Dear Mama: An Exploration of Trauma and Black Feminist Healing Practices Through Letter Writing

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Abstract

This autoethnographic project delves into the multitude of strategies I've employed over the past decade since my mother's passing to confront and heal from my trauma. Through a series of original letters spanning from girlhood to early adulthood, I narrate my journey, delving into the depths of my emotions, thoughts, and coping mechanisms as I navigate through various traumatic experiences. Guided by Black Feminist Autoethnography as its methodology and anchored in Black Feminist Thought as its theoretical framework, this project also explores the profound impact of transgenerational trauma on the psychological well-being of Black women. From enduring slavery and racialized violence to facing misogynoir, economic exploitation, and sexual violence, Black women have grappled with systemic injustices rooted in their race, gender, and sexuality for generations. Employing an intersectional lens, this project examines how Black women actively resist these oppressive systems. Additionally, it includes a comprehensive literature review encompassing canonical research, music, and literature authored by a diverse array of Black feminist theorists, scholars, and creatives addressing trauma.

Keywords: Black feminism, transgenerational trauma, healing, art, non-traditional healing practices, intersectionality
Process Essay: Part I

Introduction

On June 3rd, 2014, my mother passed away after her battle with breast cancer. She was the embodiment of resilience and grace, always encouraging me to persevere through life's challenges. Her passing profoundly reshaped my life. Witnessing her take her final breath marked one of my earliest encounters with trauma, and set a precedent for many traumatic experiences over the following decade. In this project, I utilize autoethnography to delve into the strategies I've employed in the ten years following her passing to navigate and heal from my trauma. Autoethnographic research, as I will discuss further, “combines the impulses of self-consciousness with cultural awareness reflecting the larger world against personal lived experiences” (Boylorn, 2008, 413). Through autoethnography, I aim to explore crucial questions:

(1) What coping mechanisms do Black women employ to confront and overcome trauma, and how have I personally applied these methods to address my own trauma over the past decade?

(2) How have external factors influenced my experiences?

My personal journey is preceded by a historical legacy of trauma. Black women have experienced trauma from a multitude of sources including oppression, racism, war, slavery, mass genocide, forced displacement, police violence, and physical/sexual violence (O’Neill et al., 2016; McCluney et. al, 2017). These experiences—marked by violence and dehumanization—have deeply affected subsequent generations of Black girls and women. This transmission of trauma across generations has resulted in the phenomenon commonly known as transgenerational trauma. Typically, individuals grappling with trauma turn to therapy as a pivotal step in their journey toward healing. Therapy offers a secure environment for individuals to confront their struggles, empowering them to address and heal their trauma by devising a personalized treatment plan that directly addresses their unique challenges. Despite the benefits
of therapy, many Black women harbor skepticism about attending for a variety of reasons, including structural and attitudinal barriers. Some of these barriers include financial cost, lack of medical insurance, limited services availability, shame and stigma, lack of awareness regarding mental health status and need for treatment, cultural and language differences, lack of information, inaccurate perception that mental illness is a result of personal weakness, reliance on religion, feeling as if their experiences are not valued, and fear/distrust of the treatment system (Bruwer et al., 2011; Jones & Harris, 2019; Jones, 2020).

To address the apprehension often felt by Black female patients regarding therapy, many therapists are integrating Black feminist therapeutic theory into their sessions. This approach involves “an integrated analysis of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class, and offers a model that addresses the multiplicity and simultaneity of oppressions that Black American women experience” (Jones & Guy-Sheftall, 2017, 206-207). Through the incorporation of Black feminist therapeutic frameworks into their sessions, therapists are encouraging Black female patients to critically examine their experiences within the context of broader societal and structural factors, which in turn enables Black women to be “liberated from internal psychological distress, societal barriers, and promotes skills that assist them to be self-actualizing in their goals, their will power, and their way to power” (Jones & Guy-Sheftall, 2017, 207).

Although therapy has recently become more accessible over the past few years due to the emergence of telehealth services and the broader inclusion of mental health care in various health insurance plans, therapy is still considered a luxury. During some of the most challenging and traumatic moments in my life, when therapy wasn’t accessible, I relied on other coping strategies to persevere. Some of the strategies I employed included listening to music, singing, songwriting, poetry, dancing, and praying. Upon reflecting on my life experiences and pondering
the journey that led me to where I am today, I became passionate about investigating how Black girls and women have used both traditional and non-traditional methods of healing to confront their trauma.

Before diving into this project, I deliberated over how to best approach my research. I first contemplated conducting interviews with Black women about their experiences with trauma and their methods of overcoming it, but time constraints and personal responsibilities made this idea impractical. Afterwards, I considered crafting a traditional research paper where I’d critically analyze existing research on trauma and healing. While that idea was feasible, I found it to be incredibly boring. Recognizing the importance of addressing such a deeply personal yet critical subject matter with authenticity and sensitivity, I made the deliberate choice to develop a creative project utilizing autoethnography as my methodology, positioning myself as both the researcher and the research subject.

Coming into this work, I experienced a great deal of trepidation and hesitancy. My primary concern revolved around the academic validity of my work. Since entering academia, I’ve been shaped by the expectation to conform to conventional and straightforward academic writing standards rooted in white Eurocentric norms of knowledge production and intellect (Miller Dyce et al., 2022). For years, I believed that my credibility as a scholar was contingent upon my ability to produce highly theoretical academic writing that showcased a deep understanding of the subject matter I was discussing. Moreover, I believed that straying away from the conventional scholarly journal article format was strongly discouraged within academia.

This perspective was heavily influenced by institutional norms that generally discourage creativity, authenticity, and critical consciousness in academic writing (Miller Dyce et al., 2022). Despite these prevailing norms, I was determined to develop a project that challenged traditional
academic writing standards and demonstrated my academic expertise and theoretical understanding of feminist concepts in a creative manner. As a researcher, my scholarly interests are deeply intertwined with my identity as a Black queer woman. Initially, I feared that revealing my most personal experiences might be met with disapproval from professors who might prefer a less personal approach to my writing. However, after reading the work of Anzaldúa (1981) and Walker (1974), I realized how imperative it was that I engage in this creative, autoethnographic work.

In “Speaking In Tongues: A Letter To 3rd World Women Writers,” Anzaldúa (1981) empowers women of color to write narratives of their personal, embodied experiences because these stories hold inherent value and deserve to be told from the perspective of the individual living them. When questioned on her decision to write, Anzaldúa (1981) says:

I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy…To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit. To show that I can and that I will write, never mind their admonitions to the contrary. And I will write about the unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. (187)

These few lines resonated deeply with me. As a Black queer woman navigating a society marked by racism, sexism, and homophobia, writing serves as my voice to convey the intricacies of my lived experiences as a multiply marginalized individual. Through writing, I've come to recognize the validity of my experiences, affirming their significance in a world that often overlooks them.

Writing has also provided a pathway for self-discovery, allowing me to explore and
understand myself on a deeper level. Despite the challenges posed by my identity as a Black woman, writing enables me to embrace vulnerability, a process that has been historically challenging. Engaging in this project has shed light on areas within myself that require further nurturing, revealing lingering pain from the traumatic events I've faced throughout my life.

Alice Walker (1974) also significantly influenced my decision towards creative work. In her essay "In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens," she argues that despite being inherently artistic/creative, Black women throughout history have faced oppression that stifled their creative expression. Walker (1974) underscores how centuries of punishment for attempting to read and write deprived Black women of avenues for creative expression. Drawing from the lineage of a singing/music-loving Black mother and a grandmother renowned for her sewing prowess and passion, I have personally embraced the mission of carrying forward their creative legacy. This project serves as my platform to honor and carry forward the rich tradition they bestowed upon me.

Another concern I harbored coming into this work was potentially re-traumatizing myself. Despite my dedication to spotlighting the resistance, resilience, and healing strategies of Black women, delving into my own experiences as the subject of my research compelled me to confront and articulate painful moments from my past. To keep myself grounded throughout this process, I actively engaged in what many feminists of color refer to as radical self-care. This approach entails “embracing practices that keep us physically and psychologically healthy and fit, making time to reflect on what matters to us, challenging ourselves to grow, and checking ourselves to ensure that what we are doing aligns with what matters to us” (Nicol & Yee, 2017, 134).
Engaging in radical self-care encompassed various practices. This included attending therapy sessions with my Black female therapist, immersing myself in music, song, and dance, and carving out time for my hobbies. I prioritized my physical wellbeing by eating and drinking adequately, and I nurtured my emotional health by regularly connecting with loved ones instead of isolating. Furthermore, I made a conscious effort to diversify my work environments throughout the completion of my project. Since my office space is situated in my bedroom, I found it challenging to address emotionally taxing subjects in a space primarily designated for rest and rejuvenation. Therefore, I made a deliberate effort to relocate as frequently as possible. By doing this, I preserved my mental well-being amidst the demands of my project.

This process essay will comprise two main sections: the overview and the methodology. In the overview, I will continue to discuss my process of developing the project idea, elaborate on the theoretical frameworks guiding my work, and review the research, music, and literature informing my understanding of Black feminist healing practices. The methodology section will detail how I utilized Black Feminist Autoethnography to compose my letters and connect the emerging themes from my letters to other relevant Black feminist issues.

What Does it Mean to Heal?

To gain insight into how Black girls/women navigate healing their trauma, I first had to explore the concept of healing itself. When I searched the definition of “heal” on Google, I encountered definitions of becoming sound or healthy, or free from injury or illness. While this simplistic definition suffices in certain contexts, such as recovering from a cold or virus with medication, healing takes on a more profound significance in the lives of Black women. Trauma, as we are acutely aware, can be passed down both interpersonally and intergenerationally. When groups of individuals endure victimization, oppression, brutality, and marginalization, they often
experience trauma and pass that trauma response on to their children (Menakem, 2017). Black girls who are born to traumatized Black women internalize this trauma response, and without proper intervention, they risk perpetuating this cycle. As Black girls mature and encounter societal challenges like racism, sexism, and homophobia, they often lack the necessary emotional tools to cope effectively. Additionally, pervasive stereotypes like the Strong Black Woman trope compound their struggles, making it even more challenging for Black women to break free from their trauma. The Strong Black Woman is described as:

a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men. Less of a woman in that she is less “feminine” and helpless, she is really more of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother earth…in other words, she is a superwoman. (Wallace, 2015, 65)

The expectation placed on Strong Black Women to exhibit unwavering strength in the face of adversity and to care for everyone around them is deeply ingrained. While these women are often praised for their resilience, the reality is that they are expected to maintain emotional strength for themselves and their communities. This portrayal perpetuates harmful stereotypes about Black women, leading to their further marginalization and oppression. Elite groups in society have historically manipulated and constructed false narratives about Black womanhood to maintain their power (Collins, 2000). These narratives include stereotypes/controlling images like the Strong Black Woman, mammy, matriarch, welfare queen, and hot momma, which serve to normalize social injustices such as racism, sexism, and poverty in the lives of Black women, thereby perpetuating their oppression (Collins, 2000).
In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, which provides language to describe the complex layers of identity individuals encompass. Intersectionality shows how social categories such as race, sex, gender, class, ability, and nationality intersect to shape people’s experiences and impact how they navigate in the world. Before Crenshaw coined the term in 1989, Black feminists like Frances Beale, The Combahee River Collective, and Audre Lorde laid the groundwork for what we now recognize as intersectionality. In “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” Beal (1970) analyzes how capitalism, race, and gender intersect to oppress Black women. Beal (1970) highlights how economic exploitation confines Black women to domestic roles, devaluing their labor. Additionally, Beale (1970) sheds light on the coercive sterilization of non-white women (particularly those in underdeveloped countries) by the United States, as a means of population control and maintaining power imbalances. Both Beale (1970) and the Combahee River Collective (1977) address the challenges faced by Black women within the contexts of the white women’s liberation movement and the Civil Rights movement.

The Combahee River Collective (1977) asserts the necessity of a politics that is both anti-racist and anti-sexist, arising from the exclusion of Black women from both movements. They also highlight the intertwined nature of race, class, and sex oppression, as Black women often face these forms of discrimination simultaneously. Lorde (1984) echoes this perspective in her essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” by emphasizing the need for women to recognize how their differences shape their experiences and grant certain individuals access to privileges while subjecting other groups to further oppression. Lorde (1984) specifically calls out white women who “focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age” (70). Overall, the concept of
Intersectionality illuminates how the overlapping identities of Black women render them susceptible to oppression, leading to the daily experience of trauma simply by existing.

