IN MY POWER, I EMPOWER: MOVING BLACK YOUTH FROM SPIRIT-MURDER TO EMOTIONAL EMANCIPATION

by

S. RENEE MITCHELL

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Student: S. Renee Mitchell

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This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in the Department of Educational Methodology, Policy and Leadership by:

Dr. Julie Alonzo	Chair & Advisor
Dr. Nancy Golden	Core Member
Dr. Rhonda Nese	Institutional Representative
Dr. Joy DeGruy	Outside Representative

And

Andrew Karduna	Interim Vice Provost for Graduate Studies

Official approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon's Division of Graduate Studies.

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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The daily realities of racism and structural oppression in the lives of urban Black teens create an ill-fated, normative experience that can forever influence their adolescent development. Other chronic stresses, such as multi-generational poverty, peer victimization, and gentrification have the potential to fertilize additional experiences of trauma, such as sexual and mental abuse, family dysfunction and divorce. These children then become trapped within deeply entrenched ecologies designed to work against them, and then they are blamed by schools and society for their inability to succeed. Thus, the risks, pathologies and complications that arise because of institutional, societal and historical expressions of anti-Blackness tend to become a perpetually unhealed, emotional wound that is inextricably entangled with a Black teen's sense of self. This critical narrative, phenomenological and ethnographic research study evaluates the efficacy of I Am M.O.R.E. (Making Ourselves Resilient Everyday), a culturally specific, social-emotional and arts-based program. Its approach is to hold up a mirror to anti-Black systems so Black youth can recognize, name, reflect

upon and challenge racial oppression as a structural poison, as opposed to an individual's flaw, and then heal from it – from the inside out. Then, I Am MORE provides the youth with opportunities to lead, facilitate and engage in social-justice actions that serve their community and other youth. This research is intended to test the validity of I Am MORE's intention to transform the lives of Black youth and unveil their potential by planting "seeds" of critical consciousness, social-justice activism, and arts and creativity within the youth in order to blossom Black joy, radical healing, radical hope and empowered resilience. I Am MORE's theory of change hypothesis posited for this study is: *When Black youth are grounded in their power, they heal their internalized oppression, increase their sense of agency, and then, are inspired to empower others.*

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: S. Renee Mitchell

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon
George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon
Florida A&M University, Tallahassee, Florida

DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Education, Educational Leadership, 2021, University of Oregon
Master of Business Administration, Marketing, 2001, George Fox University
Bachelor of Science, Journalism, 1985, Florida A&M University

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST

Trauma-Informed Practices
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)
Healing from Racial Trauma
Creativity as a Healing Art

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Visionary, I Am M.O.R.E (Making Ourselves Resilient Everyday), 2018-present

Journalism Teacher, Roosevelt High School, 2015-2019

Creative Consultant, Renee Mitchell Speaks, 2008 to present

Newspaper Columnist, The Oregonian, 1998-2008

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Gladys McCoy Lifetime Achievement Award, Multnomah County, 2021

Liberty Hope Award, League of Minority Voters, 2021

Spirit of Portland Award, City of Portland, 2019-20

SEL in Action Award, NYC-based NoVo Foundation, 2020-22/2019-20

PUBLICATIONS

Mitchell, S. R. (2021). When will we learn? It's not their heads, it's their (broken) hearts. In C. Hudson-Weems (Ed.) *Africana Paradigms, Practices & Literary Texts: Evoking Social Justice, 165-202.* Kendal Hunt.

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Nicolaidis, C., Wahab, S., Trimble, J., Mejia, A., Mitchell, S. R., Raymaker, D., Thomas, M. J., Williams, V., Waters, S. 2013 The interconnections project: Development and evaluation of a community-based depression program for African-American violence survivors. *Journal of General Internal Medicine, 28*, 530-538.

Wahab, S., Trimble, J., Mejia, A., Mitchell, S. R., Thomas, M. J., Waters, S., Williams, V., Raymaker, D., & Nicolaidis, C. (2014). Motivational interviewing at the intersections of depression and intimate partner violence among African American women. *Journal of Evidenced Based Social Work, 1*, 291-303.

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This dissertation is dedicated to all the Black girls who have ever been treated like they were invisible, talked to like they were stupid, and considered unsuitable for opportunities like graduations, delirious forms of joy, or even just peace of mind. *I see you.* This is for all the Black boys who believed the spirit-murdering words carelessly tumbling out of the mouths of those in authority. *I believe you.* This research is for all youth of Color who deserve to know that they are so much more than the worst thing that has ever happened to them. The words within this dissertation are for you. My journey to carve a pathway for healing has been for you. Rise up, dear ones, and shine!

Someday

hey u
with your head down
eyes brimming with sadness
lip poked out like it's sweeping the floor
why
do u care so much
about what they have to say
they
ain't talking about nothing
ain't even read yr dictionary
they don't know
stupid ugly clumsy
that don't define u
some / day
u gonna find
the world holdin' its breath
waiting for yr words
check u out in a few years
they gonna wish
they called u
friend

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

If you bring forth that which is within you,
then that which is within you
will be your salvation
if you do not bring forth that which is within you
then that which is within you
will destroy you

- From the Gnostic Gospel of St. Thomas

I Am MORE (Making Ourselves Resilient Everyday) is a nationally award-winning, youth-development intervention that uses culturally affirming, healing-centered, social-emotional learning and social-justice focused, arts-based methodology to reduce the effects of psychological, cultural and historical trauma on Black[1] youth. Drawing on my experience as a U.S.-born Black mother of three, Pulitzer Prize twice-nominated newspaper journalist and multimedia artist and performer, I founded I Am MORE as a mentoring program in late November 2018, in collaboration with three Black females, then ages 18 and 19. These graduating seniors – two African immigrants and one African American – each attended the same diverse high school where I worked in a large urban city in the Pacific Northwest (Portland, OR). The three students were members of my Black Girl Magic Club and had received three of Portland's four $16,000 college scholarships from a statewide branch of a national educational advocacy organization. Here is an excerpt written by the African American honoree, who crafted her scholarship application as heartfelt prose, detailing her childhood survival journey:

[1] I capitalize the term Black when using as a racial code. As language can be nuanced, I intentionally do not capitalize white, as that designation is merely a product of anti-Blackness and is synonymous with intentional racial oppression of Black people. In works cited, I defer to the author's capitalization choices.

when you – one day – tell my story

write that I was born to do more than survive but to thrive

that my roots originated in Africa, branched into America

and sprouted up in North Portland

from gritty soil steeped in poverty and struggle

write that I experienced racism that cut deeply into my soul and self-esteem

that I've been a victim of racial profiling

and a witness to gun violence, domestic violence and bullying

write that I have been penniless and desperately homeless

that even as a teenager, I knew what it felt like to work

from early morning to late into the night, running on fumes of energy

just so I could help feed my brothers and sisters

but at (my high school), I learned to eat impossible for breakfast

to dare to dream, to reimagine my potential

and today, I am the one who wears the crown…

(I Am MORE, 2019, p. 5)

Inspired by the resiliency and courage embedded within all three personal journeys of the scholarship winners, I designed an arts- and performative-based program to help Youth of Color[2] repair the emotional harm caused by trauma, develop

[2] Though no term is perfect, I use Youth of Color and People of Color as political terms that refer to individuals in the United States with African, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latin American, Middle Eastern, Arab, and/or Indigenous ancestry. This recognizes race as a social construct (Cokley, 2007), and this country's racialization of groups that are politically and economically oppressed based on skin color and other traits.

their creative and critical-thinking skills, and inspire their participation in social-justice activism that would push back against racial oppression. For several years until Fall of 2019, I was the only Black teacher at this most diverse high school in the state. Most of the school's Black students lacked access to other adults in the building who reflected their culture and its ways of being, communicating and knowing. Then, outside of school, those same Black students were being incessantly dehumanized by a society rooted in both overt and nuanced forms of white supremacy[3] whose racist foundation resulted in the colonizing of Indigenous tribes, the generations-long enslavement of Africans and the exploitation of Chinese and Mexican laborers (Zinn, 1980), among other oppressive tactics driven by what Freire (1996) considered to be capitalistic profit motives. Given the low percentages of POC teaching at this high school, I Am MORE initially served all YOC, but the participants, mostly from word of mouth, progressively became primarily African and African American. I Am MORE's pedagogy also increasingly shifted to serve Black students, considered the most prodigiously traumatized of all teen demographics (Cronholm et al., 2015; Goldmann et al., 2011).

At the time I began teaching, there was little guidance on best practices to empower Black youth. So, as a former bullied and racially traumatized student who never had a Black teacher or saw Black culture positively represented within K-12 curriculum, I led from instinct. I also consulted research-based theories, such as the Hierarchy of Human Needs framework by psychologist Maslow (1943), which identified

[3] White supremacy is defined here as "the systemic and historical privileging of white's collective interests, accomplishments, values, beliefs" (Hayes & Juárez, 2012, p. 2).

how to motivate individuals to reach their full potential. Based on the physiological needs identified by Maslow, l picked up hundreds of free, day-old bagels each week from a neighborhood deli and swung by the grocery store closest to the high school, where I taught journalism, to buy cream cheese, bags of cheap frozen burritos and bunches of bananas. To meet students' psychological needs, my classroom served as a safe and welcoming hangout spot. But eventually, I realized something critical was missing: Cultural congruence. Au and Kawakami (1994) categorize cultural congruence as the learning that "takes place in the context of social relationships" (p. 5) and noted that YOC sometimes don't perform well in school "because of a mismatch between the culture of the school and the culture of the home" (p. 5-6), particularly around values and communication styles. For example, YOC may be "more accustomed to being helped by their siblings and peers than by adults" (p. 19). So, peer learning and small groups, storytelling and verbal play are important, as well as what Fordham and Ogbu (1986) called "fictive kinship," which involves Black people's shared identity as African Americans. This approach is a more authentic cultural preference than individualism, which Maslow bases his self-actualization theory on.

Having visited Africa twice, I was inspired by the late South African President Nelson Mandela to instead embrace the African framework of Ubuntu, which has been heralded in African countries for generations. Anti-apartheid activist Desmond Tutu (1991) defined it as: "A person is a person through other persons" (p. 31). This cultural and spiritual practice is "the attention one human being gives to another: the kindness, courtesy, consideration and friendliness in the relationship between people; a code of

behaviour, an attitude to other people and to life" (Samkange & Samkange, 1980, p. 6). Ubuntu's ways of how to be present with others have been passed down through storytelling, song and dance (Jackson, 2002; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020).

> From the griots (singers/storytellers whose performances include tribal histories) of ancient Africa to the sometimes painful lyrics of hip-hop artists, people of African descent have known that our lives and our stories must be spoken, over and over again, so that the people will know our truth. (2002, p. 3).

As Ubuntu focuses on interconnectedness, Black people's symbiotic ties to Africa and its collective cultural memory, those principles became the basis for how critical consciousness was incorporated into I Am MORE programming. The knowing of "our truth," though, requires an awakening from what Dillard (2012) called Black people's "amnesia, often masked as nostalgia" (pg. 17), and what Freire (1970) acknowledged as internalized oppression, wherein POC learn to undermine their own capacity to succeed because of fear, which emasculates their potential to dream.

> The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. (1970, p. 33)

The strength-based Ubuntu philosophy helps redefine the way one interprets the world, thus impacting one's way of knowing (Alexander, 2005; Anzaldúa, 1999; Dillard, 2012; hooks, 1993). Ubuntu has also been used to encourage researchers of

Color to deconstruct the social conditions that create racial oppression (Davis, 1983; Diemer & Rapa, 2016; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Gay, 2000; Ginwright, 2010; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; hooks, 1981/1994/1995; Ladson-Billings, 1992/1996/1998; Mugumbate & Mtetwa, 2019; Tesfagiorgis, 1993). Scholarship filtered through the principles of Ubuntu focuses research on helping People of Color reconnect with the African-centered ethic: Know thyself (Akbar, 1996). Some scholars have taken this intention a step further by focusing research on the emotional and spiritually healing intentions of Ubuntu, which can emerge through an active and conscious reclaiming of oneself and one's culture. Dillard (2012) characterizes this cultural immersion and "(re)membering as an act of [mental] decolonization" (p. 4). This type of purposeful mindset has prompted scholars toward a mission of helping Black people embrace the contextual knowledge that "being scattered in diaspora is an act of dispossession from our past, from connections to our culture, original homelands, languages and from each other. We must (re)member in order to be whole" (2012, p. 4).

This journey back to wholeness is also personal for this researcher, as the creation of a healing rite of passage for Black youth also led to a (re)discovering of Africana womanism, a paradigm, theory and practice originated by Hudson-Weems (2019) in the mid-1980s (See Appendix A for graphic of Africana Womanism principles). This Ubuntu-confirming, soul-healing embrace of my role, as a Black woman, to serve as a mission-driven nurturer, uplifter and mother-type figure for Black youth eventually reframed my perspective. According to Hudson-Weems (2019), the intention behind Africana womanism "to leave a lasting legacy for future generations of Africana people

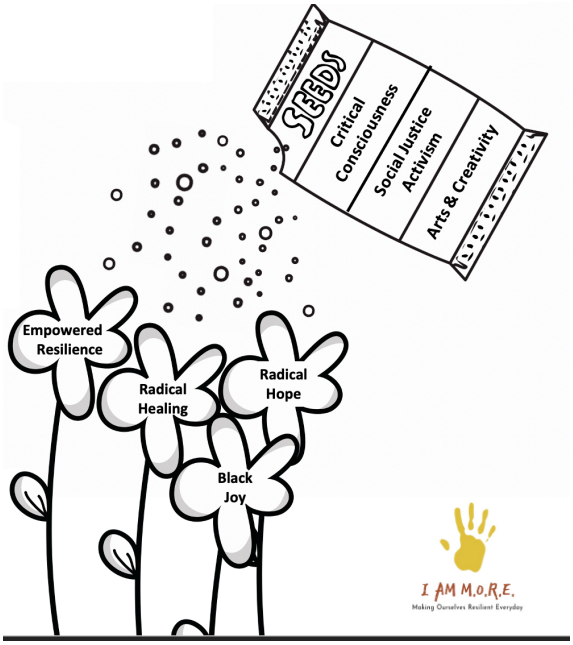
so that they will not be left with a void leading down the long and tiring journey of starting from scratch for solutions" (p. 132). This agenda eventually led me toward a model of I Am MORE serving as a Master Gardener, who tills the soil where emotionally wounded Black children are planted, in order to nurture and blossom the potential that is already buried inside of them.

So, just as both personal and scholarly research advances as more information becomes known, I Am MORE's hub of focus did, as well. The initial definition of the M.O.R.E. acronym was Making Other Resiliency-building Experiences, an adult-focused intention to provide opportunities for YOC to share their personal stories. As more young people who engaged in I Am MORE programming began to show the benefits of a cultural grounding in valuing self-awareness, collectivism over individualism, the wisdom of elders, and the embrace of oral storytelling traditions, the organization's acronym shifted toward a youth-focused objective: Making Ourselves Resilient Everyday. Its pedagogy fully embraces Ubuntu philosophies, which include storytelling, and counterstorytelling; performing arts and drumming (Ilmi, 2015); and praise songs "used to celebrate or affirm triumph over adversity, bravery and courage," (Dillard, 2012, p. 7). To that end, I Am MORE now shares songs created during the historic Civil Rights movement, along with empowerment chants, opening and closing rituals and Nguzo Saba principles, which are values and practices celebrated during Kwanzaa, an African American holiday – celebrated from Dec. 26-Jan. 1 – which was created during the 1960s Black Power Movement (Karenga, 1997/2002; see Appendix B for Kwanzaa principles). Since early 2020, I Am More's programming has operated at the

intersection of *critical consciousness*, *social justice activism*, and *arts and creativity,* all characteristics of Ubuntu (Mugumbate & Mtetwa, 2019). Collectively, these seeds of possibilities have the potential to nurture a transformative compost that stimulates growth of radical hope, radical healing, Black Joy and empowered resilience within Black youths' Gardens of Emotional Emancipation. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1.

Garden of Emotional Emancipation



Radical Hope

Using the political term "radical" refers to a philosophy that connects collectivism with social change. Radical hope, as a psychological framework, is far beyond the wishful thinking of Western psychology's foundational model of having an optimistic mindset (Snyder, 2002), or a positive emotion about the future (Lazarus, 1999). Radical hope is a future-oriented, goal-setting mindset, particularly in the face of oppression, that "allows for a sense of agency to change things for the greater good—a belief that one can fight for justice and that the fight will not be futile" (French et al., 2020, p. 13). Radical hope was a key ingredient that "fueled abolitionist, civil rights, and racial, ethnic, and women's social movements" (Mosley et al., 2020, p. 3). It requires (a) a collective memory; (b) an understanding of how to resist historical oppression; (c) ancestral pride; and (d) a social justice mindset (2020). This tactic "considers the pervasiveness of

oppression and recognizes that healing can occur in the face of ongoing psychological and political harm. Such an expansive and radical approach to healing requires radical hope" (p. 3). POC who live in a country that intentionally fails to acknowledge or encourage their dreams need radical hope to sustain the presence of those visions, even within their own imaginations. As noted by Sabzalian (2019), while "our struggles may not result in the justice and change we hope for, we must dare to dream and struggle anyway" (p. 226), as a commitment to that journey comes with its own rewards. Added Taulbert (1997), "The world must never forget how hope looks, acts, feels, or the obligation each individual has to practice it, share it, and pass it along" (p. 101).

Radical Healing

I Am MORE's version of "radical healing" is a liberatory framework that comes from increasing youths' capacity to "name, understand and ameliorate legacies of oppression" (Theriault, 2019, p. 419), as well as resist internalizing that oppression (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013). French et al. (2020) contend radical healing is grounded in five anchors: "(a) collectivism, (b) critical consciousness, (c) radical hope, (d) strength and resistance, (e) cultural authenticity and self-knowledge" (p. 14), all Ubuntu characteristics that are expected to lead toward self-actualization. Radical healing results from building the capacity and agency of YOC to unfetter themselves from the definitions, limitations and psychological harm resulting from America's colonizing practices and to "reconcile painful experiences resulting from oppression through testimony and naming what may seem to be personal misfortune as systemic oppression" (Ginwright, 2010, p. 9). This approach moves an individual beyond merely

coping or surviving and propels YOC closer toward thriving once they "gain critical consciousness about their oppression" (French et al., 2020, p. 19). Youth should also be allowed opportunities to use their artistic expressions and youth-led social justice actions in order to hold "those systems responsible for conditions in which Black youth live" (2020, p. 23-24). As noted by DeGruy (2005/2017), "The first step to healing is to know what is in need of healing" (p. 211), which is Black children's numb acceptance of a "slow and stunted growth. Three steps forward, two steps back" (p. 157).

Black Joy

Joy is often connected to expressing one's positive emotions, such as pleasure or happiness. But more and more, Black scholars are lifting up Black joy as a defiant act of resistance to anti-Black oppression. "Joy is Black life breathing free from chains" (Golden & Utah, 2015, p. 14). Hooks (1994) encourages Black people to document their joy because "if we only focus on the pain, the difficulties which are surely real in any process of transformation, we only show a partial picture" (p. 247). Black joy can also serve as a form of self-care (Lu & Steele, 2019), an act of resistance (Packnett, 2018), and a healing mental space that allows Black people "to theorize a world in which white supremacy does not dictate our everyday lives" (Johnson, 2015, p. 180). Noted Love (2019), "Black joy makes the world manageable for dark people; it is how we cope. It is how we love" (p. 121). Black joy also allows general society to see Black people as "more than their struggles and setbacks" (Dunn & Love, 2020, p. 190-91). For example, social media - in particular what has been dubbed as "Black Twitter" – has been used to celebrate the wit of Black people's oral tradition of "signifyin'," which deploys figurative

language, indirectness, doubleness and wordplay as a means for conveying multiple layers of meaning" (Florini, 2014, p. 223). This comedic interplay, a form of expressing Black joy, was traced to West and Central Africa (Gates, 2014). It uses clever critiques that encourage "others to participate, thereby generating a sense of solidarity" (2014, p. 229). In the classroom, Black joy results from having a space where one's culture is reflected back to them in a natural and affirming way. Noted Love (2019), "Teachers who understand Black Joy enter the classroom knowing that dark students knowing their history, falling in love with their history, and finding their voice are more important than grades" (p. 121). Black joy can also be as simple as an 8-year-old girl and her mother doing an impromptu dance in the rain – during the early days of the international COVID-19 pandemic.

> Our dancing in the rain wasn't a denial of all the storms that had moved in on black people that week. It was a dare. An indignant stance of confidence in the midst of this malignant monsoon called systemic racism. (Lewis-Giggetts, 2020, para. 8)

Empowered Resilience

Within the last 30 years, resilience has emerged in research as a promising remedy to counteract the effects of trauma (Benard, 2004). The word resilience originates from the Latin word *resilire,* which means to regain one's wellbeing in spite of adversity (2004). Eventually, decades of scholarly research produced a resiliency theory, which is the "motivational force within everyone that drives them to pursue wisdom, self-actualization, and altruism and to be in harmony with a spiritual source of strength"

(Richardson, 2002, p. 309). Resiliency is now considered a transcending intervention positively associated with physical health (Black & Ford-Gilboe, 2004), emotional health (Rew et al., 2001), and academic achievement (Kumi-Yeboah, 2016). The literature has recently investigated the connection between resilience and empowerment within specific cultural groups, such as gay and transgendered youth in Peru (Suarez et al., 2021); Indigenous nursing students in America (Wilkie, 2020); and Ethiopian women who have been trained in disaster preparedness (Story et al., 2020). I Am MORE, though, is the first-known research to study empowered resilience specifically within Black youth in the United States. Its definition of *empowered resilience* includes the basic premise of bouncing back after experiencing trauma, but it also includes the individual then reaching back to educate, inspire and empower others, based on their own initiative. Research suggests that those who are proud of their ethnic and racial identity, and also advocate for others, are emotionally healthier human beings (Quintana et al., 2012); have increased academic achievement and self-esteem (Constantine et al., 2006); and hold a strong sense of belonging (Graves & Aston, 2018), all interdependent qualities of self-actualization.

