

PRIDE, PASSAGE, AND PAIN: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A  
BLACK WOMAN IN THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

by

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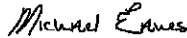


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## **ABSTRACT**

Black women in the United States of America have unique experiences to which no other group can relate. The intersectionality of their race and gender often leaves them in a vulnerable and lonely space that not many others enter. The racial and gendered microaggressions they face may follow them into their jobs, schools, and personal lives. This misogynoir culture negatively effects Black women daily as they navigate ways to respond. Communication Accommodation Theory is a theory in the field of Communication that explores several ways people can choose to carry themselves during social interactions. This study is an autoethnography exploring one Black woman's experiences with microaggressions, her responses, and how those responses have impacted her mental health and wellness while experiencing racial battle fatigue.

*Keywords:* Black women, intersectionality, microaggressions, misogynoir, communication accommodation theory, racial battle fatigue.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As a Black American woman, I face a continual struggle between culture, identity, and acceptance. I attribute this tension largely to a constant exposure to racism both directly and indirectly. Moreover, this struggle emerges and becomes visible across several contexts most notably in opposition of White American normative experiences. Ultimately, I am left questioning whether to be proud of who I am, figuring out how to do the work necessary to gain passage into the world of dominant culture, or do I passively suffer in silence? Growing up within this ever-present divide often makes it very difficult to maintain a strong sense of personal identity. You can easily find that you are out of touch with your true self, thereby questioning your existence. This cycle contributes to a form of exhaustion coined by Dr. William Smith, known as racial battle fatigue. Racial battle fatigue can be described as “the exhaustion that People of Color feel from repeated exposure to racism, as well as its negative impact on their emotional and psychological health and wellbeing” (Quaye, et al., 2019, p. 95). For example, in the United States, particularly the south, it is not uncommon for Black men and women to feel displaced in social settings where there is a White majority. While a path of least resistance may be easy to fall into a pattern of “toning it down” by adopting European standards, this form of accommodation is not a viable option for some. Not to acknowledge the social and psychological burden brought on by such intersectionality would be foolish to ignore.

To explore my unique experiences of accommodation and the tensions within such contexts, I adopted an autoethnographic approach which requires deep reflective inquiry situated in and through scholarly literature (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). In this regard, the following research study will explore my personal reflection on the psychological toll of racial battle fatigue, the impacts of communication accommodation, and unique interpersonal and relational dynamics

that I face. My goal is to share what my Black experience is like from the perspective of a Black woman living in the Southeastern United States. Through such an examination of my lived experience, I will offer different perspectives and possibilities for navigating Blackness in a country built to break us. To that end, this work intends to serve as a celebration of Black women and the beginning of a dialogue that allows us to have a voice.

## **CHAPTER 2: THEORIES**

### **Communication Accommodation Theory**

Communication accommodation theory (CAT) is a theory in the field of communication that can be used in “explaining the many ways communicators accommodate each other’s language and styles of communication, their motivations for doing so, and the communicative, relational, and social consequences” (Zhang & Giles, 2018. p. 96). CAT covers both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication and the subsequent accommodation of interlocutors. Within CAT, there are three different forms of accommodation used in communicating: convergence, divergence, and non-accommodation. Zhang & Giles (2018) theorize that convergence, divergence, and non-accommodation can be driven by group or individual motivations. The pair also found that chosen accommodative acts are heavily associated with identity, relational, and communicative consequences. That is, the ways we behave may suggest how we are perceived and influence outcomes within communicative events.

### **Convergence**

Research has yet to identify whether convergence, divergence, or non-accommodation leads to a more positive mental and social outcomes when faced with microaggressions. Within this context, I am exploring how marginalized groups, specifically Black women, view accommodation compared to how the dominant group, Whites in this case, view accommodation. Convergence is essentially doing what one can to make an interaction as easy as possible for the other person and can often be associated with “a desire for social approval and liking, attraction, similarity, trust, and a closer relational distance between interacting speakers” (Zhang & Giles, 2018. p. 98). Convergence is coming together communicatively.



Positive examples of convergence would be me using speech accommodation by speaking more slowly, clearly or loudly when I am having a conversation with my 75-year-old great aunt who has a more difficult time conversing due to some hearing loss. Accommodation could also take the form of how I use a more limited vocabulary when I am speaking with my five-year-old niece. These are examples of converging in intergroup communication because we are in three different age groups and there potentially may be misunderstandings that occur because of our different styles of communication and education levels. These are good situations in which to converge; I am meeting those individuals where they are at to create a closer relational distance between us because I understand the difficulties they may have during an interaction. Doing so does not harm anyone in the interaction.

