've been
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> following Queen Afua's book, *Sacred Woman: A Guide to Healing the Feminine*
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> *Body, Mind, and Spirit*, that is about afro-centric spirituality… We do a women's
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> circle, and it is just being in the space, being together, being able to talk about
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> what's going on and navigating that, which has been very helpful.

Mahaila and Ida's engagement in religious and spiritual practices served grounding,

connective, and healing purposes in their self-care. These findings coincide with Truong

and Museus' (2012) study that determined engagement in religion and spirituality

assisted students of color to "cope with their racialized experiences" in their doctoral

programs.

Self-Love*

All participants identified self-love as a proactive, self-affirming self-care strategy

that assisted their ability to more healthily navigate a PWIHI. Self-love presented as a

mindset, value, action, and motivational force for participants. Ida stated self-love

motivated her to be more intentional. She said, "It makes me pause and think about

myself." Angela reported that self-love for her meant unconditional acceptance of herself and trusting herself with the decisions she made. She stated:

> I feel like self-love or how I manifested that for self-care was like loving me in all respects in who I am in that moment versus the what ifs and the potentials. . . . Being affirmed that I made the best decisions that I could've made for myself in those moments for my best interest.

In addition to loving and trusting herself, Angela explained that self-love resulted in her focusing on herself, taking time for herself, and setting boundaries "with who and what [she] chose to engage with [at a PWIHE]. She said, "I would think about how I fit—What I could do for myself in those moments and that might equate to I am not going to debate that person who is always trying to debate me."

Harriet's experience coincides with Ida and Angela's experiences. She said that her self-love is centered in her self-worth and affected her engagement in self-care. She explained:

> There may be times when your self-love is low and you don't feel like you deserve care because you just let the oppression and hate sit on you, so it is really important to recognize what your worth is… and that you are worthy of care and preserving yourself.

Harriet also informed that self-love motivated her to use her personal agency and power to set necessary boundaries as a means of self-care, stating, "Love is something I thought a lot about, especially at a PWI. Of like, I'm saying no because I love me, and I need to take care of me and that is it."

Like other participants, Mahaila's self-love reminded her to focus on herself while she was being "inundated" with racism at a PWIHE. She identified that self-love served as a motivator for self-affirmations and as a resource of power "to push back on the weight of the system." She explained:

> So, for me, it is telling myself that I matter and my life matters, and, because of this, that, no, I am not going to overdo this or, no, I am not going to accept this or, no, I am not going to allow that. So, you make better choices versus it being a free-for-all for you.

Self-love impelled participants to look inward, assess and identify their needs, and to engage in self-defined action to meet these needs. In alignment with Nicol and Yee's (2017) study, self-care presented as emanating "from a place of self-love [for participants and to comprise] emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions" (p. 134). These dimensions appear to be further illuminated in this study, where I find self-love to be a mindset, value, action, and motivational force for participants. Participants embraced the mental attitude of their inherent worth (mindset), demonstrated value for themselves and for racial equity (values), engaged in self-affirming actions to uphold their mindset and values (action), and were impelled by self-love to possess and engage in the aforementioned (motivational force). To this end, when participants metamorphosized self-love into actions of self-affirming self-care (without regard for the lie of white supremacy), they maintained their power and intentionally used their personal agency to prioritize and uphold their dignity, self-worth, and well-being despite the racially toxic environment pressuring them to do otherwise. Consequently, self-love presents as the

most potent form of self-care because it comprises psychological and emotional

components that manifest action (self-care) and motivation for engagement in other

forms of self-care.

Self-Affirmations*

All participants identified intentionally engaging in self-affirmations as a means

of proactive and empowering self-care to assist themselves with more healthily

navigating a PWIHE. Mahaila disclosed how engaging in self-affirmations can be

challenging at times because of the constant counter messages emanating from white

supremacy culture, but she persisted because these are a self-empowering way to "build

[herself] up." She also reported having an "Affirmations Always" wall where she posts

empowering affirmations for herself and family. Harriet reported she engaged in self-

affirmations through self-talk. Each morning and prior to engaging in tasks throughout

the day, she reported taking time out "to talk about the greatness [she] wants for [herself]

and to affirm her racial identity, worth, skills, abilities, and purpose. She said, "It has

been really important to take care of myself to create affirmations that are for me by me.

