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“DEAD AND BLACK”
MOTHERHOOD AND THE DIALECTICS OF LOSING A BLACK CHILD TO
HOMICIDE

by

AISHA FARLEY

Under the Direction of Makungu Akinyela, PhD

ABSTRACT

Studies have indicated that the loss of a child to violence is a traumatic experience that can leave mothers in an unmitigated state of suffering and trepidation. Available research suggests that Black mothers who suffer disproportionately from violent loss, their experience of loss while individualized, is grounded in social contexts. The following phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of three Black mothers who have lost a child to homicide. This study explores the social phenomenon associated with losing a “Black” child to homicide and the grieving and bereavement experience of the surviving mother. Analysis revealed that the themes of race, gender and class are defining facets that intensify and compound the conditions of grief for Black mothers. This study concludes with recommendations in hopes of helping others begin to understand all that is lost and what must be understood when a Black Mother loses her child to homicide.

INDEX WORDS: Black Mothers, Homicide, Bereavement, Grief, Child Loss, Traumatic Loss

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2015

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	vii
PROLOGUE	viii
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Purpose of the Study	3
1.2 Significance	4
2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	6
2.1 Grief, Mourning and Bereavement	8
2.2 The Politics of Grief.....	9
2.3 Stigmatized Death and Disenfranchised Grief	12
2.4 Homicide, Grief, and Traumatic Loss in the Black Community	14
2.5 Maternal Bereavement, Child Loss and Black Motherhood...	16
2.6 Black Motherhood and Child Loss	19
2.7 Theoretical Framework: Black Feminist Thought.....	20
3 METHODS	21
3.1 Design	22
3.2 Target Population, Sample and Solicitation.....	25
3.2.1 ~Peace in the Hood in Brief~	27
3.2.2 Criteria	27

3.3	Data Collection.....	28
3.4	Ethics of Conducting Feminist Research	29
3.5	Procedure.	32
3.6	Data Analysis	34
3.7	Data management.	35
3.8	Reliability and Validity.....	35
4	FINDINGS	37
4.1	The Women	38
4.1.1	<i>Dialectics of Black Mothers Grief.....</i>	40
5	DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	58
	REFERENCES.....	72

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Inner Demography of Grief	50
Table 2 Outer Demography of Grief.....	57

PROLOGUE

Candles, Bears and Roses

It happened, one random fall night as my sister's and I rode home from a candle light vigil. As I sat in the back seat listening to National Public Radio, counting the raindrops that fell on the window where I rested my head, it hit me. It was as if someone had hit me with a ton of bricks, the pain from the impact left me with a bruised heart. I didn't know what to do so I wept. I wept because at that moment I understood the gravity of what was taking place around me. I understood the countless hours spent candle at night light vigils while other children watched cartoons and played; the marches; the rallies; the countless obituaries that lay scattered throughout the house.

Community grieving rituals had become a part of my daily routine and at twelve although I was beginning to understand what was taking place around me, I still wanted to know why. It was around that time that I began to read the obituaries that I often found in my father's Kufi's on the Television stand in my home. As I read about them, the children who had become my ancestors, some of them older than me, some of them younger I became obsessed with their stories. There was Abdul- Hakim Chui who was murdered for his coat and Shakira Johnson who was on the step team, they were like me with dreams of becoming musicians, artists, doctors and lawyers. Dreams that their parents would never get to see them fulfill. Around the age of fourteen the questions sent me on a quest for the unanswerable.

Although I have never been able to resolve my childhood why's, I recognize and accept that my childhood produced the flicker for the fire that fuels my pursuit to study grief. I have chosen to study grief in a community of mourners of which I have grown to intimately know, not out of want. For the nature of mortality and oppression is not a blissful pursuit. I have chosen to engage this subject out of necessity, the dearth of research suggests a grave need. In contemplating how I arrived at this juncture, and attempting to explain the impetus behind my research, I am obligated to reflect back.

From as far back as five, I can remember standing in the rain, waiting in the cold competing with my sister's, to shield my candle from the wind that threatened to blow out the light. As I looked up into the eyes that surrounded me, and watched the tears flow I wondered why? "Why, did my sisters and I have to skip cartoons to stand in a circle holding candles while other children played at home?" "Why was everyone always crying?" As I stood clutching my candle my thoughts were often interrupted by the sounds of sorrow. Standing in the circle lit by candles, I watched as many of the women fell to their knees around me. As I watched them weeping, my eyes often wandered to the picture of the slain youth that we had gathered to remember. Illuminated by candle light and surrounded by bears and roses I will always remember those angelic faces. Looking to the faces around me for answers, I often caught eyes with the face in the crowd illuminated by an unspeakable pain. Looking into the eyes of the Mother was heart-rending. The deafening pain in her cries would cause painful throbbing in the faintest hearts gathered to memorialize. Sometimes too

much for my little heart to bear, when I could I tried to avoid the eyes. Knowing that the inevitable meeting of the eyes could be calamitous. As a child the innocence of my eyes often drew them to me. They'd scoop up my small frame pull me into their bosom, and before I knew it I was engulfed in their grief. What often started off as hug would turn into a deathly squeeze filled with tears, sobs, running noses and convulsions. I never forgot the mothers. The sound of their grief and sorrow has an eternal dwelling place in my heart. The images of their tear filled eyes are permanently etched into the fabric of my childhood memories. As I prepare to embark on this path of research I am reminded of my beginning, the questions that I contemplated as an innocent child have not dissipated but evolved.

What plagued me as a child as I stood beside women whose children had become their ancestors, torments me now as I consider what it means to raise a Black child in America. While my personal odyssey was the impetus that catalyzed this project, I know that the losing a "Black" child to homicide is an experience that affects 28% of black parents in America who have a children between the ages of 15- 24(CDC) like many of the women in my life who were not fortunate enough to escape this facet of Black motherhood. As a Black woman who has yet to bear children, I too have had to confront this painful yet inevitable possibility. As the homicide rate continues to grow in the Black community, so grows the number of Black mothers who are faced with the task of burying their children. Far from unique, the experience of having your

children become your ancestors is a facet of Black motherhood that is often overlooked.

As noted previously I first became interested in this issue very early in life, however as a student and Black woman who has yet to conceive, I have become deeply troubled by this phenomena. The idea that motherhood in America for Black women is inextricably bound to trying to prevent your child's premature death is deeply troubling and equally distressing. This project reflects my ongoing struggle to reconcile what has become somewhat of, a 'rite of passage' amongst Black mothers in America. An inescapable reality that binds the institution of motherhood for Black women in America who have children and Black women who are hoping to conceive. An experience with death that my former teachers, dance instructors, and queen mothers alike have shared as a result of being Black mothers in America. The following study is an exploration of the lived experiences of Black women who have been unable to escape the experience of having their children become their ancestors.

1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the background of the research problem and includes a problem statement. The purpose of the study and its significance are also addressed.

The prevalence of homicide among youth is disquieting. Homicide is the second-leading cause of death among young people ages 15 to 24 in the United States and is the number one cause of death among African American individuals (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] Injury Center, 2006). According to year 2000 U.S. Census data, African Americans were victims of homicide at a rate of 21.2 per 100,000, whereas Caucasians deaths due to homicide occur at a rate of 4.9 per 100,000. According to data from 2006 African Americans were 5.8 times a likely to be victims of homicide than were Caucasians (Heron et al., 2009). Therefore, a disproportionate number of murder victims in the United States are African American, making an understanding of the ways in which African Americans experience the grief, loss and trauma associated with homicide a public health concern (Burke, McDevitt-Murphy, Niemeyer, Williams).