Given that trauma manifests at both the interpersonal and systemic level in the lives of Black women, effective healing initiatives must address both issues. French et al. (2019) provides a working definition for radical healing that addresses the impact of oppression on People of Color and Indigenous individuals in the United States. They write:

We believe it is essential that radical healing includes both acknowledgment of and active resistance from oppression, as well as a vision of possibilities for freedom and wellness…

For POCI in the United States, psychological healing must move beyond traditional notions of psychotherapy, which have historically focused on individual behaviors, cognitions, and emotions…for liberation to occur, psychological healing must focus on systemic conditions contributing to the trauma of racism and colonization. Thus, we envision a radical healing process that acknowledges the pain of oppression while fostering hope for justice and psychopolitical freedom. (French et al., 2019, 11-12)

In practice, Black women engage in radical healing by challenging oppressive structures through activism, writing, and music. Pop star Beyoncé’s (2016) musical film Lemonade exemplifies this concept. In the chapter entitled, “Resurrection,” members of the activist group Mothers of the Movement—Sybrina Fulton, Gwen Carr, and Lezley McSpadden—hold framed images of their sons, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown, who fell victim to racialized violence. By showcasing these mothers turned activists, Lemonade highlights Black women's resilience in the face of violence and their ability to transform pain into purpose, working towards collective healing. In the subsequent chapter “Hope,” the theme of collective healing persists as a group of Black girls and women nurture and support one another, coming together in communal
gathering. Accompanied by the song "Freedom," this scene vividly illustrates Black women's resistance against the mistreatment and oppression they've faced at both interpersonal and systemic levels. These chapters, juxtaposed, vividly demonstrate how Black women, united in community, are actively resisting the oppressive forces that have shaped their lives both historically and in the present day. From grieving mothers to young Black girls representing a future of hope, *Lemonade* emphasizes that healing is a communal endeavor essential for survival.

**Literature Review**

Collins (2000) argues that Black women possess a unique perspective on their experiences, which deserves recognition and inclusion in mainstream feminist discourse. She stresses the importance of seeking out expressions of Black feminist thought beyond traditional institutional settings and among women who may not be typically seen as intellectuals (Collins, 2000). By explaining that Black female intellects exist beyond formal institutions, Collins (2000) asserts that knowledge passed down through generations or acquired through non-academic means is still valuable in shaping Black feminist epistemology. With that in mind, I conducted the literature review for this project through a Black feminist lens. By taking this approach, my goal was to showcase the contributions made by numerous Black female scholars, artists, creatives, researchers, activists, and educators who are dedicated to exploring and celebrating Black healing in both traditional and non-traditional ways.

For the sake of this literature review and my project, I consider therapy to be a traditional healing practice, while spirituality and Black cultural mythology are considered non-traditional practices. According to Emma-Lee Amponsah (2023), Black cultural mythology refers to a recurring genre that typifies the way Black people have recalled their collective past. Namely, through heroic survival, memory, and narrative/art. Concretely,
Black cultural mythology can involve oral, textual, or audiovisual storytelling, aesthetics, and other forms of art, as well as philosophy and critical theory – all related to Black people’s survival and resistance throughout the post-colonial experience. (32)

To best frame this discussion on healing practices, I have separated this literature review into two sections. In the first section, I discuss some of the traumatic experiences that Black women have endured throughout history. In the second section, I examine various forms of Black cultural mythology to illuminate the ways in which Black women address and heal their trauma.

Black Women and Inter/Transgenerational Trauma

Generations of Black girls and women have subconsciously been assigned the nearly impossible task of recognizing, addressing, and resolving inter/transgenerational trauma present within their families and the broader Black community. Intergenerational trauma refers to the “collection of deep and distressing experiences within and across generations” that is “embedded in biological responses” (Barlow, 2018, 903). Intergenerational trauma, while rooted in the past, offers a framework for future generations to comprehend how historical trauma resides in their collective memory and shapes their responses to current events.

Slavery is one of the most significant historical events ingrained in the collective memory of the Black community, and the mistreatment of Black girls and women during this time still impacts the way Black women behave, are perceived, and respond to trauma in present day. During slavery, Black people were considered chattel property of White slave owners, and their bodies were deemed ugly and non-human, which justified torturous acts against them (Griffin, 1996; Broussard, 2013). Moreover, Black women were depicted as "promiscuous, immoral Jezebels who seduced their masters" (West, 2004, 1491), perpetuating the false belief that they
were excessively sexual and responsible for their own victimization, rather than holding their White slave owners accountable.

Broussard (2013) explains that enslaved Black women were unable to protest the physical and sexual abuse inflicted by White male and female slave owners due to the severe repercussions they would endure for speaking out. By suppressing their ability to defend themselves or by suffering from harsh punishment when they did defend themselves, slave owners were able to paint the picture that Black women are not victims of sexual violence but rather hypersexual beings who “asked for it” (“it” referring to rape). In their efforts to resist sexual victimization, Black women employed a range of strategies, including hiding, running away, fighting back, and staying silent altogether (Broussard, 2013).

In modern day, we see the “biological, emotional, and behavioral aftereffects of historical trauma continue to be passed down, including continuing cycles of abuse, normalization of violence, and the code of silence about abuse” being upheld within our own communities (Burnett-Zeigler, 2021, 46). An example of this can be seen in Black women abuse victims’ reluctance to report their abuser to the police. According to West (2004), memories of historical events such as lynchings and police brutality increase Black women’s distrust in and perception of the legal system. Gomez and Gobin (2020) expand on this point by discussing how intracultural pressure makes it difficult for Black girls and women to speak out against perpetrators within their racial group because they risk being severely harmed, coerced into silence, or punished for speaking up.

Essentially, Black women have been conditioned to believe that remaining silent in the face of violence will offer protection to themselves and those around them. However, this mindset is extremely dangerous, because it confines Black women to environments where they
become targets for further victimization. Despite the transgenerational transmission of silence culture, many Black women have chosen not to adhere to it. Instead, they have utilized their art, words, and voices to demonstrate how Black girls and women have transcended oppression, subordination, and pain to arrive at a place of healing. The following section will discuss how Black women have used Black cultural mythology, traditional, and non-traditional healing practices to address and heal from their trauma.

**Traditional and Non-Traditional Healing Practices**

**Narrating Pain Through Music**

Music is one form of storytelling used by Black women creatives to address and heal from their trauma. In the musical film *Lemonade* that served as a visual accompaniment for her album of the same name, pop star Beyoncé (2016) details her personal journey of heartbreak and reconciliation in response to learning about her husband’s infidelity. She narrates this journey in eleven distinct chapters: Intuition, Denial, Anger, Apathy, Emptiness, Accountability, Reformation, Forgiveness, Resurrection, Hope, and Redemption. Songs such as “Hold Up” and “Don’t Hurt Yourself” encapsulate Black women’s rage and display Beyoncé’s process as she works through her feelings of anger and hurt caused by the realization of her husband’s cheating. As the film progresses, viewers witness how Beyoncé leans into the ancestral past to find healing and reconciliation within her union. The film not only includes music performed by Beyoncé herself, but also includes a host of poems and narrations from figures such as Malcolm X who remind us that Black women are the most disrespected, unprotected, and neglected women in the America.

Another Black woman creative that has used music as a way to narrate her trauma is rapper Megan Thee Stallion. For the past three years since the July 2020 shooting incident in
which fellow rapper Tony Lanez shot her in the foot, Megan Thee Stallion has been a target of hatred, ridicule, vitriol, harassment, and violence on social media. On her *Good News* album that was released in 2020, Megan addressed controversy surrounding the shooting incident. In 2022, she released the album *Traumazine* that houses the song “Anxiety,” which gives insight into her mental health struggles as she navigates public scrutiny as a celebrity and copes with the death of her mother. In the music video for “Cobra,” Megan Thee Stallion (2023) candidly addresses her struggles with depression in the aftermath of her mother, father, and grandmother’s deaths, the violence she endured in 2020, online harassment, and her former partner’s infidelity. In the music video, Megan can be seen shedding her skin, symbolizing her journey of releasing the past so she can birth new experiences, ideas, and heal from past traumas.

*Storytelling: Poems, Novels, and Non-fiction narratives*

Storytelling in the form of poetry, novels, and non-fiction writing are amongst some of the most popular ways that Black women have narrated their trauma. In her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison (1986) explores the traumatic effects of slavery through the main character Sethe. Despite her physical freedom, Sethe remains enslaved by the haunting trauma of her past—specifically, the decision to murder her daughter to protect her from enslavement. It is only when Sethe confronts her past and trauma head-on that she begins to move towards a path of self-forgiveness for murdering her child. *Beloved* tells a story of transgenerational trauma both within and outside the book. Inspired by the real-life story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved Black woman who murdered her child to prevent her from returning to slavery, Morrison crafts a narrative that intricately explores intergenerational pain and resilience in *Beloved*. Following the publication of *Beloved*, Morrison expressed worry about the suppression of Black women’s
voices (Wolff, 1991). Through her novel, Morrison effectively conveys the enduring trauma and silence culture experienced by Black women across generations.

*The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982) follows the story of Celie, a teenage Black girl who writes letters to God that detail the abuse perpetrated against her by her father and husband. Celie’s life is consumed with traumatic events such as brutal beatings, having her children involuntarily removed from her care, and being separated from her sister. Celie communicates with God as she believes God is the only person that will listen to her. Celie’s letter writing practice heavily inspired my decision to undertake letter writing for this project. Despite each novel exploring different topics, Morrison (1986) and Walker (1982) both narrate stories of trauma and have their main characters use spirituality to address and heal that trauma.

Spirituality also plays a significant role in *The Salt Eaters* by Toni Cade Bambara (1980), which tells the story of Velma Henry, a Black activist who undergoes a spiritual healing following her attempted suicide.

In her essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde (1984) argues that for Black women, poetry is a vital necessity for their very existence. Lorde (1984) asserts that poetry “forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (37). While this essay doesn't explicitly delve into the topic of trauma, Lorde’s 1978 poem “A Littany for Survival” does. In this poem, Lorde (1978) articulates the pervasive fears experienced by marginalized individuals in a racist, oppressive, and discriminatory society, highlighting how this fear prevents marginalized communities from speaking up against injustices. Lorde (1978) argues that silence only serves to perpetuate oppression and encourages marginalized individuals to raise their voices as an act of
resistance and liberation in a society where “we [they] were never meant to survive” (line 44).
Both in her essay and poem, Lorde underscores how writing, particularly in the form of poetry, offers Black women with a vital platform to express their realities and strive for liberation. For Black women, freedom isn’t just an abstract concept, but rather a “pressing goal with historical, multi-generational, immediate, and severe life and death consequences” (Evans, 2015, 166).
Positioned at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality oppression, many Black women find poetry to be a powerful and beneficial tool for confronting daily trauma, claiming freedom, and fostering healing.

In her choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*, Ntozake Shange (1975) tells the stories of seven nameless Black women who are only referred to as colors (lady in red, lady in orange, lady in yellow, lady in green, lady in blue, lady in brown, and lady in purple). Some of the topics Shange (1975) covers in her poems include sex, love, rape, abortion, domestic violence, HIV, suicide, and sisterhood. Although *For Colored Girls* discusses traumatic situations and heavy topics, the seven women find healing and community by sharing their stories with each other. Lastly, in her book *Hunger*, Roxeane Gay (2017) discusses the ongoing trauma she navigates after being gang raped at 12 years old. This traumatic event led Gay to develop an extremely unhealthy relationship with her body and food. Consequently, she turned to overeating as both a coping mechanism and a means of protection against violent men and the harsh realities of the world.

Through music and storytelling, Black women have created spaces to articulate their pain, confront their traumas, and envision paths towards healing and liberation. Artists like Beyoncé and Megan Thee Stallion utilize music and visuals to narrate stories of trauma and resilience, advocating for both individual and collective healing. The works of Toni Morrison
and Alice Walker delve into transgenerational trauma, emphasizing the importance of spirituality and community in the healing process. Audre Lorde underscores the essential role of poetry in amplifying Black women’s voices, affirming their experiences, and providing a platform for Black women to reclaim their agency in the face of oppression. Ntozake Shange highlights the transformative power of community in overcoming trauma, while Roxanne Gay offers insights into the complex intersections of trauma, self-worth, and healing. Together, these works contribute to a methodology of Black feminist radical healing, centering Black women’s voices, experiences, and resilience, and advocating for collective liberation from systemic oppression.