So, like really homing in on my Blackness. . . . and how I want to affirm that every day."

As with Mahaila, Angela and Ida reported posting affirmations in their living spaces.

Angela stated, "I like to write [affirmative statements] on mirrors. . . . for when I am

looking in the mirror." Ida said she not only had "a ton of affirmations on [her] wall," she

also had positive sentiments others had written about her on her wall. She said, "I stare at

and read these every day." All participants identified intentional engagement in self-

affirmations to uphold their self-worth, Blackness, abilities, and truths to be an empowering self-care strategy.

*Boundaries**

All participants identified boundaries (a self-identified set of rules that denote parameters of how one will or will not interact with their environment and/or permit one's environment to interact with them) as an essential mechanism of self-care. Harriet shared she used boundaries to maintain connection with her authentic self, remind herself of the greatness of her Blackness, and to navigate white spaces. Mahaila extrapolated further, identifying the need to maintain healthy boundaries in relationships, with the learning environment, oppressive forces, emotional exertion, expectations, and protocol:

> There is only room for relationships that are uplifting and affirming. Also, it's important to have boundaries with how much you invest in the learning environment as well. I could have extra energy and be able to push and pull on a system one day, and, if I can't the next day, that is a boundary. You know? That is a boundary and being able to say I am not engaging because I cannot take on that emotional labor or that pain today. That is boundary setting, and that is something that is critical. Also, when people say things, being able to not internalize that is a feat. It's hard to do and also so much of the time it is just necessary for survival because if we internalize what people are saying that is coming from a place of ignorance you would be exhausted of any energy you could possibly have, so have that boundary as well. I have set the boundary that I may have to walk out of my class and be gone for a minute or I may not adhere to . . . a 15-minute break, I

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might need 30, and that is a boundary because that is how we have to do to

maintain and sustain given what [the existing climate is] in the course or our

classroom at the time.

Mahaila's quote epitomizes strategies Black women take to set boundaries to protect

themselves. When Mahaila describes parameters of social, educational, emotional, and

behavioral engagement, she is identifying where and how she asserts boundaries as a

means of self-affirming self-care.

For Ida, her engagement with racist professors resulted in her proactively setting

boundaries with how she perceived and engaged with their feedback. When asked about

what advice she would give current or prospective Black students of a PWIHE, she said:

Don't let your work define you. Looking at the system in which your classes are

built and the way you are evaluated, don't let your white professor's words define

you. This is an experience where you are going to engage in adversity, so just be

prepared by having your circle and not let the words of your white professors

define who you are. Often times they will say very harsh things, and it is almost

like they wage psychological warfare on you because they don't care or they are

harder on you because you are Black.

In response to said experience and awareness, Ida developed a boundary with how she

viewed, approached, and interacted with professor feedback. For her, despite their

positionality, she prioritized what she knew to be true about them and herself, that they

and their perspectives were an extension of a system of white supremacy, domination,

and oppression and she was worthy, able, and good enough to achieve her goals. Thus,

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the boundary she set prioritized herself, her thoughts, beliefs, goals, needs, and well-being over anything they perceived or said. The proactive self-affirming boundary she set with professor feedback served as an empowering and emancipating experience for her. She explained,

> My academic work doesn't define me. I'm okay with getting through and doing what is needed because it's more important to do something else. I'm just not going to devote all my energy and put it all in one basket for folks to define who I am. Since I am older now from when I first entered higher ed as a student – I was very much like these pieces would define me, how well I wrote the essay and the critique of the professor that would define me, you know, and that sort of thing, but it doesn't do that anymore. So, it is like okay, I have to revise it, so I'm going to go ahead and revise it and not make it bigger than what it is.