While statistics suggest that African Americans are disproportionately affected by homicide loss (Johnson, 2010; Phillips, 1997), few published studies have explored surviving mothers' bereavement processes (Burke et al., 2010; Johnson, 2010). The Loss of a child to violence is a traumatic experience that can leave parents in a state of trepidation, unable to find meaning. Meaning-making, is important as it is an active cognitive- emotional process

that is crucial to adjustment following loss (Neimeyer, 2006). A recent Canadian study by Bailey, Sharma and Jubin (2013) found that traumatic stress induced by the loss of a child to gun violence negatively affects black mothers' resilience. The study also identified that mothers' ability to cognitively appraise their loss positively was the primary mediator in their stress-resilience process. Considering the relevance of black women's resilience in coping and survival (Todd and Worell, 2000), it is important to understand the contextual relationship between their cognitive appraisal processes and resilience during traumatic loss.

In recent years, trauma and bereavement literature has focused on violent loss; however, researchers acknowledge that there remains a paucity of studies about the emotional and psychological suffering of parents whose children died violently (Hertz et al., 2005; Lohan and Murphy, 2006). Of lesser consideration is the social construction of such deaths and whether that negatively influence parent's bereavement experiences (Guy and Holloway 2007). The available research suggests that for black mothers who suffer disproportionately from violent loss, their experiences of loss, while individualized, is grounded in social contexts. Consequently the death of a "Black" child to homicide is a death that is compounded by a myriad of different factors that must be taken into account when documenting this specific type of bereavement.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

How do Black women adapt to the loss of a child? This study proposes to step into the lives of Black women, who have experienced one of life's most devastating, disruptive losses: the death of a child. This work attempts to join others that have attempted to understand the process of bereavement and the lives of women attempting to cope with a tragedy that has assaulted their identities and changed their lives forever.

The loss of a child is a traumatic experience that can leave parents in a state of shock unable to find meaning. The sudden traumatic death forces the bereaved to question the basic assumptions they previously took for granted: that the world is predictable and controllable, that it is meaningful and operates according to the principles of fairness and justice, that it is benevolent, that one is safe and secure, and other people can be trusted. These assumptions are shattered when a loved one is murdered. The bereavement experience for Black mothers, who are disproportionately affected by homicide and violent loss, remains overlooked.

This research was aimed understanding the social phenomena associated with losing a Black child to homicide and how the intersection of race, gender and class shape the grieving and bereavement experience of the surviving mother. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe the grieving experience of Black Mothers who have lost a child to homicide. A qualitative research strategy was used in exploring this phenomena. The nature of grief ultimately dictated the approach to this study

as such a phenomenon is an experience to be explored and described. The respective goal from start to finish was to learn about the lived experiences of Black women who have lost a child to homicide. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. How does the social experience of losing a “Black” child to homicide shape Black women’s grieving experience?
2. How does the way a child dies shape Black mother’s grieving experience?
3. How has the intersection of race, gender and class shape their grieving experience?

1.2 Significance

Cultural influence is a grossly understudied factor in bereavement’ (Bonanno and Kaltman, 1999, p. 769). Mainstream bereavement literature has not sufficiently examined the interconnectedness of race, gender and class in the bereavement processes of Black women. As a result, the intersection of these factors and how they may shape the grieving experiences of Black women has remained outside of research circles. This research is significant as it addresses an understudied population, from a specific lens. Whereas although it is certainly important to explore Black women’s lived experiences it is of equal importance to explore those experience from a position that includes all aspects of her lived reality.

In exploring the social phenomena of homicidal child loss, and Black Mother's bereavement experience, Black Feminist thought is the lens through which I frame my research. Black Feminist thought is a theoretical framework that is critical to understanding the lived experiences of Black Women in America because it is a theory that recognizes Black Women's social location and that of others with whom they interact with in their world. Black Feminist thought grounds how researchers identify, name, interpret, and write about Black women's unique experiences. Whereas traditional theories offer frameworks that are flexible enough to fit realities of any group's development, Black feminism is more specific in its integration, validation, and centering of Black women's unique realities (Collins, 2009). It rejects the notion of universal laws of behavior, favoring distinctive approaches by focusing on individual functioning, goals, and meaning within Black female realities. The historical, economic, political, and social experiences that have shaped others' and their own perspectives of who and what Black women represent are central in Black feminism. As Black feminism analyzes the meanings, social rules, values, and motives that govern actions of Black women in a specific context and from a critical stand point. In addition, as a field of inquiry that emerged from both feminist and critical race theories, Black feminist thought validates the experiences of Black women in the creation of knowledge. (Collins, 2009)

This study begins to fill these gaps in that it seeks to add to the meek body of literature that explores bereavement from a cultural and gender specific lens. This study is equally important because it examines Black

women's maternal and homicidal bereavement from a critical standpoint. This study has the capacity to provide the basis for future academic studies in the areas of Grief and Bereavement, Public Health, Women's studies, Black studies, and Sociology. Furthermore, this research is profoundly relevant because it aims to serve a community, suffering from an endemic social phenomena. As the homicide rates continue to soar in the Black community, the number of Black mother's faced with the task of burying their children also ascends. This study has the aptitude to serve as a foundation for interventions, social services and collaborative community approaches that promote growth and recovery of Black mothers who have experienced homicidal child loss. As the need to support and provide crisis intervention for Black mother's grappling with this traumatic experience remains outside of most public discourses.

2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to explore the bereavement process of Black women who have lost a child to homicide. The questions leading this research study are aimed at understanding:

1. How does the social experience of losing a "Black" child to homicide shape Black women's grieving experience?
2. How does the way a child dies shape Black mother's grieving experience?

3. How has the intersection of race, gender and class shape their grieving experience?

A review of the literature revealed that while statistics indicate that African Americans are disproportionately affected by homicide loss (Johnson, 2010; Phillips, 1997), few published studies have explored surviving mothers' bereavement processes (Burke et al., 2010; Johnson, 2010). The literature void exists in a host of academic fields.

The death of a “Black” child to homicide is a death that is compounded by a myriad of factors that must be taken into account when examining maternal grief. Therefore the following review of literature is aimed at documenting studies that have surveyed grief, traumatic loss, and the maternal bereavement domains. The basic intention of the literature review is to give a comprehensive review of the existing research in the field. In addition to the providing a review, its content also presents the argument that justifies the research subject and the manner in which it will be addressed.

The literature review will be presented in four sections. The first section includes a brief description of theoretical differences between grief, bereavement and mourning. The first section will also briefly discuss emerging discourses on grief to include disenfranchised grief and the politicization of grief. Literature regarding traumatic loss, suicide and homicide bereavement is presented in the second section. The third section is comprised of literature on maternal bereavement, literature that addresses Black mothers and

bereavement. Lastly, the chapter concludes with a description of Black Feminist theory and its intimate relationship to the imminent research.

2.1 Grief, Mourning and Bereavement

Although grief, mourning and bereavement are widely used interchangeably there are conceptual differences that must be considered before addressing this research. General definitions of grief, bereavement and mourning will be presented here and discussed in relationship to society.

The emergence of grief as a topic worthy of psychological study is an early 20th century invention (Archer, 1999) after Freud (1915/1966/1989) published his influential essay on mourning and melancholia in 1917 (Granek, 2010). The concept of grief as it is ordinarily used in this society, is the intensely painful experience that results when a meaningful loss has occurred (Granek, 2014). Grief is the subjective experience of the loss. Although grief is usually associated with bereavement it is important to note the difference. Bereavement means to be deprived by death (Holland, 2011) it is the losing of someone to whom one has been closely attached (Sabra, 2000). “To be robbed” the root word of bereavement, speaks specifically to the awareness of absence (Sabra, 2000). One definition offered by contemporary psychologists is that “bereavement refers to the loss of a loved one by death, and grief refers to the distress resulting from bereavement” (Genevro, Marshall, Miller, & Center for the Advancement of Health, 2004). Mourning is another closely related term and is frequently used as a synonym for grief. While mourning is related to grief it important to mention that while “grief is an emotion, mourning is a

state of being, a time of grieving where the individual focuses on his or her loss” (Holland, 2011). “Mourning, the ‘Old’ English word meaning “remembering with sorrow and care,” involves recognition of loss through action and is directly related to the field around us” (Sabra, 2000). While some researchers make a distinction between defining grief as “a reaction to loss” (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2005), and mourning as the “process by which a bereaved person integrates the loss into his or her ongoing life” (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2005), I use the terms interchangeably in this article to refer to the emotional reaction to the loss of a loved one that can include sadness, longing, sorrow, despair, and anguish.