**Spirituality**

Spiritually refers to an “individual’s belief, faith in, and personal relationship with God/higher power that transcends human limitations, restores them to well-being, and loves them unconditionally” (Blakey, 2016, p. 40). Black women’s reliance on spirituality/religious culture was born of slavery (Burnett-Zeigler, 2021). When diverse groups of African people were enslaved, they crafted distinct religious perspectives to help them navigate trauma, endure dehumanization, and seek refuge from systematic oppression; today, many Black women have continued this tradition by using spirituality as a coping mechanism against transgenerational and interpersonal trauma, racism, domestic violence, and rape (Blakey, 2016; Burnett-Zeigler, 2021). In a case study involving 26 African American women managing histories of trauma and substance abuse with spirituality, Blakey (2016) discovered that participants attributed their connection to God as having purpose and meaning. Participants believed that spirituality “enabled them to adapt, transform, and transcend various traumatic experiences while maintaining their faith in God” (Blakey, 2016, 52). Furthermore, these participants were able to use spirituality as a tool of empowerment that promotes recovery and healing.
Conjuring serves as another avenue through which Black women explore spirituality. Brooks et al. (2021) developed the concept of conjure feminism to trace the historical lineage of Black women’s knowledge-production. Conjure feminism, as conceptualized by Brooks et al. (2021), “is a way to think specifically about the enduring histories of Black women’s knowledge-production that began with the lessons we learned at our grandmothers’ kitchen tables and are woven into the fabric of Black women’s writing practices: motherwit, root medicine, food as ancestral memory, mothering, and spirit work” (Brooks et al., 2021, p. 452). Despite its ongoing evolution, conjure feminism is guided by core principles outlined by Brooks et al. (2021): (1) there are consequences for your actions, (2) death is not an ending but a transition, (3) one is beholden to the ancestors as well as to future generations, and (4) spirit work is necessary for our physical, emotional, and psychological health. Conjure feminism allows Black women to gain deeper insights into the influence of their ancestors on shaping their lives and wisdom.

Therapy

Therapy is a traditional method used by many people to heal from trauma. However, despite its common use, many therapeutic practices lack cultural sensitivity towards Black women. In fact, many psychologists and practitioners have not been trained to provide evidence-based interventions to their Black female clients because traditional evidence-based interventions were not created with Black women in mind (Oliphant et al., 2022). Given that intervention methods were not designed to address the unique forms of discrimination and oppression experienced by Black women, it is unsurprising that they express feelings of apprehensiveness regarding therapy. Furthermore, a host of structural and attitudinal barriers experienced by Black women make accessing care difficult. To combat these barriers, many Black therapist and mental
health care professionals have begun incorporating Black feminist frameworks into their practice. Some strategies influenced by these frameworks include practicing critical affirmations, raising Black consciousness, engaging in a race-gender analysis, helping clients practice constructive assertiveness, and encouraging Black women to take social and political action against oppressive systems and structures (Jones & Harris, 2019; Oliphant, 2022). My letters are my therapy.

Dear Reader,
For as long as I can remember, I was always labeled as strong. Before my mother passed away, it was a shock to many of my peers that at 13 years old, I was helping to care for a sick parent. When my mother died, my phone was flooded with condolence messages that reminded me to stay strong, as that’s what my mother would’ve wanted me to do. As I continued to hit other milestones in my life without my mother, on-watchers would tell me they were proud of me for my strength and ability to keep pushing despite life’s circumstances. Whenever I’d receive these comments regarding my strength, all I would do is thank the commenter for their kind words and mention God for guiding my footsteps. What people did not see behind what they perceived to be as strength was a vulnerable, broken, and lonely child that was seeking love, support, and validation from wherever she could get it. Although I did not understand it as a child, I now realize that many of my later behaviors directly stemmed from these early experiences of being referred to as strong. I had become a victim of the Strong Black Woman trope that plagues many young Black girls and women alike.

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) exemplifies resiliency in the face of adversity; she has an obligation to maintain an image of strength, she must suppress her emotions, she cannot be vulnerable or dependent on others, she must be determined to succeed whether she has the resources to do so, and she must help others (Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010). Despite my best efforts, I began to internalize the SBW trope. I learned that vulnerability made me weak, and I wanted people to see that no matter how badly they hurt me, I was unphased. I found myself becoming hyper-independent because relying on anyone—be it family, friends, or a romantic partner—made me feel weak. I limited who I expressed my feelings to, and even then, I wasn’t being completely truthful. Admittedly, I wasn’t even truthful to myself half the time, and these highly personal letters will reflect that.

Dear Mama: An Exploration of Trauma and Black Feminist Healing Practices Through Letter Writing is my attempt to hold space for my trauma, analyze the coping methods I used to navigate my trauma through a Black feminist lens, and connect my experiences to larger societal and systemic issues faced by Black girls and women. Since I was a child, I’ve been writing. There was something therapeutic about thinking through a story idea, writing it down on paper, and publishing it for others to read. When my life was in disarray, I could lose myself in the fictitious world that my story characters lived in. Writing was healing for me. When it came time for me to decide what I wanted to do for my Masters final project, there was no doubt in my mind that it would involve creative writing. I toyed with different ways to communicate my trauma in a way they felt authentic yet academic. After reading various books to inform my project, I quickly realized that letter writing was the perfect medium.

Melonas (2021) discusses how letter writing can be viewed as a radical form of self-care for Black women because it “opens up a space of counter-resistance, healing, recognition, care, and creativity” (p. 38). In Burnett-Zeigler (2021) book on Back women’s emotional wellbeing, she writes, “far too often, we have coped with our pain by turning away from it, avoiding or denying it rather than looking at it closely and handling it tenderly” (p. 3). This process of letter writing was an act of radical self-care for me because I unapologetically
acknowledged my pain without avoiding or denying my true feelings. Letter writing was the perfect way for me to confront my own trauma without someone else minimizing it or rewriting my story to make it digestible for the masses.

*Dear Mama,* as its name insinuates, is a dialogue I am having with my mother who is unable to respond. As part of my pursuit to explore Black feminist healing practices, I had to think critically about what my mother represented in the context of these letters. For example, did my mother assume a new position in my life because she’s passed on? In these letters, am I speaking to my mother as I knew her Earthside, or have I pedestalized her? In their discourse surrounding the role of ancestors in healing, Edwards et al. (2009) write:

> From an African perspective, ancestors are regarded as custodians of our lives. They occupy a position of dignity and awe among their descendants…Healing by ancestors is achieved in a sense that they provide us with a sense of rootedness; they anchor us, and they confirm our identity…The knowledge of having superior beings that are their custodians provides a sense of security for humans. Doing all that needs to be done in order to secure a place in our future destination is what gives us our identity, a sense of purpose and a sense of belongingness…Therefore if one looks at healing as an act of one making healthy we can argue that nothing heals a person better than knowing who she/he is, (descendancy) what she/he is about (purpose) and where she/he is going. One role of the ancestors in healing is to provide their descendants with a sense of completeness and guidance when there is uncertainty. (p. 5)

In this sense, the curation of *Dear Mama* is my way of healing through indirect communication with an ancestor (my mother). If ancestors are considered custodians for our lives that provide us a sense of completeness and guidance, my mother in these letters is my personal guide who is helping me navigate the multitude of traumatic events that I discuss throughout this project. The beauty of ancestral communication in this sense is knowing that my mother can’t respond, which allows for a more authentic conversation on my part because I can be wholly truthful about my experiences without fear of judgment.

As you prepare to embark on this journey of trauma and healing that spans approximately ten years, please heed the trigger warnings. This project includes mentions of terminal illness, death, suicidal ideations, mental illness, sexual assault, and violence. I hope that when you are finished reading, you have a better understanding of who I am and how I’ve employed Black feminist healing techniques to kickstart my healing process.

Sincerely,

Bria Nickerson

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Date: June 3rd, 2014
Entry Name: Can’t Give Up Now

Dear Mama,
How could you do this to me? How could you leave me behind? I have no one. My father doesn’t want me, and the rest of the family doesn’t get me like you do. I hate you. I don’t really hate you. I hate this cruel disease for taking you away from me.

We prayed together every single day that you were in the hospital/rehab. I’d sing “Can’t Give Up Now” by Mary Mary because I knew that song gave you hope. You loved reading Psalms, especially Psalms 6:2, 41:3, and 23:4. I just knew that you would beat this. I just knew you’d witness all my life milestones—graduations, weddings, children. I just knew we’d grow old together. I loved you with every part of me, and now I don’t know how I can continue life without you.

I remember the day you first told me that you had cancer. We were sitting in your room on your bed. You were quiet and uneasy. You eventually told me that they found cancerous cells in your breast, and that you would fight with all your strength to beat it. This was back in 2012. Who’d ever think less than 2 years later, you’d be gone?

I remember all the chemotherapy sessions. I’d accompany you sometimes just to feel close to you. After therapy you’d be so tired, but still made time for me. You were the greatest mother, and you are the strongest person I’ve ever known. I watched you fight tooth and nail to beat cancer’s butt. It was one of my most joyous moments when you had the surgery to have your breasts removed. I just knew the most brutal part of the storm was over. Eventually, you started to heal and returned to your old self. Seeing you being active, going to work, and continuing to live life gave me faith that things were going to be okay. Until they moved you to hospice care.

Truthfully, I knew something was up because of the questions you’d ask or things you’d say to me. You always told me you loved me, but as it got closer to the end of your life, it sounded different. Almost as if you were desperate for me to know how much you loved me. You asked me if anything were to happen to you, who would I want to live with? You’d sometimes text me in the middle of the night saying this is it. You’d have major anxiety attacks where all you’d ask for was me. You tried to make my most recent birthday great, and thinking back, you probably knew it was the last one we’d spend together.

I knew yesterday something was wrong. You were completely out of it. They prescribed too high of a dosage of medication, and you were really sleepy. And then you passed out right in front of me. I remember screaming, crying, and running out the room looking for a doctor. They came and hooked you up to a ventilator and there was a tube down your throat. I cried when I saw you. Why did they have you like this? What’s going on? I knew it from then you were gone, but I didn’t want to accept it. The last words I whispered to you were “I love you,” and I swear I heard you mumble it back.

Then we got that call. All I remember is the sound of granny’s vintage cups and bowls shattering as I threw them against the wall. I remember screaming that I was an orphan. I remember everyone running to embrace me as I sobbed and called out for you. Mommy. Mommy. Bridget. I remember asking God why he would do this to me and my family. I was
told to pray, and I did. I prayed for your strength, mama. I prayed for you to no longer feel pain. Why would he take you from me? You always told me never to question God, but I can’t help myself.

I know I can’t give up now, so please guide my steps mama.

Sincerely,
Your Baby Girl

Date: August 18th, 2015
Entry Name: I Care

Dear Mama,

Today, my doctor told me I may have depression. I went to the doctor because I was experiencing what felt like a sinus infection, and then she broke the news to me. I can’t say I’m surprised. In fact, I’m relieved. This entire summer has been terrible for me health wise, and it’s as if no one seems to notice. I haven’t been able to eat or drink without feeling like
I’m choking, I’ve lost weight, I’ve slept a lot more than usual, and overall, have felt generally unwell. Life has felt purposeless for the last few months.

Since your death, there have been many big changes in my life that I don’t think I’m adjusting to well. Almost immediately after your death, I moved in with aunty. This would be of no shock to you because you’re the one who assigned your sister to take care of me. Honestly, it’s been difficult living with her. She is always on me about everything, and I barely have any freedom. Outside of going to choir, I must come home. I don’t feel comfortable telling her anything. I know she’s trying her best, but sometimes it’s too much for me.

Her daughter is worse. To be honest with you, I don’t think she likes me very much. I know she and her husband don’t have any children, so me moving in is probably a big adjustment for them and everyone else involved. While I understand that, I don’t know why she treats me so coldly. I’m just trying to find my footing here. I don’t want to take her mother away from her. I’d do anything to have another moment with my own mother. I just want them to understand that I’m not trying to be a bother, I’m just feeling very lonely.

Adding onto that loneliness is my year of first. Since you’ve been gone, I’ve been experiencing so many big moments in my life without you here. Back in November of last year was the first birthday and Thanksgiving without you. I honored your birthday by going to one of your favorite places with the family—Atlantic City! It was weird without you there. It was also cold because it was November. It wasn’t like our usual trips. Christmas was probably the most difficult holiday thus far to celebrate. Even Thanksgiving I was able to push through, but Christmas? That was a terrible time for me. We went shopping for gifts and I remember talking to him about how terrible things were for me this year. Every year you, me, and the rest of the family went shopping together. One of my favorite shopping trips was to TJ Maxx where you gifted me a pillow pet that I really wanted. I cried into that pillow pet this Christmas.

My birthday this past May was the hardest of them all. Turning 16 is a big deal amongst us teenagers, and it didn’t feel right not having you here. I had a great time, your sister and niece made sure of it! But nothing compares to having you there to celebrate with me. I spent my birthday reflecting on the last birthday you and I spent together in 2014, and I remember you trying to make it good for me because you probably knew we’d never spend another one together on this Earth.