Ida's experience and ability to proactively assert boundaries with professor feedback in a manner that prioritized her person reinforces Mahaila's experience and sentiments about setting a boundary with white people's "issues" and not internalizing these. Harriet's, Mahaila's, and Ida's experiences evidence their need to uphold their own self-defined greatness, worth, and value in an institution that was not built to or functioning to serve them.

*Disengagement**

All participants identified disengaging from people and racially toxic situations as a means of Black self-care. In the previous example, Mahaila asserted boundaries within the construct of her educational experience and, at times, employed disengagement (e.g.,

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disengaging from class discussions, rejecting/ignoring racially ignorant conversations or instruction, and prolonging break time – a form of physical disengagement). Regarding her intentional disengagement, Mahaila stated, "That is self-preservation."

Angela described that "in those moments [when she doesn't] have the energy to self-advocate…[she determines strategies to] dodge until [she] can retreat and reenergize to come back." Angela's voice evidences how she affirms herself through trusting herself to determine what is in her best interest and not permit environmental factors to dictate or impede her self-care. In this way, she holds and asserts her personal power to maintain control of and manage herself in racially toxic environments.

Harriet and Ida's experiences coincide with Mahaila and Angela's experiences. Harriet reported when there are racist statements being made or anti-Black narratives polluting her environment, she intentionally disengages. She explained that she proactively disengages to protect herself from being exposed to and internalizing that which is not healthy for her. She said:

> So, for me, disengagement is also an act of resistance as well because I think it is a radical form of self-care of like I am going to take care of myself in this moment, but I am also going to resist the system at the same time.

While Harriet's disengagement was episodic, Ida reported her disengagement to be her "main strategy of self-care" when in educational environments to maintain her energy for her purpose. She also reported that she disengaged from assigned readings by white authors that didn't pertain to her, stating, "White content—I just wouldn't read that shit." For all participants, disengagement served as a self-affirming self-care strategy that

enabled them to maintain boundaries with their racially toxic environments while providing themselves care.

Intentional Navigation of Whiteness*

All participants reported consciously and strategically minimizing engagement with white people inside and outside of the educational environment. Angela stated, "I really am cautious, and I really don't engage with them in my social and personal life." With respect to engagement with white professors for educational purposes, Angela stated, "I interact with them with regards to what our educational needs are or, like, office hours and things like that, but that is about it." Harriet reported she spends "most of [her] personal time with friends who are racially aware" because she feels "there is more value" in those friendships due to her voice being "heard" and *not* being "the instructor" in those friendships. Ida identified experiencing "a wall" when engaging with white people. She said there is a level of safety she needs in relationships that "wouldn't normally [be present] with a white person no matter how long [she has] known them." Mahaila stated, "You can't stay true to yourself and allow whiteness to permeate all of the time. You have to pushback on that culture." Mahaila reported she has to be selective with the white peers she interacts with for purposes of safety and only shares personal time with those of higher racial awareness "because otherwise [she] wouldn't engage with white peers at all, which means [she] wouldn't engage with peers period, because that is the majority of the makeup of [her] learning environment." The intentional navigation of whiteness presented as necessary and rigid for all participants, necessary for their protection and rigid to secure this protection and their well-being. What is

vividly clear is that the spectrum of engagement with white people, for participants in this study, is short, from no engagement to extremely limited engagement (e.g., *only* to the extent necessary for educational purposes and/or with those of higher racial awareness). This illuminates the harm white people have caused Black participants and Black participants' steadfast need to protect themselves as a means of proactive self-care.

Discussion

Participants engaged with the subjugation and oppression imposed on them for this narrative study, which deserves to be acknowledged, valued, and appreciated. The emotional labor they expended permitted the opportunity for their truths to be seen and heard. These truths exposed the perpetuation of the lies of white supremacy and Black inferiority at a PWIHE and the impact of this on their educational experiences. These truths also revealed their race-conscious engagement with the institution, self-love, fortitude, power, and resourcefulness.