Convergence, however, is not always the best approach in intergroup communication. Convergence used to fulfill a desire for social approval or being liked is the kind of accommodation that is often expected of Black women. One such occurrence of negative social convergence that I have experienced was when my White manager said she prefers when I wear a wig. She shared that she felt that I look nicer as opposed to when I wear my hair in braids. I obliged. Conforming to a European beauty standard to accommodate her may first be perceived as something that seems to make my life simpler, but it is extremely problematic and harmful. When Black women accommodate these asinine microaggressions, we affirm that they are okay and we leave the next Black woman vulnerable to the same attacks. Allowing and even accommodating such microaggressions just breathes life into the already misogynoir laced society we exist within.

## **Divergence**

In CAT, divergence is identified as a communication strategy that actively points out the differences between individuals (Giles, et al., 2019). Divergence as a communicative approach often is used as a defense mechanism and last resort to guard against racial and gendered microaggressions. Victims are tired and would generally prefer to evade conflict. While some may perceive divergence as combative, it may also be reflective of Black women who possess a strong sense of identity and pride for who they are. Research conducted by Lewis and colleagues (2013) illustrates that the combination of racial and gendered microaggressions are significant sources of stress for Black women (p. 56). Moreover, Black women choose to cope with these layered microaggressions in their own ways with many choosing divergence as a defensive strategy.

Ultimately selecting to use a divergent response will rely heavily on the environment where a transgression takes place. Factors include, but are not limited to, whether there is a disproportionate number of Black and White people around, whether the transgressor is in a position of authority over the victim, and whether there would be the possibility of financial ramifications. These are all contextual factors and details that could make standing up for oneself very difficult and may require an act of courage and bravery. Examples of such divergence include things such as not changing the way certain words are culturally emphasized as well as not submitting to racist professional hair standards while White counterparts often are allowed to show up to work with “messy buns” and other unmanaged styles.

## **Non-Accommodation**

Non-Accommodation, also called counter accommodation, is more direct and unpleasant than divergence; it is often called hostile (Gilbert, 2019). Black women tend to cope with microaggressions in five different ways, three of which are forms of divergence or counter accommodation (Lewis, et. al., 2013). Within those three, two are specifically identified as resistance tactics: resisting Eurocentric beauty standards and speaking up, which is also noted as using one's voice for power (Lewis, et. al., 2013). The third strategy is still divergent; however, it may be perceived as a bit subtler, standing with other Black women. When Black women stand together in situations where one must cope with microaggressions, wrongdoings become more difficult to be swept aside or hidden under a rug because there is strength in numbers. This form of solidarity allows for a leveling of the playing field.

There is a saying in the Black community that goes, “no one has the power to hurt you like your kin”; that is a real part of the conversation when we talk about microaggressions, identity, converging, and diverging. With convergence comes the threat of being cast out by those within a shared group who choose to diverge, counter accommodate and maintain (Turner 2015). When Black individuals choose accommodation for self-preservation or peace, the label “sellout” is often thrown out by their immediate group of peers. “Hair plays a major role in determining and ascribing to cultural identities of Blackness”, thus, when Black people choose to converge and accommodate Eurocentric values and standards, it can be perceived as a betrayal to the Black community (Turner, 2015, p. 64).

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

### Autoethnography as Methodology

This research project adopted an autoethnographic methodological approach focusing on my personal narratives as a text to analyze for this qualitative study. This method enabled me to reflectively explore and share my personal experiences as a Black woman living in the Southeastern United States. From this inquiry, I was able to uncover my situated connections to larger cultural impacts, behaviors and actions, and interpersonal and relational impacts that I never may have noticed (Foster, 2014). Like any research, this method does not capture the full experience of every Black American woman; however, autoethnography does offer an abundance of insight to those who are not members of the same intersectional group (Ellis, et. al., 2011). This autoethnography aims to lead to a place of understanding. Being understood is a luxury that Black women are seldom afforded.

Autoethnography is a research approach “that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, et.al. 2011, p. 1). This method is both a process and product, a theory and method, and descriptive of an interplay between the individual and culture. Moreover, autoethnography emerged from a need to tell the whole story of one’s culture, without exploiting or misrepresenting the individuals. Ellis and colleagues (2011) explain how

...there was an increasing need to resist colonialist, sterile research impulses of authoritatively entering a culture, exploiting cultural members, and then recklessly leaving to write about the culture for monetary and/or professional gain, while disregarding relational ties to cultural members (p. 274).