Theoretical Underpinnings of I Am MORE

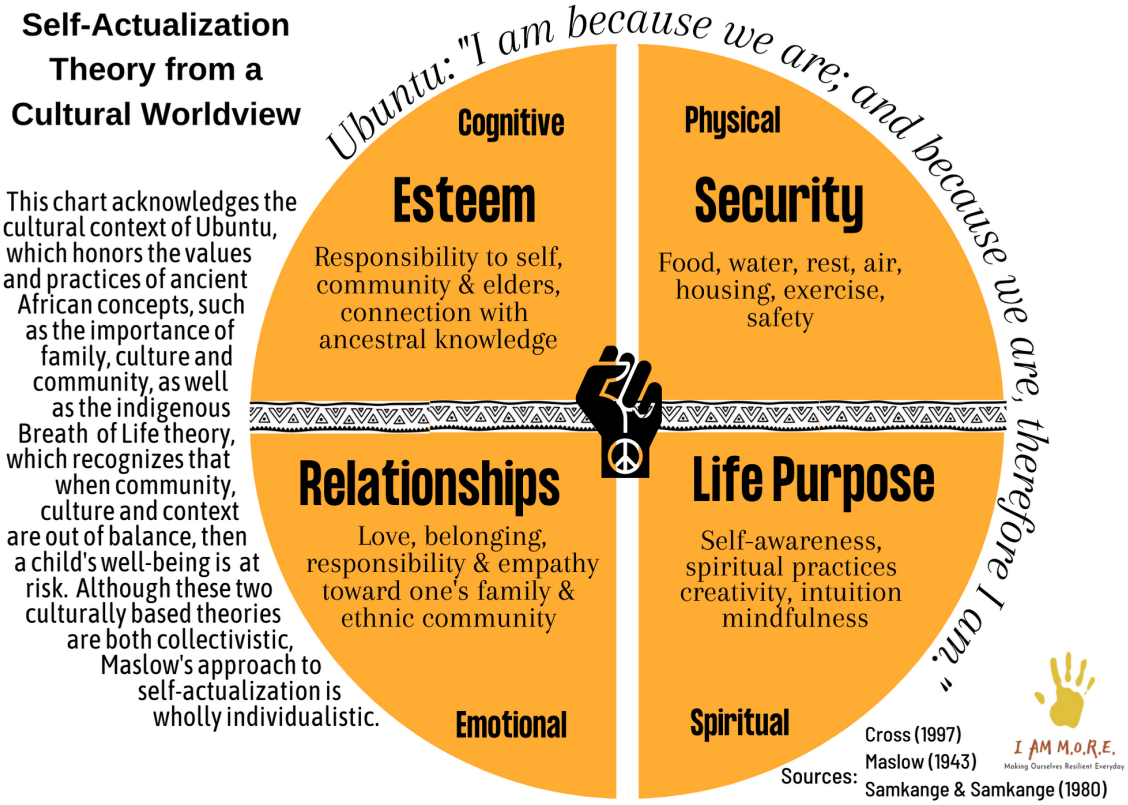
I Am MORE's research project is a response to a long-ago call to action from Anzaldúa (1990), who encouraged researchers of Color to "occupy theorizing space; that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space" (1990, p. xxv). One additional intention of the I Am MORE research study is to advance the racial trauma

conversation past the need for merely an individual-level of healing and to engage Black youth in a more courageous social-justice framework that allows them to contribute to other Black youths' radical hope, radical healing, Black joy and empowered resilience. Contextually, although the psychologist Maslow (1943) is credited with being the first to identify how to motivate people to reach their full potential, researchers of Color are becoming increasingly aware that his theory is based on individualism. Blackstock (2011) invites scholars of all cultures to test the relatively new indigenous-grounded Breath of Life theory, which is based on relational worldview principles (Cross, 1997) that have been interpreted through a lens of culture, community and a time-expansive way of thinking (2011). The Breath of Life theory identifies a series of factors, such as cultural wisdom, resiliency and creativity, that must "in balance in order to eradicate or reduce structural risk and its manifestations at the level of individuals and groups" (2011, p. 11). In addition, it considers oppression as a circumstantial factor, not as the whole of someone's story, and that "everything across all time is important to understanding human experience" (p. 11). Blackstock (2011), an Indigenous researcher who deeply studied the Breath of Life theory, "actively invites the involvement of others to debate, build on and test the theory and its applications in various contexts and cultures" (p. 12). She noted: "It is an opportunity rarely presented in North American social science theoretical deliberation" (p. 13), and "it may inform structural interventions for other cultural groups" (p. 13). In addition, according to French et al. (2020), new research is critical to "developing creative methodologies that inform and inspire new possibilities" (p. 33). In light of the culturally affirming theories of Ubuntu

and Breath of Life, I modified Maslow's framework (See Figure 2) to emphasize I Am MORE's philosophical shift away from an individualistic state of mind to an interconnected reality that acknowledges the influence of one's past, present and future in achieving self-actualization.

Figure 2.

Ubuntu + Breath of Life + Maslow's Self-Actualization Theories



When considered through the cultural context of Indigenous and of Africans' relational way of being, this unified framework better aligns with I Am MORE's commitment to raise critical consciousness in Black youth, by using aspects of their culture to inform and expand their becoming, and to foster their social agency. This updated relational, multicultural context also honors community cultural wealth, a concept originated by

Solórzano and Villalpando (1998) and helps frame how Black people cope with racial stress. I Am MORE considers cultural wealth as a contributing ingredient to emotional emancipation and its presence in this study indicates a commitment to conduct research that serves "a larger purpose toward social and racial justice" (Yasso, 2005, p. 82). What's more, studies confirm that Black children who are grounded in their racial identity tend to build a stronger sense of belonging with their Black peers, which helps them better manage future encounters with racial discrimination (Jones & Neblett, 2016). It also helps improve self-esteem (Constantine et al., 2006), increases academic and community engagement (Williams & Chung, 2013), and decreases the use of recreational drugs (Belgrave et al., 2000).

Three Grounding Theories

I Am MORE's programming is grounded in three strategies that are interwoven throughout its pedagogical structure: *critical consciousness, social-justice action, and arts and creativity.* Each strategy is considered through the lens of race, stripped of deficit-framed thinking and aligned with the transdisciplinary insights of scholars (Checkoway, 2013; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002/2009) who have expanded the literature about using cultural and community wealth and virtues to design a deeply liberatory experience for Black youth. This research study provides a practical application to the following theories, each also aligned with Ubuntu principles:

- **Relational-Cultural Theory** (RCT) is a culturally responsive framework that acknowledges that we find meaning and belonging when we are engaged in interdependence, and, conversely, feelings of shame and unworthiness when we

cannot wholly be ourselves without judgment or critique (Frey, 2012; Haskins & Appling, 2015; Lenz, 2014). This theory bolsters I Am MORE's intention to provide culturally nurturing, social-emotional skill building while teaching Black adolescents how to navigate beyond political, economic and social systems designed to oppress them (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

- **Critical Youth Empowerment** (CYE) is an emerging theory that leans on individual and collective efforts (i.e., family, organization, and community) to build the capacity of youth to become "critical citizens" (Jennings et al, 2006, p. 40). This framework encourages young people to understand how structural issues breed racial inequities that often work against Black youth and their families. Adults are still needed in this process, but primarily to create a shared-power environment that helps youth take the lead where they can, as "youth workers do not empower youth as much as they create the conditions for empowerment to happen" (Greene et al., 2018, p. 845). Affirming students' strengths, helping them build community with their peers, and encouraging them to reflect and attach meaning to their experiences increases their capacity to learn and grow (Bogar & Hulse-Killacky, 2006). "Education is a transactional experience that is, or should be, reciprocal, respectful and responsive to the assets that youth possess and that educators can learn from" (2006, p. 868).
- Finally, the theoretical lens of **Black Critical Theory** (BlackCrit) is a more specific structure of analyzing and understanding "how Black bodies become marginalized, disregarded, and disdained" (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 417). In contrast, the Critical Race Theory (CRT), which was first introduced in education circles by Ladson-Billings

and Tate (1995), operates more as "a critique of White supremacy" than a celebration of blackness (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 416). BlackCrit is grounded in a love for Black people, and encourages policy analysis and advocacy, the naming and challenging of anti-Blackness, and storytelling and counter-storytelling, which focuses on narratives about surviving or resisting oppression. Dumas and Ross (2016) encourage scholars to use BlackCrit to analyze the "dissonance between the hashtag [#BlackLivesMatter] and racialized disciplinary policies and practices in public schools" (p. 434).

> This is necessary to begin thinking about strategies to combat the failure of public schools to effectively educate Black children and their success in reproducing dominant racial ideology and the repression of the Black body. (2016, p. 435)

Research Goals and Objectives

As early as 1987, chronic racial trauma was identified in the literature as "spirit-murder." Williams (1987) first used the provocative term to compare the similar psychosomatic impacts on victims of sexual assault to victims of racism, in that both sets of the psychologically wounded are forced to prove that "they did not distort the circumstances, misunderstand the intent or even enjoy it" (p. 130). The phrase "spirit-murder" has increasingly been used by researchers focused on racism within society (Jones, 1994; Williams, 1991), employment (Erskine et al., 2020; Washington & Harris, 2001), and education (Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Johnson & Bryan, 2017; Johnson et al., 2017; Love, 2019). Although DiAngelo (2011)

wrote: “White racism is ultimately a white problem and the burden for interrupting it belongs to white people” (p. 66), years of research have documented that whites tend to have trouble understanding situations that operate outside of their experience (Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005; Matias et al., 2014). So, researchers of Color have been encouraged to be bold and courageous in exposing and decolonizing America’s racially biased and structural inequities, and to highlight various ways that POC can heal from racial trauma (Cohen-Chen & Van Zomeren, 2018; hooks, 1990, 1995; Gay, 1994; Ginwright, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Mosley et al., 2020; Sabzalian, 2019).

Black scholars, in particular, tend to bring a reverent passion toward researching issues of anti-Black racism because they have experiential knowledge they can draw from (Milner, 2007). “Care within the black community is as much a political act as it is a personal gesture because it requires that the relationship prepare black youth to confront racism and view their personal trauma as a result of systemic social problems” (Ginwright, 2010, p. 84). Doing so, according to French et al. (2020), serves as “an act of resistance” (pg. 27) against oppression and racial injustice, and “dares to subvert the mind/body split and allows us to be whole in the classroom and as a consequence, wholehearted” (hooks, 1994, p. 193). Black researchers also have what Grinage (2019) calls a potential for “black racial bonding” (p. 234), which quickly builds trust, empathy and reciprocity with the subjects being studied. What’s more, Black adults and other culturally nurturing mentors who work with Black youth are better suited to deliver culturally based interventions, noted Herman (1998), “as recovery can take place only within the context of relationships” (p. 145). Research has documented that individuals

who are invalidated by a racially based microaggression are more likely to experience depression, anxiety or other mental health problems (Nadal et al., 2014). So, to counteract the resulting impact, Johnson et. al. (2017) recommends adults who do emancipatory work with Black youth adopt a "pedagogy of love" (p. 1), which "can simultaneously reinvent realities and make new realities imaginable" (Ohito, 2019, p. 20). The original idea of using an ethic of love to reeducate POC is credited to Freire (1970), who considered it an essential ingredient to any liberatory-focused pedagogy. Darder (2003) interprets this methodology as "lively, forceful and inspiring, while at the same time, critical, challenging and insistent" (p. 497), while hooks (1990) defines this intention as critical pedagogical love, based on care, commitment, trust, respect and cultural knowledge.

A step up from pedagogical love is what hooks (1990) defines as critical pedagogical love, which is based on care, commitment, trust, respect and cultural knowledge. Prefacing frameworks with the word "critical," as with the word "radical," often reflect an intention of urgency for something to change and a promise of delivering a metaphorical medicine that is potentially transformational. Hooks challenges programs that work with Black youth "to create space where one can redeem and reclaim the past legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality" (1990, p. 147). However, she adds, Black youth must be provided a space at the margins, or outside of dominant institutions, in order to be allowed even the possibility of recognizing their potential for emotional emancipation. That's because anywhere where structural ideologies about race are allowed permission

to enter, Black youth are potentially in danger – physically, mentally, and emotionally (Hoffman et al., 2016; hooks, 1990, 1995; Mowatt, 2017). One tragic example of this reality was when 12-year-old Tamir Rice was killed in a public park in 2014, within seconds of the arrival of a 26-year-old, patrol officer, who saw Rice handling a toy gun.

> Tamir Rice was a threat in the park, he was a threat prior to the park, and he would be a threat in the future. But also, it is not just that Tamir Rice was/is a threat; it is every youth who resembles him and as a result, every youth conjures the same need to call upon state sanctioned social control and violence. (Mowatt, 2017, p. 57)

I Am MORE's pedagogy unapologetically focuses on Black youth, exposes them to the cultural wealth of the Black community, and incorporates cultural forms of creativity, which are tied to all four aspects of resiliency: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose (Henderson et al., 2007). As only 6.3 percent of American's K-12 teachers are Black (Taie & Goldring, 2020), I Am MORE's success within a school setting would be dependent upon a teacher core of mostly white women whose social imaginations, research confirms, perceive Black children to be older and less innocent than their white peers (Dancy, 2014; Goff et al., 2014). Gaertner and Dovidio (2006) also maintain that even whites who do not consider themselves to be racist, still hold anti-Black biases that can erupt unconsciously and contribute to the undermining of Black children. Their world view, therefore, puts Black schoolchildren at a greater risk of being subjected to continuous judgment (Dumas & Nelson, 2016) and dehumanization (Coles, 2020; Sealey-Ruiz & Green, 2015), which is

far more dangerous than racial discrimination, according to Dumas and Nelson (2016), because it is "a construction of the Other as not human, as less than human, and therefore undeserving of the emotional and moral recognition accorded to those whose shared humanity is understood" (p. 29). Dumas and Nelson (2016) believe that white society's interpretation of Black children is a relic from chattel slavery, when toddlers "were severely punished for exhibiting normal childlike behaviors. We contend that this imagination of Black children still holds" (p. 33-34). Once schools allow Black youth to fully act like children, the researchers continue, "It is only then that teachers and administrators can begin to understand their play and silliness is not a threat to be disciplined away" (2016, p. 41).

Critical Consciousness

The idea of critical consciousness leading to individual and collective resistance was first promoted by Freire (1970), who was jailed for a short time for his efforts to develop a literacy campaign in Brazil. He believed that when adult laborers ignored, overlooked or internalized the reasons that led to their generational poverty, their intentional ignorance fueled their continued oppression. His pedagogy of critical consciousness encouraged laborers to take a critical look at their social conditions, which quickly generated a sense of agency to make a change, which then led to their critical action (1970). "Freire literacy was not a means to prepare students for the world of subordinated labor or 'careers', but a preparation for a self-managed life" (Aronowitz, 2009, p. ix). In the last few years, Black psychologists adopted a similar framework of critical consciousness as a way to help Black youth stop idealizing whiteness and to

motivate them to challenge oppression (Hope et al., 2020). Research documents that Black youth who are exposed to critical consciousness learn to reframe an anti-Black encounter from being a personal misfortune to representing part of a pattern of systemic oppression. It also helps Black youth differentiate between three primary expressions of racism: *institutional* (e.g., disproportionate school discipline of Black students)*, interpersonal* (e.g., a teacher's microaggression) and *internalized*, (e.g., preference for long, straight hair or lighter skin). Critical consciousness is also found to have a positive effect on academic achievement (Gay, 2000), school attendance, test scores, and graduation rates (Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2016; Ginwright, 2010; Mediratta et al., 2008) and intentions to attend college (Rogers & Terriquez, 2013). Contemporary research also confirms that Youth of Color whose awareness is raised about structural racism *(critical analysis),* and who are taught they have capacity to change social inequality *(critical agency)* tend to increase their internal motivation to resist injustice (*critical action*). However, very few American youth-development programs, even ones led by Black people, provide critical consciousness programming.

Social Justice Action

Youth-led action research, evaluation and planning is a strategy that provides young people with an opportunity to work with adults to learn critical inquiry, reflection and action in order to challenge the realities of their world. This process respects and empowers youth as co-researchers, especially if they are allowed to define their own questions, create measurement instruments, participate in data collection and analysis, and collaboratively plan how they will share their findings. Youth-led social action also

has psychosocial benefits, as it helps strengthen their critical thinking, public speaking, writing and planning (Sabo Flores, 2008). Political theorist Antonio Gramsci describes this process as one that produces "organic intellectuals" (Filippini & Barr, 2017).

The concept of youth as researchers, first referenced as youth participatory action research (YPAR), was eagerly embraced by the international community in the 1970s, and slowly edged its way into the United States in 2000 (Sabo Flores, 2008). Researchers experimented with new methodologies after discovering its potential to raise the consciousness and spirit of youth (Sabo Flores, 2008; Wang & Burris, 1997). Strategies were designed to build youth leadership (Camino & Zeldin, 1999), and increase youths' capacity to become social change agents (Camino, 1992; James & McGillicuddy, 2001). Scholars considered the use of YPAR as a social-justice activity that can provide a focused form of resistance that can lead to transformation (Cammarata & Fine, 2008; Solórzano & Degado-Bernal, 2001) within society and within youth. YPAR can also "awaken them to community conditions, enable them to reflect upon the root causes of problems, and motivate them to take action in a civil society" (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003, p. 23). YPAR emerged out of the philosophies of transformative participatory evaluation (Brisolara, 1998; Cousins & Witmore, 1998), which is rooted in empowering oppressed individuals and groups to create and respect their own knowledge by defining problems, gathering information and using the results to elicit social and policy changes, and positive youth development. Over time, this helped youth-development leaders move away from considering young people as deficit-laden troublemakers who needed to be rescued, to viewing youth as keepers of

wisdom who have a fundamental right to engage in shaping programs, policies and systems that affect them or are designed to serve them (Camino, 1992; Sabo Flores, 2008; Sandercock, 1998). The literature shows that Youth of Color, in particular, enthusiastically engage in social-justice actions that matter most to them (Checkoway, 2009; Delgado & Staples, 2009; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Ginwright, 2010; Irby et al., 1999; London et al., 2003; Noguera et al., 2003). But their options to engage in YPAR are typically limited to programs outside of school and within community-based organizations that don't always allow Black students to focus on counteracting anti-Blackness (Checkoway, 2013). In 2002, San Francisco-based Youth in Focus developed a YPAR-based resource to specifically serve more YOC. It combines youth-led research, evaluation and planning (Youth REP) as a way to "shift and heal the relationships between youth and adults (London et al., 2003, p. 44).

Critical social justice action is considered as a deed of self-preservation (Hope & Spencer, 2017). Ginwright (2010) frames it as a political act, as it "builds hope, political consciousness and the willingness to act on behalf of the common good" (p. 56). However, contemporary research has not always provided a straight line from analysis to agency to action. Lozada et al. (2017), for example, reported that social-emotional skills were the mediator between critical reflection and critical action. Hope and critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2009), characterized as a "rose that grew from concrete" (Shakur, 1999), have also been identified as essential motivators for youth to engage in critical civic action (Freire, 1997; Wilson et al., 2005). This intention also requires a collaborative ingredient: Racially conscious adults willing to create an empowering and

welcoming environment for Black youth (Jennings et al., 2006). That is because much of the potential of YPAR's impact depends on whether its design is structured to be youth-led or adult-led, and whether youth are allowed an active and meaningful influence in the research projects. When youth are actively engaged in the decision making, it also enhances adults' "sense of personal efficacy and belonging" (Sabo Flores, 2008, p. 12).

Arts and Creativity

Arts-based research (ABR), a term that was coined in 1993 (Barone & Eisner, 2012), has been credited with expanding the borders of social scientific research (Leavy, 2015). It is generally considered to be an evolving, practice-based methodology that combines art and science to generate information data based on "resonance" (Leavy, 2015, p. 3), and "knowing, doing and making (Pinar, 2004, p. 9).

> ABR offers ways to tap into what would otherwise be inaccessible, make connections and interconnections that are otherwise out of reach, ask and answer new research questions, explore old research questions in new ways and represent research differently, more often effectively with respect to reaching broad audiences and nonacademic stakeholders. (Leavy, 2015, p. 21)

Although decades of researchers have acknowledged ABR as a legitimate approach, it lacks an even strategy of application (Coemans & Hannes, 2017), or even a consistent name. ABR is often referenced in the literature as arts-informed education, image-based research, photovoice, theatre of the oppressed, and a variety of other terms. It is considered a particularly useful methodology when working with young people and other vulnerable populations (Green & Kloos, 2009; Ho et al., 2011) because

it provides a safe space to talk about sensitive issues (Feldman et al., 2013), and is "fundamentally transformative in its very essence" (Bloom, 1997, p. 26). Scholars note that it is "crucial" more arts-based research (ABR), especially those involving underrepresented groups, report methodological reflection of their processes, in order to inform other researchers (Lee & De Finney, 2005; Rydzik et al., 2013). In addition, until YOC engage in more storytelling that raises the critical consciousness of peers and adults, spirit-murdering becomes a shameful secret that individuals believe is happening only to them. Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her well-acclaimed TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," argued that a multiplicity of voices helps prevent POC from being reduced to mere stereotypes. "Stories have been used to dispossess and malign. But stories can also be used to empower and to humanize" (Adichie, 2009).

> I don't realize it myself until I talk to someone, especially my white peers. They don't realize what we would go through*: "Oh my gosh, that happened to you?"* But for me it'd be like, that's pretty normal. And it's kind of horrifying how we've normalized the violence. Like internalized it, you know? One of the lines I repeat in my head and I realize how bad it is. It's like: *"It's gonna happen. I'm not white. I'm going to get discriminated against" (personal interview, March 2, 2021)*

As this research project has the potential to generate new insights, my intention was to use arts-based research, such as performances during our Resiliency in Rhythm events in 2020 and 2021, as both a data collection and a dissemination technique. This approach allows images, dance or poetry, for example, to replace some of the traditional report writing (Foster, 2012), as the art forms already translate the

information outside the binary of traditional qualitative approaches, offering a more nuanced understanding of the experiences being studied (Coemans & Hannes, 2017). Creative performances also have the potential to rouse an emotional response from the artist and the audience member. As an art form, storytelling can also "illuminate, educate, transform or emancipate" (Leavy, 2015, p. 273). It offers a way of making meaning and has a unique ability to deconstruct and critique complex issues that are difficult to express (Holgate et al., 2012), while narrating both personal and societal experiences (Brewington & Hall, 2018). ABR storytelling, in particular, serves as an expression of cultural analysis because it represents how youth think evaluatively about their life circumstances (House & Howe, 1999; Thompson-Robinson et al., 2004). This approach also allows for collection of data that are more interesting because it captures first-hand and poignant moments (Kaptani & Yuval-Davis, 2008). This qualitative process also has the potential to unearth issues that might have been hidden or on the periphery using traditional methods (Howe, 2009).

In this proposed study, my ABR process will also be filtered through a BlackCrit lens, and will reflect four purposes, identified by Solórzano and Yosso (2002): Youth can: (a) Build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice; (b) Challenge society's perceived wisdom and provide a context to understand and transform established belief systems; (c) Start to see possibilities beyond the ones they live; and (d) Provide a context to understand and transform established belief systems (p. 36; 156). McKean (2006) also describes three types of transformation that occur when using ABR methodology: The

participants' *personal transformation*, which includes increased confidence and a sense of well-being (Clover, 2011); *audience transformation*, where the audience gains new insights on a particular issue (Feldman et al., 2013); and *institutional transformation,* which involves policy change (Sutton-Brown, 2011).