2.2 The Politics of Grief

Grief like laughter and any other emotion is a reaction to a circumstance, event or experience. Most of us have experienced grief in our lives, from death, estrangements, disappointments and separation. Grief is inextricably connected to the human experience. Although grief is considered to be a universal phenomenon, the social aspect of grief is often neglected. Therefore there is a belated need to organize our thinking around grief, to consider its intimate connection to the social world. The expression of grief is defined as mourning is culturally, historically, and politically situated (Granek, 2014).

Gilbert (2006), noted that in every society grieving has been regulated in terms of duration, modes of expression, and rituals and traditions around how to mark and mourn loss and death. For example in western societies grief is understood to be a psychological condition and process that has a starting

point, middle, and end. For example the American Psychiatric Association (2013), has removed bereavement from its major depressive episode diagnosis, meaning that anyone showing symptoms of clinical depression after a major loss will be medically diagnosed even if the symptoms are caused by bereavement related losses, even if only been two weeks have passed since loss (Forstmeire &Maercker 2007). To this end the task of the bereaved is to do their “mourning work” and quickly get back to the task of living. Therefore the way grief is interpreted is largely dependent upon what our society views as normative. In the context of grieving, western societies pressures to quickly get over death and loss pathologizes grief, and forces the mourner to evaluate their grief on a continuum of normality versus abnormality. On this. Horwitz and Wakefield (2007), suggest that

“sadness, including grief is no longer tolerated in society and the pressure to be “up to speed and on track” is so immense people are medication themselves by the millions to appear normal. The pressure to be happy, productive and functioning leaves little room for sadness, and because this not a demand that most bereaved people can accommodate, many feel a sense of shame of shame and embarrassment at their inadequacy.”

As a society American’s have grown to be so uncomfortable with unpleasant and difficult emotions that we critique, police and even treat them as an illness. Although grief research has usually focused on assessing the

psychological impact of a specific event, there is burgeoning research on the grief as a political domain. On this, one feminist scholar noted,

Open grieving is bound up with outrage, and outrage in the face of injustice or indeed of unbearable loss has enormous political potential....whether we are speaking about open grief or outrage, we are talking about affective responses that are highly regulated by regimes of power and sometimes subject to explicit censorship (Butler, 2009).

In a recent study on the Politicization of grief, Granek (2014) argues that framing grief within a psychological/medical frame dampens the rage that often accompanies widespread losses of all kinds. This includes “natural and expected deaths, but also deaths caused by murder, and other losses that are a product of social injustice such as poverty, imprisonment, violence, lack of education and other opportunity gaps that are rampant in Western industrialized societies” (Granek, 2014). Further he notes that:

the focus on the individual mourner’s grief at the expense of the social conditions that caused the losses they are mourning delegitimizes the anger of the mourner, places the focus on the individual body of the griever and effectively takes away attention from the wider social forces that are producing these losses en masse (Granek 2014).

Furthermore he notes that these “distinctions are not natural or arbitrary, they are consciously manipulated and managed by the state with a frightening precision.” He contends that the politicization of grief is also nationalized in

“social distinctions about which life is grievable and which life is fungible (Granek, 2014).

Holst-Warhaft (2000) notes that the exploitation and perpetuation of the families grief under the public’s gaze, can serve as a conscious and precise manipulation of national and collective loss in the service of justifying war. For example grief in the political realm was evident after September 11, 2001, where 3000 people were killed in the bombing of the World Trade Centers. The public mourning was encouraged and still supported as justification to invade “terrorist” ridden countries, in 2001 in addressing the nation President Bush used word like “grief,” and “mourning” throughout his talk as a justification for revenge (Holst-Warhaft 2000). Portarti (2003), notes whether pro- or anti-war examples like this illustrate the tremendous power in the manipulation of grief for political purposes. Further, the politization of grief is also “nationalized in social distinctions about which life is greivable and which life is fungible.” Butler (2009), argues the political manipulation can divide populations she notes; “an ungreivable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never been counted as life at all.” The distinctions of who is grievable within the state are further examined in Kenneth Doka’s theory on stigmatized death and disenfranchised grief.

2.3 Stigmatized Death and Disenfranchised Grief

Kenneth Doka (1989) coined the term disenfranchised grief to describe grief that does not fit into socially acceptable norms within a given society. He offers a critique on the social aspect of grief by naming grief that is neglected,

unacknowledged, unexpressed, avoided by others, and not legitimized as disenfranchised. In his findings on disenfranchised grief he explores the concept of stigmatized death which considers 'how we die' and its relationship to grief. He notes that "some deaths are clearly stigmatized limiting support or shaming survivors so that they are reluctant to seek social support' (Doka, 2002). Similarly Redmond (1989) found that many survivors of a loved one's homicide face a sense of stigma. Whereas in many homicides the victim may be seen as contributing to death, in some cases his belief contributes to people blaming the victim (Ryan, 1971). Doka (2002) notes that this is particularly true when the victim is seen as a perpetrator, or killed in the process of committing a crime. Of the engendered stigmas Doka notes that some homicides generate community outrage where the support is forthcoming. However in many homicides cases the victim may be seen as contributing to the death, in some cases this belief may lead to "blaming the victim" (Doka 2004). Secondly the victim may have played a contributing role in the homicide, the victim may have been engaging in illegal behavior such as selling drugs etc., therefore in these cases support is diminished (Doka 2004).

In addition to examining how we die and its relationship to grief, Doka further interrogates the notion of disenfranchised grief to include the death of someone who is devalued. Similarly to Granek who declared that there are social distinctions about which life is grievable and which life is fungible (Granek, 2014). Doka (2002), notes "sometimes it is how one lives, as well as how one dies, that disenfranchises death and enhances stigma...some

individuals carry a social stigma that devalues them to their social group”(330). Furthermore, he notes that in some cases the stigma can be physical, as in the case of physical disability, in other cases it may mental stigma, such as addiction, mental illness or homosexuality. Although Doka, does not acknowledge the social reality of oppression and or identify the possibility of disfranchisement of an entire social group in his analysis, it is safe to infer that given the historical implications of race, gender and class oppression in this country the idea of a devalued life and therefore death can be ascribed to various social groups. A recent study on of traumatic loss in African Americans bereaved by homicide notes that,

“the priority of such research is great in light of the history of poverty, racism and oppression that has placed untold stresses on African American that in turn may well contribute to the ways in which they experience death and dying in general and in homicide bereavement” (Holloway, 2003; Roenblatt & Wallace, 2005; Laurie & Neimeyer 2008).

It is critically important to note as mentioned previously that social distinctions about which life is grievable are not natural or arbitrary. The death of someone who is devalued as noted earlier are often consciously manipulated and managed by the state (Granek 2014).

2.4 Homicide, Grief, and Traumatic Loss in the Black Community

~The demography of death is not democratic~

There is an inherent connection between homicide and being Black in America. Data relevant to homicide suggests that African Americans account for 68% of homicides victims (Sharpe, 2008). Further, according to the Center for Disease Control, Suicide and Homicide are among the leading cause of death for African American males aged 15-34, constituting a major public health problem (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] 2011). As a recent study noted, the disproportionate number of murder victims in the United States of which are majority African Americans makes the understanding of the way African Americans experience grief, loss and trauma associated with homicide an important public health concern (McDevitt-Murphy, Neimeyer, Burke, Williams 2012). An earlier study found that loss by homicide puts survivors at risk for adverse outcomes such as posttraumatic stress disorder, complicated grief syndrome and depression (Rynearson & McCreery, 1993).