What was most compelling to me when planning my research approach was that autoethnographers are allowed to recognize all the ways personal experience can influence the research process (Foster, 2014). That is, I am not separate from my research, my identity, and my experiences. This unique tenant became very important to me once I grasped just how personal this work was to me. Applying autoethnography entails a sustained practice of introspection and using personal narratives to convey unique insights through detailed accounts of personal experience (Berry & Patti, 2015). In that regard, autoethnography is phenomenologically related to exploring lived experience and how we make sense of those experiences situated culturally (Cepeda, 2021). A researcher must also infuse scholarly literature into the writing and analytical stages of interpretation and analysis to accomplish this form of inquiry (Ellis et. al., 2011).

During the research process, I first began to write down all my experiences and feelings. Doing this allowed me to immerse myself into a headspace that focused on my unique intersectionality. Engaging in sustained introspection helped me to avoid shaping my life and emotions to fit into the literature. To arrive to that space did take a little trial and error. Initially, I identified my personal encounters as I read the literature. I realized that it just did not feel natural for some reason. Finally, I thought about how my therapy sessions go. My therapist listens to me talk about my experiences, writes about the feelings I have associated with them, and then diagnoses how those things impact me. I realized that focusing on my experiences was where I needed to start. So, I decided to just take a journaling approach. I detailed my recollections, the feelings associated with them, and the impact they have had on me. Then I utilized scholarly literature to gain understanding. These processes allowed me to pinpoint salient issues within my lived experiences as a Black woman living in the Southeastern United States. For me, this was a profound discovery as I moved forward in the development of my autoethnographic research.

## **The Respondent or a Brief Introduction to Kaila Johnson**

Within traditional research design models, sections addressing methodology report details about participants, respondents, or the populations studied. Because this is autoethnography, I am the respondent of this research study; therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to disclose some information detailing my upbringing and background for the reader to gain valuable insight to this project.

I am a twenty-four-year-old Black woman. Born and raised in Florida, I have lived in the south all my life. Growing up, I lived in a two-parent household with two younger sisters. My parents made it a point to teach us about respect, hard work, and the importance of an education. For as long as I can remember I have been taught the value of education. I was often told what a privilege it is for a woman, a Black one especially, to have educational opportunities. I have not taken this advice for granted. Many of my family members are educators, including my mother. My mother is a principal and has been an educator for 30 years. She continues to have great influence on the way I view teaching others, learning for myself, and impacting the world. My father is a man with very traditional ideas about how a household should function, including that of a child and a woman's place. My father's perspectives are largely rooted in his southern Baptist religious beliefs. Much of my attitudes about the world stem from my views on religion and culture. While I was also raised Baptist, I no longer identify as a Christian. My earliest memory of racism is from 7th grade. A White male classmate asked me if my father lived with me. He was shocked when I told him that my father did.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### **Racial Battle Fatigue**

The great American writer James Baldwin famously said that “to be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost all of the time,” and there has been no truer statement regarding my life experiences. That is a very difficult and exhausting reality that many Black women are bound to. Black people have had to be strong historically due to factors largely associated with chattel slavery. Research illustrates that “although slavery as a formal institution ended [over] 150 years ago, ethnic minorities continue to face a social and economic environment of inequality that invariably takes a toll on mental health” (Ashley, 2014, p.27). One of the main mental health struggles brought on by those lingering effects is racial battle fatigue (RBF), which describes the specific ways in which Black people experience a distinct exhaustion and are suffering physically, mentally, and emotionally from the cumulative effects of racism (Quaye et al., 2019).