The I Am MORE framework focuses on two of the three forms of potential transformation: *personal* and *audience;* and it connects the storytelling and counterstorytelling elements to African oral history traditions, such as using songs, performing arts, and cultural artifacts to share wisdom or philosophies (Ilmi, 2015). Pedagogy for Black youth that is informed by this African cultural context is a "liberating and healing antidote" (Johnson et al., 2019, p. 57) because it interlaces African and African American ways of being as "complex and vibrant rather than problematic and pathological" (p. 57). In addition, narrative storytelling can empower young people to become change agents (Heise, 2014) and can reframe their focus toward hope instead of despair. This reframing helps heal the internalized oppression of Black youth and redirects them toward becoming willing actors in social change (Ginwright, 2015).

> ABR offers ways to tap into what would otherwise be inaccessible, make connections and interconnections that are otherwise out of reach, ask and answer new research questions, explore old research questions in new ways and represent research differently, often more effectively with respect to reaching broad audiences and nonacademic stakeholders. (Leavy, 2015, p. 21)

In addition, the inclusion of ABR in a project design also creates an opportunity for participatory engagement between youth storytellers and adults, which provides

positive benefits for both groups (Mattingly, 2001). "What is ultimately most significant to dialogue is not the talking by the marginalized, but the hearing by the dominant group" (Jones, 2004, p. 65). That's because personal stories can stir emotions, promote dialogue and engender empathy amongst the listeners, which is a precursor to prepare someone to challenge their own stereotypes (Leavy, 2015, p. 26). Stories can also guide the adult listeners toward changing their perceptions of the youth storyteller from being broken and impoverished to strong and resilient (Fosl, 2008). By listening to youth voices, adults also help youth develop and strengthen their own resiliency. "While there is no way to compensate for an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it, by making it a gift to others" (Herman, 1998, p. 149).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

From its founding, American society has been socially constructed to favor whiteness (Roediger, 1994). The generations of tyranny against African Americans caused them to lose touch with their ancestral roots and they were, therefore, demarcated by a system that was designed and intended to oppress them (DeGruy, 2017; French et al., 2020). "At a deep level, white people are believed to be biologically and morally pure, and, therefore, closer to the divine, the holy" (Ponds, 2013, p. 23). The effects of white supremacy, which is defined as "the systemic and historical privileging of whites' collective interests, accomplishments, values, beliefs" (Hayes & Juárez, 2012, p. 2) is "intimately linked to the subordination and oppression of people of color" (Hyland, 2015, p. 431). And, systemic racism is designed to advantage whites, whether or not they are aware of or desire the privileges they receive (DiAngelo, 2011; Hulteen & Wallis, 1992). As anti-Blackness has been embedded within U.S. laws, societal rules serve as both "a product and promoter of racism" (Matsuda, 1996, p. 22). And racial discrimination is as much an issue today as it was during the Civil Rights era (Patchter et al., 2010) and both Blacks and whites are "less likely now than in the past to think that civil rights have improved" (Jones, 2020, para. 5).

"Racism has run like poison through the blood of American society…And since that beginning, America and Americans have invested much in denying it" (DeGruy, 2017, p. 12). Grills et al. (2016) characterize racial oppression as being rooted in "the lie of Black inferiority" which was used to "justify the enslavement, colonization, and subjugation of

African people" (p. 333). The psychological effects of chattel slavery, which was remarkably more inhumane than the world's previous forms of slavery, (DeGruy, 2017), have never been remedied, "nor did the traumas cease" (p. 100), "exacting a wound on the African American psyche that continues to fester" (p. 97). Notes Alexander (2012): "Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries" (p. 336). The literature has documented the cumulative, traumatic effects of generations of anti-Black racism. This culturally unique history has created ongoing marginalization and has prevented upward socioeconomic mobility (Reuf & Fletcher, 2004). Even wealthy Blacks experience high levels of stress and anxiety associated with and caused by racism (Bennett et al., 2004). And as Black people's psychic connections with other Black people "frequently trumps everything else" (DeGruy, 2017, p. 19), when Black people witness, watch videos or hear about the deaths of unarmed Black people at the hands of police officers, the incident can contribute to a collectively shared memory of that trauma (Grills et al., 2016), even though they have not directly experienced the event (Bloom, 1997), which is also an emotional reflection of Black people's ancestral connection to Ubuntu. Compounded by other anti-Black interactions, the resulting grief and suffering is nearly unceasing. "When black people attempt to mourn, new losses often emerge before they can process the old ones" (Grinage, 2019, p. 228), which traps them within "constant states of injury and rendering them fundamentally broken" (p. 229).

In some cases, maladaptive coping responses can include unhealthy eating, sleep impairment, paranoia and alcohol and drug use (Grills et al. 2016), and its effects are

similar to posttraumatic stress disorder (PSTD), such as nightmares, avoidance, suspicion, hypervigilance to a threat and flashbacks (Comas-Díaz, Hall & Neville, 2019). When responses become internalized, they can show up as prolonged grief, self-hatred, and aggression (Jackson et al., 2010); disconnection, internalized shame and hidden rage (Hardy, 2013); and helplessness and frustration (Gump, 2010). Carter et al. (2005) termed these persistent psychological reactions as results of "race-based traumatic stress." DeGruy (2005) was the first to name a similar condition she termed "Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome," a consequence of centuries of American chattel slavery, followed by persistent and ongoing institutionalized racism and oppression. The cumulative effects of that assiduous trauma pose "one of the greatest threats to positive health outcomes for Black people" (Kaholokula, 2016), because racism "remains a suffocating blanket that does not allow them to breathe" (Grills et al., 2016, p. 333).

Additionally, political white conservatives, framing a narrative of Blacks as "pathological" and "predatory," have seeded "an elaborate contextual setting up" (Wilson, 2002, p. 51) that has acclimatized "a societal mind-set that tolerates and perpetuates injustices in education, employment, housing, health care, law enforcement, land use, child welfare, transportation and nearly all other aspects of life" (Grills et al., 2016, p. 333). Those injustices help proliferate poverty, disinvestment and negligence, which can fertilize other traumas, such as sexual and mental abuse, physical and emotional neglect, and family dysfunction, which also contribute to Black children being placed into foster care due to their exposure to violence. These pervasive forces also create an ideal breeding ground for chronic stress and can pollinate community

violence and peer victimization (Evans, 2004; Evans & English, 2002). Wilson (2002) maintains that anti-Blackness is at the root of all these issues. "Inner city black lives in this presenting seemed expendable, a people who agreed through choice to dwell in dangerous, self-made cultures and terrains" (p. 51).

Black Teens Most Impacted by Racism

Black teenagers are statistically the demographic youth group most likely to experience trauma (Cronholm et al., 2015; Goldmann et al., 2011), in society (Pincus, 1996) and in schools, which, as socializing institutions and places of cultural hegemony, replicate damaging systems of oppression (Benner et al., 2018; Love, 2019). So, racial trauma becomes a normative experience (Lanier et al., 2016), when Black youth are at a critical, analytical time in their development. Hughes, Watford & Del Toro (2016) notes that "adolescence is a period during which racial knowledge becomes more intricate, due both to changes occurring within adolescents and to changes occurring in how others perceive and relate to them" (2016, p. 4). It's also during this stage of life when Black youth, who are trying to figure out how they fit in with their peers, start to recognize that "anti-Blackness organizes the social context of their lives" (Coles, 2020, p. 2). Black high school students, for example, are suspended far more often than their white counterparts and often punished more severely for similar misdeeds (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). This race-based disparity in discipline rates is a symptom of a deficit-based approach that fixates on the person as the source of a problem that needs to be repaired (Benson & Fiarman, 2020). "If adults were to stop viewing young people as something to be fixed and controlled and instead, helped enable their development,

there would be phenomenal change in their lives and society in general" (Portner, 1994, p. 31). Instead, schools have become ripe soil for "black suffering" (Dumas, 2014).

> For many of them, schools ignore their aspirations, disrespect their ability to learn, fail to access and cultivate their many talents, and impose a restrictive range of their options. Within this overwhelming oppressive schooling context, too many Black boys simply give up-beaten by school systems that place little value on who they are and what they offer (Davis, 2008, p. 533).

Schools' patterns of pathological conditioning perpetuate psychic trauma, fertilizes low self-esteem, and contributes to a negative self-identity for Black students (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tatum, 2003). Even schools and school districts that enthusiastically embrace social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed (T-I) strategies often neglect to acknowledge how anti-Black racism breeds trauma (Grinage, 2019; Legette et al., 2020). And when Black students are not provided greater sociopolitical and racial context for why schools and society are so generally unwelcoming, efforts to individually soothe their encounters with racial injustice through SEL and T-I practices equates to what national SEL expert Dena Simmons calls "white supremacy with a hug" (as cited in Madda, 2019, para. 10). Research on social-psychological interventions have demonstrated that even brief interventions that target students' subjective thoughts, feelings and beliefs can yield impressive short- and long-term academic and psychological benefits, particularly for students of color (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Crenshaw (2015) and Dumas and Nelson (2016) have urgently called for innovative research frameworks that use counter

storytelling to reflect the nuances of Black students' experiences and offer them a voice in the design, implementation and analysis of programs designed to serve them.

A Cultural Mismatch

For decades, educational scholars have made definitive connections between racial trauma and low academic achievement (Alim & Paris, 2015; Banks, 1984; Bell, 1980; Dumas, 2014; Gay, 1994; Hardy & Laszloffy, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Nieto, 1996). Murell (2009) notes that academic achievement is "much less a matter of an individual's disidentification with school and more a matter of the school context's disidentification with the student" (p. 97), and a lack of acknowledgement about their racial context. "African American students cannot trust teachers who lie to them about racism, ignore Black achievements, gloss over slavery and segregation, or confine the study of Black history and culture to Black History Month" (Thompson, 1998, p. 540). According to researchers, one of the core reasons why the educational system isn't working for Black students is because the teaching workforce is comprised mostly of white, middle-class women (King, 1991; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). This situation creates what Irvine (1990) called an absence of "cultural synchronization" which inevitably influences teachers' judgments about the way Black students verbally express themselves (Ferguson, 2001), the way they wear their hair (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018), and even the way Black males move through the school hallways (Neal et al., 2003). "To be clear, the insidious and daily instances of dehumanizing teaching practices and the lack of love continue to damage Black youth across all geographical spaces" (Johnson et al., 2019, p. 47). King (1991) coined this subconscious bias against

Black children as “dyconscious racism,” which is considered “an uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (p. 135). These subjective verdicts about Black children, wrapped in a “deficit imagery” (Johnson et al., 2019), allow educators, with almost unrestrained impunity, to treat Black students as an “other,” and therefore “undeserving of the emotional and moral recognition accorded to those whose shared humanity is understood” (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 29). Ladson-Billings (2009) asked: “How can teachers who see African American students as mere descendants of slaves be expected to inspire them to educational, economic, and social levels that may even exceed their own” (p. 36).

Johnson et al. (2019) characterizes the attempts of educators – from all ethnic groups – who celebrate multiculturalism or diversity without including a discussion of historical oppression equates to “fake love” (p. 1). This gives teachers permission to “avoid any actions that put caring into practice, as the object of compassion exists primarily within an imaginary realm” (Matias & Zembylas, 2014, p. 321). Some scholars also question whether teachers’ declarations of benign emotions, such as caring, empathy or pity, when translated through whiteness ideology, are really racialized feelings of loathing and disgust for children of color (Ahmed, 2004; Matias & Zembylas, 2014). Johnson et al. (2019) links the bodily violence that Black children might experience in their neighborhoods to the dehumanizing emotional violence they are encountering in school. “Every day, Black youth are exiting our nation’s classrooms with metaphorical broken arms and dislocated shoulders and with bruised hearts and

wounded souls. And yet, the adults in their lives continue to expect students to keep entering these combat zones" (Johnson et al., 2019, p. 47).

Racism has Impact on Youths' Health

Black adolescents are at a stage in their cognitive development where they begin to better recognize racism (Hughes et al., 2016), which can be experienced as a sudden crisis or as an ongoing threat (Ponds, 2013). The constant threat of harm can become a source of chronic worry (Rucker et al., 2010), harming their psychological well-being (Benner et al., 2018; Grills et al., 2016; Seaton & Iida, 2019) and causing anxiety and depression well into adulthood (Assari et al., 2017a; Assari et al., 2017b). The mental impact can also lead to emotional numbing and sleep issues (Rich, 2009) and cause Black teens to be more susceptible to internalized shame and self-hatred, disconnection and hidden rage (Hardy, 2012). Their heart wounds also negatively impact physical health (Brody et al., 2014; Felitti et al., 1998; Williams et al., 2019), and their propensity to be low income (Smith et al., 2013). The resulting deep-seated challenges can also have long-lasting and cascading negative effects on youths' well-being (Masten, 2014); affect executive functioning (Shonkoff et al., 2009); and seed emotional, cognitive, health and behavioral challenges (Shonkoff et al., 2012), which "can hinder children's development, health, behavior, and school performance and thus their life trajectories" (McEwen & Gregerson, 2019, p. 791). What's more, individual and collective experiences with racism also can breed fatalism and indifference toward oneself and others, and stimulate an impulse to take anger out on others, including killing other Black youth through gun violence (DeGruy, 2005, 2017; Ginwright, 2010; Rich, 2009).

Notes Love (2019), “the very basic idea of mattering is sometimes hard to conceptualize when your country finds you disposable” (p. 2).

Ecological Systems Ignore Black Experiences

Black youth-development roadblocks are often blamed on the individual, rather than the racially biased systems. Black scholars have noted that even organizations designed to build self-identity, self-concept and self-esteem rarely acknowledge society’s anti-Black structures that influence and undermine the healthy development of Black youth (Camino, 1992; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2017; Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2008; Shorten, 2010; Zukin et al., 2006). In addition, a majority of youth-development-related research has evaluated the lived experiences of youth through a white, middle-class, perspective (Roediger, 1994), and has often emphasized the voices of program leaders or parents at the expense of youth perspectives. The modern youth development (YD) theory, for example, is when youth have the right amount of community assets, such as school and family support, and individual resources, such as a sense of purpose (Leffert et al., 1998), that young person will become a successful adult. This theory and others filter knowledge through the lens of whiteness ideology, which reinforces stereotypes (Frankenberg, 1993), ignores the potential presence of Black youth within social research (Leavy, 2015), or deems Black youth to be “at risk” if they don’t measure up (Theriault & Dunlap, 2013). This philosophical disconnect may unintentionally perpetuate the very issues that sparked a need for radical healing programs (Dumas & Nelson, 2016).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) was the first American to outline an ecological systems theory, which considers how individuals are influencing and being influenced by at least four interconnected layers of social systems. However, when each of those interconnected systems are layered with historical and structural racial oppression, its cumulative physical, social, emotional and psychological impacts are passed down from generation to generation (Evans-Campbell, 2008). Because of the absence of racial context in Bronfenbrenner's theory, scholars of Color are discovering racial dissimilarities (Hong et al., 2021). Black children "need their own theoretical framework that can articulate their position and trajectory in the world drawing on and accounting for pre- and post-enslavement experiences while capturing spiritual, psychological, social, educational development and station" (Bush & Bush, 2013, p. 1-2).

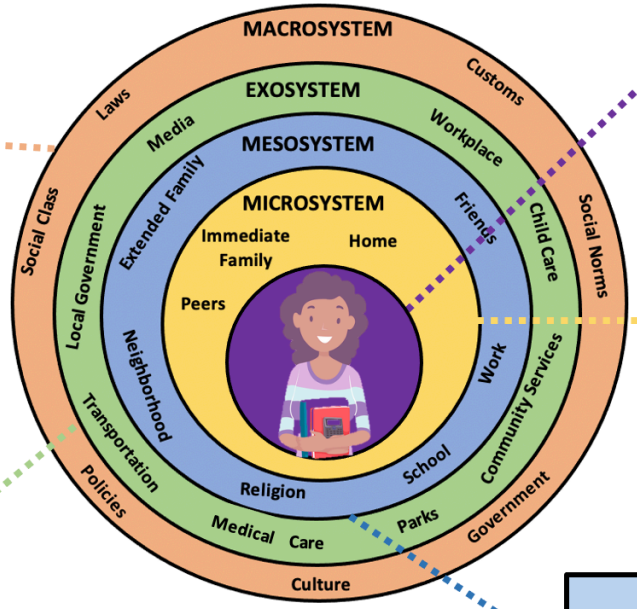
Partly in response to what I interpreted as Bush and Bush's call to action, I revised Bronfenbrenner's structure to highlight research findings about how Black children, in particular, are specifically negatively impacted by each of the ecological systems Bronfenbrenner identified (See Figure 3). This updated, cultural framework also confirms the need for a new narrative that doesn't focus so much on what still needs to be fixed, but on a (re)membering of African's descendants' cultural resilience that existed before, during and after the triangular, trans-Atlantic slave trade route. This perilous journey, called the Middle Passage, was used to steal, sell and trade up to 12 million African men, women and children, during the 16th to 18 centuries. It's a cultural(re)membering of the ancestral resilience required to survive that journey and then (re)create a life in America despite generations of intentional, anti-Black

Figure 3.

Bronfenbrenner Bioecological Model of Human Development
Through the Lens of an African American Experience

MACROSYSTEM
Society, laws, customs and policies are socially constructed to favor whiteness and justify racial oppression in the lie of Black inferiority. Government engages in financial disinvestment, negligence and injustice in employment, housing, health care, law enforcement, land use, child welfare, transportation, and privatization of public services. Gentrification disrupts historically Black neighborhoods. Prisons serve as free labor.

EXOSYSTEM
Anti-Black messages are perpetuated in media. Black families work more hours and earn less. Schools lack sufficient resources. Affordable child-care centers are limited. Community services provided from deficit lens (*reduce violence, increase academic achievement*) that reinforces stereotypes. Bias of medical care providers contributes to health disparities. Absence or underfunding of community-based, culturally specific services. Limited access to safe, neighborhood parks. Over-reliance on public transportation.



Adapted from Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979).

Sources: Alim & Paris, 2015; Assari et al., 2017; Bennett et al., 2004; Brody et al., 2014; Carter et al., 2005; Coles, 2020; Comas-Díaz; Davis, 2008; DeGruy, 2017; Dumas, 2014; Evans, 2004; Hall & Neville, 2019; French et al., 2020; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2009; Gym 1994; Grills et al., 2016; Grinage, 2019; Gump, 2010; Hardy, 2013; Hyland, 2015; Jackson et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2019; Kaholokula, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Legette et al., 2020; Love, 2019; Masten, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017; Reuf & Fletcher, 2004; Roediger, 1994; Rucker et al., 2010; Shonkoff et al., 2012; Tatum, 2003; Williams et al., 2019; Wilson, 2002.

INDIVIDUAL
Anti-blackness organizes the social context of each Black child's life. *Impacts:* Prolonged grief, self-hatred, shame, hidden rage, aggression, helplessness, frustration. Also breeds unhealthy eating, sleep impairment, paranoia, alcohol & drug use, fatalism, nightmares, hypervigilance to threats.

MICROSYSTEM
Race based traumatic stress intensifies. Grief from repeated Black death. Poverty. Police bias. Family dysfunction breeds child abuse, sexual and physical abuse, divorce. Neighborhoods lack safe places to play. Subconscious racial bias of white educators make schools "a site of Black suffering." Activates school to prison pipeline.

MESOSYSTEM
Gang violence & peer victimization. Family dysfunction shuttles Black children toward a culturally deficit foster care system. Racially disproportionate health issues lead to higher death and infant mortality rates. Lack of connection to neighborhood and friends because of gentrification leads to depression and disconnection.

I AM M.O.R.E.
Making Ourselves Resilient Everyday

destabilization that will help support Black youth in deflecting America's spirit-murdering attempts to undermine the humanity of Black people (Dillard, 2012; Feelings, 1995). "[I]f this part of history could be told in such a way that those chains of the past...could, in the telling, become spiritual links that willingly bind us together now and into the future, then that painful Middle Passage could become, ironically, a positive connecting line to all of us, whether living inside or outside the continent of Africa" (Feelings, 1995, p. ii). This perspective, though, requires "deepening our understandings of who we really are as African ascendants by wrestling and wandering within and through the past and seeing its traces on our lives today" (Dillard, 2012, p. 111).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Evolution of I Am MORE

As the youth founders of I Am MORE identified as Black, they encouraged other African and African American students, male and female, to participate in I Am MORE programming. However, as a teacher at the most diverse high school in Oregon, I also invited Asian, Latinx, Middle Eastern and white students to engage in our programming and storytelling performances. Throughout the last half of the 2018-19 school year, the ethnically and gender diverse group of students were provided meaningful engagement with supportive adult mentors, lessons on social-emotional skill building, writing workshops and often-paid opportunities to co-facilitate trauma-informed trainings for adults or publicly share their personal stories at school events and in numerous public spaces. During the summer of 2019, a little more than six months after we began, I Am MORE hit two significant milestones: 1) It was awarded a $5,000 grant from a NYC-based educational foundation; and 2) I Am MORE youth were invited to be highlighted at the opening ceremony of a 3rd annual, trauma-informed conference in Philadelphia. By that time, most of the cadre of performers had been on a stage only once or twice. The greater community donated money to pay hotel, travel and food expenses for six youth and two adults. One student, a Latino male, couldn't take the East Coast trip because he was concerned about leaving his Mexican-born mother and siblings, for fear they might be deported in his absence. So, three young people – a Hmong female, an African American female and an African immigrant male – performed at the conference

opening and earned a standing ovation from over 500 attendees. The next day, with standing-room-only capacity, I Am MORE facilitated a workshop on trauma-informed practices from a youth's perspective. Written evaluation responses from workshop attendees reflected an understanding of how their own trauma shows up in their interactions with all children. Here are three samples of comments, which were posted on the I Am MORE website:

> *"I learned that I need to understand and respond to my own trauma backpack before working with my young people. Thank you so much. Your work has been the highlight of this conference for me and exactly met my needs for serving my community and students in a more compassionate and meaningful way."*

> *"I learned how our own trauma completely affects our parenting. We need to be aware of how we are feeling or bringing into a room or home, because we can transfer our energy to those people."*

> *I was so impressed by the presenters and what they brought to the space. The training provided some great tools to recognize trauma in children and how to engage them in a way to work through it."*

Since this trip was the first time any of the six youth had been on the East Coast, we extended the excursion and visited New York City, where we took a horse-driven carriage ride around Central Park; a sight-seeing ferry to Ellis Island, and shopped on Fifth Avenue. We ended the 6-day trip in Washington, D.C., where we visited the White House, the Capital and the Ronald Reagan building, and spent hours in the National

Museum of African American History and Culture, which was the first time any of the youth had ever visited a museum that focused solely on Black experiences.