A recent study on African American homicide bereavement and traumatic loss, that explored the psychological impact of homicide bereavement in a sample of 54 African Americans (88.9% female) who had experienced the murder of a loved one within the past 5 years, found that amongst the participants there was a high degree of PTSD-positive cases and positive screenings for complicated grief and depression (McDevitt-Murphy, Neimeyer, Burke, Williams 2012). Furthermore Participants who were within 2 years of a homicide loss showed significantly higher levels of PTSD and anxiety severities than those who were 2 or more years beyond the loss (McDevitt-Murphy,

Neimeyer, Burke, Williams 2012). In contrast, levels of complicated grief and depression did not differ significantly between those early and late in bereavement (McDevitt-Murphy, Neimeyer, Burke, Williams 2012).

The question of how homicide survivors compare with survivors of other traumatic events has also been addressed in a few reports. One study investigated a sample of 93 African American homicide survivors and two contrast groups with comparable demographic characteristics (Thompson, Norris, & Ruback, 1998). Compared with a group with no trauma exposure ($n = 119$) and one with non-homicide trauma exposure ($n = 108$), homicide survivors exhibited significantly more severe PTSD symptoms and general distress than either of the control groups. Although this study did not assess complicated grief, the authors found that overall distress was significantly predicted by the nature of the relationship—mothers were more likely to exhibit PTSD symptoms—and by the frequency of contact with the victim as well as self-rated closeness of relationship to the decease (McDevitt-Murphy, Neimeyer, Burke, Williams 2012).

2.5 Maternal Bereavement, Child Loss and Black Motherhood

Typically, a group that has experienced a particular traumatic event such as combat, war, or a natural disaster is selected and studied extensively (Vrana, Lauterbach). However despite the alarming statistics and rates of homicidal death amongst African Americans, there is still a lack of research that examines how African- American survivors are coping with this type of

unexpected death (Sharpe, Joe and Taylor 2013). Even less is known about how mother's cope with the unexpected death of a child.

A recent Canadian study by Bailey, Sharma and Jubin (2013) to explore the influence of the mediating resources of social support, cognitive appraisal, and quality health care on the relationship between traumatic stress and mothers' resilience (Bailey, Hannays-King, Clarke Lester, Velasco, 2013).

This study used a cross-sectional design to investigate how traumatic stress, induced from gun violence loss, affects resilience of a sample of Black mothers living in a large metropolitan city in Ontario, Canada. The study which consisted of 48 Black mothers ranging in ages 32-60 years (mean age 5 51.5 years, SD 5 8.4). Sought to investigate how traumatic stress, induced from gun violence loss, affects resilience of Black mothers, and explore the influence of the mediating resources of social support, cognitive appraisal, and quality health care on the relationship between traumatic stress and mothers' resilience.

The study also identified that mothers' ability to cognitively appraise their loss positively was the primary mediator in their stress-resilience process. Considering the relevance of black women's resilience in coping and survival (Todd and Worell, 2000), it is important to understand the contextual relationship between their cognitive appraisal processes and resilience during traumatic loss. This study validates the role of social support and positive appraisal as important resources in the stress process for some Black women who have lost children to gun violence. Although the results serve as

groundwork for this particular issue and population, clarification of these associations is relevant for the development of trauma and violence interventions in empowering women who lose children through violence.

In a similar study written by the same authors they sought to explore Black Mothers Cognitive Process of Finding Meaning and Building Resilience after Loss of a Child to Gun Violence. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten participants to address the following research questions : (1) What is the relationship between primary and secondary cognitive appraisal and resilience among black women who lose children to gun violence? (2) How do black women find meaning and build resilience following loss of their children to gun violence? (3) What factors influence black women's cognitive process of finding meaning following loss of their children to gun violence? In this study the researchers discovered that finding meaning in the loss of child was an important aspect of resilience for the mothers. Spirituality also served a key role in helping mothers find meaning or purpose in their child's death. When the mothers understood and accepted the death as part of God's will and plan, their reconciliation gave them strength to find some meaning in the death and become more resilient. In addition the researchers found that race played a significant role in how Black women came to make sense of their loss. Therefore research suggests that for black mothers who suffer disproportionately from gun violence, their experiences of loss, while individualized, are grounded in social contexts.

2.6 Black Motherhood and Child Loss

“The pain of knowing what lies ahead for Black children while feeling powerless to protect them is another problematic dimension of Black mothering” (Collins 2009)

The death of a child is an event that occurs in the mother’s inner and outer world, the internal world of thought and feelings give us insights into the meanings of the subsequent loss and reaction to death (Edlestin, 1984). Therefore the meaning and grieving experience is sought through an understanding of motherhood (Edlestin, 1984).

Black mothers have been plagued by child loss since arriving on the shores of America. The history of poverty, racism, and gender and class oppression has placed Black mothers in a position where they have often had to contemplate the possibility of this loss while raising their children

“I dread to see my children grow. I know not their fate. Where the white girl has one temptation, mine will have many. Where the white boy has every opportunity and protection, mine will have few opportunities and no protection. It doesn’t matter how good or wise my children may be they are colored. When I have said that, all is said. Everything is forgiven in the South but color.” (Lerner 1972, Collins 2009)

Patricia Hill Collins notes in *Black Feminist Thought*, that ‘Black Motherhood is a fundamentally contradictory institution. African American communities value motherhood, but Black mothers’ ability to cope with the intersecting

oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality and nation should not be confused with transcending the injustices characterizing these oppressions” (Collins,2009). While, motherhood has been examined in the context of race, gender and class oppression, little understood about its relationship to child loss.

2.7 Theoretical Framework: Black Feminist Thought

Theory grounds how we identify, name, interpret and write about experience (Few, Stephens, Rouse- Arnett 2001). To explore the social phenomena of homicidal child loss, and Black Mother’s bereavement experience, I will utilize Black Feminist thought as my theoretical framework. Using Black Feminist thought as my theoretical framework is critical to understanding this phenomenon because it is a theory that recognizes Black Women’s social location and that of others with whom they interact with in their world. Black Feminist thought grounds how researchers identify, name, interpret, and write about Black women’s unique experiences.

Whereas traditional theories offer frameworks that are flexible enough to fit realities of any group’s development, Black feminism is more specific in its integration, validation, and centering of Black women’s unique realities (Collins, 2009). It rejects the notion of universal laws of behavior, favoring distinctive approaches by focusing on individual functioning, goals, and meaning within Black female realities. The historical, economic, political, and social experiences that have shaped others’ and their own perspectives of who and what Black women represent are central in Black feminism. Black

feminism analyzes the meanings, social rules, values, and motives that govern action in Black female in a specific context from a critical stand point. Human action and interpretations are considered historical by products of collective experience. As a field of inquiry that emerged from both feminist and critical race theories, Black feminist thought validates the experiences of Black women in the creation of knowledge (Few, Stephens, Rouse- Arnett 2001). For these reasons, Black feminist thought has been identified as an appropriate framework for exploring this social phenomenon.