The purpose of this study was to explore strategies of self-care that can assist Black students with more healthily and successfully navigating a PWIHE. Four Black participants (graduate students) attending the same predominately white institution of higher education (MVU) were recruited by convenience sampling to participate in the study. To appropriately situate the purpose of the study and enhance understanding of Black students' experiences at a PWIHE, I asked participants to describe their experiences navigating and resisting oppressive forces at a PWIHE prior to asking them to describe the self-care strategies they employed to assist them with more healthily and successfully navigating a PWIHE. Throughout the interviewing process, intentional,

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proactive, self-affirming, and empowering strategies were emphasized to elicit responses that maintained alignment with the purpose of the study and were independent of whiteness.

The data revealed that all participants identified continually experiencing racism that manifested racial stress in their masters and doctoral programs while maintaining a strong connection to and prioritization of self to resist oppressive institutional forces and/or maintain effective self-care. The following are themes relevant to how participants experienced racism that resulted in racial stress and an inequitable educational experience: persistently hostile racial climate; lack of racially conscious and/or culturally competent professors; invisibility; inequitable educational experience; unmet educational needs and extra scholastic labor; emotional labor and burden; and no compensation (for their extra labor). Three of the four participants actively engaged in resisting oppressive forces to varying degrees while one participant actively disengaged from resisting oppressive forces as a means of proactive self-care. For the three participants who actively engaged in resisting oppressive forces, they acknowledged intermittently choosing *not* to confront racist ideology and practice (disengaging) as a means of resistance and self-care. Participants identified that their experiences of racism at MVU manifested mental, emotional, and physical duress for them, such as anger, frustration, worry, self-doubt, exhaustion, and isolation. To mediate this racial stress, participants intentionally, proactively and reactively, embraced their self-worth, utilized their personal power, and engaged in self-affirming self-care strategies.

The proactive strategies of self-affirming self-care employed by participants were independently determined and implemented from a place of self-love to uphold their dignity and personal power while asserting boundaries with the omnipresent, exclusive, and toxic culture of white supremacy at MVU. These self-care strategies prioritized participants in an environment that rendered them invisible and included: affinity spaces (family, Black, and BIPOC), purpose and persistence, speaking up, personal reflection time, hobbies, religion and spirituality, self-love, self-affirmations, boundaries, disengagement, and intentional navigation of whiteness. Of the 13 self-affirming and empowering self-care strategies generated through this study, eight (62%) of these (affinity spaces—family, Black, and BIPOC, purpose and persistence, speaking up, personal reflection time, hobbies, and religion and spirituality) have been found in previous research and five (38%) of these (self-love, self-affirmations, boundaries, disengagement, and intentional navigation of whiteness) yielded new knowledge about self-care strategies. In the calculations, affinity spaces were counted as three distinct categories (family affinity, Black affinity, and BIPOC affinity) because these corroborated previous research in the respective categories by Bentley-Edwards et al., 2016, Cooper et al., 1994, Griffith et al., 2019, Quaye et al., 2019, and Truong and Museus, 2012.

The findings of this study are groundbreaking because these document the intentional, proactive and preventative positionality, or mindset of the participants. With high self-concept, cultural competence, racial pride, value of racial equity and justice, and experiential insight to the extent of the parasitic racial climate at MVU (as reported by

participants throughout the course of the study), participants engaged in actions of self-affirming self-care in a manner that prioritized and empowered themselves without regard for the response of whiteness in the academy. Moreover, they functioned in a manner that rejected the lies of white supremacy and Black inferiority. While white people and race relations (humanity) benefited (whether acknowledged or not) from participants' truth and stance, their positionality was about themselves, their inherent equality and value as people, which they upheld through their authenticity and unapologetic actions of self-love that manifested self-affirming self-care. This self-love asserted a mindset that directed their self-care and empowered them to be self-reflective and observant in a manner that permitted them to more healthily remain at the helm of their existence in a sea of lies. They individually determined their expectations, boundaries, terms of engagement, and manner of engagement. In alignment with Nicol and Yee's (2017) study, participants' proactive engagement in self-affirming self-care (what Nicol and Yee refer to as *radical* self-care) "fundamentally alter[ed] how [they] made choices" (p. 134) about their allocation of space, time, and energy for themselves personally and as students, which served to revolutionize their presence in academia in a manner that was transformative.