> *That trip was the first trip I've taken out of Oregon and my second airplane ride. So it was very new. And it was really different because I've never been in hotels before either. I've never been in a populated area...And that experience, it felt like we were on a tour. The energy there was really energetic. Everyone's happy. Everyone was excited. And we were there for more than a business type. It was for fun too.* (personal interview, March 5, 2021).

The two adult chaperones, myself and another experienced educator and teaching artist, did group check-ins to see how everyone was feeling, review what they were learning and to have everyone acknowledge something they were grateful for. On the last night, we sat around a large firepit on the roof of a Washington, D.C. apartment complex, with a stunning view of the lighted Senate building. Eventually, the conversation became emotional as youth shared their I Am MORE healing journey.

> *It just made it seem like, you know, I was at a place where I'm safe and I can be myself. Like, I know a lot of people's emotions really came out those couple of days. Like I was telling stuff that I never thought would ever let anybody else other than my family members know. That was one of my favorite trips with I Am MORE. That was like the second time I performed as well.* (personal interview, March 23, 2021)

Exposing students to social justice activism is also a signature seed in I Am MORE's Garden of Emotional Emancipation**.** Hope et al., (2020) encourages researchers

to continue to explore how to motivate youth to be "agents of social change" (p. 8). I Am MORE layers social justice activism with a culturally sustaining pedagogy that is intended to provide youth with sufficient context to identify and evaluate any oppressive variables that might be at play. This framing of critical consciousness that motivates social action establishes the potential to create a transformational counternarrative for youth who are marginalized and disenfranchised because of structural and racially based social barriers (Checkoway, 2013; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2009).

Description of Intervention

Since I Am MORE has never been evaluated for its fidelity of programming since its founding in late November 2018, I wanted to document and evaluate the effects of I Am MORE programming, specifically on Black youth. I also wanted this study to respond to the challenge by Bush and Bush (2013) for Black researchers to create "our own theoretical framework" (p. 1) that acknowledges the breadth of African people's pre- and post-colonized experiences and the various threads that create the quilt of who Black people are and will become, generations from now. So, in the ancestral spirit of griots that (re)tell our stories so that "people will know our truth" (Jackson, 2002, p. 3), this qualitative research project uses a critical narrative approach to capture the cultural truths of Black people. This research study is phenomenological, which looks at the lived individual experiences of youth who went through I Am MORE programming since it was first created, through "their voice. Their journey. Their lived experience" (Rocio, 2020, p. 7). It is also ethnographic, which focuses on the collective experiences of the

community of youth who participated in the programming, the adults who served as witnesses to their own interactions with I Am MORE, the collection of artifacts from our brochures, official website, videos, artistic performances, audience evaluations, as well as my own observations. As noted by Fetterman (1998), the ethnographic approach is similar to the observing, interviewing, researching of artifacts, analyzing and writing process done by many professional journalists. This study's research, though, is both a product and a process, a (re)membering and a calling forth in order to "gather sufficient and sufficiently accurate data to feel confident about research findings and to convince others of their accuracy" (Fetterman, 1998, p. 10). This research process is also considered a transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) because it centers the insights of the participants, rather than depending solely on a researcher's interpretation (Klassen et al., 2012). Its potentially transformative process allows knowledge to increase because when youth tell stories and are allowed to reflect on their words "the stories (they) tell change the way (they) act in the world" (Geiger & Sorber, 2013, p. 349).

Over its first two years, I Am MORE's intervention organically and progressively evolved from a performance- and mentoring-based empowerment program to a three-step, cumulative process that is intended to change the lives and perspectives of YOC by helping them reclaim their ancestral wisdom, heal their own broken hearts and invigorate their critical thinking skills so they, too, can evolve into their roles as Master Gardeners and use their newfound knowledge to further their mission-driven development as young Africana men or women, and cultural nurturers of other

brokenhearted Black youth. “From my view, this is a critical, sacred, and legitimate space from which the African ascendant can enact teaching and research that also affirms ourselves and our communities” (Dillard, 2012, p. x). Here are the three steps:

1. **Inside-Out** begins the journey of critical consciousness by providing Black teens with skills to adopt an internal gaze in order to become analytical researchers of their own complex and often traumatic lives (Gillespie et al., 2009). This process, which centralizes individual healing, helps them reframe negative experiences as wisdom-laden signposts to their becoming, which is an important shift from victimization, passivity and silence. This process also helps direct youth to more deeply understand and appreciate their sense of purpose, so they can begin to walk through the world, not as victims, but as heroes of their own reimagined story. This process was the original essence of I Am MORE programming.
2. **Outside-Up**, which is the newest of the three steps, builds on youths’ budding research skills, critical consciousness and their growing confidence by providing them with guidance on how to see, name and challenge systems of racial oppression through social-justice action. As part of an emerging process called youth participatory evaluation (YPE), teens analyze racial justice issues and develop a critical inquiry about systemic issues designed to oppress Black youth and privilege whiteness. This process teaches youth to question power relationships and also has psychosocial benefits, as it helps strengthen skills, such as critical thinking, public speaking, writing and planning. This process also supports the benefits of Relational-

Cultural theory, which acknowledges that we find meaning and belonging when we are engaged in interdependence, (Frey, 2012; Haskins & Appling, 2015; Lenz, 2014).

3. **Up & Beyond** allows the now emotionally emancipated youth to use their creative skills, such as music, spoken word, fashion, dance and art, to share their newfound wisdom and insights with the community. This form of resistance, pushed through the filter of BlackCrit, creates cultural space for individual and collective healing that was imagined to benefit from the ancestral singing of spirituals and drumming, and, even during modern-day, hip hop rap battles.

Like strands of braided hair, the combination of each of the three steps woven with another is intended to demonstrate how critical consciousness, social justice activism, and arts and creativity collectively influence the potential transformation of Black youth from being spirit-murdered to emotionally emancipated. This bricolage also entwined other modes of inquiry, such as arts-based research (ABR), in order to critique, expand and adjust our youth-development practices. This improvisational approach embraces ethnographic and narrative forms of analysis as a creative methodology that will inform I Am MORE and others on how to support Black youth to radically heal and mentally free themselves from the emotional and psychological effects of racial trauma. Dillard (2012) refers to this unapologetic space of inquiry that centers Black experiences as "endarkened," as it embraces African culture's communal qualities to purposefully interrupt racial oppression. This framework also rejects "white sensibilities as a normalized benchmark for qualitative research" (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2020, p. 1) in order to deepen understanding of the healing impact of counternarratives and

to celebrate "relationship building, healing and engaging in raw and honest dialogues" (p. 13). So, the (re)telling of a revolutionary healing and creative journey begins.

Participant Sample

Each of the three I Am MORE cohorts who participated in the 2020 intervention had up to five youth members, ages 17 to 22, who were led by an adult facilitator and a youth co-facilitator, in order to minimize the power differential within the groups and allow the discussions and lived experiences of the participants to serve as bidirectional sources of information. Freire (1970) calls this approach "problem-solving education," as each participant is actively involved in collaboratively co-constructing knowledge and is an active agent in the learning process. The youth were placed in positions of leadership in running the bi-weekly sessions, based on curriculum they developed from their own life experiences, as well as what was provided by I Am MORE. As the intervention was initially scheduled to end by early November 2020, youth who wanted to continue meeting shifted from three cohorts to one large cohort and, 7 of the 12 youth extended their participation through mid-December.

Data Collection

This inquiry focused on three research questions:

- How do I Am MORE's pedagogical practices influence radical hope, radical healing, Black joy and empowered resilience?
- What is the effect of I Am MORE's intervention on racial identity and pride?
- In what ways does the I Am MORE's intervention contribute to its proposed theory of change: *"When I am grounded in my power, I intuitively empower."*

The qualitative data dates back to the beginning of the I Am MORE journey in November 2018. From these early years, data included videotaped performances, personal essays, photographs, self-evaluations, audience evaluations, dyad observations, emails, website information, and I Am MORE's brochure and booklet of philosophies. The second set of data, collected from August 2020 to March 2021, focused on the expanded curriculum from the I Am MORE intervention, and semi-structured, online, individual interviews with youth who participated in the intervention. I also held online interviews with a Black adult facilitator of the 2021 I Am MORE intervention; a white teacher who worked at the high school where I Am MORE was founded; the white former principal of that same high school; the Black CEO of a clinic that primarily serves children of color; a Latino high-level school district employee who hired one of the I Am MORE youth co-founders for a summer internship at the school district headquarters; and an experienced teaching artist who served as a chaperone on I Am MORE's first East Coast trip. This analyzing of written and spoken data from both the youth and the adults strengthens the internal validity through a triangulation of source and member checks. I categorized the data as having being collected either before or after the intervention, so I can compare data from two different groups of youth participants, who varied in ethnicity and life experiences. I also analyzed the two sets of data at different times, first analyzing data from the 2020 intervention and temporarily archiving the information from the first set of data. Then, I analyzed the first set of data to determine whether the findings were similar. This two-step process, which Lincoln and Gurba (1985) call referential adequacy, allows me to test the validity of my

initial analysis. In addition, my prolonged engagement from the beginning of the I Am MORE journey and my history developing rapport and deep trust with the youth and adult participants, adds to the validity of the analysis, as I am in a position to recognize potential distortions in the data or analysis (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). In addition, prompts for personal journal entries were assigned to interns weekly to reflect on curriculum teaching social-emotional skills, mindfulness and critical consciousness, which allowed for what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call "persistent observation" (p. 305). Those journal entries were analyzed for the resiliency markers of social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose (Benard, 2004). Researchers are increasingly using narrative writing in studies of people who have experienced trauma in order to understand how they make meaning from their experiences or shift from victim to survivor mindset (Leavy, 2015).

Data Analysis

In an attempt to make meaning of this overwhelming labyrinth of data, I used three steps, advised by Merriam and Tisdell (2015): Consolidate, condense and interpret. I also leaned on three culturally responsive theories to help guide me through the interpretation of the data. I looked to the Relational-Cultural theory (RCT) to discover whether youth and adults found meaning and belonging when they were engaged in I Am MORE group meetings, performances and the intervention. This theory bolsters I Am MORE's intention to provide culturally nurturing, social-emotional skill building. The application of Critical Youth Empowerment theory (CYE) informs how a shared-power collaboration between adults and Black youth affected the process of

youth developing their own social-justice action projects, as well as how youth perceived their leadership skill-building as community organizers. Finally, Black Critical theory (BlackCrit) encourages the explanatory power of youth's storytelling and counter storytelling encounters with anti-Blackness. This theory helped interpret how Black youth benefited from creative and performative opportunities, such as our annual Resiliency in Rhythm performances, to transcend their trauma by making their racial experiences and learning a gift of wisdom for others. Using these three theoretical perspectives was a form of theory triangulation and added validity to the interpretation of the data (Patton, 2015).

Using methods suggested by Moustakas (1994), I read each of the 18 transcribed interviews to get an overview of what each person was saying. Then, I read the transcripts a second time and highlighted significant quotes about the interviewees' experiences. Following the advice of Creswell and Creswell (2017) to find meaning within data through thematic analysis, I then created two code books, one that focused on responses about the seeds planted into I Am MORE's Garden of Emotional Emancipation, such as critical consciousness, social justice activism and arts and creativity. Each person received their own color code to honor anonymity. From the analysis of their comments, an additional category emerged – youth leadership – which did not easily fit into the three categories previously identified.

A second code book focused on the fruit expected to arise from those planted seeds, such as radical hope, radical healing, Black joy, and empowered resilience. Collectively, these ingredients were expected to lead to one's emotional emancipation,

which is the ability to release the "lie of black inferiority" (Grills et al., 2016) in order to continuously heal from past encounters with racial trauma and to decide to live life more joyfully and self-assuredly. Lastly, I arranged quotes from the six adults I interviewed into a third, 18-page code book that was used to triangulate the information provided by the youth participants. All of this information guided my analysis of the research findings.

Trustworthiness and quality assurance

Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) point out that researchers should be cognizant of the drawbacks of narrative analysis research, which involve concerns about who controls or owns the data, whether people's privacy is protected and how to balance the voice of the youth with my voice as a researcher. Another limitation to this study's trustworthiness is its overwhelming dependence on qualitative data that is self-reported. As part of my quality assurance process, I interviewed 12 youth, a few of whom had been participating in I Am MORE since its early days, and six adults with different ethnicities and perspectives. The adults included a bi-racial female who was a co-chaperone on I Am MORE's East Coast trip; a Black female facilitator of the summer intervention; a Latino male high-level school district leader; a white female teacher who had worked with some of the I Am MORE students in her classroom and guided the creative process during our first Resiliency in Rhythm event in 2020; and a Syrian immigrant, who identifies as white and was the principal of the school where I Am MORE was founded. These four points of view that were coming from an outsider's perspective were intended to cross check information provided from the youth

participants. Before the narrative analysis began, I did an initial member check with the 18 people who had participated in the interview process. Within a few days after the interview, I emailed their unedited, transcribed transcripts, and invited them to check for consistency of messaging, and to make any desired additions or alterations desired. This process allowed participants to confirm interpretations of their information, which increases the credibility of a qualitative study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Stake, 1995). Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider this process as a critical technique for validating information from various stakeholders who are part of the research process. Three of the 18 interviewed, two youth and one adult, sent back minor modifications, which mostly involved removing "ums" or "like" and repeated words. I also looked through previous data, such as self-evaluations, journal writing and recordings of the internship cohorts to seek both confirming and disconfirming evidence out of an acknowledgement of the potential of a social desirability bias, which produces a tendency for young people to answer questions in a way that underreports some attributes and overreport more socially desirable answers. I found no significant evidence to discount any of the interview responses.

I then used the transcripts to create anonymized code books. I triangulated the data to verify themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Patton, 2015; Stake, 1995) by cross-checking the interview transcripts against other sources such as scholarship applications, personal journal entries, and previous statements, recorded on video or printed. A triangulation process "reduces the risk that your conclusions will reflect only the systematic biases or limitations of a specific collection method" (Lincoln & Guba, p.

93). I then emailed the code books to each individual I had interviewed and invited them to do a second member check to compare their answers with other youth and adult sources, and to make suggestions on what information to take out, keep in, and recategorize into different themes. This triangulation process allowed research participants to further determine "whether the description is complete and realistic, if the themes are accurate to include, and if the interpretations are fair and representative" (Creswell, 2005, p. 252). More than a benefit for the researcher, Ortiz (2001) notes that these types of member checking can provide "cathartic opportunities for self-revelation and introspective opportunities for self-discovery, both of which may possibly contribute the potential for transformation in self and identity" (p. 193). This process strengthened the credibility of results by doing member checking on a deeper level than what Birt et al. (2016) characterized as checking off boxes

The next-to-final draft of the analysis was then put through another triangulation process by inviting several youth, including the three co-founders and a Black female facilitator of the summer intervention, to participate in a smaller member-checking focus group (Doyle, 2007). The intention was to deepen their research skills by inviting them to dive more deeply into the research synthesis and analysis process, with hope they would digest the information more deeply. In addition, I intended to allow them a final opportunity to share their thoughts, help further co-construct the analysis, and reflect how their experience influenced their current belief systems and behaviors. I individually emailed the now three codebooks and scheduled an online training in the process that Goodson (2013) calls "bathing in the data" (p. 40), which involves reading

slowly, writing notes in the margins of the transcripts and then allowing the thematic analysis to emerge through discussion, as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2017). This inclusion of young people in the process of analyzing the data came with its own challenges, however. These included the youths' schedules (Capous-Desyllas, 2010) which sometimes conflicted with their jobs or family responsibilities, written, verbal, and social skills, and limited autonomy and independence (Merves, et al., 2015). So, in the final member checking analysis, the youth participants didn't fully complete the task on deadline. Ultimately, I had to take full responsibility for the final analysis in order to organize and present the information in a timely manner. As an additional value-added strategy, it is vital that the youth are not marginalized or defamed (Guerrero & Tinkler, 2010; Moletsane et al., 2009). So, as the researcher and mentor of the youth, I was mindful to make sure that this analytical process allowed for an authentic triangulation where multiple people reviewed and analyzed findings, which has the potential to lead to a deeper understanding of the information (Patton, 1999).

Role of the researcher

As I served as the primary data collection instrument, it is important to consider what I bring to this role as researcher. My personal experiences informed this study because of my experience with qualitative research, from the perspective of an award-winning former journalist, and seven years as a community-based participatory researcher. My role as an educator also shaped my understanding that the voices of youth are critical to understanding their experiences, and how important it is to treat them, as Ladson-Billings (2009) said, as "the *subjects* and not the *objects* of study" (p.

180; italics from the source). My professional and personal familiarity with the students and the research topic serve as resources, rather than as liabilities, in the way that they informed the design of this study, the interviewing process, the analysis of the data, the desire to include youth in the interpretation of the data, and the sometimes creative and visual way of presenting the findings. While using this empirical transcendental phenomenological approach, I made every attempt to represent the youth participants' experiences as authentically as possible, as they are the experts of their own experiences. In addition, cultural insiders who share the same ethnic background as their studied group are more sensitive to a people's sociocultural contexts (Banks, 1998) and are therefore, "considered more suitable gatherers of this information than researchers" (Lewis Ellison & Solomon, 2019, p. 225). Lastly, my embrace of African womanism (Hudson-Weems, 2000) sets the communal context of racial liberation that "is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires" (p. 216) of the whole community.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The following interview data was synthesized based on I Am MORE's investments into young people, broken down into categories, and represented as a) seeds invested into I Am MORE's Garden of Emotional Emancipation and b) the fruit that sprouted as a result of a Master Gardening process. During the 2020 summer intervention, all of the youth who participated identified as Black; each of the youth co-facilitators, two females and one male, were coincidentally African immigrants who had been in living in America since elementary school. Using the BlackCrit theory, this allowed the conversations to focus issues and conversations on, about and with Black youth born in Africa and in America, especially as the state's Black population is only 2.2 percent, according to the latest Census numbers. Even the state's largest city is less than 6 percent Black. (See Appendix C for comparison table on how I Am MORE's theories align with its foundational models for emotional emancipation).

Data as Seeds Planted

I intuitively knew that the "seeds" – i.e., **critical consciousness, social justice activism and arts and creativity** – were more likely to produce fruit if they were done within small groups because of what Leavy (2015) called a "resonance" (p. 3), that comes from experience with "knowing, doing and making (Pinar, 2004, p. 9). This particular framing, which provided a safe space for participants to engage in interactive and honest dialogue, became the bridge between cultural- and self-awareness and social justice, a journey Freire (1996) calls "rehumanization," as it affects one's way of

knowing and being. This process helps transfer an individual's perspective from one's separate identity to one's role in a cultural collective, which confirms the influence of Ubuntu. Kumagi & Lypson (2009) define the process as "the continuous critical refinement and fostering of a type of thinking and knowing—a critical consciousness—of self, others, and the world" (p. 783). Another key ingredient in I Am MORE's approach is the leadership development provided to Youth of Color, who have trained and facilitated workshops for both youth and adults since a month after I Am MORE was founded. The young people's storytelling and counterstorytelling efforts were often greeted with standing ovations and tears from adults in the audience, and a sense of agency and purpose in the youth who engaged in storytelling. The overwhelmingly positive responses from I Am MORE youth, during their individual interviews, about their experiences sharing their stories in front of adults and other youth confirms the influence of both Ubuntu – "I am because we are" - and the Relational-Cultural theory, which notes that youth find meaning and belonging when coming into an authentic communion with adults and other youth, where together they create a safe space to share their experiences, learn life lessons from each other and inspire each other's possibilities.

I Am MORE also uses this type of storytelling and counter-storytelling as a methodological and pedagogical tool so that the stories of YOC are independent of the white supremacy lens that has historically handcuffed them to stereotypes, biases and negative labels. Individually, critical consciousness, social justice activism and arts and creativity are considered important foundations for participation in social change.

Collectively, they also potentially bloom radical hope and healing, joy, and empowered resilience within Black youth who are carrying a heavy burden of accumulated and historical trauma. (See Appendix D for a listing of Seeds Planted quotes) At a training workshop of over 300 primarily classified staff who work for the state's largest school district, such as maintenance workers, office receptionists and other employees, an Asian youth, a graduating senior at the time, publicly shared, for the first time, her personal journey of isolation and racial discrimination. Her former teacher happened to be in the audience and I observed him standing up and commenting on the microphone about how the remarkable amount of self-confidence the young speaker had developed since the time he knew her when she was in middle school. During the individual interviews for this research study, that young lady said that presentation helped her better process and heal from her spirit-murdering and a lack of validation from adults.

> *I had no one to talk to before I Am MORE. You know, being the person, I am, I'm very opinionated and, you know, I have my own experiences and my path in life. And those things contribute to my own politics and how I choose to do things and how I feel affected by things. Coming from North Portland, my whole life in a low-income neighborhood and from a family of immigrants, I've had a lot of criticism towards the city of Portland, but also towards the public education. And especially when I was younger, because I grew up not knowing English until later on in my life. So, by the time I got into I Am MORE, it was in my later years of public education. And what really stuck out to me was when I was invited to speak, how much people would actually want to listen to me compared to when I*

was a child. I would say "This isn't right", or "Wait, we shouldn't be doing this." And I would completely get brushed off. So that's why I find I Am MORE so important. I'm like "I had a teacher do this to me, and this is what you're not supposed to do."...I said that students needed, like, we need you to be like our family, sometimes. Cause we don't have a family at home or, you know, we might be going through something and sometimes you just need to say, "Are you OK?" Or checking with us. Little things really are important, and education isn't just education. It intersects with our normal life. It's part of our life, like 80% of my life as a kid was education, like five out of the seven days of the week. So, it's very important...But it's more important for students of color, and that's the majority of I Am MORE is that we get to speak out about our experiences... So, to have them kind of start thinking about this or for them to consider it, even it was just a little spark, it was something important. And from peers, it was that kind of affirmation. Like, I've been through that too. Like you're not wrong. (personal interview, Jan. 23, 2021).

Putting YOC into positions of authority, where they can make decisions, make money and make social change, is part of I Am MORE's strategy of raising youths' critical consciousness of their own power. We borrows liberatory tenets of Black, Indigenous and other psychological frameworks in order to counter deficit-based and single-storied perceptions about the potential of Youth of Color, while also placing their voices at the center. For example, one of the youth co-facilitators, a high school junior at the time, was initially awkward about being paid thousands of dollars for leading other youth and

engaging in an on-the-job leadership training. In a semi-structured, online interview, she said money stirred up suppressed money fears, not only for her but her female cohort members, most of whom were the same age.