For me, RBF has had a very strong, loud presence in my life. RBF is something that is regularly brought up in my therapy sessions. I can usually attribute RBF to workplace and classroom racial microaggressions. Further research has concluded that not only are racial microaggressions a regular, everyday occurrence for Black women, but also that they bring on stress, racial battle fatigue and psychological distress as a direct effect to the victims (Harris et al., 2019; Solorzano et al., 2000). I can confirm and recognize that “ethnic minority students enrolled in White majority universities face unique challenges including perceptions of being unsupported and experiences of racism, discrimination, and alienation” (Blume et al., 2012, p. 47). Compounding and amplifying my sense of alienation is that I am living, studying, and working in a Trump supporting, South Georgia county. My tolerance is now low. The small

things have really begun getting to me. Hearing that those who support Trump are not all bad people or racists is exhausting. Being triggered by big White men in bigger pickup trucks with Trump bumper stickers on them, and then having to explain to my White peers why his hateful rhetoric is bothersome and highly problematic is exhausting. As I write this, I continue to remind myself that it is not my responsibility nor my burden to educate White people on things outside of their protected bubble. I also must fight to remember not to minimize my feelings or reactions for the comfort of White people, who continue to be clueless or willfully ignorant to the realities all around them. That is the most exhausting. A study by Basford *et al.* (2014) found the following:

Discrimination is not disappearing but is instead becoming subtler and more ambiguous. Subtle discrimination causes uncertainty regarding the accuracy of perceptions of prejudice, creating the kind of ambiguity that has been associated with anxiety and depression (p. 341).

Another dimension contributing to RBF is that of gaslighting. Existing studies show that gaslighting has functioned as a major contributor to racial battle fatigue in the Black community.

Gaslighting describes the act of manipulating others to doubt themselves or question their own sanity; people confronted for committing microaggressions deny the existence of their biases, often convincing the targets of microaggressions to question their own perceptions (Johnson et al., 2021, p. 1024).

It is no coincidence that Black men and women are the groups found most vulnerable to almost every health condition monitored by medical researchers when measured against other racial-gender groups (Smith et al., 2011). This is especially prevalent on college campuses as



ongoing negative interactions with faculty seemed to instill a sense of self-doubt in some of the African American students interviewed. Many students mentioned the importance of having other African American students in their classes to provide support against stereotype threat (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 66).

### **The Miseducation of Kaila Johnson**

A Black woman achieving a true safe space in the United States seems incredibly unlikely. This comfort that I have worked tirelessly towards continues to look painfully insurmountable. One place where this barrier feels particularly true is in educational settings. It is important that students have teachers who they feel can understand them and meet their needs. I am not suggesting that White teachers are incapable of doing their jobs, "it is, however, necessary to investigate the importance of the discrepancy between the percentage of Black students and the percentage of Black teachers with the underlying assumption that Black teachers often serve a special role in the lives of Black students" (Naman, 2009, p. 26).

Valdosta State University is a historically White institution. During my four-year undergraduate career at Valdosta State University, I was enrolled in 40 different courses. Of those 40 courses, only eight of them were taught by Black professors. However, five of those eight were taught by a Black professor I took more than one course with, meaning that out of the 38 undergraduate professors I have been taught by only five of them have been Black. I took classes with five Black professors during my undergrad years and only one of them was a woman. To add insult to injury, in the two years in my graduate program, I did not have one single Black professor. That puts me at having five Black professors, out of 44 professors in total. In six years of college, I only felt that I could culturally identify in some way with eleven percent of my professors.

Furthermore, it is a known fact that “students of color appear at risk for regularly experiencing microaggressions while attending historically White institutions, contributing to what has been termed as ‘racial battle fatigue’” (Blume et al., 2012, p.46). Racial battle fatigue, like any other stressor, can lead to poorer performances in the classroom. Out of the eight classes I had with a Black professor, I received an A grade in seven of them and a B in the other. I received an A grade in each of the three courses I took with that Black, female professor. Every semester that I took with one or more Black professors was one that I made the Dean’s List, except for one. (I would like to note that during that semester I was dealing with great personal loss and obstacles.) Oddly enough, I did not make the Dean’s List in any of the four semesters where I had exclusively White professors. This is not to say that there is or will always be a negative correlation for all Black students, but simply that there seems to have been one in my case. This is an interesting observation that I feel is worth more attention.

Upon further inquiry, I discovered that of those five Black professors I took courses with, only one of them is still employed by Valdosta State University. Two of them have taken employment at more diversity rich institutions. I cannot help but wonder why that may be. Additionally, I took a women’s studies course that was taught by a male professor, a cultural studies class taught by a White woman, and an African American Studies course taught by a White woman. Nothing about these staffing issues made sense or felt good. Someone outside of a designated marginalized group rarely possesses the unique insights and credibility required to teach someone within that group anything about themselves. Moreover, if they are not culturally competent, it should not be allowed to happen. Without that explicit cultural competence, I find it to be blasphemous and offensive.