The experiences and transformative presence of the participants at a PWIHE exposed the insidious and pervasive nature of racism in the academy. Their transformative presence also served to demonstrate their psychological and emotional emancipation from the lies of white supremacy and Black inferiority as they prioritized and actualized self-love through self-affirming self-care that uplifted their holistic well-

being. Consequently, their authentic presence and assertion of value for their humanity and wellness served to organically challenge the dominant ideology, uphold the fight for racial justice, and reveal their experiential knowledge and truth in the academy and through participation in this study. In the aforementioned ways, participants' transformative, self-affirmed and self-empowered, presence within the academy evidences how they were able to assert themselves in ways that countered racism in alignment with core tenets of CRT.

While demonstrating their emotional emancipation from the lie of Black inferiority, participants infused the academy with their counter narratives which served to uphold the concept of multiple realities that are of equal importance and worth. In doing so, they validated and humanized those experiences that rejected, defied, and replaced the lie with the truth of their Black humanity (Community Healing Network [CHN] & The Association of Black Psychologists [ABPsi], 2016; Grills, 2021; Grills et al., 2016). This indicates the first tenet of EET: Freedom from the lie of Black inferiority. Participants' ability to actualize self-love though the engagement of self-affirming self-care without regard for its impact on whiteness or the response of whiteness is indicative of healthy self-esteem, racial pride, and intimate connection with one's personal power, evidencing the second tenet of EET (acquisition of personal power and identity). While it impossible to denote where participants are individually and/or collectively in the process of healing from the legacy of racism in this country (the third tenet of EET), the varied levels of emotional emancipation they demonstrated signify the possession of a mindset that

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served their well-being at MVU and remains critical to their healing (CHN & ABPsi, 2016; Grills, 2021; Grills et al., 2016; TEDx Talks, 2015).

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The recent recognition of racism as a public health crisis highlights the sustained state of great racial unrest in this country. As a microcosm of the larger society, predominately white institutions of higher education perpetuate the lie of white supremacy and Black inferiority through the abuse of power despite centuries of resistance and decades of research informing about the psychological and physical harm it causes Black people. Given the slow pace of change in this country, this narrative inquiry is significant because it focuses the marginalized experiences and voices of Black graduate students attending a PWIHE to contribute to the body of knowledge about strategies of self-affirming self-care that they can engage in for their holistic well-being. This research is also significant because it focuses Black students from a strengths-based perspective and generates knowledge for Black empowerment, emotional emancipation from the lie of Black inferiority, and healing. This generated knowledge provides valuable insight into personal agency and strategies of self-care for Black students navigating a PWIHE.

In this study, participants identified being inundated with racism without adequate institutional supports or care to assist them with navigating the resulting race-related stress. Consequently, Black students were required to rely on their personal agency to generate self-care strategies to assist *themselves* with more healthily and successfully navigating a PWIHE. The most problematic source of the experienced racism in their educational experience manifested from their professors' lack of cultural competence and inability to develop and implement racially equitable curriculum and facilitate racially

equitable classroom discussions. More specifically, the data suggests a correlation between culturally incompetent professors and participants' experiences of invisibility, inequitable educational experience, unmet educational needs, extra scholastic labor, and exhausting emotional labor that manifested racial stress. The racial stress presented as chronic for study participants as they navigated institutional and individual racism, resisted oppressive forces, and functioned to uplift their self-worth by engaging a mindset that nurtured their truths and healing through self-affirming self-care strategies and reinforced their emotional emancipation from the lie of Black inferiority.