> *So, that was something that I had to come to realization with...the importance of valuing my work and not always doing everything for free or for, you know, this hope of something that will eventually return back to me...So to have money is a tug and pull situation and realizing that it also taught me, you know, that statistic that, you know, Black people aren't educated enough about finances. (personal interview, Feb. 3, 2021)*

However, as critical consciousness empowers youth to think deeply about power relationships, this co-facilitator, on her own volition, attended a financial-management class. Then, after the intervention was over, she (re)taught the same skills of how to save and manage money to other youth people who participated in the intervention. Her initiative reflects the heart-opening influence of Ubuntu and, also, the Relational-Cultural theory, which acknowledges that we find meaning and belonging when we are engaged in interdependence, (Frey, 2012; Haskins & Appling, 2015; Lenz, 2014).

> *So, that's why we decided to have like a class, a financial course at the end of the internship, because it was just that feeling of people feeling like there was this weirdness about money, this weirdness about finances and it especially came from, like, a lot of guilt that if you have money and someone else doesn't, you know: Do I deserve it? (personal interview, Feb. 3, 2021)*

The results of I Am MORE's approach to leadership-building opportunities were particularly noticed by the high school principal who offered this observation:

> *That's something that I think I Am MORE does very differently, that the youth that you work with become part of the organization itself. They become the teachers and the mentors and the leaders, which I think is a very different model from what other organizations do*. (personal interview, Feb. 10, 2021)

Emotional Safe Space

The Relational-Cultural theory was also key to understanding the depth of connection the youth had with each other. Each meeting allowed space for youth to share what was on their minds and build community among strangers, especially since peer interactions were so minimal during the pandemic. Once school had gone online, most were feeling even more vulnerable and alone. Several young people mentioned how important it was for Black youth participating in the intervention to have an emotionally safe space to process their lives, especially after the tragic deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, who were the worldwide symbols of the Black Lives Matter protests around the world. Portland's historic 100-straight days of protests, which drew thousands of people, and were marred by vandalism of downtown businesses and government offices, and violent confrontations between protesters and police officers. Many of the youth said the bi-weekly intervention meetings were the only places they had to process difficult emotions about Black death being on replay on social media and in the mainstream media, such as newspapers, radio stations and radio stations. Witnessing or even just hearing about the negative experiences between

protesters and police can lead to what Truong et al. (2016) calls secondhand racism. They "come to the realization that they are also vulnerable to the racism that they have vicariously experienced, and they can encounter harmful emotional, psychological, or physiological consequences" (2016, p. 227).

> *Well, something that I really appreciate is that I Am MORE has created a safe space for Black youth to just be themselves in a world where there's like, nowhere where can you go. Like, who do you talk to? How do you process all these things that are happening in your own household; things that are happening in your own school? I mean, you don't really have anyone to turn to. And how do you feel yourself? Because during this process, you kind of forget who you are. And something that I appreciate about I Am MORE is that in the midst of all of these things, I AM MORE has been like an open house, open for anyone to come and to just be themselves to reflect and to just take a deep breath especially during this year. I mean, all these protests going on, the riots and so much more, it's just been really taking a toll on our mental health. (personal interview, Feb. 4, 2021)*

The all-Black environment also created an emotionally safe space for Black youth to process the emotional numbing (Rich, 2009) caused by racism, share intimate details of their lives and receive support from other Black youth, both within the meetings and afterward. The impact of having Black youth lead the conversations was particularly resonant as peer interaction is critical to helping youth discover who they are.

> *I was really depressed. Like, it was bad. Like I wasn't taking care of myself. I wouldn't eat for, like, days. But I would look forward to those meetings because I*

knew there were people there who were not necessarily going through the same thing as me, but it was like a support system, like a judge-free support system. I could go there, and I could say how I was feeling, and I could just be real and be, like, OK, I know it's kind of gross, but I haven't showered in two weeks because I'm just not happy. You know? Like I just don't want to get out of bed. And like, people were there to help me in sharing those feelings and be, like, OK, why don't you try this after this meeting? Why don't you try to, like, wash up? Or why don't you try to eat? And, like, I'll check back in with you afterwards. Cause it wasn't just the meeting. It was outside of it, too, with my whole group, all of them. It just formed a different type of connection because we were so intimate with each other and we just spoke our truth. (personal interview, March 15, 2021)

Self-Reflections

The I Am MORE intervention regularly created space for Black youth to engage in critical self-reflection of their assumptions, values and sense of purpose through analyzing society's racially biased structures, and then giving voice to their inner wisdom, through journal writing, group discussions and weekly assignments they were expected to complete. One of the group activities was to critique the Philadelphia ACES survey, (Cronholm et al., 2015), a 40-question survey that is used to determine an urban youth's experiences with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including racism, witnessing violence or living in foster care. Felitti et al. (1998) was the first research study to connect ACE scores with adult health issues, but that seminal study was ultimately criticized for its lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity. So, Cronholm et al.

(2015) designed a separate questionnaire that would reflect "the contextual relationships addressing the complex interplay among individuals, household and community factors shaping health" (p. 360).

For I Am MORE's purposes, we were curious whether the ACEs-related questions would raise youths' critical consciousness about past exposure to trauma. One of the surprising discoveries was how unaware some of the Black youth were to the depth of their own trauma. One 20-something male participant who was from a family many would consider to be solidly middle class said he was unaware of how prevalent trauma is among Black youth. During a reflective journal writing exercise, he acknowledged how racial trauma had become so standard that it had become unremarkable – until it was pointed out to him.

> *In some areas, I found myself surprised to realize how much of the things that I've seen in my own community, and often took for granted, are seen as traumatic anomalies. Many of the questions, if you are POC or low income, are just descriptions of how life is in America. For me, though I understood that my own experience is not the same as the American norm, it made me reflect on the "degree" of my trauma, which I guess is the point. I started to think about instances that I hadn't really even considered to be abnormal in my development, but apparently is clinically viewed as traumatic. But then, at the end, I'm just kind of left with that cold confirmation: "yeah, you are traumatized." (journal writing, July 6, 2020)*

Social Justice Action

The youth who participated in the intervention also engaged in several social - justice action projects. Many of the youth participants, using their own personal experiences and perspectives, collectively drafted a booklet for educators about how to better interact with Black youth; and one of the I Am MORE co-founders led several online youth conversations, titled "Talk Back/Talk Black" about various real-life topics. Toward the end of the intervention, youth participants were paid by a children's clinic to create a marketing plan for a youth-oriented COVID-awareness marketing campaign. Here is feedback from one of the youth co-facilitators:

> *One of the biggest things that a lot of them talked about was when we did a presentation, a marketing presentation to a children's clinic. And I think that was so exciting. Like I had never seen them so excited. Oh my gosh, I could see every time I checked up on the (Google) slides presentation, there were edits being made. There were comments being made. It was crazy. And I think it's because they really felt like, "Wow, we have this opportunity to actually do something in our community rather than just talk about it," which is very different from a lot of school groups...And that was one of the best things that I remember. They like came to me afterwards and were like, "Well, we did it!" So that's definitely like, I think that there's a different result. There's the result of just having conversations and feeling like you didn't really do much. And then, there's the I Am MORE results where it's like, you're continuously doing stuff and you're never bored.*
>
> (personal interview, Feb. 3, 2021)

Also a practicing Africana womanist, the children clinic's CEO, who was interviewed for this research, said she was impressed by the youth's preparation, their enthusiasm, and the questions they asked in advance of the official presentation. She acknowledged that the presence of Black young men was particularly heart-warming.

> *It was so very enlivening watching them get so excited about the opportunity to present their ideas. Watching them just come alive, making those presentations and what they were offering, I wasn't just excited for the moment. I was very excited about what that portended for the future in allowing them an opportunity to create a future that is theirs, as opposed to what typically happens is adults assuming we know all and then the youth showing up and that's what they're stuck with.* (personal interview, March 25, 2021)

Many of the adults witnessing the process – whether from the inside or outside of I Am MORE – reported similar observations of how Black youth benefited from the intervention, including a) the community they established together felt safe, authentic, and healing; b) youth developed significant leadership skills they weren't exposed to previously, including being paid for their expertise; and c) youth were empowered to think differently about themselves and the impact they could have on others. One I Am MORE youth, a graduating senior, decided she wanted to see menstrual cycle products available in all of the girls and gender-neutral bathrooms. So, she collaborated with a small group of her friends, who all researched the issue, then got support from the principal to make it happen. She then organized volunteers to make sure products were

kept stocked. The principal said he considered this youth's social-justice project as a reflection of her personal revolution, in part because of her participation in I Am MORE.

> *She's one of the students who kind of stands out to me the most as somebody who had just gone through just an incredible transformation from the young person that I remember who very sweet and very, very shy or withdrawn. We use these words that attempt to describe what's happening, but they're imperfect, but it seemed we were not providing a place and an opportunity for her to really shine. Even when I observed her in groups of friends, with other people that she felt comfortable with, she was never the one who did most of the talking. She was not the one who was clearly leading the group. So, even at times when she felt connection with her peers, it was hard to get a sense of: Who is this young person really? And especially if she was in a classroom with other people that she did not necessarily know, she is somebody that you know, most observers would probably not notice, right? Through being connected to I Am MORE, she became, I don't want to say a completely different person. She probably became the person that she actually is: A strong, powerful, clear courageous young woman who was able to be both vulnerable and strong and who just kind of entered into the world from a place of strength that I definitely did not observe before. (personal interview, Feb. 10, 2021)*

Data as Sprouted Fruit

Below is a sampling of responses from the semi-structured, individual interviews, which were aligned with themes, member checked by participants, and categorized,

based on which questions their responses addressed. (See Appendix D for a full listing of Sprouted Fruit quotes). As the first research question had multiple inquiries, I broke them into four different questions. Using this type of qualitative process creates space to discover perspectives about someone's personal experiences that might otherwise have stayed hidden using more traditional methods (Howe, 2005).

RQ1a: How did I Am MORE's intervention influence <u>radical hope</u>, which is allowing oneself to imagine an alternative narrative in the face of collective injustices?

> *It's been a hard journey. But during this time, I can say that I Am MORE has given me something to believe in. I don't know what my life would look like if I Am MORE was not in my life. Honestly, if I can imagine my life without I Am MORE, I would say that I would be this close to, like, giving it all up, honestly...It has given me hope to say, okay, not all things are bad in my life. I can say, OK, I'm grateful about these things. And practicing gratitude has been something that has brought light to my life because there have been many days where I'm like, there's no one in my life. Like there's no family in my life. There is no anyone that I can say that has been there...But then when I sit down and I reflect, I can say, even though there are all these things going on, these things that are not going as planned... let me be grateful for this moment and let me appreciate the people in my life. And so me giving myself that space, I then see how blessed I am.*
>
> (personal interview, Feb. 4, 2021)

RQ1b: How did I Am MORE's intervention influence radical healing, which is a process of being proud of one's identity and rejecting forms of internalized racism, while building capacity to resist oppression.

> *Always my whole entire life, I struggled with self-love. I struggled with self-acceptance. I struggled with self-worth. I used to look outside for self-love, for self-acceptance, for self-reassurance because I didn't know there was anything as self-love. I just knew it was a word, but it never made sense to me. Like where am I going to get it from? So, I really struggled through life. I was always told: "Oh, be strong." So, I just walked through life, just knowing, OK, I need to be strong. I need to keep going. I need to keep pushing through all the challenges, through all the problems. But then I was never told, like, you are enough. You deserve all the good things in life... so I had to get myself to a space where I had to start the process for myself. I had to get to a place where I had to take accountability for myself. I couldn't really keep looking outside or blaming other people or trying to point fingers at who didn't teach me that. I just had to get myself to a space where I had to be like, now that I know better, I need to do better for myself. Not for other people, but for myself. (personal interview, Jan. 27, 2021)*

RQ1c: How did I Am MORE's intervention influence Black joy?

> *It took me a while to actually accept that I deserve to be happy and to forgive myself for all the things I've denied myself before. Like it took time, but I feel, like, just having the space, which I Am MORE, I believe, is the space where, you know, that those great people who I'm surrounding myself with, who are on a different*

mental capacity where I can look at them and reflect and say, "Oh, I aspire to be this calm or not be so anxious"...That's really what I Am MORE can do, just holding that space...where I can have the ability to work on myself without being judged. (personal interview, Jan. 28, 2021)

RQ1d: How did I Am MORE's intervention influence empowered resilience, which is the strength to not only overcome challenges but to then reach back to educate, inspire and empower others?

I Am MORE helped me realize that if I wanted a different life, if I wish that things were different, that it was up to me to start doing the work. So yeah, I would say resilience in my life showed up in that aspect, just looking at myself, inwardly and looking at the work that I needed to get done and just becoming the best version of myself for myself, with myself and for other people. (personal interview, March 1, 2021)

RQ2a: What effect did the intervention have on social and emotional skills?

It's up to me to become competent adults in the future. Not only with things like money .... but just, you know, being emotionally available and knowing how to, you know, synthesize our emotions and our thoughts into things like art and poetry and music and stuff like that. Just learning how to, you know, be an overall competent human being, you know, like emotionally and physically and just introspectively learning how to express and collect yourself and the different modes of doing that and how. (personal interview, March 25, 2021)

RQ2b: What is the intervention's effect on your relationship with your racial identity?

So, to me it was very healing because I don't, aside from my personal family, I don't really have many Black peers. Oregon is very white and, being sort of quiet person, I found that I didn't really fit in or like get in with a lot of the other Black students in my area. I Am MORE was a way to be able to just find Black people in general. I feel like we need a space. We can be creative. We can talk about the things that are going down with ourselves…that kinship is very, very transformative and helpful in my opinion. I think it is an asset and a strength. … I didn't have that confidence in myself and my blackness. I didn't know that I could public speak, I can make money. I could do my activism work and you know, my time and my effort were valuable. My labor was valuable. I didn't know any of that (before I Am MORE). So, giving children opportunity or just teens in general, the opportunity to see that they have that work, they have that power, and they have that potential, it's limitless. It's literally priceless. (personal interview, March 25, 2021)

RQ3: In what ways did the intervention contribute to its theory of change: *"When I am in my power, I empower."* This question honors the philosophies of Ubuntu, the Breath of Life theory and Africana womanism (Hudson-Weems, to "willingly bind us together now and into the future" (Feelings, 1995, p. ii). It also responds to the call to action by Hope et al. (2020) to motivate more youth to be "agents of social change" (p. 8).

What I'm really thinking on is where we should be embedding and passing onto the next generation, the next people that we're teaching, so they can continue on teaching it. And definitely hope is like we're just here now, like it creates a path

> *for the next person, you know? And I feel like hope is a start of what I want to do. But we can turn into much more resilient. I want to be able to make sure everybody, including myself, is able to always be able to bounce back from whatever you go through and not letting that define who you are. Those words are just like key messages to be able to pass that back to the next generation because you're not always going to be here. But, once you have that embedded, you don't have to be like everybody that you interact with.* (personal interview, Feb. 8, 2021)

Arts-based analysis

From its founding, I Am MORE has encouraged youth of Color to express themselves in various forms of visual art (e.g., photography, drawing, painting, graffiti), performing arts (e.g., theatre, dance, music, live art), and literary arts (e.g., poetry, creative writing). At I Am MORE's first storytelling performance in January 2019, four young people – two Latino males, a Hmong female, and one of the African American co-founders – spoke publicly for the first time about a pivotal and traumatic childhood experience. As confirmation of the impact that public storytelling opportunity had on one of the youth participants' sense of self, her quote in I Am MORE's first brochure said: "I wasn't afraid of being judged anymore. I learned how not to let negativity affect or control my life. Now, teachers no longer have to tell me to speak up. I reclaimed my voice" (I Am MORE, 2019, p. 2.) I Am MORE's first public performance, which was broadcasted live on television and on a public radio station, was an annual tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the longest running annual MLK tribute in the country. The

emotional reactions from adult audience members left a lasting impression on each of the youth and inspired each of them to continue committing to their personal development and their counterstorytelling, which confirmed how ABR methodology can lead to both personal and audience transformation (Clover, 2011; Feldman et al., 2013).

> *I never thought I would be able to make anyone cry, but at the end of that performance, I saw tears...I was like, you know, I'm stepping into my power. I never knew I was able to do that. And as a youth, and this was my first time too, so taking it all in, I was able to process: "Oh, like, how is this happening?...I feel like I made a good impact in the world, but even the smallest bit of impact because I never felt I was able to impact anyone outside of my family as a caretaker. So having that experience made me feel like I could do more, and I could do bigger stuff, and I can present to a bigger crowd of people. So, by having the audience, and people in the audience tell me what it meant to them, I was able to feel that I had more power to do more just by sharing my story. And it may sound like it's something really small, but great things start from small steps.* (personal interview, March 5, 2021)

Before the pandemic shut down in-person gatherings, I Am MORE youth were paid to perform at various arts-related happenings, city and county government events, and community-based festivals. Youth were also paid to write poetry for a county-sponsored anti-smoking campaign. Another ABR project reflected the storytelling artistry of a graphic novel to tell the individual stories of I Am MORE youth (See Appendix F). Although naming personal experiences, challenges and obstacles can be

traumatic (Ngo et al., 2017), giving testimony to one's personal stories can also support a radical healing process, and "is a powerful tool they can apply throughout their lives" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 89). In addition, when problems at the center of the research *(the effects of racial trauma)* are analyzed, described or explained through individual and collective storytelling, that methodology rises to what are called "empowerment narratives" (Fosl, 2008). This, in turn, increases a youth's self-esteem, problem-solving skills, and ability to think positively about the future, which are all indications of resiliency (Benard, 2004). "The trauma black youth experience can be healed by their collectively sharing their trauma" (Ginwright, 2010, p. 97).

In January 2020, several months before the summer intervention, I Am MORE created its first youth showcase, titled "Resiliency in Rhythm: A phantasmagoria of youth storytelling, dance, art & other creative expressions." Our racially diverse group of performers ranged from a second grader who wrote, illustrated, published and sold her book internationally, to a 13-year-old classically trained ballet dancer whose live painting process was inspired by the youth performances, to a fashion storytelling segment, accompanied by live drumming, where three young people, two African immigrants and a Hmong immigrant, represented their individual journeys from trauma to resiliency. This idea was proposed by one of the youth co-founders, whose dream of being a runway model had been discouraged by white adults who told her she was too short. As I Am MORE uses ABR to offer Black youth a liberatory and healing experience from the woundedness of anti-Blackness, we immediately endorsed her idea. A fellow teacher, a 30ish white woman and personal friend, helped three Youth of Color design

each of their three outfits. One of the two female models, the oldest in her immigrant family of eight children, designed the most creative concepts for her outfits.

> *So, she went from being home all the time, taking care of a lot of siblings, being really weighted down, feeling depressed. So, that outfit for her was like this big, heavy black blanket with all of these things attached to it. And hers was very much the butterfly story where the next outfit, she was kind of breaking out of her cocoon a little bit. And that phase was representative of when I Am MORE came into her life and how she was able to shed some of that heaviness and step into the opportunity and the strengths and what you could do with those experiences. And then the final outfit was really, you know colorful and flowy and just very vibrant and to see her embodying that, it was beautiful, and it felt so good to her.* (personal interview, Feb. 3, 2021)

During the Resiliency in Rhythm events, much of the counterstorytelling is focused on personal encounters with racism, at school and in the community. Yet, since there are so few places to process their experiences and understand the greater sociopolitical context behind racism, Black youth carry the resulting resentment, sadness and anger in their bodies. One 16-year-old poet talked about a range of her suppressed emotions within her 2-minute, original poem:

> *When I put my head under the water/the screams of my ancestors clog my head/yet I stay underwater, I stay/I want to hear them because they are screaming instructions on how to survive/they are singing me Negro spirituals, guiding me to the freedom they fought for…* (I Am MORE, 2021).

Eventually, her poem shifted from cultural reverence to anger:

> *My ancestors weep/they fought for a change/they begged for a change/give me a change/so don't be mad when we burn down cities you forced us to make/don't be mad when we shout and scream at the system you built to kill us…* (I Am MORE, 2021).

Also, as part of the 2021 Resiliency In Rhythm program, three of the youth organizers of local Black Lives Matter protests talked publicly – for the first time – about their frustration with racism, cultural appropriation and being pressured to cater to the comfort of white people, which, again, can lead to emotional numbing (Rich, 2009) and anxiety and depression (Assari et al., 2017a; Assari et al., 2017b). A 16-year-old high school youth activist, said she is "exhausted" by what she interpreted as the disingenuousness of white people attending the protests, but not doing much of anything else to fight for racial justice. A college student and an official photographer of the youth-led BLM protests said he was caught between two worlds, as he was raised by white parents who adopted him from Ethiopia when he was an infant. He said he catches himself being extra nice to white strangers so they won't feel intimidated.

> *Subconsciously, I don't even recognize it, sometimes. But other moments, I stop and go: "Why the hell did I just wave and smile to that person to try and make them understand that I'm a 'nice one'?"* (I Am MORE, 2021)

A bi-racial, 18-year-old college student athlete said she initially was on the sidelines of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. But after watching a series of cell phone videos of Portland's protest rallies on social media and noticing protesters being tear gassed

and arrested by police, she organized her suburban hometown's first and only BLM march and then took on a leading role at Portland's youth-led protests. She said she now walks through the world differently, with purpose and a sense of agency. At over 6 feet, she already is taller than most females her age, but now, she said, she can sense that some white people feel even more threatened by her since she became an activist.

> *White people are honestly scared of me when they see me. I can see it. I see it in their face. I see it in their body language. And it's something that I'm no longer worried about if my presence is too intimidating to handle. All I need from a white person is their respect…I'm not asking for your help. I'm not asking for you to love me. I'm not asking for you to necessarily protect me. Just give me the respect that we have all deserved for centuries. And that's all I need.* (I Am MORE, 2021)

A Case Study of Empowered Resilience

One African male who was a co-facilitator during the 2020 intervention is a textbook representation of I Am MORE's transformative impact. When I first met this young immigrant as a graduating senior, he was tall and handsome but grossly shy. He would wear his hoodie tied to the middle of his chin, as if he was trying to hide from the world. During the I Am MORE intervention that is the basis of this study, he wrote in his journal how he had been bullied in middle and high school by white classmates, which made him feel ashamed of his skin color, his accent, and every part of his Africanness.