Currently, I am going through my first heartbreak, and I am utterly crushed. I knew Trevor and I weren’t going to last forever, but I never thought we’d end this way. Trevor has become such a big part of my life, and after the way he treated me, I considered taking my own life. Trevor and I began speaking around September of 2014. At first, our conversations were about homework. We shared a class together that he never attended, so he always needed to know what we did in class. As weeks went by and we started to speak regularly, I found myself crushing on him. I didn’t know how he felt about me, but sometimes he showed signs that he liked me too. My pride would never allow me to tell him how I felt first.
Eventually he made it clear that he liked me, and I did the same. We started going out on dates, and of course, I had to lie to go on them. One of the hardest parts about dating Trevor was having to keep secrets from aunty. This is when I realized how sneaky I could be, and that her overbearing nature is what caused me to be secretive. After going on our second official date, we shared our first kiss together. It was an amazing moment, and that’s when I knew how crazy I was about him. Shortly afterwards, he introduced me into the world of sexual intimacy. This was a difficult thing for me to come to terms with. I was a girl who went to church every Sunday, and I just knew how disappointed aunty would be with me if she knew I was engaging in pre-marital sexual acts as a teenager. The first time Trevor and I did something sexual together, I tried to get hit by a car on my way home. I thought I would be banished to Hell and couldn’t properly regulate my emotions.

For months Trevor and I stayed together. Like any relationship we had our ups and downs, but through it all, we stayed together. This was my first time in a serious relationship. This was my first time being so in love. Although I knew Trevor and my time was limited due to him getting ready to graduate high school, I didn’t care. Anytime we got to spend with each other, I was going to find a way to make it happen. He had a busy schedule, so his time was very limited. It felt great when he made me a priority. I was on Cloud 9, until the end of May rolled around.

Senior trip is one of the most significant parts of your high school career as a student. As we got close to senior trip and graduation, Trevor became more and more distant. Responses were infrequent and if he did respond, they were short. After his senior trip, he ignored all my messages. I would reach out to check on him, but he would leave me on delivered. I had other friends ask him why he wasn’t speaking to me, but all he said was that I was being childish and to speak to him directly. I finally spoke to him on the one-year anniversary of your death, mama. I thought that he’d be more kind knowing what day it was. Instead, I found out he was allegedly talking to another girl. A few days later, I found out he was unfaithful to me during his senior trip.

I tried to come to terms with everything, but it all hurt so badly. Just a few weeks before his trip we were happy and in love, and a few weeks later he’s ignoring and cheating on me? He could’ve been honest with me. I thought we’d built a relationship where we could be vulnerable with each other, but maybe I was wrong. I spent weeks asking myself what could I have done differently. I knew I wasn’t always the best partner to him and engaged in petty behaviors, but I really tried to fix my behavior when I knew he didn’t like it. I was willing to change myself to meet his standards. He wasn’t willing to change to meet mine.

At one of my lowest moments, I had one of my best friends record a video of me singing I Care by Beyonce.
I had such a personal connection to that song, and hoped that by posting the video, he would see it and reach out to me. He never did. I struggled to accept that our relationship was over, that he wanted nothing to do with me, and that he was moving on with his life without me. I tried to do the same, but by summer, I had fallen into a depression. Now here I am months later writing you a letter about how bad I still feel.

Mama, why does this have to be so hard? Why do people tell you they love you but hurt you? I have no one to talk to about these feelings except this paper. I can’t tell aunty. I can’t tell her daughter. I can talk to my friends, but what do they know? We’re all just trying to figure this life thing out. I wish I didn’t care so much about everything. I wish that I could accept things for what they are. I wish I didn’t hate myself. I wish I didn’t want to end my own life. I wish you were here.

Sincerely,

Your Baby Girl

Date: February 17th, 2017
Entry Name: Lemonade

Dear Mama,

Today I’m feeling really low. For the past few weeks I’ve been managing my emotions well, but today was bad. I know I’m depressed. I still haven’t seen a therapist because your sister doesn’t believe in anything other than prayer (despite being a retired social worker). To think you’ve been dead almost 3 years, and I still haven’t attended a single therapy session. It’s a wonder I’m still here today.
School was bad today. It’s been bad for the past few days, honestly. Valentine’s Day was 3 days ago, and of course I was alone. I feel bitter. I know at 17 you’re not supposed to be “searching for love,” but I feel so empty. I want to feel loved and not just by a boy. Ever since you’ve left, I’ve just felt so alone. Does anyone truly love me? Now that your sister is sick, I’ve been more isolated than usual. She is the priority right now, and that makes sense. But I miss feeling loved by her. She’s made some mistakes with me, but she’s an amazing woman and I’m scared of a life without her. Her daughter has been overwhelmed with her mother’s declining health, so we’ve been at odds recently. Tension is very real. I’m just trying to stay afloat at this point, and truthfully, isolation is what keeps me sane. How sad is that?

Facebook has essentially become my journal.

I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t vent to Facebook intentionally. I want someone to see it. I want someone to help me. I want Damian to see it, even though we aren’t friends on there anymore. I know one of his friends would report back to him like they do about anything I say/do on there. I bet he was with his little girlfriend on Valentine’s Day. Yeah, I’m very bitter about them. I just don’t understand how someone who claimed to have loved you could hurt you the way he did me? I invested my love, time, and energy into him, all for him to cheat on me with her.

I know I wasn’t always the greatest girlfriend. I am not without fault. He told me how he felt about Trevor and I communicating, but I didn’t listen. But how does that justify cheating and lying? He lied to me for weeks with no remorse. I saw the decline in our conversations, and I begged for things to change, but according to him we could never come back from all that happened. All that happened? You mean the things I did when we were separated after he broke up with me. You’ll get a great chuckle out of this, mama. During the summer of 2016, Damian and I separated because he was losing interest in me and felt that our conversations lacked substance, but then recanted shortly afterwards. Do I look like I have
the word desperate plastered across my forehead? I guess I’m never good enough to keep the first time around. Go figure.

So, for the remainder of that summer, I spent time with Trevor. I know it wasn’t right, but it felt right at that moment. For once, I had the upper hand. After the pain Trevor caused me, he was the one begging me for forgiveness. I almost ended my life after the heartbreak Trevor caused me. I fell into such a deep depression that I was scared I’d never escape from it. This was my time to get answers, to get closure, to get vengeance, to get the love that I was seeking. Truthfully, I knew I wasn’t emotionally ready, and that Trevor just so happened to come at a convenient time. Damian had just told me that he didn’t like me and I was not worth his time anymore, and that was a hard pill to swallow after I spent months being disgustingly in love with him. I felt that if I’m not wanted here, I’ll go elsewhere. But as I sit and write this letter, I don’t feel like I’m wanted anywhere.

I truly feel so alone. I miss him so much. He was one of my best friends, mama. We had inside jokes, and we sang to each other, and he made me so happy, but he also made me mad, and I hated him sometimes, but then we kissed and make-up. Why couldn’t we come back from things? Why couldn’t he stay? Why doesn’t anybody stay?

You left me! And dad left me! And Trevor left me! And Damian left me! Am I worthy of staying around for? I know you didn’t voluntarily leave me, but I have so much resentment towards you, mama. Nobody in this entire world understood me the way you do, and I’m feeling aloof without you. I always think about my experiences and how different they might’ve been if you or even dad was here.

I think a lot more about dad than I’d like to admit. I hate that he has so much power over me. How could you not want an innocent child? How could you be so cruel to a human being you helped to create? How could you not even send your child condolences when her mother died? They say a young girl’s father is supposed to be her first love, but truthfully, he’s my first heartbreak. He was the first man to ever betray me, and now, I find myself chasing after boys who have a habit of doing that same thing. Sometimes, I’m grateful that he wasn’t an active presence in my life, otherwise, this pain would be worse. It still hurts though.

I also think about Trevor. Would we have been able to make things work when he graduated high school and was starting college? Would I have even wanted things to work? I can only imagine what being a college student feels like, especially with all the access and freedom you have. Truthfully, he probably would’ve been cheating on me too. I still think about him though. I think about his safety. Being in the army sounds scary, and after our summer ended, I thought a lot about if he was safe. You never know the last time you’ll hear from/talk to someone; you know what I mean? I learned this because of you, mama.

And now Damian. I think about him every single day. I think I may be going through the five stages of grief. I remember reading about that when you were sick and dying. I went
through different stages with my emotions as I came to terms with your mortality, and now I find myself going through that same process to navigate this breakup. Unfortunately, I’m stuck in the depression phase and don’t know how to move past it. Although cheating is part of the problem, the bigger issue is who he cheated on me with. He told me he had no feelings towards his best friend, and that’s exactly who he ended up with. He lied to me, and the lies went on for a while. I have messages that show how long things were happening behind my back, but somehow, I’m being jealous, crazy, and insecure. And now every day I go to school and get painted as the angry Black girl when I see them happy together. But don’t I have a right to be angry? Don’t I have a right to be hurt?

Earlier today I wrote a poem.

And she once again ends up alone.
In a world full of people, she feels so alone.
In a household full of loving family, her soul can’t find home.
To the public, her feelings may not always be shown,
But she stays isolated in her personal space, where she remains alone.

Whenever things become too overwhelming, I turn to music and writing. I listened to Lemonade by Beyoncé and tried not to cry when Sandcastles played but failed miserably. I can tell Beyoncé felt scorned and lonely when she was dealing with Jay-Z’s cheating, and that’s exactly how I felt with Damian. We’ve invested so much love into each other, and this is how you repay me? As Beyoncé says, “we built sandcastles that washed away” and now I’m stuck on the beach alone trying not to drown.
I don’t want to be alone anymore.

Sincerely,
Your Baby Girl

Date: January 13th, 2019
Entry Name: SA I & II

Dear Mama,

It’s been two years since the first sexual assault. I remember the moment clearly as day, but I wish I didn’t. Even two years later, I don’t think I’ve ever moved past what happened to me. Can you believe it happened again?

I should’ve just gone home. It was senior pajama day, and I was enjoying my time with my fellow seniors. We were taking pictures and enjoying each other’s company. I had worked so hard in school since your death, and it was amazing to partake in senior activities because it was a representation of how far I came. When she told me she was going to this man’s house, I was in disbelief. We had just met him yesterday when we’d gone shopping for my pajama day outfit. What do you mean you’re going to his house? I knew I didn’t have to, but something in my spirit did not sit right with her going alone. So, I went with her.

The first sign that something was off was the location he provided. Rather than providing a concrete location, he told us what stop to get off on the bus and where to wait. Eventually,
he met up with us at that spot. I guess he wanted to protect himself, and because we were essentially strangers, he didn’t feel comfortable providing his exact address. While I could understand his reasoning, I couldn’t understand why we continued to go through with this.

The second sign was asking us to come to a random home to smoke. She almost did it, but I stood my ground and said this was not going to happen. We decided to wait at a nearby pizza shop while he took care of his business. By this point in time, I already felt uncomfortable with the situation and urged her to reconsider staying. While she kind of felt the same way, the feeling wasn’t strong enough for us to leave, so once he texted her saying he was done, we met back up with him.

Walking to his house is the part of the story that makes my stomach churn. Had I known then what I know now, I would’ve fought harder for us to leave. I knew I could’ve left by myself, but I didn’t feel comfortable doing that. I didn’t want anything to happen to her. I wanted her to be safe. By the time we entered his home, I knew we were in too deep, and it was too late for us to turn around. He led us to his room where we both sat on a chair together, doing anything to avoid his bed. He made a comment about us being “too shy” and told us to relax. At first, he started to playfully pull at certain articles of clothing we had on. Wasn’t anything playful about his intentions, though.

Eventually we both ended up on the bed with him. Me in the middle and her to the right of me. I remember thinking how insane this was because we just met him but were laying in his bed. We started to make small talk where we learned that he was attending college. My anxiety was heightened even more because we were high schoolers. There was nothing okay about this. I don’t remember what his age was, but I knew at the very least he was older than us and in a position of power at that moment. After small talk, he made it very clear that his intentions were to have sex. I remember making a comment to my friend before we were in this situation that he was an attractive man, but that may have given off the wrong idea. I don’t blame her for how she took it.

I remember the feeling in my body when he first started touching me. His touch was warm, but my body felt ice cold. My mind was racing and all I kept thinking was “why is he touching me when I’m not the one who he was interested in?” and “what is he going to do to me?” When I took a good look at him, I noticed that he looked strange. His eyes were bloodshot red, his movements were uncoordinated, his breathing was slow, and he showed other signs that he probably did more than smoke weed during our brief separation. I remember him starting to rub on my genital area. I remember my multiple attempts to force his hand away from me. He touched all over my body from top to bottom. Then he put his fingers inside of me. I felt disgusted. How could he not realize I wasn’t into this? Or maybe he did realize and simply did not care. I remember being so upset with my own body for responding to his touch. I didn’t want this. I wasn’t interested in having sex with him, but because my body was responding positively to his touch, he continued.
I remember him asking her to reach over and get a condom. She was in a complete state of shock at what was happening. When she didn’t move, all she did was look at me. I looked back at her with pleading eyes. I was praying in that moment she understood that I really didn’t want this, and luckily, she did. While he was reaching for a condom, she pulled me from under him. I remember walking home that evening in full blown tears. I had a multitude of feelings that ranged from anger, sadness, fear, and anxiety. I felt lucky to have escaped unscathed for the most part, but I hated myself in that moment. I felt dirty. I felt worthless. I felt guilty. All I wanted was to call Damian, but I knew he hated me and probably wouldn’t answer the phone. I went home that night and put on a facade to my family. I put a smile on my face, told them about my day before the incident occurred, and then talked about how great of a time I had at the school party I allegedly was at. Before I went to bed, I made a post on Facebook and made a vow to myself to never let this happen to me again. Until it did.