Grills reminds us that "the physical enslavement of black people ended, but the attitudes and behaviors driven by the lie remain part of the cultural air we breathe" (TEDx Talks, 2015, 7:20). The "we" in the previous sentence applies to *all* people. We are all impacted by the lie and have work to do to eradicate the lie from our psyches that serves to perpetuate the subjugation, oppression, and discrimination of Black people. For Black people, we have survived 400 years of subjugation—400 years of marination in the lies of Black inferiority and white supremacy without reprieve, and we have had to function in manners that perpetuate the lies against ourselves for survival. There is no escaping the impact of this, which is the psychological injury of internalized racism (Speight, 2007). Internalized racism is not merely self-blame, it is "all about the cultural imperialism, the domination, the structure, the normalcy of the 'way things are' in our racialized society" (Speight, 2007, p. 129). Juxtapose the legacy of internalized racism for Black people in this country with the functioning of study participants and a distinct paradigm shift is evident. As opposed to functioning from a place of subordination,

participants functioned from a place of self-affirmation that defied the lies and upheld the

truths of their humanity (Grills, 2021). In doing so, they demonstrated possessing a

mindset that is critical for psychological emancipation from the legacy of enslavement

and healing from past and current day racial traumas (CHN & ABPsi, 2016; Grills, 2021;

Grills et al. (2016); TEDx Talks, 2015). This does not translate to participants having

arrived at the destination of emotional emancipation and healing, and it does evidence

that they are well equipped for and in the process of their individual journeys.

The strategies of Black self-care generated in this study may serve as a resource

for empowerment, emotional emancipation, and healing for Black students at

predominately white institutions of higher education. Participants demonstrated strategies

of conduct that were similar and different from previous studies. Similarly, participants

maintained focus and persistence in pursuit of their goals, spoke up, and engaged in

affinity spaces (family, Black, and BIPOC), personal reflection time, hobbies, and

religion and/or spirituality to assist their well-being while navigating a PWIHE.

Differently, participants demonstrated a sincere connection with and allegiance to their

authentic selves that presented as the foundation of their functioning and ability to

prioritize and actualize self-care strategies that were not reflected in previous research.

These self-care strategies (self-love, self-affirmations, boundaries, disengagement, and

intentional navigation of whiteness) served to proactively uphold and protect the sanctity

of their Blackness and humanity. Paramount to the new knowledge generated about self-

care strategies was participants engagement in self-love as the most powerful and

influential source of self-care because, in itself, it served as a revolutionary act of

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resistance that defied the lie. It also served to perpetuate a mindset that motivated and manifested behaviors of self-care that prioritized and nurtured Black value, worth, experience, and truth (*more* self-love). Thus, self-love served as a mindset, value, action, and motivational force for participants that was generative, connective, personally empowering, and healing for them while it reinforced their psychological emancipation from the lies.

While participants functioned in a system where "[their] oxygen [was] overtaken by the carbon monoxide filled lie of Black inferiority" (TEDx Talks, 2015, 7:20), they demonstrated tremendous resourcefulness in their ability to capitalize on their strengths to cultivate and assert a mindset that enabled them to prioritize and mobilize self-love, generate self-affirming self-care strategies, and promote healing from past and present racial traumas. In addition to foregrounding participants' self-affirming self-care strategies, this study served to foreground the potency of self-love in Black self-care, the importance of perspective in cultivating and/or affirming a mindset for self-care, the significance of implementation methods of self-care (and coping) in research, and the role of *proactive* implementation of self-care strategies in utilization, personal empowerment, healing, wellness, and psychological emancipation from the lies of white supremacy and Black inferiority. As Marcus Garvey said, "We are going to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because whilst others might free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind" (Dixon-Montgomery, 2018, p. 15).