> *The reason why is because a lot of people were calling me " Black ass." "You're so dark." "'You look like the night" and other things to put me down because of how*

dark I was. I really struggled to embrace my amazing and beautiful skin color because I thought I was too dark, and it made me super ugly. Every time I took a picture, I would always try to make myself lighter and do other things so I don't look dark. (journal writing , Sept. 18, 2020)

As previously pointed out, racial trauma becomes a normative experience (Lanier et al., 2016) for Black children that "organizes the social context of their lives" (Coles, 2020, p. 2). However, researchers say raising someone's critical consciousness about racial trauma can relieve their feelings of isolation and self-pity (Diemer et al., 2021; Ginwright, 2010), as well as motivate them to prove the racist stereotypes wrong (Carter 2008). So, during I Am MORE's first Resiliency in Rhythm fashion show in 2020, this same young man used three changes of clothing to confidently – and for the first time – share his empowering story of having grown up in a refugee camp in Tanzania, and how he was ridiculed for not being able to speak English, for wearing African clothes, and for speaking his native language in public. He ended his storytelling fashion show talking about how proud he was for being African, and how he had learned, with support from his family and I Am MORE programming, to embrace all aspects of himself. This same young man also participated in I Am MORE's Resiliency in Rhythm production in January 2021 and was interviewed on camera by the youth co-producer, one of I Am MORE's co-founders. His words of advice:

Don't let the society label who you are, because they're always going to tell you: "You can't be this." "You can't be that." But, at the end of the day, it's, like, you can be. Nobody should be able to tell you that. And as long as you have

confidence in yourself and you have that support…you can do anything (I Am MORE, 2021)

About a month after his second Resiliency in Rhythm performance, he decided to pursue his passion of becoming a businessman, at age 20. So, in March 2021, this once-shy African immigrant started a clothing line with his 18-year-old cousin, called *bproud*, to encourage others to embrace whatever makes them unique, and to proudly accept themselves – as is. He said I Am MORE's programming helped him make the decision to transcend his experiences by making the wisdom within them an inspiring gift to others.

> *I've always been an entrepreneur, but it's like, I Am MORE really brought it out of me. Like at first, I always thought I was too young to try to achieve it. But it's like, this is the best time to start and make mistakes. And as long as I'm learning through those mistakes, it's like, that's really what's going to help out...Just being part (of Resiliency in Rhythm 2020), especially the one that we did with the fashion, that kinda helped me out wanting to pursue a clothing brand - just picking out the fabric, picking out what kind of clothing. Like clothing can symbolize so many different things and could really express how a person feels, how a person looks. And that was like, wow, this will be something dope for me to, like, try out and really see. And just being part of that kind of started a passion for me to want to be able to pursue something like this. So just experiencing that kind of, like, opened up other opportunities and even being part of like the TED talk we did this year (Resiliency in Rhythm 2021), it was like, "Oh, maybe I want to start a podcast in the future." It's like every time I'm always*

part of something, I always come out with a new idea, something I can try, something I can do. (personal interview, March 23, 2021)

Adult perspectives

In individual, semi-structured interviews, the adults who have witnessed I Am MORE's impact said that they noticed that youth participating in I Am MORE are regularly reminded that their ideas matter, that they are worthy of financial and personal success, and that they are expected to think like leaders and entrepreneurs. An adult facilitator for the intervention, a Black mother of three, who also subscribes to the intention of Africana womanism and who had previously run her own youth-oriented nonprofit, said I Am MORE brought a combination of three main things to the table that she had never seen in her 20 years of youth-development work: *Community and a sense of belonging, a safe space, and self-empowerment.*

Over the course of the two decades that I've been working with Black youth, these have always been issues and things that they've sought and couldn't find, or that's how they met me through doing other things where they found one of these three things. But I haven't really been in a place where they've been able to find all three. So, this makes I Am MORE an anomaly. And that's even with like the coaching and mentoring and things that I've done in the past. They might have been able to find one of those three elements, but this is one of the first places where they've been able to acquire all three. (personal interview, Jan. 26, 2021)

In an interview, the principal who led the high school where I Am MORE was founded confirmed that he noticed the I Am MORE youth developing more of a sense of agency, self-awareness and purpose, and how he believed that growth was sustained over time. His words, though, indirectly acknowledge a "deficit imagery" (Johnson et al., 2019) that frames how many white teachers' and administrators perceive YOC.

> *We often times have this paradigm first that our young people are somehow broken. You know, they're missing something. And then we bring a program or a person who's gonna fill that gap. And instead, I think your approach says: "I know there's strength inside of you." And that what we're working through is really just bringing that out, helping you connect with that, and then you sharing it with others…So that's the transformation that I saw: Students finding their voice, students growing into their power, finding their confidence, and in the process were working through some things, finding ways to work through pain, finding way to work through loss and grief, and experiencing healing in the process* (personal interview, Feb. 10, 2021).

I Am MORE's programming also helped raise the consciousness of a white high school educator. Years prior, this educator had partnered with me in producing an award-winning, 3-minute film featuring students at our school silently acknowledging how the tragic death of Trayvon Martin hit close to home (Brave Alice, 2018, Feb. 16). But it was her experience helping produce the 2020 Resiliency in Rhythm fashion show that prompted this educator to take a closer look at her family's indoctrination, which endorsed a deficit-based ideology that is deeply and ultimately rooted in anti-Black

pathology. Instead of considering Black children as resilient and capable, which focuses on their strengths and potential, this teacher was conditioned to consider Black people as helpless victims who warranted her pity.

> *Before I Am MORE, I, as a white person thinking about the Black experience and the Black struggle, I think the main thing that I was missing was recognizing the resiliency of black people. And, you know, it's just been fed down to me where it's like, if I'm sympathetic to that experience, it's like, "Oh, that's just so sad. That just sucks." Like that's so hard, you know, and failing to recognize the other part of people being under constant hardship in so many places of their lives, that there is so much resiliency in the everyday. I can think about experiences that I've had that have been very adverse and very hard, and the way that they have like really disabled me, you know, from being like super functional in my life. And, and then being able to see the ways that, that Black people still thrive and find joy and are insanely creative and are so motivated to continue fighting for change… It's just incredible. And so, for me, in the homogenous places where I grew up, there was not a lack of respect based on like, you're human, I'm a human, but just a lack of respect in seeing the resiliency that has been present the whole time. So that has totally influenced my work in the way that I, you know, meet Black students of mine where it's not like, "Oh, you know, let's help you overcome this." It's like: "You are amazing. Everyone in your family is amazing. And I can't believe what you've done." Like, let's build that. Let's*

celebrate that and recognize that and give that more energy." (personal interview, Feb. 3, 2021).

Lastly, one of the top school district administrative leaders, a Latino male, at one of the largest school districts in the Pacific Northwest, said he intends to borrow I Am MORE's tactics for empowering Black youth to help inform his districtwide strategic plan that centers Black and Native students. Of the more than 49,000 students in 81 schools, Black and Native youth make up almost 9 percent of Portland Public Schools' student population; whites are more than 56 percent and Latinos are 16.5 percent.

> *Yeah, there's a lot of pain, but a lot of the pain comes with, you know, the authentic relationships that we're building, the hard conversations that we're having. And, so again, I actually channel the energy of I Am MORE. And like, again, you have no idea, but you're giving us an opportunity to really process. I think unconsciously, (I Am MORE) helped me bring into context the pain and the hurt of our community here in Portland. Not as a barrier, but as an opportunity. Right?…That's what I remember about I Am MORE and that is essentially the premise and the ethos of what we hope is our strategic plan for the district. (personal communication, Feb. 26, 2021)*

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This research project was the first to analyze the strength-based I Am MORE program, which has fascinating promise as a culturally nurturing intervention with a singular focus on transformative, social-emotional learning and trauma-informed techniques, specifically for Black youth. This research has also helped transform the theorizing space by combining the lenses of Ubuntu, Breath of Life, BlackCrit, Relational-Cultural Theory and Critical Youth Empowerment, and formulating a unique framework that other researchers can build upon to engage Black youth in a leadership-building development process. By also pouring seeds of critical consciousness, social justice activism and arts and creativity into the lives of Black youth, and further fertilizing the compost with cultural congruence and self-reflection, we have documented the transformative Master Gardener process that can blossom radical hope, radical healing, Black joy, and empowered resilience within Black youth, who were shut down, closed off, angry and feeling alone.

Given the decades of research documenting the predilection of America's schools to spirit-murder Black children, this intervention holds encouraging results. It is worthy of a closer look by researchers willing to recognize that the solution to the persistent racial achievement gap is not an issue of the head but the heart. Black children are not broken, they've just been broken-hearted by the systemic bias that works against them at every turn. And their capacity to still function in the face of a relentless scaring of their psyche, is a testament of Black people's current and ancestral

resilience. Black joy can be particularly essential for Black people as it serves as a practice of personalized self-care, a transactional opportunity to bring happiness to oneself while welcoming those witnessing one's smile, laughter, or moment of peace to join in this act of defiant resistance. Five national epidemiologic community surveys confirmed that the mental health of African Americans, who are exposed to more relentless mental health stressors, including anti-Black racism, is still "comparable to, and possibly better than, those of Whites" (Archibald, 2018, p. 1), mostly because of these cultural resources: Spirituality and a strong racial identity. According to Archibald, "when African-Americans are confronted with a life stressor, they may possibly resort to spirituality strategies which in turn possibly promotes their level of social support and may counteract their feelings of low self-confidence, low self-esteem, and low self-efficacy, which may help alleviate the deleterious effects of stress" (2018, p. 9). And when youth feel good about being Black, "there is an increase in their self-esteem, self-efficacy and academic motivation" (Ross, Powell & Henriksen, 2016, p. 1).

Given that some of the youth were exposed to the I Am MORE process for only a few months, their journeys are reflective of an aching desire within Black youth to finally be seen, heard and authentically loved on caring adults, who show them that they are worthy of greatness. Through this process, I Am MORE demonstrates that once-traumatized and brokenhearted Black youth can quickly recover from being constantly spirit-murdered if they are nurtured in a similar way. Then, they can begin to transcend that trauma more fully by reframing their traumatic experiences as gifts of wisdom that help shape whom they are becoming.

It takes profound love of Black children to soothe deeply scarred over but still bleeding wounds and then help guide the youth on a journey back to themselves. It requires an intention and commitment to (re)connect them to a history that grounds them in their own power, but also sets them free because it helps them "find the marriage of meaning and matter in their lives, in the world" (Dreamer, 2005, p. 2). I Am MORE's self-discovering process offers access to a connection to cultural memory through the raising of Black youth's critical consciousness, the exposure to social justice activism and the creative, and authentic counter storytelling that reflects the lived experiences of Black youth. Collectively, these intentions can provide an "opening to the spirit of something that has, until that moment, been asleep within them" (Dillard, 2012, p. 3). This awakening process, though, is best delivered in communion with other Black youth, so the "give and take of dialogue makes struggling together for meaning a powerful experience in self-definition and self-discovery" (Ladson-Billings (2009, p. 190).

Once, Black youth can get (re)connected with these cultural memories, which Dillard defines as "the roots we must first grow in order to have leaves" (p, 12), it does not take long to produce fruit that tastes of emotional emancipation. However, this transformation and acknowledgement of an ache for truth (which most Black youth don't consciously realize they have – cannot be achieved without an authentic and visible ethic of caring that is so palatable that youth can feel in the depth of their souls. According to Love (2019), "test scores cannot and will not increase until students are healing from trauma and/or mattering to themselves and their community" (p. 161). In addition, I Am MORE's cultural healing balm must be delivered from the inside-out.

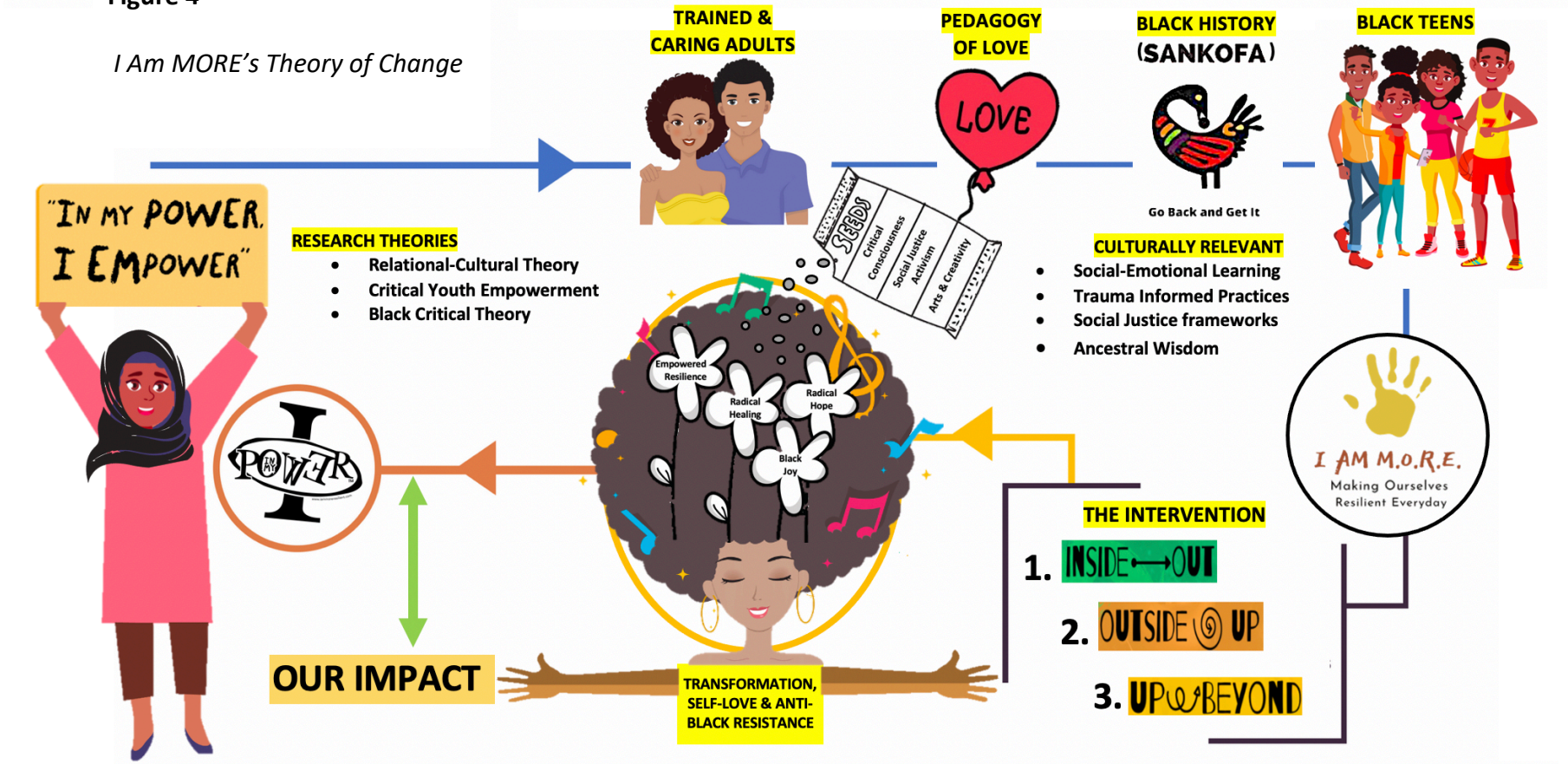
Then when the once-deeply wounded and silenced Black youth are acknowledged, affirmed and treated with tenderness and profound love, they not only become grounded in their own capacity to shine, but they also are inspired to reach back and help others do the same. This not only further confirms the principles and intention of Ubuntu, but is also reminiscent of I Am MORE's foundational theory of change: *When I am grounded in my power, I empower*. (See Figure 4).

Implications for research and practice

Black youth who have been subjected to anti-Black oppression are often waiting for permission to live empowered lives. However, in order to fully shift them toward personal transformation, I Am MORE's pedagogy is dependent on adults providing this emancipatory programming with authentic and revolutionary love, which is an embodied and passionate desire for racial justice that radiates from one's inner being. "Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and the world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed" (hooks, 1994, p. 243). Therefore, I Am MORE's potential is contingent on adults personally committing to shift from complacency toward bearing witness, validating, and normalizing a Black youth's emerging social-justice mindset. These are the necessary ingredients that will prepare a Black child's wounded soul to experience healing from the spirit-murdering they often encounter in society, and then to gather the psychological strength to disrupt future oppressive attempts to undermine their possibilities. What is at stake is a shared redemption, an interpersonal *and* mutual opportunity to unravel the status quo. For when Black youth are empowered to maintain their emotional liberation, it ultimately

Figure 4

I Am MORE's Theory of Change



tills the soil for the collective Black community's own much-needed, self-love revolution.

Threats to Validity

One of the greatest strengths of this study – my personal involvement as the principal investigator and the main instrument through which data are interpreted – is also one of its greatest challenges. Researcher bias, especially from a novice researcher, could prevent certain phenomena from being noticed. For example, my purposive sampling depended on my own judgment to include two of the three youth co-founders of I Am MORE within the research study. This decision, and possibly our interpretation of the data we examined, might have been influenced by our previous mentor-mentee relationship. In addition, I was conscious of the power dynamics between me and the youth that could have influenced what students shared in interviews and focus groups. When considered through a critical racial lens, however, my bias was also a beneficial resource. "Critical educators perceive their primary function as emancipatory and their primary purpose as commitment to creating the conditions for students to learn skills, knowledge, and modes of inquiry that will allow them to examine critically the role that society has played in their self-formation (Darder, 1991, p. xvii).

An ethical issue is also a concern with arts-based research (ABR), as questions arise about ownership, representation and the capturing of young people's vulnerable emotions in their writing and performances (Kaptani & Yuval-Davis, 2008). This concern is partly addressed by having each participant sign, in advance, voluntary, informed-consent permission slips. Any youth under age 18 were also required to have at least one parent's signature on the photo/video/audio release form in advance of their

performances. This gave I Am MORE permission to use or reuse their photos, videotapes or audio recordings of the performances. Youth were also acknowledged and respected as the owners of their own art, which is used as part of this research, and were given copies of their videos, photographs and other materials, when requested. One of the greatest strengths of this study – my personal involvement as the principal investigator and the main instrument through which data are interpreted – is also one of its greatest challenges. Researcher bias, especially from a novice researcher, could prevent certain phenomena from being noticed. For example, my purposive sampling depended on my own judgment to include two of the three youth co-founders of I Am MORE within the research study. This decision, and possibly our interpretation of the data we examined, might have been influenced by our previous mentor-mentee relationship. In addition, I was conscious of the power dynamics between me and the youth that could have influenced what students shared in interviews and focus groups. When considered through a critical racial lens, however, my bias was also a beneficial resource.

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Next Steps

Expand Curriculum: I Am MORE intends to set the stage to eventually engage in longitudinal research where we will follow Black youth long-term for quantitative measures, such as employment, well-being, and engagement in racial activism. We also will develop I Am MORE-specific surveys to document whether the Black youth who come through our programming are maintaining their embrace of radical hope, radical healing, Black joy and empowered resilience over the long-term. For the shorter term, we intend to collect data about benefits of the additional curriculum we are adding during Summer 2021, beyond our signature 3-step process of Inside-Out, Outside-In and Up and Beyond. Those additional courses include leadership-building subjects, such as financial literacy, public speaking, brand management, grant writing, entrepreneurship, dating violence and mindfulness These life-skills additions were partly based on suggestions from participants in the first intervention in 2020.

Draft culturally specific SEL curriculum: In Fall 2021, I Am MORE will begin coordinating an Educator Practice Community (EPC), in partnership with the state's largest school district. The attempt is to use I Am MORE programming as a foundation for what can

eventually be implemented within the district's K-12 schools to better support Black students. This two-year opportunity, which was funded by a NYC-based foundation, is one of only two youth-development programs in the country that was selected by the philanthropic foundation to develop innovative programming around SEL for underserved communities. The first year is intended to plan and organize a culturally specific project idea in partnership with the state's largest school district and other partners, including a charter PK-5 school that is founded by Black women and has a mostly Black staff; an alternative high school that serves a large percentage of Youth of Color; a community-based children's clinic that also serves YOC; the College of Education at the state's third largest university; and a nonprofit consulting group that works with 50 school districts around the country to help school leaders improve their policies, hiring practices and a school's shared and equity-focused sense of purpose in order to also help transformative programs, like I Am More, become successful and feel welcomed within a particular school district. This EPC is expected to be shape and sustain the possibility that I Am MORE can quickly scale and share its programming around the state and country.

Start a publishing company for Black youth. During the 2020 internship, youth created a guide for teachers on what Black students need in order to increase their sense of belonging within schools, and to improve Black students' academic achievement, and reduce the proverbial school-to-prison pipeline. That book became a catalyst for an idea to share the brilliance of I Am MORE's youth leaders with the world. In addition, one of the I Am MORE co-facilitators for the 2020 intervention was able to leverage her

association with I Am MORE in order to get a grant from a local arts and culture foundation that regularly awards grants to Portland-area artists and arts organizations. This youth leader plans to interview Black elders in order to write a book in the spirit of anthropologist and folk tale writer Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote numerous books about the early 1900s South and was considered one of the pre-eminent writers of the 20th Century. Lastly, I Am MORE youth who have been participating for at least a year will each be invited to write a chapter in an upcoming collection of stories – including photos, videos, graphic novels, poetry and art – that will highlight their individual journeys from spirit-murder to emotional emancipation. Eventually, the publishing company will become a way to engage more youth in our community based, leadership-development programming and workshops.

Future Research

Based on interest from Black youth in the 2021 intervention, I Am MORE will be having youth craft a Portland-based survey that can be used to chart the extent of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including racism, witnessing violence or living in foster care – of Black youth within the Portland area, as well as their levels of belonging within schools. This idea was seeded by youth who were introduced to the 40-question Philadelphia ACES survey, (Cronholm et al., 2015). While providing feedback during the intervention about why they thought the Philadelphia-centered survey was unrelatable to urban youth in their city, a few of the youth raised the idea of creating their own. This survey-design project will primarily be led by youth, who would also be trained on research-related skills, which includes administering the survey, analyzing results and

reporting the data to the school or the greater community. This survey project is the root of a larger intention to deepen the YPAR training of Black youth in order to eventually evaluate existing community-based programs – in partnership with local philanthropic foundations – to judge whether those programs are actually serving the social, emotional and academic needs of Black youth.

As part of that process, the youth involved in this initiative would also be providing those agencies with a laundry list of suggestions on how they can improve their programming. Black youth will also be trained as co-facilitators to train adult youth-development leaders on I Am MORE's signature three-step process, as well as engaged in learning how to craft social and policy changes. This power-shifting is strongly recommended by YPAR scholars Ritterbusch et al. (2020), who engaged sexually exploited children in Uganda, ages 16-25, in a large-scale, peer-led, YPAR process to develop their roles as community change agents. "[W]e urge scholars to create spaces for sustainable YPAR movements, both in academic and policy arenas, and to design participatory initiatives that prioritize knowledge produced by and for the improvement of children and young people's lives globally" (p. 10).