It’s been three weeks since the second sexual assault. I hate that I’m even writing this. In this very moment, I hate and feel sorry for myself. While this assault wasn’t as scary as the first one, it still left me with crippling anxiety. I lived next door to the assailant, and my heart would race any time I had to walk past his door. I actively tried to avoid him. If I saw him somewhere, I avoided that area at all costs. Prior to the assault, we were friendly. We had conversations with each other. I allowed him into my apartment. How could he do something so disrespectful to me? He’s tried to apologize multiple times, and while I accepted his apology, I don’t feel comfortable around him. Truthfully, I’m scared of him now. He said that he wasn’t in his right mind, but does that give you the right to grope and touch me inappropriately?

As I sit and write this letter, I think about how different things might’ve been for me if you were still here. I really miss you, mama.

Sincerely,
Your Baby Girl
Dear Mama,

He’s finally gone, and I’ve fallen into an even deeper depression. I think I may have begun to love him, but more than anything, I know I hated him. How could he treat me this way? I supported him this entire semester. He was hungry? I fed him. He needed homework assistance or a personal tutor? There I was, rearranging my schedule to accommodate his needs. He needed a shoulder to cry on when the weight of the world became too overbearing? There my shoulder was—warm and inviting—ready to soak up his tears. I was at his beck and call. I was desperate for him to see me, to see that the entire world wasn’t against him.

Truthfully, I should have known this would never work. To be honest with you, I didn’t even want this to work when this situationship commenced. I came into this thing believing we were incompatible. I mean, can you blame me? We were from two completely different worlds. He was from the streets. He came from struggle, hardship, and extreme violence. I grew up with a relatively loving family, I didn’t have to endure struggle to survive, and the closest I came to death was after contemplating suicide back in 2015. We were
simply...different. And despite knowing this, I still made the mistake of letting him into my world.

We started our situationship in September. Of course, the foundation of this relationship was built on sex. He told me from that first night we slept together that he wanted more. He wanted a relationship with me. He had liked me for months and all he needed was the opportunity to prove that he could be the partner I needed. I knew I should’ve listened to that feeling in the pit of my stomach saying “this is a bad idea,” but instead, I allowed my curiosity and desire for a new sexual experience to cloud my judgment. Although I deprived him of an exclusive relationship, he still reaped the benefits of being with me.

I had multiple chances to break things off. First, the girlfriend. Was that his girlfriend? He was never truthful with me about anything, especially not about her. He always told me he had to stay by her side to prevent her from actively self-harming. Knowing that he was in some form of entanglement with another girl should have been enough to have me running to the hills, but still I stayed.

Second, the weapon. I knew he had it, and I knew that it wasn’t supposed to be in his possession. Imagine my surprise finding out that he was using photographs of that very same weapon to threaten someone who rejected his sexual advances. Of course, I had to report him. I had a leadership role on campus where I was mandated to disclose information like this to the university. But you know what I did immediately after writing that report? Called him to scream at him for being so stupid and careless. I was angry and frustrated that he would threaten someone because he didn’t get his way. I was upset that he even had the weapon to begin with. But you know what else I felt? Guilt. The same night he did this was the same night he and I had an argument. Was this my fault? Did I put this other person in harm’s way? I grappled with that thought for a while, but still I stayed.

Third, the excessive lying. There were many nights he lied about his whereabouts, even though I knew where he was. Hell, sometimes we would be in the exact same place, and he would still lie about it. In the back of my brain, I can still hear him saying “you’re tripping” or “believe what you want” any time I tried to hold him accountable for his lies. Other times, he would lie by omission. For example, if I asked him what he was doing for the night he might say “I’m just going to chill,” but would completely withhold crucial information that he was going to chill with her. On the night of October 30th, I hit a breaking point. He once again lied about his whereabouts, and I learned that he was with her. I ran to my friend’s house at 3 in the morning angry, frustrated, and crying. I then decided to write a song about him where I emphasized how bad the lying was, but still I stayed.

Lastly, the emotional and physical violence. Whenever he didn’t get his way, he started calling me out of my name. The name-calling ranged from “you’re a joke” to “you’re a b***h/w***e!” Although I knew nothing I did warranted such demeaning and distasteful name-calling, I always gave him the benefit of the doubt. I knew he was deeply pained by things that he did not speak about, and I was a safe space for him. He lashed out on me because I was the only person he felt truly had his back, so when I hurt him with my actions,
he hurt me with his words. Sometimes, he would randomly start arguments that would either leave me angry, frustrated, or in full-blown tears. Our arguments generally went like this: he says/does things that hurt my feelings. I’m then made to feel like the villain, he ignores me for a few hours (sometimes for days), then he finally apologizes so we can “make up.” I knew this behavior wasn’t okay, but I cared so much about his wellbeing I allowed his emotional manipulation to control me. Emotional manipulation became a common theme in our situationship, until one day when things became physical. Admittedly, I started the altercation by putting my hands him. I can’t say I remember why I did, but I know I was upset and lashed out. I then remember him shoving me into a table and knocking the wind out of me momentarily. It was at that moment I realized how toxic this situation had truly become. Prior to this altercation, I already knew that he was violent. Growing up, he lived in environments that required him to protect/defend himself, but I never expected us to get to a point where we put our hands on each other. Although he had been rough with me before, it was usually verbal/emotional, but never physical. I knew in my spirit that we could never truly move past this, but alas, still I stayed.

And now here I am on December 15th crying while I send him a message telling him that I’m finally going to leave him alone.

As I write this message, I ask myself why I chose to stay in this situationship for so long despite his mistreatment. Why did I care so much about him? Why did I extend so much grace? I know I didn’t deserve the disrespect, so why did I accept it? Did the good moments really overshadow the bad, or did I just excuse bad behavior? More than anything, I questioned my own value and self-worth. I always promoted confidence and self-love, but at this moment, I hate myself. I hate myself for allowing him to continue mistreating me. I hate myself for ignoring the signs of how toxic and dangerous this situation was. I hate myself for caring so deeply about someone so self-absorbed and selfish. I hate myself for needing someone. I hate myself for wanting someone to feel and heal my pain. I hate that it was him.
Dear Mama,

The past few days have been difficult for me emotionally and I feel like nobody cares. I’ve been sad for so long, and because the people I thought were supposed to care didn’t, I’ve simply learned to exist within this sadness. It’s ironic because today they finally showed some type of concern. I was so shocked by this, I tweeted about it.

What about all those times as a teenager when I begged for someone to see that I was drowning? Now that they suddenly care, I’m supposed to believe it’s genuine? I went off to college and essentially became estranged from them, and now that I’m back home, the feelings that preceded that estrangement are rushing back.
The saying *I love you, but I don’t like you* is something I’ve heard all my life—specifically regarding family. When I was younger, I understood it to mean that you can love someone (your family) even if you don’t like everything they do or say. Now that I’m older, I despise that saying. There is something truly wrong with convincing someone that they must love someone just because they’re family. I would never flat out say I hate our family, but I would say that my feelings for them are complicated, and I am still working through them as an adult. There were many times as a teenager I felt misunderstood. I didn’t always feel loved. In fact, sometimes I felt unwanted, overprotected, and neglected. How many 15-year-olds lose their mother, and are supposed to just move on like nothing happened? I know their intentions weren’t to treat me as if *nothing* happened, but I don’t feel the right steps were taken to help me move through such a heavy loss. First granny at 12, then you at 15, and then aunty at 18. That’s a lot to endure over a 6-year period.

During the three years I lived at Aunty M’s before going to college, I felt isolated. Like I was an outcast. I didn’t really feel like I was wanted there. Although Aunty M showed me so much love, I don’t believe she was fully prepared to care for a teenager due to her declining health and the fact she hadn’t raised a teenager in 30+ years. Aunty M always tried her best for me, but her overprotective and overbearing nature caused me to develop bad behaviors. I learned how to become sneaky, which forced me to isolate myself anymore. I didn’t feel like I could tell her anything, so I became reclusive instead.

It didn’t help that nobody in that house made me feel like I could open up to them. S and her husband were very cold to me when I first moved in. We’ve come a long way since then, but I still hold a lot of negative feelings towards them. I can’t really tell you a time as a teenager where I felt like they genuinely cared about my feelings because nobody would ask me about them. On a holiday or your birthday, I may have gotten the “how are you feeling?” question, but what about a random Tuesday? The pain from your death was something I experienced daily, and I wished they cared about me every single day of the year, not just on “special days.”

Then we have my brothers. You knew how much of a sweet spot I had for them. I have so many memories of being a child and spending time riding around with them or playing video games. As a child, I had no cares in the world, and I knew that I had two men in my life who would do anything to protect me. It wasn’t until I became older and saw things through a different light. I saw overprotectiveness. I saw selfishness. I saw someone willing to put other people in a bad situation to benefit themselves. I saw anger, aggression, and defensiveness. I saw someone who could never be wrong. I saw someone who easily disrespected me because they felt challenged. I saw all the bad characteristics that I didn’t understand when I was a child. I saw my brothers for the multifaceted people they were, and I realized, I didn’t like them.

And then there’s Aunty B. Of all the relationships I have with different family members, Aunty B might be one of the most complicated for me to explain. I grew up loving Aunty B dearly. She was fun and she had an amazing spirit. As a child, I spent a lot of time with Aunty B. At some point in time, she was probably the only person I could talk to about anything going
on in my life. But I noticed from young that she lied a lot. She’d steal. She was overbearing. She would break promises she made to me and then make me feel bad for being upset with her. I think the hardest part about my relationship with Aunty B was getting older and realizing that if we were not family, she would not be someone that I’d ever have as a friend.

As I write this letter, all I can think about is the years of bottled-up pain and resentment I’m holding. I don’t want to feel this way, but I can’t help it. I’ve found more love and support in my friends than I have in my own family, but blood is supposed to be thicker than water, right? So why don’t I feel like their concern for me is valid? Why didn’t they care about me when I was crying for help? Why don’t I feel the love that I’m supposed to feel?

Sincerely,
Your Baby Girl

Date: April 12th, 2022
Entry Name: ADHD

Dear Mama,

When I was younger and struggling to maintain a clean room, did you ever think something possibly may have been wrong? Do you remember all those times during parent-teacher conference when you’d yell at me about my desk being messy, or how you’d react to my teacher’s report about me being a chatter box? What about your frustration with me anytime I misplaced important items or documents? I still remember how useless I felt when you or aunty would call me lazy. You might not have realized, but I tried so hard every day. School was extremely overwhelming, but I still worked my hardest to achieve good grades so I didn’t disappoint you or aunty. I tried with all my strength to do everything you guys asked of me—and perfectly at that—just so I could avoid feeling bad about myself. I felt like you guys set these unrealistically high expectations for me, and when I didn’t reach them, I was met with despondency. Why didn’t you dig deeper to figure out why I was this way? Why did you reprimand me instead of showing compassion?

All throughout college I struggled due to the expectations you and aunty set for me during my childhood/teenage years. I had to always be at the top of my game. Whether that meant I came to class prepared to answer all the professor’s questions, I rewrote my assignments until they sounded nearly perfect, or I forced myself to clean part of my room every single day, I did it. And eventually, I found myself becoming even more depressed and isolated. I tried everything to keep up the facade, but one day my room became a small mess and I simply could not clean it. And that small mess turned into a large pile. And that large pile turned into me having a complete mental breakdown. Things became so difficult for me at one point I couldn’t even get out of bed. I just couldn’t understand why everything was so hard for me to do. I started turning in my assignments late, I was neglecting my household duties, I was easily distracted by everything, my impatience was at an all-time high, and my thoughts were so disorganized. I knew I could not continue to
live this way, but I didn’t know what was wrong with me, and I didn’t have the language to describe what I was experiencing.

I successfully graduated college in 2020 and thought that maybe the school environment was contributing to my problems. I believed that entering the workforce would be the change I needed, but unfortunately, my plans were halted due to the onset of a global pandemic that left the world in a state of distress and uncertainty. I spent all of 2020 trying to salvage what bit of my mental health was left. By 2021, I started to spend more time on Reddit where I learned about ADHD and neurodiversity. After falling down a rabbit hole of ADHD research, I was almost certain that I had it. After learning more about ADHD, I became determined to get tested. In fact, I even went so far to ask for help on Twitter.