Many predominantly and historically White institutions continue to willfully struggle when it comes to faculty diversity, an issue that became far more evident while building a committee for my thesis. A large part of creating a motivationally supportive educational setting is ensuring that there are opportunities for all students to feel that they are safe, seen, heard, and in a place where they belong (Gray et al., 2018). There are no Black, female professors in my entire department, or any Black professors at all for that matter. Nor were there in the three departments that I subsequently sought out as alternatives. This is a direct example of how “ethnic minority students enrolled in White majority universities face unique challenges including perceptions of being unsupported and experiences of racism, discrimination, and alienation” (Blume et al., 2012, p. 47). A lack of support and alienation are precisely what I felt when I discovered I could not find a Black, female professor to sit on my committee for a thesis discussing the Black woman’s experience. These are things that my White classmates would never have to face or stress about, male or female. While talking to different professors asking if any of them knew of anyone who fit the criteria, it was suggested on four separate occasions that I expand my thesis to be “more inclusive” or “focus on something other than Black people specifically”. The irony of those statements stung considering it was statements like those that were the reason for my thesis in the first place. As a Black woman, I have been asked to adjust myself and bend to fit into a box of what White people deem inclusive or a good idea my whole life. I am always expected to change when asking for the bare minimum.

Another huge slight from educational entities has been the recent trend of banning curriculum on Critical Race Theory (CRT), which is “an academic legal framework based on the premise that race and racism are central in the formation of American law and society” (Miller et al., 2022, p.7). This is yet another act essentially telling me that I am intentionally being

miseducated and ignored, and that the dominant group does not care. This is a way of further denying myself, and every other person of color, access to historical and cultural information that has already been stolen from us. Even worse, this is being done in the name of preventing White guilt, because their feelings are more important than that of any person of color and their right to be educated on their history and culture. We are teaching American history, but only including one group of Americans. Many White conservative government officials believe that CRT encourages “anti-white racism, cultural division, and threatens the public institution of education”, which is truly comical considering that they take no issue with Holocaust history or stories of White confederate “heroes” being drilled into our minds (Miller et al., 2022, p.3). For starters, anti-white racism within itself is a myth. White Americans can absolutely experience prejudice and even discrimination. However, by definition, they cannot experience racism in this country and that context is important to note. The United States of America was built on stolen land by people upholding the idea that White (European) people are superior. People who tortured, stole, raped, murdered, and erased masses of innocent people with the goal of ensuring that no other group would prosper here. Racism is defined as “the systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another”, White people being the group with the advantage (Braveman et al., 2022, p.172). With this country’s long history of outright hatred and systemic racism implemented with White people in the role of the oppressor, for the benefit of White people, the claim of racism cannot be supported. White people are not currently, nor have they ever been oppressed in this country.

Sarah Pearce (2019) informs readers how racism still fuels racial microaggressions in school settings and that addressing these incidents has not been a priority in training for educators thereby further encouraging their continuance. The refusal to call me by my name is

one of the earliest forms of racial microaggression that I can recall having encountered and endured throughout my educational career. My name is Kaila, pronounced KAY-luh. Being a reasonable person, I understand why people may mispronounce my name on their first try. It could easily be mistaken for ky-luh. However, I do not understand how, after being corrected, someone continues to mispronounce my name. Anyone who puts forth effort to read my name should not struggle. It consists of two syllables, no silent letters, and no accents. No one who is reading and putting forth effort can mistake it for Kalia (kuh-lee-uh), as the “I” in my name is very clearly placed before the “L”. During my time at Valdosta State University, I had a professor who refused to pronounce my name correctly, even following several corrections. This is a professor I took courses with in 2017 and 2021, and who also served as my academic advisor from 2021 to 2023. He would pronounce it with a long “I”, call me Kalia, Kali, or just refer to me as Miss Johnson. Of all the times I have sat in a classroom where a teacher refused to pronounce someone’s name correctly, or even call them by their name at all, I have never witnessed it happen to a White student. Pearce goes on to talk about how White people and minorities alike are hesitant to speak up on racism in educational environments but notes a key difference. She states that for those White students and teachers “racism is defined solely or mainly as a conscious individual act” and that for those experiencing racism it can seem “too insubstantial to be labeled racism” (Pearce, 2019, p.86). This uncertainty coupled with gaslighting behaviors, like feigning innocence and/or ignorance, creates this nagging feeling of inadequacy and self-doubt.