3 METHODS

The following chapter addresses the characteristics of a qualitative research design specifically a phenomenological study, and discusses why it was the most appropriate design for this study. Second, the chapter provides a discussion of how I went about selecting a sample, including the criteria that were used in sample selection. Next, a discussion of the data collection strategy for this study is provided as well as the method of data analysis used. Lastly, this chapter addresses validity and reliability, as well as researcher bias and assumptions.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe the grieving experience of Black Mothers who have lost a child to homicide. A qualitative research strategy was used in exploring this phenomena. The nature of grief ultimately dictated the approach to this study as such a phenomenon is an experience to be explored and described. The respective goal from start to finish was to learn about the lived experiences of Black women

who have lost a child to homicide. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. How does the social experience of losing a “Black” child to homicide shape Black women’s grieving experience?
2. How does the way a child dies shape Black mother’s grieving experience?
3. How has the intersection of race, gender and class shape their grieving experience?

3.1 Design

As mentioned previously the nature of grief ultimately dictated the approach to this study as such a phenomenon is an experience to be explored and described. According to (Firestone, 1987), the qualitative research paradigm is rooted in a phenomenological approach, holding that reality is socially constructed through individual or collective definitions of the situation. Whereas the implicit intent of qualitative research is to understand a particular social situation, event, role, group or interaction (Locke, Spirduso & Silverman, 1987). This form of inquiry allows the researcher to gradually make sense of a social phenomenon, through using study participants and oneself as a tool in exploring information about the phenomenon of interest. In short, the purpose of qualitative research is to generate fruitful data that can lead to a greater understanding of an observed phenomenon (Berg, 2001).

According to Creswell, we also “conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individual to share their stories, hear their stories to minimize the power relationships that often exists between a researcher and the participant in the study (Creswell, 2013). Creswell also defines qualitative research as “...an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. Additionally, Creswell lists eight distinct factors that a qualitative researcher must consider before choosing to embark on a qualitative study:

1. What is the nature of the question? The question should ask “how” or “what” rather than “why” as most quantitative questions do.
2. The topic of a qualitative study should be in need of exploration.
Exploration refers to the idea that all is not known about the topic and that theories are unable to explain the behavior of participants.
3. There should be a need to present a detailed view of the topic area.
4. A qualitative approach is needed to observe individuals in their natural setting. Studying participants in their own setting helps to keep the findings within the context of the participants’ surroundings.
5. One may also select qualitative inquiry because of a desire or need to write in a literary style (i.e., use of “I” or storytelling).
6. Qualitative study should only be used when the researcher has sufficient time and resources to gain an accurate and extensive picture of the participants’ experiences.

7. Is your audience receptive to qualitative work? Be sure that reviewers will be intrigued rather than displeased with the use of qualitative inquiry.
8. The researcher must be able to embrace the role of active learner and be willing to present the results from the participants' view in a way that is free from judgment. (p. 20)

After an extensive review of research literature and a subsequent examination of Creswell's (2006) considerations, I determined that qualitative research was the most appropriate methodology to use in exploring and describing the grieving experience of Black mothers who have lost a child to homicide.

In this study a Black feminist thought approach was also utilized not only because it is most suitable framework for investigating Black women's lives but because Black feminist thought provides a context to examine the complexity of Black women's lives as a "specific group characterized by their gender, race and class"(Few, Stephens, Rouse-Arnett, 2001). Since Black women share a "historical reality, and thus a shared world view of historical resistance", there was an emphasis placed on honoring this shared experience in considering an appropriate design (Collins, 1991). Additionally, because Black women's experience grieving the death of their child to homicide is an experience that is compounded by a myriad of factors, this context was also considered to be one of the highest priority when deciding upon the appropriate design. Whereas noted by Creswell (2003) the aim of the theoretical

perspective, whether it be a conceptual framework, a specific ideology, or advocacy is more important in guiding the study than the use of methods alone.

A phenomenological approach was employed in this study as this method focuses on understanding the lived experiences of individuals experiencing a common phenomenon (Creswell 2013). Because Black Studies and Black Feminist Thought research traditions seek to describe, explain, and empower the participants, the researchers and the community, I have decided that phenomenology provides the richest and most descriptive data and thus is the ideal research design for exploring the maternal bereavement process of Black women who have lost a child to homicide (Creswell 2013).

3.2 Target Population, Sample and Solicitation.

There were several considerations in determining the study sample size. The validity and meaningfulness of qualitative research has less to do with the sample size and more to do with the selecting participants with the information richness. Further a purposeful sample is chosen over a randomly selected sample because the purpose of qualitative inquiry is to produce multifaceted information from each participant, resulting in a better understanding of the given phenomena. Creswell (2006) suggested that qualitative inquiry requires the researcher to seek participants who will provide the richest data available. Because the sample size for a phenomenological research design ranges from two to twenty-five, I have elected to choose a purposeful sample of five

participants (Creswell, 64). A sample size of five was chosen as the goal of this research is not statistical generalization. Additionally I did not choose the smallest sample because I recognize the importance of being able to gain in depth information about this phenomena, conversely I did not elect to interview a larger number of participants because it is necessary to select a sample size I can manage given the time and resources I have available. Although the findings generated from this study are not generalizable to the masses, the goal of this research design is to identify shared experiences amongst individuals experiencing a shared phenomenon; locate the universal nature of the experience, and detail the phenomena in a way that provides the insight needed to aid future studies.

This project sought the participation of five research subjects. The target population of this study is Black Mothers who have experienced homicidal child loss. Participants were solicited through the organization Peace in the Hood. A purposeful sample, as therefore recruited through the agency Peace in the Hood. A purposeful sample, which implies intentionally selecting individuals to learn to understand the central phenomenon was used. According to Patton (2002), one of the design strategies for qualitative inquiry is purposeful sampling. This speaks to the idea that the researcher intentionally seeks participants who have an array of information about the topic area or issue of interest and can, therefore, provide insight in ways that others could not. A purposeful sample is chosen over a randomly selected sample because the purpose of qualitative inquiry is to produce rich, multifaceted information

from each participant, resulting in a better understanding of the given phenomena. Therefore, I utilized purposeful sampling for this study in choosing five participants from the organization Peace in the Hood. Those who are both active in the program and those who are inactive were identified through program databases and be recruited to participate in the study. The following paragraph briefly explores the organization Peace in the hood, to provide a brief explanation for why the participants came from this specific organization.

3.2.1 ~Peace in the Hood in Brief~

Founded in 1987 the Cleveland based coalition of leaders, community stakeholders and victims of violence was created to help address the myriad of challenges facing urban America. Of the challenges affecting the community championed by Peace in the Hood is respite and support to victims of violence. Following a tragedy such as a missing child, a homicide or an act of violence, a member of the support team contacts and visits the family of the victim. Support services are offered to the surviving family including but not limited to grief counseling, assistance with funeral arrangements, assistance with handling news media, care at funerals and support through court proceedings. Peace in the hood staff also assist with helping the family with basic needs through coordination with other social service agencies.

3.2.2 Criteria

Criteria is established in research to assist in choosing a sample that is rich in information and that will provide data related to the purpose of

the study. All of participants chosen to participate in this study met the following criteria:

- Identified as Black, non-Hispanic;
- Had lost a child to homicide
- Were willing to speak freely about their grieving experiences
- Were available for contact when clarification was needed with regards to the data collected;
- Spoke English clearly;

The data collection as mention in the previous section involves to explore, understand, and describe Black Mother's grieving process after the loss of a child to homicide.

3.3 Data Collection

While quantitative data collection is good for collecting information about people's attributes, perceptions and attitudes, qualitative interviews are used to reveal detailed information and deeper insight into the phenomena being study (Krueger, 1994). In order to gain a deeper level of insight into the lived experiences of Black Mothers who have experienced homicidal child one on one open-ended interviews were conducted.

Because of their qualitative nature, one-on-one interviews allow researchers to look beyond the facts and numbers that might be obtained via survey methodology—researchers can learn or confirm the meaning behind the facts (Shamdasani, 1998). Interviews were executed in a one-on-one format to

create an accepting environment that put participants at ease and allowed them to thoughtfully answer questions in their own words and add meaning to their answer.