It was not until a conversation with a friend last month was I able to muster up the courage to schedule a psychiatrist appointment. Today, that psychiatrist gave me the diagnosis that changed my life.

At first, I felt victorious. All my life I’d been struggling and didn’t know why. I felt vindicated. I knew I wasn’t lazy. I wasn’t unmotivated. My brain just functions differently. And then a few minutes later, the grief kicked in. Life should’ve been different for me. I didn’t have to struggle the way I did. I have lived for 22 years, and all of them that I spent in school were filled with me struggling. So now I ask again, why didn’t you show me more compassion? Were you afraid of what it meant to have a child that was “different?” Were there any symptoms of ADHD that you heard of but didn’t see me exhibit? Was it because of money? Could you not afford testing? Was it because of cultural reasons? Not a single day passes by where I don’t think about you giving me an answer.

Sincerely,
Your Baby Girl
Date: April 13th, 2022
Entry Name: Grieving/Nights Like This

Dear Mama,

I’m spiraling. I’m not sure I can continue pushing through. Truthfully, I don’t want to live anymore. I don’t think I’ve spiraled this badly since 2016. The past three weeks have been heavy for me. I am going through two very bad breakups, I am terribly burnt out from my job, and yesterday, I got my ADHD diagnosis—which is exemplifying my emotions tenfold. I’ve been working fully remotely since the beginning of this month and having my office space in my bedroom makes it extremely difficult to separate my work life from my personal. Every single morning I cry when I clock into work, and every single evening I cry after clocking out. I hate my job, I hate my life, and I hate myself.

I spent an hour of my day (while on the clock might I add) writing a thread on Twitter about loss. Specifically, grieving the loss of someone that is living. Writing my thoughts and feelings out helped me a lot in that moment. While I am still spiraling, I was at least able to get through the remainder of my workday. I always thought journaling should be personal/private, and Twitter is the last place you should go when seeking privacy, but knowing she could see those tweets felt empowering in some strange way. I wanted her to know that I still loved her, but I hated her all the same. I wanted her to know that I was going to be just fine, and that I didn’t care about her anymore. In all honesty though, I wanted her to know that I was drowning and I wanted her to rescue me, but I knew she couldn’t.
THREAD: My recent discovery on dealing with the loss of a loved one that is still living. Specifically, I will discuss how this type of loss is extremely devastating yet freeing, and highlights the frustrating, but normal feelings that accompany this type of loss:

And ihe the baddie B 4/13/23
Friendly reminder before starting: Healing is NOT linear, meaning you can go days, weeks, or months feeling just fine, and then one day you feel like your progress was all for nothing. That is normal and it is okay. Do not beat yourself up. That is part of the healing journey.

And ihe the baddie B 4/13/23
Part 1: I’ve considered this multiple times in my short life. I’ve watched my grandmother, mother, and best friend all die. I have also watched people that are currently living, whom I loved with all heart, separate from life. Despite them being alive, it hurts regardless.

And ihe the baddie B 4/13/23
I hope anyone that sees my thread and relates to the topic at hand can use this thread as a means of self-reflection, and a guide to navigate their feelings through their time of acceptance and healing.

Add another Tweet before starting:

Add another Tweet

Add another Tweet

Part 3: I never expected to fall as deeply in love with her as I did, but love is uncontrollable and it happened nonetheless. We, unfortunately, were dealt a not so great set of cards as our relationship commenced at the beginning of the pandemic where restrictions were strict.

Add another Tweet before starting:

She is moving on to be with other people as am. I know I will get into the part of self-reflection, accountability, and feelings.

Add another Tweet before starting:

Part 7: Losing someone that is still living 100% may feel like the end of the world. It leaves you feeling incomplete. Knowing someone you love & still feel an emotional connection is/is separating from you to move on is difficult, and it is 100% okay to be sad, hurt, angry, etc.

Add another Tweet before starting:

Part 8: It is also completely normal to want to erase them from your mind & even wish you never met them. But, loss can also be very freeing depending on your perspective of your situation. Was this person serving you? Were you and this person equally yoked?

Add another Tweet before starting:

Part 5: Although I officially ended our relationship in January 2023, I never really ‘ended’ our relationship. And, as a result of this, we ended up in a tumultuous situation through the year, where I was dating both her & another person.

Add another Tweet before starting:

Part 6: Finally, in 2022, my ex and I have officially separated from each other.
Reflecting on the beginning of our relationship, I would have never thought things would end up this way. Trinity and I began dating in January of 2020. Prior to dating Trinity, there was a girl that I believed I had a crush on, but I wasn’t completely sure. All my life up until this point I had only dated boys, so I was unsure if my feelings were based on attraction or were strictly platonic. For days after the interaction with this girl, I found myself thinking more about what it would be like to be with a woman.

When Trinity and I first started hanging out, the first thing that caught me was her humor. She always made me laugh with her impressions and the silly things she would say. Then, it was her cooking. She was an excellent cook, and I loved sitting in the kitchen and chatting with her while she made dinner. Lastly, it was the way she cared for her friends. She always made sure that her friends had everything we needed, whether that was food, medication, water, or a shoulder to lean on. To this day, her caring nature has always been my favorite thing about her.
After Trinity and I were intimate for the first time, we became inseparable. We alternated sleeping over at each other’s apartment, we cooked for each other and together, and we enjoyed being in each other’s company. The time I spent with Trinity showed me how similar we were, and we bonded over many shared likes/interests. For a while, things seemed too good to be true. We were happy together and enjoyed the feelings of bliss we shared. For the most part, things were great until March of 2020. Once the pandemic hit and strict restrictions were implemented in the United States, our relationship became strained. We went from sleeping next to each other every night to facetime being our only form of connection. We lived in two different states, and taking public transportation was discouraged because it was a breeding ground for transmitting COVID. I lived for our facetime calls as that was the only way I still felt like we were together, and many nights we would fall asleep together on the phone.

After months of talking to Trinity, I finally decided to introduce her to the family, which was an extremely daunting task. I was anxious they wouldn’t accept her/our relationship and that they would make unkind comments about her. Trinity presented more “masculine,” and I believed that her appearance would make her a target for negative remarks. I had lived with our family long enough to know what type of people they are, and I knew they’ve made their fair share of “gay jokes,” but this felt different. After meeting Trinity for the first time, they seemed cold and distant. I saw how they looked at her, and I didn’t like it. They questioned my choice on dating a woman. I simply responded by saying I’m dating her because I like her. I never thought our family would be homophobic, but their attitudes caused me to pull away from them. I learned to be mindful about what I shared, as I did not want to hear anything negative about Trinity.

After being together for a while, I started to notice certain things I did not like about Trinity and my relationship. For one, Trinity did not put enough effort into seeing me. Although we were still in a pandemic, Trinity had a car and could visit me, but she barely did. And if she did visit, it was always for a short amount of time. Secondly, I felt that she allowed too much interference from her mother in our relationship. I thought for a while I may have been experiencing jealousy from not having you, but I later realized that Trinity was not standing up for our union the way she should’ve been. Lastly, Trinity would not do the smallest things I asked of her to strengthen our relationship. I wanted to spend time with her, I wanted to kiss her, I wanted to be embraced by her, I wanted to feel like a girlfriend and not just a friend she facetimed regularly. Anytime I’d bring this up to her, things would only change temporarily before reverting to the way they were initially.

As more time passed, I began to resent Trinity. I felt like our relationship only continued because of me. Her communication was poor which frustrated me to no avail and resulted in me not communicating with her. I resented her for not being the Trinity I fell in love with earlier in the year. Where had the passion gone? What about the effort? Why didn’t she try harder for us? Despite me pressing her for wanting more, things were not changing, and my patience was growing thin. So, I made the heartbreaking decision to break up with her. I thought that would be the end of things, but boy was I wrong. Instead of us fully separating, we ended up in a year and a half long situationship. I was heartbroken that we couldn’t
figure things out, and I wasn’t ready to let her go, but I had no more fight left in me. While navigating this heartbreak, I started talking to someone else. I now know that I was not emotionally available to make such a big decision, but I was hurt, and I wanted to feel better. I acted selfishly and recklessly, and I loved every minute of it.

This new guy I was seeing always took me out. We’d go to nice restaurants, we’d go on fun dates, and we always went out to drink. I had just turned 21 at the height of the pandemic, so having access to purchase alcohol felt exhilarating. I loved the feeling of being drunk. In fact, I craved it. Alcohol lowered my inhibitions and made me forget about all my problems. I felt liberated. I felt like nothing or no one could hurt me when I was drinking. And that was the beginning of the downward spiral.

I became dependent on alcohol. No matter where I was going or what I was doing, I needed a drink. I loved not remembering. I loved to come home feeling giddy despite feeling depressed inside. I didn’t realize it at the time (or maybe I did but ignored it), but alcohol became a crutch. I used it to cope with my pain and my guilt for starting to date someone else even though I knew I was still in love with Trinity. I used it to flex and show her that I’m living my best life, when I truly was miserable. I wanted my girlfriend back, but I also really liked this guy. I wanted to have my cake and eat it too, and for the entire year, I faced the consequences of my actions.

There were consistent arguments between me, Trinity, and the new guy. They disliked each other because of me despite never meeting. In their eyes, the other person was the reason we couldn’t be together. In actuality, my selfishness was the reason. I hated arguing and sometimes our arguments became really heated. I spent plenty of nights crying and hyperventilating after arguments where things simply went too far. I often did things I knew would hurt the other person. I lied. A lot. I thought that by lying, I would maintain harmony in each of my relationships. This cycle of arguing, “breaking up” and “making up” became normal in this situationship. At various points I knew things were becoming unhealthy. In all honesty, this entire situation was unhealthy. I had a great guy that did everything I could’ve wanted and more, but for some reason, I still yearned for Trinity. I progressively started to hate myself more and more. I didn’t want to still feel so connected to her. I didn’t want to give up the consistency the new guy gave me in hopes that she’d treat me right. I wanted love that was easy and done the right way without me begging, and by the time she gave me that, it was too late.

We should’ve stopped communicating when she started talking to another woman. But how dare she date another woman? I know that’s selfish of me to say, but that’s how I felt. No woman was going to be a better partner for her than I was. Although I was hurt, I told her that I’m happy as long as she’s happy. Admittedly, when things failed between them, I felt a sense of relief. I knew that was wrong of me, but I didn’t care. Reflecting on things now, my resentment had grown way too deep for her, and I should’ve walked away permanently. But as the saying goes, hurt people hurt people, and many people were hurt in this situationship.
And now here I am writing this letter after losing my mind on Twitter. Trinity finally moved on, the new guy decided that he needed to step back from our relationship because he could not trust me and he was hurt from my mistreatment of him throughout the year, and I still hate my job. I’m sitting here alone in the dark crying. What was wrong with me? Two years of my life I gave to Trinity and that was how she repaid me? I finally gave the new guy what he’d been asking for all this time. Why weren’t we together then? I hate myself. I know I’m the problem, but I’m hurting too. Am I not enough? Why couldn’t Trinity love me properly the first time around? Why did she have to leave me? Why did he have to leave me? Why does everyone leave me?

Sincerely,
Your Baby Girl

Date: 3/31/24
Entry Name: Looking Into The Future

Dear Mama,
I haven’t written to you in almost two years. I can’t believe it’s been so long. I’ve always heard the phrase *time flies as you get older*, but never realized how true it was until recently. So much has happened since I last wrote to you. Firstly, and most importantly, I started graduate school! You know I’ve always loved school, so it would be of no surprise to you that I intended to get further education after graduating college back in 2020. Even though I wanted another degree, I knew that I needed a break before going right back to school. At that time, I was extremely burnt out and did not realize that ADHD was contributing to that burnout, so my original plan was to take a year off and then go back to school. Unfortunately, when the pandemic hit, I was essentially forced to take some time off, and that made my desire for graduate school even stronger.

Originally, I intended to get my master’s degree in criminology. I was a Criminal Justice major with two minors in Psychology and Sociology, so it made sense to me that I would get a Criminology degree. When I first started researching different criminology graduate programs, I felt a disconnect. I knew that I was interested in crime, but more than anything, I was interested in women and crime. I took many classes in undergrad focused on women’s victimization as well as their participation in criminal activity. I was particularly interested in sex crimes, sex offenders, and the ways in which women—specifically, Black women—interacted with the criminal justice system. After the sexual assault and poor response from my university, I knew that my passion lay in social justice and supporting survivors, and for some reason, criminology wasn’t satisfying the desire I had.