### **Paying the Toll, It Was Funny...Until It Wasn't**

Humor is often used as a coping mechanism for depression and anxiety. “Black American humor began as a wrested freedom, the freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel in

order to create distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community” (Early et al., 2010, p.34). So often the Black community replaces the help of actual professionals and accountability with humor and the need to laugh. Since the formation of civilization humor has been utilized as a form of therapy. Humor and joke-telling are ways to vent and share those innermost thoughts that one would not feel so comfortable sharing under normal circumstances. This is where the problem lies because “three and a half centuries of oppression produced a particular style of resistance humor that entwined defiance, cunning, inventiveness, and retaliation. Stories, anecdotes, jokes, and pranks record Black counteractions to oppression and provide insight into the character of the oppression itself” (Taylor, 2022, p.6). Every time someone laughs at a mental struggle, dissociation from the problem occurs, not leaving the space that is necessary to deal with it. Research has shown that “beneficial humor styles (and particularly self-enhancing humor) correlate negatively with depression, anxiety, and stress” (Edwards & Martin, 2010).

When joking about personal struggles, a deeper sense of despondency is inadvertently set into motion and grows, eventually consuming the joker over time. As friends continue to gather making casual jokes about how miserable everyone is as a collective, a pattern of suffering is created and normalized because now a sense of community, one that Black people often desperately seek, has been discovered within it. Pedetti (2017) says that “society does not acknowledge depression when buried beneath a constantly amused face, recognize its title as an illness, or even speak of it, and therefore the silence of depression grows stronger” (p. 248). The world in its current state is a place where people like the late DJ and dancer Stephen “tWitch” Boss and beauty queen and attorney Cheslie Kryst, can be severely depressed without anyone ever knowing until it is too late because there is always a laugh to be had. A world where a

friend or coworker can look someone in the eyes and say that they want to end their life and it wouldn't be known whether to laugh, agree, hug them, or find them help. This should not be a normal phenomenon.

The greatest problem that is encountered with humor regarding mental health is that “findings suggest that humor produces positive short-term emotional changes” rather than the long-term changes that are desperately needed (Gremigni, 2012). Humor is being used as a quick fix, nothing more than duct tape on a burst pipe. While mental health discussions seem to be improving, a great deal of Black people are still not seriously talking about the depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation plaguing our community. These things are brought up, related to by others, laughed about, and then moved past while life continues. This is something seen on television, film, music, and everyday interactions. It is heavily implied that it is not acceptable to feel these things or talk about them unless given a sarcastic, comedic undertone. Depression not only needs to be talked about, but it needs to be taken seriously. The necessary work must be put in and a stop must be put to allowing humor to override proper mental health care and examination.

Humor is often used in a way that is harmful to the individual joke teller, however, it is also applied in a way that is detrimental to others. There is a fine line between a bully and a joke teller. There is nothing wrong with making jokes and it is generally understood that jokes usually involve some degree of truth, which usually involves some degree of pain. Mental health linked hospitalization, incarceration, and death have all increased in the past several years. Hurt people, hurt people. As of late, “news stories have picked up on the concern of socially ostracized children and teens and highlight children who are teased and bullied, dropping out of school,

running away, dealing with emotional distress and depression, and attempting to take their own lives” (Mills & Carwile, 2009).



## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Most are guilty of having committed at least one act of microaggression, whether they were aware of it at the time. When looking into how microaggressions fit into the everyday lives of marginalized groups, specifically Black people, research seems to conclude that “they remain pervasive because racism is an inherent part of United States culture” (Harris et al., 2019, p. 73). It is important to acknowledge those things, look at why they are happening and proceed to do whatever can be done to dismantle that extremely harmful culture.

When leaning towards convergence rather than divergence, there is the risk of losing oneself and the respect of others, including aggressors and members of a shared community. This is where Black people experience the struggle of picking and choosing battles (Lewis et al., 2013). This process is about exploring a situation and taking it into account in its entirety, being selective about if a response should be provided, when a response should be provided and how said response should be delivered (Lewis et al., 2013). An example for a time when this approach would be conducive would be a situation where the aggressor from a dominant group (White male or female) is also in a position of power over the victim (Lewis et al., 2013), like at work. Microaggressions in the workplace constitute a hostile work environment at the very least, as they can range from “racial slights, recurrent indignities and irritations, unfair treatments, stigmatization, hyper surveillance, low expectations, and personal threats or attacks on one’s well-being” (Smith et al., 2016. p.4).