Given the sensitive nature of this research, data collection was conducted in a location that was convenient and comfortable for the participant. The emotional safety of the participants was paramount in conducting this study. Because of the sensitive nature of this research, risks of re-traumatization is a threat was strongly taken into account. Given ethics of care and reliability the questionnaire and interview guide was peer reviewed by a clinical therapist, who examined the protocol for evidence of any psychological distressing questions and aided in reframing and finalizing protocol draft. Additionally the interviews were structured to flow into and out of the emotional subject matter and focus mostly on the participants' response to the death of their child rather than on the details of the homicide.

3.4 Ethics of Conducting Feminist Research

Additionally, because Black Feminist research seeks to emphasize power within the context of Black women's lives it was important to address the dynamics of power in the researcher – informant relationship. Along these lines it is suggested that Black women researchers develop a “contextualized understanding of power in three dimensions (a) personal power {experiencing oneself as an agent of change with the capacity to effect change}; (b) interpersonal power{ having influence over other because of one's social location, interpersonal skills or credibility} and (c) political power {effectively

utilizing formal and informal means to allocate resources in an organization or community}, for feminist power is conceptualized as a resource that is created, maintained, lost and or regained in the process of social interaction (Few, Stephens, Rouse-Arnett, 2003). Further, leading feminist scholars, suggest that feminist researchers focus on not objectifying or exploiting participants, they must pose questions that speak to the centrality of gender in the way an individual's world view is shaped. Few, Stephens, Rouse-Arnett (2003) suggest that the goal of such studies is to "correct both invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position." Creswell (2006) suggested that when conducting feminist research a researcher should consider engaging in the following procedures:

1. Conduct sequential interviews in an interactive, dialogic manner that entails self-disclosure on the part of the researcher and fosters a sense of collaboration.
2. Conduct group interviews that provide potential for deeper probing and reciprocally educative encounters.
3. Negotiate meanings of results with participants in the study.
4. Strive to address issues of false consciousness and conceptual determinism.
5. Be self-reflexive about what researchers experience as they conduct research. (p.83)

As a researcher who is a both grounded in the Black experience and feminist framework, I am aware of the distrust and fear of exploitation that can

be at play in the relationship between the researcher and subject. Therefore in thinking about how to conduct fieldwork with this population there is a considerable amount of time spent contextualizing self in the research process and monitoring power, representation and ethic of care. In working with Black women who are vulnerable and may or may not have been able to speak about their experience it deeply important that the process not be disempowering. Thus equalizing the power relationship and adopting a non-hierarchal stance is imperative in the research relationship with a vulnerable population. Of equal importance in working with Black women that have endured unspeakable trauma is the necessity to address issues of vulnerability with sincerity and genuine empathy.

Therefore all interviews will begin with an open conversation about my personal interest commitment and investment in exploring their lives from a place of empowerment. I imagine being very candid with expressing the undisputable facts about the marginalization of Black women's narratives regarding this issue, and my personal goals in challenging the communities and academia to turn their attention to a community of women who have been forgotten. The women will also be reminded that anything that they chose to share and teach is valued and appreciated.

As mentioned previously, given that my research seeks to explore a traumatic event in my participant's lives it is of utmost importance to discuss and address the challenges and ethical concerns of conducting this type research. Because of the sensitive nature of the subject, all participants will be

informed of the right to withdraw from the study and or abstain or decline answering any question at any time. In addition an information resource pamphlet will be distributed with a list of local grief counseling and support groups. After the interview all participants will be contacted via telephone for a follow up, where participants will have the opportunity to give feedback and or elaborate on topics they may have potentially wanted to follow up on.

3.5 Procedure.

After approval from the university's Institutional Review Board women who met the inclusion were asked formally to participate in the study. Unfortunately only three of the participants selected for this study were able to participate, two of the participants were unable to participate due to a family death and an unforeseen medical issue. Three Black mothers from the city of Cleveland, Ohio participated in this study. After obtaining informed consent from the participants, the participants filled out a brief demographic survey. With the exception of one, all interviews were held at the homes of the mothers where was able to share in pictures and other important remembrances periodicals and awards that helped memorialize their child. Interviewing in the home also gave me preview to the neighborhood that the child grew up in, as all of the women revealed in the interviews that "it was important to stay in the community." After the intent of research and procedures were explained the one on one interviews began. Each interview was participant-centered in the sense that participants were not interrupted and maintained primary control in the interview. Each interview will begin with an open conversation that will

focused directly on the experience of surviving the homicide of a loved one. All participants were asked to respond to the following initial interview questions:

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself?
2. Can you describe what happened to you?
3. What is life like for you now?
4. Do you think what has happened to you is unique to Black Mothers?
5. Does it seem that your social status has affected how you were responded to by authorities?
6. How does what happened to you affect you today?
7. How have you gotten to a different place?
8. What do you need to heal right now?

Subsequent statements or question were asked in attempts to obtain clarification or elaborate on findings regarding the participant's experience. This method of inquiry will allow participants to identify aspects of their experience they believe are the most important or had the most personal impact shifting the focus from one of pathology to one of meaning and personal perceptions. Following the interview participants were offered the opportunity to discuss what the interview experience was like for them, and were be provided with a list of grief resources for support. Field notes were taken in addition to the recoding during each session. Interviews will be digitally

recorded, transcribed and saved on the researchers password protected computer.

3.6 Data Analysis

A phenomenological procedure was used to analyze qualitative data. This consisted of extracting statements significant to the phenomenon. In this method, all written transcripts are read several times to obtain an overall feeling for them. From each transcript, significant phrases or sentences that pertain directly to the lived experiences are identified (Creswell, 2013). Meanings are then formulated from the significant statements and phrases; the formulated meanings are then clustered into themes allowing for the emergence of the themes common to all participants' transcripts; the results are then integrated into a description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Themes were identified as a result of the combined process of making associations with the findings, the Black feminist thought theoretical framework, and maternal bereavement and grief literature.

To ensure reliability, thematic data was "peer reviewed" by two additional researchers recruited for the purpose of providing an "external check of the research process" and to help verify and saturate categories for the purpose of revealing emerging themes. Validation was accomplished through multiple methods of collection (observations, interview, and surveys), data coding and validation by the principle interviewer and member checks by participants (Creswell, 2013). Validity is the outcome goal of the research and is based on trustworthiness and external reviews (Creswell, 2013).

3.7 Data management.

All assessments and recorded interviews were stored in my home in a locked cabinet immediately following the interview. The recorded information, transcriptions and surveys were only seen by the student principal investigator. Interview data was stored in a notebook, as well as on a password-protected laptop that only the student principal investigator has access to. At the completion of the study, interviews and recorded tapes were destroyed.

3.8 Reliability and Validity.

This section will address qualitative reliability and validity. According to (Merriam, 1998) validity and reliability exist in qualitative research in an effort to understand a world as it is seen and experienced by participants in the study. Therefore it is imperative that issues of validity and reliability be addressed so that readers can trust that a certain level of rigor has been met. For qualitative data, there are several strategies to address validity, Creswell (1994) suggests that the following strategies be employed:

1. Triangulation of data- Data should be collected through multiple sources
2. Member Checking
3. Peer examination
4. Long terms and repeated observation at research site
5. Participatory modes of research
6. Clarification of research bias (p167-168)

After reviewing the following strategies, I decided to employ four of the six procedures to ensure internal validity in my study. Triangulation of data, whereas data will be collected through multiple sources to include interviews, observations and document, analysis; member checking where the respondent will serve as a check throughout the analysis process, whereas an ongoing dialogue regarding my interpretations of the informants reality and meaning will ensure the truth value of the data; participatory modes of research respondents will be involved in most phases of the study to engage and check interpretations and conclusions and Clarification of research bias- at the outset of the study research bias will be articulated throughout the thesis proposal (Creswell 1994). The primary strategy to ensure external validity will be the provision of rich, detailed descriptions, and rigorous documentation of all phases so that anyone interested in replicating my study will have a solid framework to do so (Merriam, 1988). Three techniques will be used to ensure reliability. First, I will provide a detailed account of the focus of the study, the researcher's role, the participants' role, the basis for or selection criteria, and the context from which data will be gathered (Creswell, 1994). Second, triangulation or multiple methods of data collection was used to ensure and strengthen reliability and internal validity. Lastly, data collection and analysis was reported in detail to provide a clear accurate and replicable study. All phases of this project was subject to scrutiny by three academic scholar's serving as thesis committee chairs who will served external reviewers.