Implications of Research

The implications for this research are multifaceted. The research illuminates participants' internal power, resourcefulness, and ability to emancipate themselves psychologically and behaviorally from the lies of white supremacy and Black inferiority through self-affirming self-care at a PWIHE. The research also shows a strong correlation between participants' high self-concept, cultural competence, and value for racial equity and justice and their ability to emancipate themselves from the lies. These qualities presented as reinforcing a mindset of self-love that prioritized and cultivated proactive, self-affirming self-care strategies for their personal empowerment and self-defined, directed, and constructed emancipation. Inherent in participants' positionality (mindset, values, and purpose) and functioning was rejection of and resistance to the lies without regard for whiteness. This infers that the prioritization of self-love as a guide for functioning over the needs or responses of whiteness serves to disrupt and mitigate the impact of racism and safeguard psychological and physiological well-being, which is resilience.

Though discrepancies exist between the purpose and implementation methods of self-care and coping, previous research was included in the analysis of this study that utilized the language of "coping" because it served to both strengthen the analysis and expose important gaps in literature. These gaps include the discrepancies between the meanings and intentions of self-care and coping strategies and the value of including proactive or reactive implementation methods in research to enhance understanding and meaning making. These gaps also expose the lack of research related to strategies of self-

affirming resistance, empowerment, and self-care for Black students navigating

predominately white institutions of higher education. Black students are worthy of and

deserve to be encouraged, supported, and informed about strategies that assist them to

maintain their authenticity while sitting up straight in "the crooked room" (Harris-Perry,

2011, p. 28) of white supremacy culture. Both cannot be had. One cannot contort to the

configurations of the crooked room as an adaptive (aka "coping") response and maintain

their authenticity and personal power. One must be grounded, centered, self-affirmed,

and self-empowered to sit up straight in the crooked room as a means of self-affirming

self-care and, consequently, organic resistance to the status quo for the benefit of

individual and collective healing. Additionally, when considering proactive strategies of

self-affirming self-care, empowerment, and resistance, there exists a gap in the literature

about that which is healthy and sustainable for Black students and, contrastively, which

strategies are unsustainable and destructive to their well-being. Finally, a gap in the

literature exists about the impact of research on Black students at PWIHE, and this is a

gap that needs to be filled if we are to honor and demonstrate care for Black participants

in the research process. I perceive it to be likely that the dynamics and process of

research could replicate and contribute to participants' overburdened experiences at a

PWIHE, which evidences risk of harm.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Project: Black Self-care at PWIHE
Time of interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer: Vicki Garrison, Mountain View University, Doctoral Student
Position of interviewee: Participant recruited by consecutive sampling

Project Description: The purpose of this narrative study is to explore how strategies of self-care can assist Black students with surviving and thriving in PWIHE. In this research, self-care is defined as the practice of using one's personal power (what one can control) to engage in action for self-regulation, self-preservation, wellness, and empowerment. This research is significant because it focuses Black people, a marginalized group, and expands knowledge on strategies of self-care for Black students in PWIHE, an area of limited research. Using narrative inquiry, this research will illuminate Black experiences, empower Black voices, and validate Black truth in PWIHE while extracting and capitalizing on Black agency to generate knowledge for Black empowerment. The generated knowledge will provide valuable insight into personal agency and strategies of self-care for Black students navigating PWIHE.

Questions:
1. How do you identify racially?

2. What comes to mind and/or heart when you hear "Ella's Song" [Play excerpt of "Ella's Song"]?

3. As a/an [insert interviewee's racial identification] being, what are your experiences of navigating a PWIHE?

4. What are your experiences of resisting or "pushing back" on oppressive systems?

5. What are your strategies of self-care that assist you with more healthily and successfully navigating a PWIHE as a [insert interviewee's racial identification] being?

6. What advice would you give to up and coming [insert interviewee's racial identification here] students to assist them with surviving and/or thriving in a PWIHE?