It was through extensive research that I came across Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS). I had never heard of this degree program before, but I was thoroughly intrigued. As I scanned through different WGSS graduate program pages, I saw terms such as Black feminism, intersectionality, queer theory, and social justice, and I just knew this degree was the right one for me. I reached out to Black female professors at various programs to learn more about their specific research area(s), but eventually found a home at the University at Albany.

During my time at the University at Albany, I’ve had memorable experiences. I’ve taken some amazing classes focused on Black feminism, diasporic studies, global politics, Black women’s mental health, and digital activism to name a few. I developed close relationships with many professors who’ve helped me grow tremendously as both a student and young professional, all while cultivating my adoration for Black feminism. Through encouragement by my professors, I presented at two conferences: one national and one focused specifically on Black women’s health. I also have formed relationships with some of my cohort mates that I cherish greatly. Most importantly, I’ve had the opportunity to train, teach, and supervise students while managing an entire program. This has been the most rewarding and meaningful position I’ve ever been awarded, and I am grateful the WGSS department took a chance on me.

Over these past two years, I’ve grown as a young adult. Turning 21 at the beginning of a global pandemic did a number on me, and I didn’t realize it until now. Truthfully, I’ve just been trying my best to figure out how to do this thing called life, all while navigating in a
world full of uncertainty. I’ve been spending time getting to know myself as a young adult without comparing myself to who I was as a child. I’ve made so many mistakes in my youth, and I’m learning to forgive myself for them. I am not my past, and it is unfair to continue resenting myself for behaviors I engaged in previously. Therapy has helped me tremendously in coming to this realization. It would be untruthful of me to say that I’m always kind to myself, but this process of learning to love myself is continuous and will take time. I’m committed to putting that time in.

I’m also in a relationship with someone that I care about deeply. He has been a great support system for me during these past few years despite our tumultuous circumstances. After Trinity, I was unsure what love would look like for me again. I loved Trinity with every fiber of my being, and it was difficult to come to terms with the fact that we would not be together. I could continue to put the blame onto her for our failed union, but I am not blameless. Part of growing up is acknowledging your role in the way situations play out, and that is something I’m starting to do more often. Two years ago to this day, I sat on the floor in my bedroom sobbing after this man broke up with me. Trinity told me she was moving on from me a week prior to this, and I was sure that I would not live to see another day. I’m happy to say not only did I push through, but I became more intentional with showing this man I wanted to be with him. Two years later, we are at a much better place in our relationship, and it feels great.

I’m writing this letter to you as I sit by my bedroom window soaking in the beautiful sun rays. I’m having a lot of big emotions right now. In about five weeks, I will be 25 years old. Isn’t that crazy? I often think about how different my life would have been if you hadn’t left this Earth. I was just 15 when you departed, and I couldn’t fathom a life without you here. Truthfully, I still struggle with knowing you’re never coming back. Death is such a scary thing to come to terms with, especially because it’s the only thing certain in our lifetime. Over the past ten years since your death, I’ve done a lot of growing, crying, doubting, wondering, and achieving. I’m about six weeks away from graduating with my master’s degree. This degree is the culmination of years of pain, hard work, grief, and trauma. There have been plenty moments during my journey that caused me to doubt if I would see another day, but here I am ten years later, thriving. I applaud myself for my perseverance and I can hear you applauding me too. As I close this chapter of my life and prepare to enter a new one, I can confidently say all that I’ve endured was for something in the end. I know I have a bigger purpose, and I hope to live in it.

Well, I think that’s all I really had to say. Thank you for listening. Until we meet again.

With All My Love,
Your Baby Girl
Process Essay: Part II

Methodology and Letter Creation Process

In higher education, academic scholarship often prioritizes epistemologies, practices, and perspectives established by White individuals; consequently, the institution marginalizes the ways of knowing and knowledge production of Black individuals, deeming them illegitimate in
comparison (Morton & Nkrumah, 2021). Furthermore, the socialization process in higher education typically promotes white centered frameworks and methodologies as universal and suitable for students of all demographic groups, despite these methodologies being created by and for White men and children (Morton & Nkrumah, 2021). As a Black feminist researcher navigating predominantly white academic environments and working alongside predominantly white colleagues, I recognized the importance of employing a methodology for my project that bridges the personal and the political while also resonating with other Black women. Therefore, I made the deliberate choice to utilize Black Feminist Autoethnography (BFA)—a research method influenced by Black Feminist Thought (BFT)—for my project. BFT reflects the perspectives and interests of Black women (Collins, 2000). One of the central tenets of BFT is that Black women are knowledge producers who work in community with each other to devise strategies of resistance (Davis et al., 2021). BFT empowers Black women to define their own experiences and utilize resistance strategies and ways of knowing to challenge dehumanizing definitions of Black womanhood (Davis et al., 2021). BFT aims to raise Black women’s critical consciousness and foster a deeper understanding of how oppressive systems influence their daily lived experiences and ability to navigate the world (Davis et al., 2021).

BFA is a type of ethnographic research that combines autoethnography with the principles of BFT. Autoethnography:

is an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues. (Poulos, 2021, 4)
Black feminist autoethnographers use BFT in conjunction with autoethnography to shift from passive observation about life “toward a standpoint rooted in interrogation, resistance, and praxis” (Griffin, 2012, 143). The goals of BFA include raising social consciousness about Black womanhood, empowering Black women to define themselves, humanizing Black women who experience intersecting oppressions, and fostering awareness amongst Black women about their role in perpetuating systemic oppression (Griffin, 2012). While crafting each letter for this project, I reflected deeply on my traumatic experiences during childhood and early adulthood, and considered how they were exacerbated by larger social, cultural, and political factors. I scoured through each letter to find overlapping themes and patterns in my behavior. Through the application of BFA, I not only analyzed my experiences from a researcher’s perspective but also identified how I utilized Black feminist practices to navigate and heal from my trauma. Collins (2000) highlights that Black women use various media such as music, literature, daily interactions, and everyday behavior to cultivate a Black feminist consciousness. Throughout the decade covered in this project, I personally turned to music, literature, and discussions with friends to navigate and process my trauma. Now that I’m older and possess a deeper comprehension of social, cultural, and political influences on my life, I am better equipped to recognize how my behaviors, and those of others around me, were shaped in response to these influences.

In my pursuit of engaging in BFA, I embarked on a journey to better understand myself and how I navigated my traumatic experiences. This involved examining my behaviors following moments of hurt, reflecting on the conversations I had during those times, and considering any additional factors that may have exacerbated each situation. This investigation of myself spanned from before my mother’s passing to the present day. Despite penning the final letter of the series
in March, I am still actively engaging in BFA as I contemplate how I can utilize this research to enact change, both on an interpersonal level and within society at large. In the following sections of this process essay, I will delve further into my letter creation process, discuss the challenges I encountered during my research, examine the emerging themes from my letters in relation to Black feminist issues, and conclude with an overall assessment of the project.

**Letter Creation Process and Challenges**

Before I attempted to pen my first letter, I immersed myself in existing music and literature by various Black writers, scholars, and creatives addressing trauma in their own unique ways. Music has been integral to my healing journey over the past decade, so I incorporate it throughout my letters. While some entries directly reference songs I’ve written or musical covers I’ve performed, many derived their titles from songs that held significance in my life during traumatic times. For instance, the second letter “Can’t Give Up Now” is inspired by the gospel song of the same name by gospel duo Mary Mary. Naming it after this song pays tribute to my mother, whom I used to sing it to during her cancer treatment, while also conveying my determination to keep going after her passing. Similarly, letters like "I Care" and "Lemonade" pay homage to Beyoncé, whose music has helped me navigate complex heartbreak. The letter “Lyin King” takes its name from the song of the same title by singer Jhené Aiko, where she confronts a former lover for their self-centeredness and mistreatment. I chose this title deliberately, as the letter delves into my emotions following the conclusion of a toxic relationship with a man who regularly deceived me. "Grieving/Nights Like This" is an ode to singer Kehlani, whose music supported me through exploring my sexuality and coping with the end of my first relationship with a woman. This letter candidly addresses the pain of that breakup, with Kehlani’s music providing validation for my emotions.
Reading *The Color Purple* provided me with a clear framework for constructing my letters. In the novel, Celie engages in an ongoing conversation with God, despite not receiving a response. Although she endured numerous hardships, Celie’s persistent communication with God helped her persevere, which was powerful to read. As I reflected on my own experiences of trauma and the absence of my mother's support due to her passing, the notion of connecting with her in a similar manner to Celie's communication with God felt empowering. Celie began each of her letters with “Dear God,” and in her final letter, she closed with “Amen.” Growing up attending church, prayer always began by addressing God and ended with the congregation saying amen to reinforce our prayer. Inspired by this tradition, I adopted that same style for my own letters. Each letter opens with “Dear Mama,” but the final letter has a different ending than the letters that precede it to symbolize the closure of a specific chapter of my life—living in trauma—and my transition towards healing.

Finally, the title of my project was directly inspired by the song of the same name by rapper Tupac Shakur. In “Dear Mama,” Shakur (1995) provides an autobiographical account of his traumatic upbringing, expressing gratitude for his mother's love and support despite the numerous challenges she faced. While my own experiences of trauma differ from Shakur's narrative, the underlying message of maternal love and adoration deeply resonates with me. One of my goals with *Dear Mama* was to establish a dialogue with my mother as I grapple with my trauma, while also honoring her impact on my life—both before and after her passing.

The next phase of this process involved conducting archival research. Examples of archival sources include audio/visual materials, documents, manuscripts, and electronic records (“Why Archival Research,” n.d.). In addition to drawing from literature and music by other Black writers and artists, I utilized various personal archival sources to enhance my project.
These included old messages and tweets/Facebook posts, personal writings like poems, songs, and journals, and audio recordings such as videos of me singing. While not every source was included, many letters feature screenshots that provide additional context. Locating old messages and tweets was relatively easy; I simply filtered specific keywords. However, retrieving items like old Facebook posts and personal writings posed a greater challenge (which I'll delve into further in the challenges section). In total, it took me about three months to gather all the necessary information for writing my letters. After sorting through all the materials, I began drafting my letters. While the process of locating archival sources and writing the letters wasn't extremely difficult, I still encountered numerous challenges along the way.

One of the major challenges I faced during this process was the loss of a significant portion of my materials. Most of my personal writing was done either on my phone, laptop, or with pen and paper. Over the past decade covered by this project, I've moved and changed devices multiple times, resulting in much of my writing being either discarded or lost during these transitions. This loss restricted the amount of content I had to work with, but fortunately, I had amassed enough archival sources to mitigate the impact of the missing ones on the outcome of my project. Another challenge I encountered was adhering to a strict research schedule. As mentioned earlier, I dedicated approximately three months to gathering archival sources (from December 2023-March 2024). Facebook offers a feature called “Memories,” that allows users to view their past posts on specific dates. However, accessing these memories requires daily manual checking, which was not feasible given my other responsibilities—juggling this project, teaching, work commitments, and student life. While each of my letters was influenced by events in my life at the time, my inconsistent use of the “Memories” feature limited the information available to me. Despite accumulating sufficient research for my project, I can't help but wonder
what additional insights I might have gained if I had been more consistent in checking “Memories.”

A third challenge I faced was writing letters about my younger self from my present-day perspective. While I had enough archival materials to support the content of my letters, reliving those experiences was impossible. Despite using archival materials to immerse myself in the mindset of my younger self, I found it challenging to authentically capture the perspective of the young, traumatized girl I once was. Additionally, it was difficult to replicate the writing style I had as a teenager, considering how much my writing skills have evolved over the years. I aimed for authenticity in my letters, but achieving it was challenging given that my current writing style differs from how I used to speak and write. To address this challenge, I reminded myself of the creative nature of my project, which allowed for flexibility in my writing style. I aimed to blend my current writing style with elements of how I may have sounded when I was 15-19 years old, and overall, I believe it turned out well.

My fourth and most daunting challenge was overcoming the fear of re-traumatization. Social media’s archival system granted me access to past messages from individuals who caused me significant harm. To ensure the utmost authenticity in my letters, I spent hours, days, and even weeks revisiting these exchanges, often exposing myself to gaslighting, emotional manipulation, and other toxic dynamics. While I had the support of my therapist during this time, her availability was limited, leaving me to navigate the emotional toll of this project alone. Writing these letters resurfaced memories of past behaviors that were unhealthy, prompting me to remind myself that I am no longer defined by them. Additionally, I struggled with managing the emotional wounds still lingering from traumatic events I’ve experienced. Before embarking on this letter-writing journey, I believed I had moved on from these painful situations. However,
completing the letters forced me to confront the truth: instead of facing my pain, I had embraced the Strong Black Woman stereotype, concealing my true feelings as a means of self-protection (Nelson et al., 2016). This project compelled me to look in the mirror and acknowledge that I still have more work to do in terms of healing.