4 FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe the grieving experience of Black Mothers who have lost a child to homicide. A qualitative research strategy was used in exploring this phenomena. The nature of grief ultimately dictated the approach to this study as such a phenomenon is an experience to be explored and described. The respective goal from start to finish was to learn about the lived experiences of Black women who have lost a child to homicide. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. How does the social experience of losing a “Black” child to homicide shape Black women’s grieving experience?
2. How does the way a child dies shape Black mother’s grieving experience?
3. How has the intersection of race, gender and class shape their grieving experience?

Participants in this study were recruited via criterion and purposeful sampling methods (Patton, 1990). Criterion sampling (Creswell, 2013) refers to picking cases that meet that meet specified criteria, which was essential in selecting women who had experienced this phenomenon. Three out of the five one on one interviews took place in the homes of the participants and there were two phone interviews. All of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by

researcher. Participants who agreed to participate in the individual interviews were asked if they could be contacted later either to review their transcription or to be asked clarifying questions. All of the participants granted permission to be contacted at a later date. Two were contacted by phone for a follow-up conversation to shed light on some of the statements that were made during the initial interview.

This chapter has two sections. The first presents the profiles of participants in the order in which they were interviewed. Pseudonyms chosen by the researcher were used in order to keep their true identities confidential. The second section presents data from the individual interviews.

4.1 The Women

I will never forget when she was murdered this mother came to my house to say she was sorry, she heard my story on the news and she had lost a daughter too, and she began to weep and moan and I thought oh noooo this just happened ...I asked her when did your daughter die and she said 26 years ago and my first thought sitting in that room was, why was she still crying? I didn't get it... 26 years to my life I understand, it doesn't go away.

Even after deciding to interview women in my hometown familiar to me, I was very uneasy about the idea of asking to discuss a loss so great, I imagined that hearing the stories of loss would be equally difficult. To my surprise the women eager to speak with me, I am forever indebted to them for their graciousness.

The interview group was fairly homogenous along the designated criteria. All of the mothers met the criteria of losing a child to homicide and being fluent

in English. All of the women were over the age of 34 and identified as being Black. Every participant had completed high school or obtained a GED with the exception of one, all of the women were single at the time of their child's death. All of the children were under the age of 18 at the time of their deaths two were 14 and the other child was 16, similarities in age came as no surprise given the statistics on homicide and crime rate in Cleveland. All of the mothers had surviving children. All of the women revealed that they have become involved in activism since their child's death.

Though I originally contacted five women only three of the five participants selected for this study were able to participate. All of the participants were from Cleveland, Ohio. With the exception of one, all interviews were held at the Peace in the Hood office. The mothers shared in pictures and other important remembrances periodicals and awards that helped memorialize their child. Interviewing them in their community gave me purview to the neighborhood that their child grew up in. In every instance the mother's welcomed me graciously, they were excited to tell their story, they were thrilled that their story would be used to educate and teach others. All of the women discussed the need to reach other people.

"I can't stand to see other people go through what I have, if people knew how it felt to have their child snatched away they would live differently"

(Ms. A.S.)

The interviews and talks formed the primary basis for this study, the taped and transcribed conversations were designed to produce a description of their lived experiences. Interviews varied in length from 1-1/2 hours to 2 hours. The mother's differed in their tone and discussion of feelings although the same questions were asked in each interview. The women are quoted throughout this analysis and conclusion nevertheless their stories are theirs. To ensure their anonymity, certain details have been changed, as it is my belief that their stories hold power without identifying information. Whether their experience can be generalized to men other racial or socioeconomic or cultural groups is questionable, as this exploratory phenomenological study was designed to capture the stories of the historically neglected and socially disenfranchised. Although the underlying dynamics of grief may be identifiable, when your child is dead and Black the grief is vastly different, this study was designed to explore this phenomena through the live experiences of Black mothers coping with such a traumatic tragedy. These are their stories of loss.

4.1.1 Dialectics of Black Mothers Grief

I remember, I was in the grocery store one day trying to push a cart, and I couldn't understand why the cart wasn't moving...I have to be honest I was thinking there has to be something wrong with the wheels (laughing)... what is the problem? I kept trying to push it, kept trying to push it and that's when I realized it wasn't the cart it was me. I had no strength...so that was the way it was when she died.

(Ms. P.Y)

The death of the child is an event that assaults the mother's inner and

outer world. Both are real and both must be understood. Although both are of equal importance when attempting to understand child loss, this study has sought to describe and explore the social world of grief as it relates to losing a “Black” child to homicide. The interviews were designed to explore how the intersection of race, gender, and class shapes the grieving and bereavement experience of the surviving mother. Although this study and therefore the findings focus on the ‘outer world,’ there are aspects of the inner world that are shared with the hopes of helping one begin to understand all that’s is lost when a Black dies of homicide.

The findings were sought through a series of open-ended questions that are not the same as the research questions but were intentionally created to explore them and this study’s intent of describing the social impact of losing a child to homicide in Black mothers. From the three verbatim transcripts, 88 significant statements were extracted. After arranging the formulated meanings into clusters 27 themes emerged. The findings are integrated thematically below, it is important to note that most of the themes and categories were extracted from the transcripts, the Mother’s.

4.1.1.1 Inner World

“I used to burn candles on his birthday I really want to forget it, but you can’t forget it...you can never forget...around March I start feeling depressed, because I’m wondering what would he have done... what would he be doing.... who would he have become... because he had a very skillful hand Aisha... he could look at you and go in another room and draw you... He was a good artist.... This birthday he would’ve been thirty six....”

In this section the focus is on the Mother's internal world, however she is not alone in her grief. The following narratives will explore the some of the aspects of her daily life and the dynamics of some of the very important relationships that have changed as a result of her loss. The emphasis again was on the Mother's internal experiences as she described her adaptation to loss.

Where there is grief. There is guilt.

"I had to be the man and the mother"

According to Edelstein (1984) there are several different causes of guilt in maternal bereavement: (1) the actual responsibility for the event; (2) imagined responsibility for having prevented not death; (3) assuming blame for the child's responsibility of hurting himself, herself or others; (4) as a reaction to being a survivor or; (5) relief in ending a conflicted relationship (Edelstein, 70). These categories are not mutually exclusive, although all of the women interviewed mentioned guilt it seems that the guilt that they experienced are most closely related to the idea of 'imagined responsibility' for having prevented not death, than any of the categories identified. Whereas although the circumstances surrounding their child's death was out of their control, they still believed that it was humanly possible for them to have prevented their child's death. Most of the narratives reflected the idea of 'imagined responsibility' which they seem to associate with having to play the role of

“protector” a role that they associate with being a “man.” For example one of the mother’s describes that having to “be the man and the mother” puts single Black mothers in a complex situation where they have no choice but to be the protector.

“In the community where you have such an absence of father’s, the mother has to become the protector, I felt like I didn’t protect her and so not only are you dealing with grief, you’re dealing with guilt, guilt is a huge part of it.”