Name	Description
Ella's Song	This is a freedom song written by Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon to uplift, honor, memorialize, and pass on the words of civil rights activist Ella Baker. The song was used in this study for grounding purposes -- to connect the past with the present, establish an informed and safe interviewing atmosphere, and to acknowledge mutuality of experience between researcher and participants.
Black Student Experiences of Racial Stress	Black students' experiences of racial stress as the result of being Black at PWIHE and encountering overt, covert, individual, systemic, and institutional racism
Prevalence of Racism	Black students' perception of the prevalence of racism at PWIHE based upon their lived experience
Racial Stress & Inequitable Educational Experience	Racial stress is the psychological, emotional, and physical distress associated with the experience of racism. Inequitable educational experience refers to the policies and practices that reflect the views and function to meet the needs of white people
Lack of Racially Conscious and/or Culturally Competent Professors	White professors' inability to see, understand, respect, consider, and appropriately respond to and/or engage with experiences, values, attitudes and beliefs across cultures
Invisibility	Black students' experiences of not being seen, valued, considered, or heard
Extra Labor & Unmet Needs	The labor of Black students that exceeds that of white students as the result of functioning in a predominately white, racially hostile educational environment that fails to meet their educational needs
Emotional Labor & Burden	Emotional labor is the managing of emotions in a racially hostile environment. It is also the energy expended when one educates or feels there is an expectation for them to educate white people about matters of race, racism,

Name	Description
	equity, and justice. The aforementioned are experienced as a Burden to Black students.
No Compensation	The institutional failure to compensate Black students' labor in the educational environment that serves to diversify and enrich the education provided for the benefit of white professors and peers
Resisting Oppressive Forces	Black students' experiences of resisting (pushing back on or rejecting) the lie of white supremacy perpetuated at a PWIHE
Existence as Resistance	Black students' experiences of their presence being an act of resistance at a PWIHE
Confronting Racist ideology & Practice	Black student experiences of identifying and challenging racist ideology and practice
Or Not	Black students' conscious and intentional refusal to resist oppressive forces as a means of proactive self-affirming self-care, personal empowerment, and liberation
Strategies of Black Self-Care	The proactive, self-affirming, empowering, and liberating self-care strategies Black students implement at a PWIHE to assist their wellness and success.
Affinity Spaces	Engagement in safe spaces as a means of proactive self-affirming, empowering, and liberating self-care
Family Affinity	Spaces held exclusively for those participants' identify as family
Black Affinity	Spaces held exclusively for Black self-identified people
BIPOC Affinity	Spaces held exclusively for Black, Indigenous, and people of color
Purpose & Persistence	Focusing and prioritizing educational purpose to persist in academia as a means of proactive self-affirming self-care and personal empowerment

Name	Description
Speaking Up	Maintaining and upholding one's authentic self and perspective to expose and challenge racism (e.g., racialized dynamics, policies, practices, and interactions) as a means of proactive self-affirming self-care and personal empowerment
Personal Reflection Time	Reflecting in isolation on racialized experiences as a means of proactive self-affirming self-care and personal empowerment
Hobbies	The engagement in activities of interest for pleasure and relaxation as a means of proactive self-affirming self-care and personal empowerment
Religion and Spirituality	Religion refers to the belief and trust in a higher power or system of faith. Spirituality focuses the human spirit (or soul) and is individualized in approach to enhance one's connection to self, others, and the world.
Self-Love	The state of appreciating, valuing, and demonstrating regard for one's self-worth and a motivating force for self-care—Self-love is the most potent form of self-care because it comprises psychological and emotional components that manifest action (self-care) and motivation for engagement in other forms of self-care
Self-Affirmations	Self-accepting and racially informed affirmations that have a beneficial effect on one's self-esteem, confidence, and personal and racial empowerment
Boundaries	The assertion of boundaries in relationships, environments, and with educational practices as a means of proactive self-affirming, empowering, and liberating self-care
Disengagement	The intentional disengagement from people, situations, environments, and practices that are racially uninformed/hostile as a means of proactive self-affirming self-care and personal empowerment

Name	Description
Intentional Navigation of Whiteness	The strategic navigation of whiteness (and white people) at a PWIHE (e.g., selective engagement with white people, minimizing or terminating engagement with white people, etc.) in manner that prioritizes Black wellness