The experiences I’ve recounted in this section are deeply intertwined with the methodology of BFA. Immersing myself in the music, literature, and cultural works of Black writers and creators addressing trauma has allowed me to intimately understand certain facets of Black womanhood. Through the lens of autoethnography, I’ve had the opportunity to humanize and validate my own experiences, effectively challenging misconceptions surrounding the Black female identity and experience. Holding true to the principle of shifting from passive observation towards interrogation, resistance, and praxis (Griffin, 2012), BFA has compelled me to critically examine my personal experiences from an intersectional perspective. It has urged me to resist the narrative of being defined solely by my trauma and encouraged me to analyze the systemic influences that have contributed to my circumstances. Moreover, the insight gained from my research has not only aided my personal healing journey but also equipped me to advocate for collective healing among fellow Black girls and women navigating similar challenges.

**Emerging Themes and Black Feminist Issues**

As I mentioned earlier, my application of BFA led me to recognize the profound influence of social, cultural, and political factors on both my own behaviors and those of people around me. Drawing from my graduate education, I've developed the ability to critically analyze how factors such as race, gender, sexuality, and class intersect to shape experiences in my life. In this section, I will expand upon emerging themes from my letters and connect them to systemic
issues that are relevant to Black girls and women. These themes include racism, violence and silence culture within the Black community, internalization of the Angry Black Woman stereotype, and challenges related to sexual identity.

**Racism, Healthcare Discrimination, and Class Disparities**

The issues of medical racism and class disparities are subtly addressed in the letter titled “ADHD.” In this letter, I expressed the mixed emotions surrounding my ADHD diagnosis. Despite exhibiting classic symptoms of ADHD, I was often dismissed by my mother and aunt as lazy or forgetful, which negatively impacted my self-perception and approach to school and work. Initially, I harbored resentment towards them for their lack of awareness and unkind comments. However, with time and the application of an intersectional lens, I’ve come to understand the complexities of their actions in relation to larger systemic issues. Research on ADHD indicate that a child’s likelihood of being diagnosed varies based on factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Bergey et al., 2022). While more Black children are receiving diagnoses, they are still underdiagnosed compared to their White counterparts (Moody, 2016). Despite increased awareness, many individuals lack understanding of ADHD and its impact on children’s behavior; furthermore, access to education about ADHD is limited in low-income communities, leading to missed signs and delayed diagnoses (Moody, 2016). Cultural mistrust and medical racism also present significant barriers to obtaining an ADHD diagnosis, particularly for Black individuals. Research highlights how historical mistrust in the healthcare system—stemming from a legacy of discriminatory practices—impacts Black individuals’ decision-making regarding seeking care and adhering to treatment plans (Carlisle & Murray, 2020).
Based on research and my own experiences, it’s possible that my family harbored concerns about encountering medical racism had they attempted to get me tested for ADHD. Furthermore, they may have had limited knowledge about how ADHD manifests in girls. Historically, scientific literature on ADHD has predominantly centered boys, resulting in many girls going undiagnosed (Biederman et al., 2002). Studies indicate that girls diagnosed with ADHD often exhibit more inattentive symptoms and are less likely to have learning disabilities in mathematics and reading (Biederman et al., 2002).

Given my academic performance and relatively good grades in school, it's likely that my family simply overlooked the symptoms I displayed, dismissing them as mere character flaws. Lastly, financial constraints stemming from our socioeconomic status and debt-to-income ratio potentially made obtaining a diagnosis challenging. With both my mother and aunt facing health issues, a substantial portion of our income was allocated to their medical expenses and care. Although we were not impoverished, our finances were carefully managed to ensure essential bills were covered and basic needs were met, leaving little room for additional expenses that may not have been deemed essential. Considering these circumstances and the limited support available from outside sources, it's understandable why I remained undiagnosed for an extended period.

**Sexual Violence, Victim Blaming, and Silencing Culture in the Black Community**

In letters such as “SA I & II” and “Lyin King,” I delve into sensitive topics such as sexual assault and intimate partner violence (IPV). “SA I & II” discusses my experience as a survivor of sexual assault, exploring the complex emotions that accompany such a traumatic event. On the other hand, “Lyin King” portrays a relationship characterized by toxicity,
unhealthiness, and borderline abuse. In both letters, I reflect on how I allowed these situations to escalate and why I tolerated recurring, harmful behavior. Many of the sentiments surrounding my victimization are rooted in a historical legacy of victim blaming dating back to slavery. During that period, White slave owners subjected Black slaves to brutal rape and abuse, asserting ownership over their bodies (Hamid, 2020). As discussed in the literature review of this process essay, Black women who resisted their abusive owners faced severe consequences, leading many to endure their suffering in silence to protect themselves. To justify their abuse, White slave owners constructed a false narrative that Black women were hypersexual and promiscuous (Hamid, 2020). This stereotyping persists today and shapes the treatment and justice Black women receive following victimization.

The pervasive oversexualization of Black women often leads society to shift blame onto them when they become victims of sexual violence and speak out about it. This unjustly burdens them with the responsibility for their own victimization instead of holding perpetrators accountable. This blame includes interrogating them about their attire or behavior. Intra-racial relationships often foster a greater inclination toward silence, particularly due to the awareness many Black women have about how the police system treats Black people, especially Black men. This awareness often leads Black women to feel obligated to protect their abuser at the expense of their own well-being (Gómez & Gobin, 2020).

As I showcase in the letter “Lyin King,” I personally experienced this sense of obligation. Despite having the option to report my former partner for his mistreatment, I opted to remain silent for several reasons. Firstly, I was keenly aware of the various personal challenges my former partner was facing. His experiences with homelessness and past encounters with the legal system added layers of complexity to our situation. As two Black students attending a
predominantly white institution, I feared that speaking out against his mistreatment could exacerbate the situation for both of us. Additionally, I worried about his potential reaction towards me if I ended the relationship, given his tendency for verbal abuse during arguments. Lastly, I harbored concerns about the university taking my complaints seriously.

**Am I an Angry Black Girl/Woman?**

For as long as I can remember, I’ve been labeled as “angry.” Whether it was in high school or college, people have frequently remarked that I appear mean and unapproachable, despite me being approachable and easy to chat with. The letters “I Care” and “Lemonade” delve into themes of heartbreak, grief, and anger, making them some of the most challenging letters I’ve penned. In both letters, I express my pain and frustration after being betrayed and ignored by former partners. In "I Care," I recount my hurt upon discovering my partner's infidelity on the one-year anniversary of my mother's death. In "Lemonade," I confront the betrayal of my partner cheating on me with his best friend. At various points in my relationship with my former partners, I was labeled as an “Angry Black Girl,” and it significantly influenced my behaviors and self-perception. Angry Black Woman are unfairly characterized as “irate, irrational, hostile, and negative despite the circumstances” (Ashley, 2013, 28). Moreover, they are also described as “aggressive, unfeminine, undesirable, overbearing, attitudinal, bitter, mean, and hell raising” (Ashley, 2013, 28; as cited in Malveaux, 1989; Morgan & Bennett, 2006). This labeling not only perpetuates racist and sexist stereotypes but also restricts Black women from freely expressing their anger. Ironically, many of the traits associated with Angry Black Women are actually "survival skills developed by Black women in the face of social, economic, and political oppression" (Ashley, 2013, 28). Being labeled an Angry Black Girl has negatively impacted me, leading me to suppress my emotions or “calm down” to gain respect and credibility. Despite the
validity of my feelings of anger and frustration, being identified as an Angry Black Girl insinuates that I am only worthy of respect when conforming to certain behavioral expectations.

**Sexual Identity and Homophobia**

For many individuals within the LGBTQ+ community, coming out represents a pivotal moment in identity development. Initially, when I came out to my family, I was met with acceptance. However, over time, a noticeable shift occurred in how both my former partner and I were treated. In the letter “Grieving/Nights Like This,” I delve into the intricacies of my relationship with my ex-girlfriend, starting from the beginning of our relationship to our permanent separation. Within this letter, I explore my journey regarding my sexuality and reflect on the evolution of my family dynamics after coming out. As I embarked on this journey of self-discovery, I observed various factors influencing how I navigated it, and research has provided me with better insights into these factors and their impact on me.

Brooks et al. (2008) conducted a study involving 14 ethnic minority bisexual women to investigate factors affecting their bisexual identity development. Their findings were categorized into five areas: internal self-concept, community membership, sexual identity management, partner relationship issues, and family and social reactions (Brooks et al., 2008). Internal self-concept addressed personal understandings of bisexuality, while community membership reflected identification patterns within LGBTQ+ and heterosexual communities (Brooks et al., 2008). Family and social reactions encompassed reactions from family, friends, and society at large (Brooks et al., 2008). Many participants in the study also expressed how their intersecting identities, such as race, ethnicity, and religion, compounded the challenges they faced in their sexual identity development (Brooks et al., 2008).
This research study helped me conceptualize my own experiences as a Black queer woman, and better understand how different facets of my identity have shaped my sexual identity. Prior to coming out to my family, I’d only dated men. Consequently, my family perceived my affection towards another woman as “just a phase,” leading them to not take my relationship with my ex-girlfriend as seriously as my subsequent relationship with a man. While my friends and other queer individuals were supportive during my relationship with my ex-girlfriend, I noticed uncomfortable stares from people—particularly in predominantly white spaces—when we showed affection in public.

Reflecting on these experiences, I realized they were likely influenced by a combination of sexism, racism, and homophobia. Additionally, I grappled with my own perception of my sexual identity, especially after dating a man following my separation from my ex-girlfriend. Despite simultaneously dating both partners, my family seemed to show more respect towards my new male partner. I also noticed a shift in public perception based on my partner's gender, with heterosexual privilege becoming apparent to me as I realized that presenting as straight made me appear “normal” in the eyes of society.

**Conclusion**

This project, guided by Black Feminist Autoethnography (BFA), has allowed me to deeply explore the intricate dynamics of trauma and healing within the context of Black womanhood. Through this process, I've gained a deeper understanding of my own path towards healing and its connection to the concept of radical healing. The main goal of the project was to examine the various coping methods I've used to heal over the past decade since losing my mother, all viewed through a Black feminist lens. Each letter penned in this project commenced with the greeting "Dear Mama," initially intending to address my late mother directly. However,
as I embarked on the letter-writing process, the identity of "Mama" evolved, transforming from a literal representation of my mother to a symbolic reflection of myself. In addressing this imagined "Mama," I found myself engaged in a dialogue with a younger, wounded version of myself—the embodiment of unresolved trauma and unhealed wounds that lingered within. By conversing with this imagined "Mama," I created a safe space to express my most raw and vulnerable emotions, unfiltered by societal expectations or external judgments. This process of self-dialogue facilitated a profound form of healing, allowing me to confront, nurture, and ultimately reconcile with the wounded aspects of my inner being.

Through the application of BFA, I’ve come to grasp the intricate connection between my various intersecting identities and my experiences of trauma. For example, while casually stating that I’m Black, queer, neurodiverse, and a woman might seem straightforward, it carries complex implications regarding how I'm treated, perceived, and expected to conform within society. BFA has also illuminated that true healing from my trauma necessitates disentangling it from my sense of self. It's not until I can separate my identity from my trauma that genuine healing can begin. Furthermore, my engagement with BFA has not only enriched my personal healing journey but also strengthened my dedication to collective liberation and social change. By sharing my experiences and insights, I hope to amplify the voices of Black girls and women and inspire them to embrace autoethnography as a tool for empowerment, resistance, and liberation.

In the future, my aspiration is to publish this work, extending its reach to a broader audience. Specifically, I envision it being profoundly impactful for therapists, social workers, healthcare providers, policymakers, lawmakers, graduate students, and individuals interested in Black feminist healing. This comprehensive exploration touches upon a myriad of crucial topics
relevant to each of these groups, offering invaluable insights that can inform policy reform and enhance understanding of the experiences of Black women. Moreover, I am deeply committed to ensuring that this work finds its way into the hands of young Black girls who may find themselves in circumstances similar to my own. I believe it has the potential to inspire and empower them, demonstrating that they, too, can transform their pain into purpose. My hope is that this work will serve as a guiding light for these young girls as they navigate challenges in life. I want them to feel seen, heard, and embraced into a community of Black girls and women, where their experiences are validated, and a sense of belonging is fostered. Having experienced the isolating struggle of my own youth, my ultimate wish is for this work to offer solace and support to another young Black girl, sparing her the hardships I endured.

As I bring this project to a close, I'm reaffirming my commitment to practicing radical self-care, both within and beyond academia. Through my engagement with BFA, I've recognized the significance of self-care and self-reflection as powerful forms of resistance against oppressive systems. Looking ahead, I remain dedicated to advancing on this path of healing, advocacy, and collective liberation, championing the rights and well-being of all Black women.

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