Another theme of this autoethnographic exploration is the misogynoir which engulfs Black women in this country. Misogynoir describes the anti-Black forms of misogyny directed towards and experienced by Black women (Kwarteng et al., 2022). Even the so-called compliments we receive are attacks on us. The most blatant example of this is the strong Black

woman trope. Living in a world where you are constantly punished for being the very thing you are encouraged to be, a strong Black woman. The strong Black woman trope is one that has plagued us for years upon years and is a blueprint designed to do us more harm than good. The value of a Black woman is placed in how much she endures, her labor, trials, and tribulations. Meanwhile, the White woman is valued for her beauty, softness, and vulnerability. She can rest in her femininity and is treated delicately. This is pattern that goes back to slavery and still has Black women clinging to the idea of strength being our only measurement of value. Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" speaks to this perfectly. One portion reads, "That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?" She continues by proudly detailing the harsh work conditions and brutal abuse Black women endured paralleled to White women at the hands of this country. She finds power in her strength and her fight, a mindset that was born out of a need to survive and is the very one killing us today.

The most important thing that I gained during this process was learning that so many of the feelings I have felt for years because of racism, microaggressions, and injustice have actual terms to define them. This research process has offered me such a beautiful forum for release and healing. There are things that I have spent years believing were my experience and my experience only. Feelings that I have swallowed and suppressed because I thought that I had to. To find so many pieces of published literature describing my exact experiences and emotions has brought me a new sense of clarity and meaning. More than anything else, it has been enlightening and therapeutic. Two years ago, I had no idea what racial battle fatigue was, and it is something that I have been afflicted with for years. I feel empowered and seen in a way that I

have never been able to in the past. I suspect that there are more Black women who will feel this relief and clarity after viewing my work.

I am inclined to think that there are many Black women who converge under pressure in predominantly White, intercultural settings than those who diverge because it is just easier. I have been guilty of being one of them. Everything in our life is a fight and it is consuming and exhausting. I am tired. I must smile when people tell me how articulate I am, I must spend hours doing my hair, I must be smart while not being too strong or intimidating. It is all exhausting. Trying to balance who I am pulls so much energy and I am not allowed to break. I cannot live a soft life full of joy and vulnerability and I hate it. Before this research began, I believed that I was crazy or dramatic for being upset that White people refused to say my name right. I let people from non-marginalized groups convince me to not “make things about race” or “pull the race card”, when the fact is that is simply not possible for me as a Black woman. It is not possible for me because others do it for me. I cannot tell you how many times I have talked on the phone with someone and once they met me a White person has said “I thought you were White” or “you are so well spoken”. That is not the compliment that it is often claimed to be. It is rude, offensive, and overtly and willfully ignorant.

Another reason I feel many Black women may converge is that there are already so many of us “feeling drained by the intense scrutiny their everyday actions received in the context of negative preconceived notions about African Americans” and fighting it simply would not seem beneficial in those moments (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 67). My belief that many Black women may stray away from boldly going against the European grain comes from a 2013 study by J.A. Lewis and colleagues. That study talks in depth about how “Black women have to manage the psychological effects of the gendered racial slights and be aware that if they choose a resistance

coping strategy, they may be making themselves vulnerable to further microaggressions, which is a catch-22.” (p. 61). Considering that I am a Black woman, I can confirm the validity of that statement. I would assume that trend would be followed. Finally, I am forming this conclusion based on basic human patterns. Excluding race, people tend to take the route they view as causing the least amount of friction. I have been guilty of letting things go for argument’s sake and just going with the flow. I attribute the concession to racial battle fatigue, a lack of security and support, and the overwhelming presence of post racial gaslighting.

As in any methodology, there are limitations. The experiences I shared are not meant to express every Black woman’s experience. I do encourage further explorations and call for more Black women to engage in sustained reflective inquiry about their own experiences and situate those experiences in research literature. To that end, a collective study may yield more themes and solutions to lessen racial battle fatigue and reach honest conversations addressing microaggressions and eradicating all forms culturally based and institutionally sustained misogynoir. That is, I offer to the readers that this call for action may serve as a convergent strategy for change.

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## APPENDIX 1

### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAT	Communication Accommodation Theory
CRT	Critical Race Theory
RBF	Racial Battle Fatigue
SAE	Subtle Acts of Exclusion
RDD	Racial Discrimination Distress
HWCU	Historically White Colleges and Universities