I Am MORE will also eventually engage in a youth co-led, research project that compares outcomes in one's Garden of Emotional Emancipation between Black youth and those in other underserved populations. More mixed-methods research could be done to compare outcomes between in-school and out-of-school programming. However, in contrast to other youth interventions, I Am MORE is not reliant upon a school-based site, as hooks (1990) recommends Black programming be provided in a

physical and emotional space outside of dominant social control, because of that educational system's tendency to serve as racial "combat zones" (Johnson et al., 2019) and "sites of black suffering" (Dumas, 2014). Taking an intentional step to work within schools would first be dependent on I Am MORE's capacity to develop a train-the-trainer curriculum and then prepare a cadre of culturally diverse teachers and employees of community-based youth programs on how to successfully implement I Am MORE's now evidence-based, inside-out Master Gardener process.

Lastly, there remains an urgent need for researchers to authentically extract the experiences of African immigrants from the buckets of context they are placed into as part of an overall Black experience. Their sun-kissed skin tones are similar, but the details of Africans' stories of attempted assimilation are radically different than African Americans, whose families have been on American soil for generations. Yet, this country's racial wounds are universally and automatically inflicted upon African immigrants, who often experience unrelenting, anti-Black racism for the first time once they hit America's shores. What's more, the literature reveals very little about real-life experiences, challenges and racism experienced by first-generation African immigrant teenagers (De Walt, 2011; Fu & Graff, 2009; Parks, 2014; Traore & Lukens, 2006; Watson, 2004). "Researchers need to build capacity in bringing an anti-racism lens to their work, questioning whether or not they have the data on the diversity of communities of color, and working to modify research and data collection practices in order to make the invisible visible" (Curry-Stevens, 2013, p. 102). A failure to address the complexities of African immigrants' social, emotional and spiritual needs will

continue to complicate the healing potential of the American born Black community. Ubuntu, after all, reminds us that our individual and shared destinies are intertwined: *I am because we are and because we are, therefore I am.* Ashe!

Summary Statement

I Am MORE's social-psycholoical intervention attracts Black youth and other YOC who have been scorned, silenced, and shell-shocked by white supremacy, and we hold an emotionally safe space, designed especially just for them. At I Am MORE, we like to say that we don't just give youth something to do. Instead, we serve as Master Gardeners to help create an inside-out process that nourishes the soil/soul of Black youth, blossoming heir potential revealing to them the someone they've always wanted to become: Self-assured, transformed, and emotionally emancipated. We listen to their dreams, we smile at - and with - their silliness, and we remind them of how resilient, brilliant, and creative that Black people are. With I Am MORE, Black is not the "other;" it's the everything. Black is the embodiment of what matters most to I Am MORE, to themselves, to each other. Using the soul-healing, spiritual practice of Ubuntu, we also remind Black youth of our interconnectedness as Black people, and the freedom awaiting them once they (re)embrace their collective cultural memory that has been calling to them from Africa's shores since they were born.

We hold up a mirror to the thick phlem blocking their authentic voices from emerging from the back of their throats, and we create space for them to build the confidence to tell their own stories in their own way, without shame, apology or permission. We do not blame them for their failures, as we have seen the road they

have traveled and it was not a path designed for their success. We also let them know that we see their "bruised hearts and wounded souls (Johnson, Bryan & Boutte, 2019, p. 2), and we hold space for the possibility of their full restoration. We remind them: I Am MORE cannot heal you; you must learn how to heal and soothe yourselves, Black children. There must be a reason why the world has tried so hard to block your natural light. The whispers of your ancestors will speak that truth when you are ready to listen. In the meantime, you must look within to find your own potential. And the profound love you allow yourselves to ingest can become the liquid salve that will heal your inner woundedness and invite Black Joy for an extended stay. The Black youth who have been through I Am MORE programming are the human faces of how educational theory and practice can create individual and collective transformational change. These young people have demonstrated that Black youth can and should challenge society's perceptions of their potential, and demonstrate possibilities beyond the ones they have even dreamed for themselves. and the source of inspiration to use social action to help others find their own path toward healing, too.

Epilogue

After analyzing the data from this research project, I was inspired to translate my thoughts into *researcher-voiced poetry* (Prendergast, 2009), also called *ethnographic poetics* (Brady, 2004, 2008; Denzin, 1997). This form of data uses rhythm, metaphors and poetic forms to provide deeper meaning, evoke emotion, and allow for another type of narrative reflection of the I Am MORE research data. As a researcher and heARTivist, this form of writing is a way for me to reflect a radical love for the potential

of all Black youth to heal, to thrive, to have their brilliance radiate as bright as the sun. I dedicated this poem to all Black youth, now and yet unborn, and title it “Hear / For U:”

I live at the crossroads
of act/ivism, art and academia
trying to offer melanined travelers
a soft landing a warm hug
a respite that feels like home
the welcome sign beckons
but only for eyes weary & downcast
to recognize and recollect
what lies within darkened shadows
those who arrive
do not come empty handed
the bags they lug
are rotting & unreasonable
their burdened hearts broken
their wounded souls
fatigued & aggrieved
from dreams too long deferred
come, I say, closer still
let me help u unravel the lies
I cannot save or heal u
but I will (re)mind u
yr long ago lineages
are interpreting secrets
unearthing cultural memories
listen up as they advise:
u are everything u need

so release yr shackles

from yr mind, heart, body

those constraints have led you here

now let them go leave them be

give yrself permission to fly

lean yr ear toward the wind & listen

yr ancestors are whispering

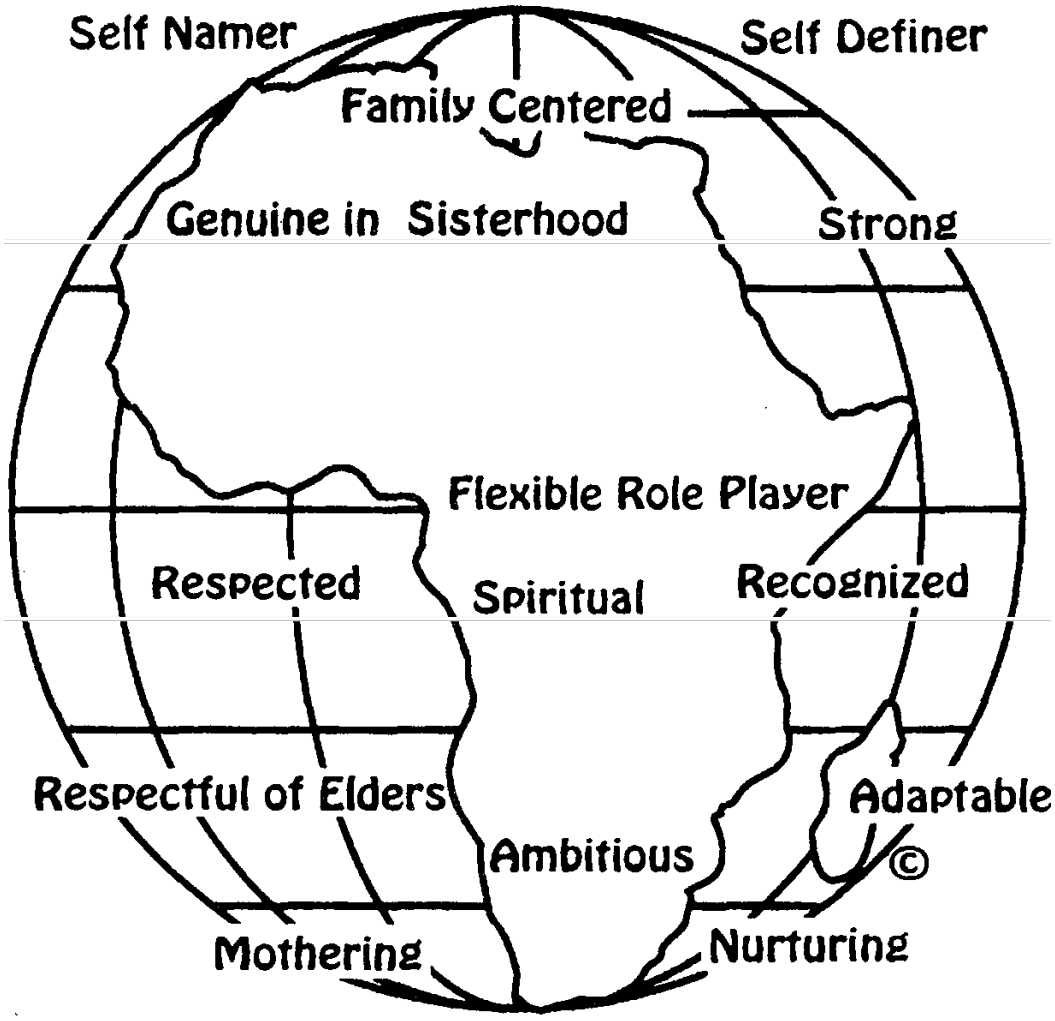
(re)member

(re)member

(re)member

APPENDIX A

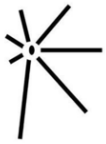
THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF AFRICANA WOMANISM



Source: Hudson-Weems (2019)

APPENDIX B

NGUZO SABA, THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF KWANZ

Principles	Pronunciation	Definition	The meaning of the principle
	**Umoja** *oo-MO-jah*	Unity	Emphasizes unity within the Black family and the Black community, and is reflected in the Ubuntu saying: *"I Am because WE are"*
	**Kujichagulia** *Koo-gee-cha-goo-LEE-yah*	Self-determination	Encourages Black people to define and name ourselves, as well as to create and speak for ourselves, rather than being defined, named and spoken for by others outside the community.
	**Ujima** *oo-GEE-mah*	Collective Work & Responsibility	Reminds us to make our brothers' and sisters' problems our problems and to solve them together, as a way of honoring our obligation to our past, present and future.
	**Ujamaa** *oo-JAH-mah*	Cooperative economics	Supports building and maintaining Black stores, shops, and other businesses and to make the profits work to bring collective economic strength back to the Black community.
	**Nia** *NEE-yah*	Purpose	Using our individual and collective talents to build up and benefit the Black community. This encourages all to look within to set personal goals based on our unique life purpose.
	**Kuumba** *koo-OOM-bah*	Creativity	Using creativity and our creative energies to benefit and maintain a strong and vibrant Black community more beautiful than we inherited.
	**Imani** *ee-MAH-nee*	Faith	Affirming our individual self-worth and that of our parents, teachers and leaders, and to maintain confidence in our ability to succeed and triumph in our righteous struggle for justice.

Source: Karenga, M. (1997/2002)

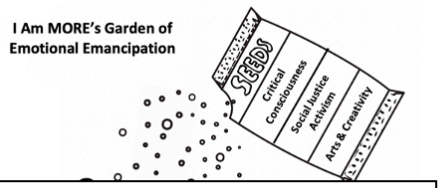
APPENDIX C

THEORIES & FOUNDATIONAL MODELS FOR EMOTIONAL EMANCIPATION

Dimensions	Relational Cultural Theory (RCT)	Critical Youth Empowerment Theory (CYE)	Black Critical Theory (BCT)	Social Justice Activism (YPAR/YREP)	Critical Consciousness	Arts-Based Research
Safe, supportive environment	Growth-fostering relationships are the source of meaning and empowerment	Environment must be safe, fun, caring and challenging for all youth..	Setting must be safe to encourage listening, sharing and reflecting.	Activism encouraged by positive support of youth	Supportive environment is emphasized	Safety & support are essential for vulnerability to emerge
Meaningful youth participation	RCT uses models of "power with" and "power for", where all matter and seek meaningful connection	Adults provide clout to youth as they develop capacity to make their own decisions	Cultural storytelling is used as a way to center youth voice and experiences with race/racism	Systemic approach to engaging young people in social resistance	Can be used to help youth take social action and gain control over lives	Meaningful participation is critical for authentic storytelling
Radical Healing Radical Hope Black Joy Empowered Resilience	Meaningful relationships are how we come to understand ourselves, build empathy, increase hope, joy, and resilience.	Shared power between adults and youth, with transfer to youth as they gain capacity for more leadership	Joining legacy of resistance is empowering; and raises hope of possibilities beyond ones present circumstances	Addressing conditions that can reshape context of life creates sense of efficacy, hope and resilience	Strength-based process leads to liberation which gives back power, and helps gain control over one's quality of life	Youth and adults both benefit from hope, joy and resiliency building through youth storytelling
Individual and community level oriented	WE are hardwired to connect, and build community; central to our development	CYE interweaves individual and community empowerment	BCT names, theorizes and mobilizes from individual and community levels	Raises confidence in capacity to promote social justice within self and community	Individual and groups can gain greater control over their lives by how they process connections.	Presentation of the arts is done at a community and individual level
Influences social-political values	Challenges separate-self paradigm within social and political values; promotes connections	CYE programs emphasize analysis and encourage social change goals	BCT challenges dominant ideology, based on anti-Blackness and is committed to ending racism	Transformation is based on systematic and institutional change	Objective of critical consciousness is to address systemic oppression and racism at its core	Art can be used to create messages that challenge socio-political frameworks
Critical reflection	RCT examines trauma, isolation and social shame when people feel disconnected	Critical reflection through varied youth-based approaches is integral to CYE	To understand BCT, one must reflect on how capitalism and racism co-evolved under colonialism	Based on praxis of critical reflection and social justice action	Critical reflection, which leads to action is required as part of critical consciousness,	Storyteller and listener engage in critical reflection of knowing and understanding

APPENDIX D

QUOTES ABOUT SEEDS PLANTED



Critical Consciousness starts with cultural affirmation, and critical analysis of society's racist structures, which generates a sense of agency in Black youth that sets a foundation for critical action to push against those oppressive elements of their reality.

So, to me it was very healing because I don't, aside from my personal family, I don't really have many Black peers. Oregon is very white and, being sort of quiet person, I found that I didn't really fit in or like get in with a lot of the other Black students in my area. I Am MORE was a way to be able to just find Black people in general. Oh, I feel like we need a space. We can be creative. We can talk about the things that are going down with ourselves because, you know, we would have some talks about, you know, what's going on with us. And I feel like I won't be able to do that if other people are there. I mean, all minorities obviously have like a similar experience, mostly, but having that kinship is very, very transformative and helpful in my opinion. I think it is an asset and a strength.

I feel like I Am MORE is, like, one of the very first programs to really specialize or focuses on me, the individual, and as me growing… I love the way that I AM MORE teaches agitation so much better than schools. In school, it was just like a textbook kind of thing that feels like I'm checking off boxes. Like I'm kind of just focused on grades and not really like internally getting that information I will need to get ahead. But, whenever I do anything with I Am MORE, even when I was the co-facilitator, I did a lot of research and I felt like I was learning a lot of things that I don't think I was ever learning, and really just getting a hands-on experience has been a game changer…I feel like a lot of people, especially a lot of people of color here in the US kind of go through the same trauma and having a place where they can express their feelings will be a great place. And I Am MORE is definitely one of those places here in Portland.

And that's the thing that they always say, you know, as a person of color, you have to be 10 times better than your white counterparts. But what happens is you have Black youth constantly moving and feeling like they can't stop moving and have nowhere to channel their emotions, their stress their anxiety. So, you know, it was a moment of realization that we all had that similarity…I think our vision is very much so that the youth can liberate themselves. And so I think that leadership aspect is very unique…Sometimes, I was just like really struggling to continue working in school. It was just, you know, I felt like I was learning more at I Am MORE. … But there aren't very many opportunities to apply those ideas into school because I mean, the structure of school itself was built on making sure that kids learn quickly. And then you can put them in a factory, teach them to be quiet, raise their hand.

Me, personally, growing up in Portland, it was really important to see mostly Black people in my group. Because it's kinda like important, like you have to look for the Black people, you know, they're not just there. You don't just walk outside and like, your neighbors are Black unless you were lucky to be in that kind of neighborhood. And I just feel like diversity is real. Like there's other races that need to be included. But in this specific work, I feel like Black people need to be the focus. I feel like it's kind of reparations because where else are we getting this? Where else are there supportive black people? Like, it's really hard to find.

Critical Consciousness

Well, something that I really appreciate is that I Am MORE has created a safe space for Black youth to just be themselves in a world where there's like, nowhere can you go. Like, who do you talk to? How do you process all these things that are happening in your own household; things that are happening in your own school? I mean, you don't really have anyone to turn to. And how do you feel yourself? Because during this process, you kind of forget who you are. And something that I appreciate about I Am MORE is that in the midst of all of these things, I Am MORE has been like an open house, open for anyone to come and to just be themselves to reflect and to just take a deep breath especially during this year. I mean, all these protests going on, the riots and so much more, it's just been really taking a toll on our mental health...I believe Black youth should have their own thing to say that this is like for us. That's very important because Black youth need to, like, your voice needs to be uplifted more and they need to have their own thing, their own programming, you know?

For me, as a Black girl, when we go into spaces or community-based organizations or even school clubs or things like that, they're usually created for other people. And this might sound very weird, but when I walk into spaces, Black girls are almost the last on the roster. They're always like the last people to be considered. So you will find clubs at school that are created for a specific ethnic group or specific cultural group. But then when you look at Black girls, we always have to almost try to make ourselves fit into those groups so we can feel part of a community.... So I feel like I Am MORE, it's that unique space where it's ready made for Black girls. It's ready made just to show the strength of black women, especially in a group together because like we've grown up in a society where you have forced us to be strong by ourselves. And I feel like that's probably another reason why it's very rare to find a club that's specific for Black women. It's almost like, "Oh, they don't need to be part of a group. They're fine. They're good."

It's very interesting because two out of the three co-founders are Africans. And so there is really that like, mindset, like, "Oh, we're really encouraging more African students and young people to be more open to joining groups like I Am MORE...Honestly, I think it's a good thing moving forward, because that will expose a lot of like cultural expectations. Like, from an African's perspective, African Americans are this type of way, right? But being in that space and learning from each other really would teach us a lot.

There's like, you know, the communication, the self-confidence building...But the thing that I loved the most is I'm with other Black people. So it's like we share the same type of stuff instead of just talking about random stuff...My identity was brought up all the time because we're talking about Black youth, Black women, Black males. So that was always brought up in a good way, you know, not nothing negative...It makes a big difference because where is that Black community? Where is that Black school? Where is that, you know, those Black bikers, those Black store workers or stuff like that? So having that, these are the words of Black youth that's making an impact right here. And it's like, I can go to them and not go to people that think they know what's best for me, when really these Black students experienced the same thing. And they know what's best for me because they've experienced it.

Critical Consciousness 	And so many of us, especially students of color can all connect to this because we all have been through some sort of discrimination within schools. Even though we want to say that schools are better now, it's still happening regardless. And you know, it gets even worse when things come to physical violence or that you're one of the few minority students in the class. Like I got hit with a ping pong paddle when I was younger. Cause this kid just kept picking on me and the teacher didn't do anything. Like he hit me in the face. Like just stop. Oh my goodness. You know, they're like you, because of the amount of trauma that we experienced as younger students and especially students of color in the public education system or just in education institutions in general...I don't realize it myself until I talk to someone, especially my white peers. They don't realize what we would go through*: "Oh my gosh, that happened to you?"* But for me it'd be like, that's pretty normal. And it's kind of horrifying how we've normalized the violence. Like internalized it, you know? One of the lines I repeat in my head and I realize how bad it is. It's like: *"It's gonna happen. I'm not white. I'm going to get discriminated against."* Whenever we have more different stories and more different points of view, the more it can challenge (stereotypes) that people might have. Just say like my father left me as a young kid. There might be someone in the audience that has had the same issues I have or someone who has immigrant parents. And the more people are going to relate to it, more than let's just say, other than we're all the same race and the same background...It's just gonna make a really compelling story of like, "Hey, anybody can do it no matter what race and what gender you are, anybody can do it." I think that was our cool core goal at one point, that we could show no matter what happened to you, you can basically tell your story. And I kind of really liked that because it made me feel more empowered. I think it's very important and it actually sends a very strong message because usually within groups, you would see students of similar backgrounds. And although that is still a good factor to have students of different backgrounds, you learn a lot more and there's a different history behind everyone. So the multi-ethnic grouping for us team leaders is very important. I would like to have more students of different backgrounds join because then we expand our reach. We expand our expertise and knowledge within the people we have, and we can connect to more people. And if there's multiple students knowing different resources and having different backgrounds, I feel that we would have a wider audience compared to what we have now. And just seeing someone that represents you on the stage or like a youth leader that represents you on stage, you already feel the connection.

Social Justice Activism helps youth realize their potential to critique, expand and adjust youth development practices and social justice practices that are intended to engage and empower them.

Something about I Am MORE is that it's training youth to be able to train other youth. And that's something that you don't see, especially in school. It's always about the adults doing this, doing that. And you just feel like you're being dragged along. So, that doesn't really give you that motivation to just say: *"You know what? This is about me. It's about my people, my community. And I want to learn about this so that I can be able to change the lives of this particular youth and help them gain a skill."* Like when it's focused on the youth, the youth feels like they are respected. Like their skills are being respected. Their experience is being respected, and that they are being honored as well. And that they're taken seriously…A lot of adults look down on the youth and think that they are not able to do anything, being able to lead or able to produce something or being able to just organize something without the adults.

I've always been an entrepreneur, but it's like, I Am MORE really brought it out of me. Like at first, I always thought I was too young to try to achieve it. But it's like, this is the best time to start and make mistakes. And as long as I'm learning through those mistakes, it's like, that's really, what's going to help out…Just being part (of Resiliency in Rhythm 2020), especially the one that we did with the clothing, that kinda helped me out wanting to pursue a clothing brand - just picking out the fabric, picking out what kind of clothing. Like clothing can symbolize so many different things and could really express how a person feels, how a person looks. And that was like, wow, this will be something dope for me to, like, try out and really see. And just being part of that kind of started a passion for me to want to be able to pursue something like this. So just experiencing that kind of like opened up other opportunities and even being part of like the Ted talk we did this year (Resiliency in Rhythm 2021), it was like, "Oh, maybe I want to start a podcast in the future." It's like every time I'm always part of something, I always come out with a new idea, something I can try, something I can do.

So at my school, we do have a lot of teams and equity teams and unions, but the problem a lot of the times is that there's no real push for, you know, actual things being done…You have the administration saying that it will help these teams progress. But they're the ones who are causing the barriers. With I Am MORE, this group of youth really push through but also there're not the barriers. There's actually the support, which is something very different. And also you have youth actually feeling like they're making a change…One of the biggest things that a lot of them talked about was when we did a presentation, a marketing presentation to a children's clinic. And I think that was so exciting. Like I had never seen them so excited. Oh my gosh, I could see every time I checked up on the slides presentation, there were edits being made. There were comments being made. It was crazy. And I think it's because they really felt like, *"Wow, we have this opportunity to actually do something in our community rather than just talk about it,"* which is very different from a lot of school groups…And that was one of the best things that I remember. They like came to me afterwards and were like, *"Well, we did it!"* So that's definitely like, I think that there's a different result. There's the result of just having conversations and feeling like you didn't really do much. And then there's the I Am MORE results where it's like, you're continuously doing stuff and you're never bored.

	A lot of what we were doing was either work based on ourselves and our personal interests. So I got to explore kind of what I like to do and what I would do if given the opportunity to, you know, write about my blackness or, you know, what I would say to school administration and as a Black student, like stuff like that. I got to explore lots of different facets of my being and that's a really imperative part of what I Am MORE is or was for me. It was the idea that I could explore anything I wanted to, anywhere, too. And that's a far cry from what being in school is like. We did that booklet we called a good guide about what Black students need in the Portland Public Schools. And I just enjoyed doing that cause I had to write an essay. And I was just like, this is so lovely because I know further on, I'm going to be able to use this…I need these things in this book, like my mental health, you know, all this stuff is important. It's like, "Oh, he's just being bad." But there's reasons, you know. Like he's not just acting out for no reason… I think it's really needed to talk about the social justice issues. it gives that space for everyone to be able to share their vision and make you grow. Because I feel like a lot of the time, we might have dreams or visions or we're like, okay, I want to do this. I want to do this. But it's like, where do I get the space? Where do I start? How do I start? Who can I work with? Can I get the help? So I feel like I Am MORE is where we're able to make our visions turn into a reality….I feel like every time we meet, or every time we have a meeting, every time we have a community-based planning, anything like that, we work towards fulfilling that mission, even stronger, even greater….When we kind of start, I don't know what to say, but when we start to focus so much on: *"Oh, what are other people thinking?"* Or what do other people expect from us? What do other people want from us? And, then we start forgetting what we want for ourselves.

 **Arts & Creativity** have psychosocial benefits, as they strengthen each individual's skills, such as critical thinking, public speaking, writing and planning.	So, being also involved in the arts, I've learned to have a balance of both organization and creativity. So that's kind of something that you know, with I Am MORE, I've constantly been working with…I'm learning how to really cooperatively work with different types and different styles of creativity. There's the *organized* creative, there is the, you know, *open* creative, and I'm really learning how to mesh all of that together. And it's nice that I get to do it with youth who are also really proactive about getting things done and who are also leaders in their community. I was a very shy person and if I had ideas, I'd always keep it to myself and I decide, OK, this is might be cool. But like, I didn't know how to act on it. I didn't know who I can go out and tell. And I Am MORE kind of gave me that platform…You're learning how to even take videos on your phone and how to edit it through your phone and that really just helped me out…I would always think like art needs all this fancy equipment to be able to kind of start filming and stuff like that, but you really don't. And it's like sometimes just like that knowledge is a barrier to your creativity. And so I feel like definitely it's just having like a place where you could continue to learn and really express your creativity without no concern. And if you have an idea, knowing that there's somebody behind you, that will be able to support and if they can, they can find somebody that can support you. I got kind of anxious being on stage, but then as I did it more and more, I found out that, like, even if I do mess up, it's okay because everybody messes up. So if I just laugh it off and keep going, and I don't stop, and let it sit on my conscience that I had made a mistake and, you know, like feel that anxiety, then it's fine…I want to say that I Am MORE really helped me get over my anxiety…that it's okay to feel that anxiety and it's natural to feel that anxiety and I should *want* to feel that anxiety because that means I'm experiencing something new. I shouldn't just run away from it or like try to push it down just because I don't like it. I didn't really talk, and I really liked literature. But when I got into I Am MORE and I heard some of your poems…I liked your language, the way, you know, you don't have to say things always directly. You can always use idioms or metaphors. It helped voice out my feelings and my anger. Like, sometimes you can't just say *"I hate this person,"* or like, *"I feel this way"*…And it was nice to, you know, have someone to support that art, like you are communicating your feelings because sometimes just saying something helps just let it all out.

	You hardly see that where students are performing to a bunch of adults. Usually the audience is generally the same as the performers, like students will perform for students, and adults would perform in front of adults. But from my experience, a lot of adults are listening, and it felt very different...I felt that at the time as a youth performer, I really reached out to the hearts of other adults who felt the same when they were young, and they weren't able to express that. ... And there's people in the audience that were in tears...I never knew I was able to do that. And as a youth, and this was my first time too, so taking it all in, I was able to process: "Oh, like, how's this happening"? I feel like the core thing that makes I Am MORE I Am MORE is it's the members itself, the kids. I feel like there wouldn't be I Am MORE without their performances. Their stories. Their creative ideas. It's basically the core fundamental group about I Am MORE, it's the people itself. I've always had this vision to have something like a YouTube channel or something like that, where it wouldn't just be me. Cause I don't like drawing attention to myself, but I like having guests on the shows where they will come, and we'll have a topic and that's what we'll talk about. So you won't be an interview. It would be like a conversation. And every time, we could change the topic to something different. So I'm really interested in that even if it'd be like a podcast or a TED talk. So that way, we can have a way to let's just talk, see what we have in common, ways to help each other and stuff like that. It's up to me to become competent adults in the future. Not only with things like money .... but just, you know, being emotionally available and knowing how to, you know synthesize our emotions and our thoughts into things like art and poetry and music and stuff like that. Just learning how to, you know, be an overall competent human being, you know, like emotionally and physically and just introspectively learning how to express and collect yourself and the different modes of doing that and how.

 **Expanding youths' horizons,** through performing and taking trips to Sunriver, OR, Philadelphia, New York City, and Washington, D.C.	I've experienced new things that I've never been able to experience before. That trip was the first trip I've taken out of Oregon and my second airplane ride. So it was very new. And it was really different because I've never been in hotels before either. I've never been in a populated area …And that experience, it felt like we were on a tour. It was very, I don't know how to explain it. The energy there was really energetic. Everyone's happy. Everyone was excited. And we were there for more than a business type. It was for fun too, but all that fun in business, they kind of interlock together…. it was different compared to how I travel with my family. And I was able to be more as an individual, other than a daughter or assist to how to take care of someone. I felt that I was focusing on myself and my own improvement, compared to me helping others and having to hold back because I had to be the caretaker. Definitely one of the things was that we got to travel. Like those places I have never been to. So it was a great place just being with two guys and doing the check-ins. It just made it seem like, you know, I was at a place where I'm safe and I can be myself. Like I know a lot of people's emotions really came out those couple of days. Like I was telling stuff that I never thought would ever let anybody else other than my family members know. That was one of my favorite trips with I Am MORE. That was like the second time I performed as well. I was a little bit less nervous cause after that first time I experienced it and, but that whole trip was so fun. Yeah, that whole trip was a great opportunity for me, because first of all, since I'm in the US, I've never left Portland. That was my first time stepping out of Portland and going somewhere else. And it was an amazing opportunity. And even though I wasn't one of the youth speakers at the events, I was able to like, see everyone else prepare for theirs, what they had to say. And also like at the moment and how they were presenting themselves, that was very incredible for the exposure I got to seeing how public speaking works, especially when you don't know anyone else in the group.

Developing youth leadership allows youth to build their capacity to become social change agents, especially if youth are allowed active and meaningful influence in the process.

I feel like the youth nowadays are, we are influenced by our environment and our family life, but we're also influenced by the limitless information we have access to on all of our devices. And I feel like that really changes the person, because it can really make or break your personality. So I feel like having youth-led groups and youth led projects are really important… because adults, as they grow up, like their mindset changes and like, they can say that they're doing things for the benefit of kids and adults can learn all these things about kids to help them understand kids better. But at the end of the day, nobody knows the youth better than the youth because times are constantly changing.

Looking back just recently doing the Resiliency in Rhythm and doing the Talk Back/Talk Black conversations, those are producers' things. And I didn't think I could do it and I don't even think I'm doing it right, but I'm doing it. I'm on it, all right. I'm supposed to be working at a job. And there isn't really a lot of jobs that I can do that are benefiting me as an individual, giving me skills that I can use and that can uplift and change my life. So there aren't really, especially at my age and I don't have any experience. So if I were to apply to a job, I wouldn't really get a job. I had a caregiver job, which I didn't even want to do, but I had to do a job. And so the fact that I'm able to gain skills that are helping my life, helping me grow, helping me gain skills that I can use in different areas and even different opportunities. So that's something that I Am MORE, like, has changed the game.

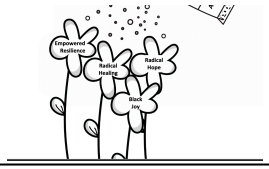
So, that was something that I had to come to realization with…the importance of valuing my work and not always doing everything for free or for, you know, this hope of something that will eventually return back to me….So to have money is a tug and pull situation and realizing that it also taught me, you know, that statistic that, you know, black people aren't educated enough about finances. So, that's why we decided to have like a class, a financial course at the end of the internship, because it was just that feeling of people feeling like there was this weirdness about money, this weirdness about finances and especially came from, like, a lot of guilt that if you have money and someone else doesn't, you know: *Do I deserve it?*

I got to take care of my parents because my parent was a single parent. Like some parents are not from here, so they need extra help. I got to help them out with, like, bills. I'm going to help with other things…So, that's great that you're trying to make that into a job because that just hits two birds with one stone: You're trying to provide for your family and you're doing something that you really like….I thought it was very important because at that time, I also had work and I kind of didn't want to miss a day at work. But, when I showed up there and I knew that I'm going to get paid for it, it made me more comfortable. Like, "*Hey, I'm not going to lose all my money. I'm just going to do this instead.*" And that makes me feel good…In reality, it's like this, this is real work. Like putting your emotions out there and being like really emotionally vulnerable, it's a hard job, very hard job. I've done a lot of jobs back in my day…But like out here showing your emotions to adults, it's, it's pretty hard. I'm not gonna lie. It's, it's pretty nerve wracking too, but it makes you feel like it was worth it, basically. It makes you like, "*Hey, I felt really good. And I got paid for something. I tried my hardest on it.*" It feels really good.

 **Developing youth leadership**	I think that that really inspired me. I'm like, wow, you can really make a lot of money for just doing something that you're passionate about and do something that you are like an expert, like you have an expertise under. So, I feel like just getting paid really motivated me. And then also just, like, made me want to do more because it's, it's good to give back. But like once you are giving back, you're actually getting paid for that. Just like it feels like, I don't know, like, I had to explain it, but it's like, I feel like definitely, like, I don't think it was like the main factors was me getting paid, but like, it definitely helped for me to continue ongoing because I, like I said, me personally, I was going through a lot of things and having like that stable income coming in was able to help me out, just like taking a lot of the loads off, just like helping pay bills, grocery shopping and stuff like that. I was able to help my family a little bit more. So, it was like I was doing something I love, but at the same time I was getting rewarded and that just like, you know, it was like, yeah, I definitely want to be able to come back. And it was like, you know, it's like getting paid to do something you love is just such a different feeling. I didn't have that confidence in myself and my blackness. I didn't know that I could public speak, I can make money. I could do my activism work and you know, my time and my effort were valuable. My labor was valuable. I didn't know any of that *(before I Am MORE).* So giving children opportunity or just teens in general, the opportunity to see that they have that work, they have that power, and they have that potential, it's limitless. It's literally priceless. I had no one to talk. So before I Am MORE, you know, being the person, I am, I'm very opinionated and, you know, I have my own experiences and my path in life. And those things contribute to my own politics and how I choose to do things and how I, I feel affected by things. Coming from North Portland, my whole life in a low-income neighborhood and from a family of immigrants, I've had a lot of criticism towards the city of Portland, but also towards the public education. And especially when I was younger, because I grew up not knowing English until later on in my life. So by the time I got into I Am MORE, it was in my later years of public education. And what really stuck out to me was when I was invited to speak, how much people would actually want to listen to me compared to when I was a child. I would say "This isn't right", or "Wait, we shouldn't be doing this." And I would completely get brushed off. So that's why I find I Am MORE so important. I'm like "*I had a teacher do this to me, and this is what you're not supposed to do.*" ...I said that students needed, like, we need you to be like our family, sometimes. Cause we don't have a family at home or, you know, we might be going through something and sometimes you just need to say, "Are you OK?" Or checking with us. Little things really are important, and education isn't just education. So it intersects with our normal life. It's part of our life, like 80% of my life as a kid was education, like five out of the seven days of the week. So it's very important...But it's more important for students of color...that we get to speak out about our experiences... So to have them kind of start thinking about this or to them to consider it, even it was just a little spark, it was something important. And from peers, it was that kind of affirmation. Like I've been through that too. Like you're not wrong.

APPENDIX E

QUOTES ABOUT FRUITS SPROUTING FROM SEEDS PLANTED



Radical hope is allowing oneself to imagine an alternative Black narrative in the face of personal or collective anti-Black injustices.

We had a lot of diary writing that was something I did a lot and talking about what I felt and that really helped. And I think being around so many youth going through the same thing, it definitely helped me push myself to speak and tell how I was truly feeling…When we were able to write in our journals, we were able to just put down some ideas. But when we came together and we heard about what everybody else wrote in their journals, it was all very similar to what we were all feeling. And that idea that we all had this common experience was really comforting at times, you know?

It's been a hard journey. But during this time, I can say that I Am MORE has given me something to believe in. I don't know what my life would look like if I Am MORE was not in my life. Honestly, if I can imagine my life without I Am MORE, I would say that I would be this close to like giving it all up, honestly…It has given me hope to say, okay, not all things are bad in my life. I can say, OK, I'm grateful about these things. And practicing gratitude has been something that has brought light to my life because there have been many days where I'm like, there's no one in my life. Like there's no family in my life. There is no anyone that I can say that has been there…But then when I sit down and I reflect, I can say, even though there are all these things going on, these things that are not going as planned… let me be grateful for this moment and let me appreciate the people in my life. And so me giving myself that space, I then see how blessed I am.

I wasn't expecting it to be as introspective as it was. And I liked that. I liked that a lot…You know, being Black in America is not the easiest thing to do. And you often feel disconnected from your community, especially in Oregon, where there's not a huge Black population. So just being able to kind of look within myself and figure out, you know, what being Black means to me and then also what it means to my peers and what being Black as a collective can mean. It was really transformative and helpful for me as a young Black woman…. It's a thing that a lot of kids, Black kids, specifically need, because I definitely was not confident in being a Black woman, like even two years ago.

Always my whole entire life, I struggled with self-love. I struggled with self-acceptance. I struggled with self-worth. I used to look outside for self-love, for self-acceptance, for self-reassurance because I didn't know there was anything as self-love. I just knew it was a word, but it never made sense to me. Like where am I going to get it from? So, I really struggled through life. I was always told: "*Oh, be strong.*" So, I just walked through life, just knowing, OK, I need to be strong. I need to keep going. I need to keep pushing through all the challenges, through all the problems. But then I was never told, like, you are enough. You deserve all the good things in life… o I had to get myself to a space where I had to start the process for myself. I had to get to a place where I had to take accountability for myself. I couldn't really keep looking outside or blaming other people or trying to point fingers at who didn't teach me that. I just had to get myself to a space where I had to be like, now that I know better, I need to do better for myself. Not for other people, but for myself.

Radical healing is a process of becoming proud of one's cultural identity and rejecting forms of internalized racism, while building one's capacity to resist racial oppression.

I'm pretty good about speaking up for others, but I'm not great about speaking out for myself, which is something that I started working on in I Am MORE….I Am MORE definitely taught me a little bit more about what it means to have not just value in your work, but value in yourself.

I met a lot of people that I probably would have never met. And just the doors that I Am MORE has been able to open to me is just, like, it's been incredible. And the learning experiences I've been getting and just me blooming and getting out of my comfort zone has been tremendous.

When I look at my life, I can say that there's just been a lot of damage. And that I did not cause myself. It just happens to be. And when I looked at my life, I can say that my body, my mind have been looking for ways to protect itself. And that happens to be maybe not even talking about the things that have happened. And me not talking about it, it's me not acknowledging the fact that I'm hurting and that I'm in pain. And so my body and my mind have been running away from the situation. So me doing that, it doesn't provide a space for healing. So in the past few months, I can say that I have been giving myself the opportunity and grace to say that you are safe and let us start healing ourselves.

It took me a while to actually accept that I deserve to be happy and to forgive myself for all the things I've denied myself before. Like it took time, but I feel like just having the space, which I Am MORE, I believe, is the space where, you know, that those great people who I'm surrounding myself with, who are on a different mental capacity where I can look at them and reflect and say, *'Oh, I aspire to be this calm or not be so anxious.'* …That's really what I Am MORE can do, just holding that space…where I can have the ability to work on myself without being judged.

I would say the affirmations were really helpful, especially through quarantine because I was depressed. I was really depressed. Like, it was bad. Like I wasn't taking care of myself. I wouldn't eat for like days. But I would look forward to those meetings because I knew there were people there who were not necessarily going through the same thing as me, but it was like a support system, like a judge-free support system. I could go there, and I could say how I was feeling, and I could just be real and be like, OK, I know it's kind of gross, but I haven't showered in two weeks because I'm just not happy. You know? Like I just don't want to get out of bed. And like, people were there to help me in sharing those feelings and be like, OK, why don't you try after this meeting? Why don't you try to like wash up? Or why don't you try to eat? And like, I'll check back in with you afterwards. Cause it wasn't just the meeting. It was outside of it, too, with my whole group, all of them. It just formed a different type of connection because we were so intimate with each other and we just spoke our truth.

So, I feel like having I Am MORE, it gives us the space to be vulnerable, a space to be strong…I Am MORE accepts you for everything that you have to bring, everything that you have to offer, the good, the bad, what you're working towards, what you want to work to become. I feel like that's what makes I Am MORE so different

Black joy is an affirming mental space that allows one to be unapologetically happy and proud about being Black.

You're learning so many informative things in I Am MORE. It's not like school, but it's like you're engaging with people who have similar experiences or who understand your experiences. It's very exhilarating. And so to have all this fun and then, you go back to this normal life of school or home, it was very hard. A lot of times I had to motivate myself to do this homework assignment and then work on I Am MORE stuff, when I really just wanted to work on I Am MORE stuff.

It's really scary, honestly, but the fact that we're able to say, OK, this IS us youth, we're going to gather. We're going to reflect on this, or we're going to talk about this, and we're going to check in with each other and how we're feeling. That's very crucial because a lot of us don't have that. We don't have that in our homes. We don't have that in our schools. And having a space where it's a safe space; it's with other young people that you can connect with – it's something that just uplifts your spirits, and it really comforts you. It's a warm hug that you don't get in the world.

It's like, I want to do this for other people, but it's never been like, what about me? What are the things I want to do for myself? And I remember like you used to say love yourself. I would say those words, but I never knew what they meant…I started realizing that one thing that's going on with me is that I'm not paying attention to my mental health, because I would get anxiety all the time. I would get mental breakdowns and all that, but I would really never pinpoint the issue and try and figure out what's causing it. I just had a minute to myself where I was like, OK, I have to figure out a way to learn to love myself, be myself, enjoy my own company and things like that. I started paying attention to things that trigger me. Now it's like, I'm just at peace with myself. I can go there without an anxiety attack or anything like that.

I would say the biggest one I loved the most because of COVID, I wasn't able to socialize or talk about personal stuff that I'm experiencing…I did that a lot more and it felt good that we still even reach out today and say like, *"Hey, how's it going?"* Stuff like that. So that was very beneficial checking in with each other all the time. And then talking about what's going on in the community, like with the Brianna Taylor case and the Black Lives Matter movement. This was so helpful in its own ways of like, you know, talking about stuff that we needed to do personally. We always had deeper conversations, but we have to finish this later, you guys. Oh yeah. I loved that the most.

Last year, my senior year, I remember writing down affirmations and every morning I would wake up and I would read those affirmations to myself at least three times. And then I would go take a shower, get ready, do everything. And then just doing something like that really lifted my spirits. I remember I started to walk different. I started to talk different. I started to approach people differently. I started to look at life very differently. So I would say resiliency, for me, showed up in my life. Just finding my inner power. And I Am More, also played a very big part in that because you would definitely help me tap into my inner self because I feel like a lot of the times as Black girls, especially African girls, we're taught to take care of everyone else by ourselves. So I feel like I Am MORE played a very big role in just helping me tap into my purpose. Helping me recognize that I am worthy. I am enough. I'm deserving of everything good life has to offer.

 **Empowered resilience** is the strength to not only overcome challenges but to then reach back to educate, inspire and empower others.	What I'm really thinking on is where we should be embedding and passing onto the next generation, the next people that we're teaching, so they can continue on teaching it. And definitely hope is like we're just here now, like it creates a path for the next person, you know? And I feel like hope is a star of what I want to do. But we can turn into much more resilient. I want to be able to make sure everybody, including myself, is able to always be able to bounce back from whatever you go through and not letting that define who you are. Those words are just like key messages to be able to pass that back to the next generation because you're not always going to be here. But, once you have that embedded, you don't have to be like everybody that you interact with. Whenever you touched on something so traumatic and so personal to you after that you have people come up to you and ask you questions about yourself, it makes you feel much more appreciated, like every single time. No matter if we're like completely different or really the same, they just appreciate it. I feel like that's a core that I really, really like about I Am MORE. I didn't feel forced, or I didn't feel like I had to share my own story. Like I felt like I was generally really comfortable about sharing experiencing something really traumatic from myself to other people that I just don't know. I felt later on in life, like even now, I feel more comfortable about myself. I've been realizing I've been really busy with work and I've been, like taking care of my family. But I just feel so, so comfortable. And so confident lately, because I'm like, well, this is what made me who I am. But I'm here now as an adult doing the stuff that I want to, and it made me, like, kind of reflect a lot, like what happened through my life. But at the same time, made me feel like I have more stuff to do. I should get to it. I've experienced new things that I've never been able to experience before…I never thought I would be able to make anyone cry, but at the end of that performance, I saw tears…I was like, you know, I'm stepping into my power. And there's people in the audience that were in tears. I never knew I was able to do that. And as a youth, and this was my first time too, so taking it all in, I was able to process: "Oh, like, how's this happening?…I feel like I made a good impact in the world, but even the smallest bit of impact because I never felt I was able to impact anyone outside of my family as a caretaker. So having that experience made me feel like I could do more, and I could do bigger stuff, and I can present to a bigger crowd of people and it really did happen. So by having the audience, and people in the audience tell me that what it meant to them, I was able to feel that I had more power to do more just by sharing my story. And it may sound like it's something really small, but great things smart from small steps. I Am MORE helped me realize that if I wanted a different life, if I wish that things were different, that it was up to me to start doing the work. So yeah, I would say resilience in my life showed up in that aspect, just looking at myself, inwardly and looking at the work that I needed to get done and just becoming the best version of myself for myself, with myself and for other people. When I first came into I Am MORE, I didn't have to prove my potential because you already saw that, and you gave me skills that I needed. t's become like I AM MORE has revealed certain things about myself that I did not know. And it has equipped me to use that, to empower other people. So that's something that I didn't see. And I think that is what makes I Am MORE what it is. And without that, then it would just be something that isn't too interesting.

APPENDIX F

EXAMPLE OF STORYTELLING THROUGH GRAPHIC NOVEL

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