Although all of the mother discuss aspects of guilt, the guilt that they describe and have experienced is distinctly different from the categories found in maternal bereavement literature. The mothers interviewed seem to associate their feelings of guilt with the idea of protection as it relates to being single Black mothers, rather than feeling guilty for being a survivor of death itself. Although grief literature explores the nature of guilt as it relates to maternal bereavement, it is clear that single Black mothers cope with an additional feature of grief. As they negotiate their child’s death they are dealing with guilt associated with being a single mother. Therefore their grief is compounded, as the guilt that they carry is associated with feeling that they have not only failed to protect their child as a mother but also as a father, an assumed responsibility.

“All we can try to do is protect, the worst thing in the world for a mother is to have something happen to your child and you didn’t do everything in your being to protect them.”

In the following quote another mother describes her internal battle with guilt as her comments below reflect the unblemished reality of what guilt from grief does to the spirit and what is needed to reconcile the guilt. She notes:

“I had to stop to beating up on myself, I had to tell myself you are not the enemy here you have been wrongfully done. You’ve done what you’ve had to do to.”

Couched in this quote is the idea that the guilt from this type of grief makes a mother feel as though she is an enemy to herself. Although this characterization of guilt is not implicit in the other interviews the quote itself is a marked exemplification of how the manifestation guilt manipulates the inner world of grief.

It Changes Who You Are

“Nothing is the same, nothing will be the same, and it’ll never be the same”

A resounding theme that was described by all of the mothers, that was anticipated but necessary to mention in capturing the essence of their inner world grieving experience was the idea of unyielding grief. As the grief from this tragedy as described in the narratives is one that dramatically disrupts their connection to life, their relationship to others, and themselves. The loss is so tilling that one of the mothers describes it as already being ‘dead’ she recalls;

I remember someone threatening me one time, they said something like ‘I could kill you’.... this was not long after her death and I said to him you

cannot kill me cause I'm already DEAD!...those were my exact words' whatever you gonna do go ahead I'm already dead.

Another mother articulates that the pain from the grief of her loss has given her heightened sensitivity around children. She explains below how her loss has impacted how she views the world:

It's been 21 years and it still hasn't changed. I'm living. The void is there, but I have to go on because I have my other two children, I have my two boys to live for I view the world differently.... because of my loss, I hate to see other children neglected or abused.... because I don't have mine.... and that's a precious gift..... If people only knew how it felt to have their child snatched away they would live differently.

The relationship between mothers and their remaining children are deeply affected by the death the children are exposed to the full range of grief, a distressing ordeal. All of the mother's discussed how the death has affected their relationships with the surviving children.

The injustice that I have done to my other children is horrible... all of my other kids had to live under this stress... there mother was never the same... I'm sure it has affected them.... I see it in how my other daughter treats my grandchild....

Another narrative describes the insidiousness of grief in the internal world of a mother who is traumatized and tormented by her daughter's unsolved case:

Well I have to tell you by her case being an unsolved homicide and rape, in my mind everyone was the KILLER... cause you don't know who it is! It put a wedge between me and other people because I'm watching for signs....I'm watching for signs... You want to go out, you want to have a date or a nice dinner, but who do you do that with because it could be the KILLER!....

She further elucidates how grief metastasizes her inner world;

So it changes who you are in a way that you can never describe. You're not as trusting... I'm at a place that where I feel aloof... I'm at a place where you can't get to me and that's bad! because I want to be loving I want get to you in a loving way, but I have to come through all these bricks and mortars.... So you almost don't care about anyone or anything, I don't want it to sound like this you know...(pause) but it is what it is, you've seen so muchyou've done so much...there is a giant impact. We get called to all of the murders all the rallies your father will tell you...and at somepoint you just shutdown emotionally, you become robotic and I think that's for your sanity but every now and then something horrific comes to you and it hits you like an earthquake. It shakes you so hard that it crumbles that wall.

The death of a child slashes through all aspects of a Mother's world, sparing no one on its path. Everything and everyone is subjected to this acute ache, the wrath of grief rips through the family, leaving relationships shattered and eternal stress on the grieving mother, thus her internal world will never be the same.

Trauma is Rekindled

~Every time a child is murdered it affects you~

Another untold aspect of grief that affects the Black mother's inner world is the re-traumatization that occurs from living in violent inner city communities. While many of the mothers proudly discussed that they had decided to stay in the inner city neighborhoods as a sign of hope, as Ms. PY stated "I choose to stay here, so people can see me continue so people can see me get up and got to work every day," their sacrifice comes at a high price. As one of the mothers describes the consequence of continuing to live in an inner

city community she notes;

*“I’m better now, but it used to be bad, it was like every time I heard that another child was dead I would think of him and breakdown and cry.”
“When I hear an ambulance, when I hear a phone ring late at night my heart jumps, and I think of him.” WD*

Although most of the mothers recognize the trauma that they endure as a result of their decision to stay in the community, yet still believe the community needs them and therefore it is more important to stay. Two mothers describe the disturbance below:

As mother in the community you are always affected... ‘it hurts... every time a child is killed I feel a pain...I pray ‘please protect the mother.’

Another mother describes,

*“Because of the continuous homicides, the pain is always rekindled, it’s always rekindling that moment. It’s like pouring salt on an open wound.”
Ms. SA*

Anticipation of Loss

“If they can fight to kill we can fight to live”

While studies involving grief traditionally focus on physical loss or the death of a loved one, there is burgeoning literature on inevitability of death. Intimately connected to the Black experience anticipatory grief is a type of grief that is often present yet remains completely outside of discourses that explore the Black experience. According to Elisabeth Kubler Ross anticipatory grief is preparing for the loss ahead. More silent than grief experienced after a loss, anticipatory grief is the fear of the unknown, the fear of pain we will someday

experience (Kessler, Kubler-Ross, 2). This type of grief is also present in Black mothers who are currently grieving, as the anticipation and fear of loss never goes away as one of the mother's narrates:

We carry in our hearts the ones we lost and we fear for the ones we still have here

She elaborates further:

The fear that I might have to bury another son keeps me fighting...I'm fighting because I don't want to lose my other two...or my grandkids.... I had to get out so I can save my grandchildren...the only way to do something about it is to get in these streets... If they can fight to kill... we can fight to live...

The fear and anticipation loss in this case has become a catalyst for her, as she like all the other mothers interviewed have used their grief to transform their tragedy into triumph. An additional feature of Black mothers grief that

Can't rest until my child is buried

"We don't get to grieve they are trying to figure out how to bury"

At the time of loss, funeral plans and memorializing the child's death during the service is critically important as the funeral service itself "reflects one way of assuming mastery in a helpless situation" (Edelstein, 55). The funeral therefore becomes the one last thing a mother can do before their child is gone forever. The planning of the funeral illustrates a dimension of agency as the Mother often takes on the task of creating a ceremony in tribute to their child's life. Mourning their child's loss through the planning of the funeral is a significant area of the grieving process where Black mother's experience

helplessness and destitution. Many Black mothers facing this type of tragedy are not prepared for the financial undertaking of a funeral and are therefore plagued by the trauma and shame not being able to bury their child. As one of the mother's describes;

The majority of Black mothers are caught off guard financially, in other words they didn't have any insurance...So now they have to grieve and be financially responsible at the same time... many of which don't get to grieve because they are trying to figure out how to bury their child.... That was not the case with me but I see this with many of the women. PY

Another mother describes the toll that it has taken on her financially as her role as an activist has put her in positions where she has assumed financial responsibility for many of the mother she's worked with in her organization. In the following quote she elaborates on her own financial situation:

"At one time Aisha, I had money but a lot of my money, most of it went toward helping these mothers bury their children" -WD

Table 1 Inner Demography of Grief

Theme	Significant Statement/Quote
Deceptive Responsibility	<p style="text-align: center;">Where there is grief there is guilt <i>'I had to be the man and the mother'</i></p> <p><i>"In the community where you have such an absence of father's, the mother has to become the protector, I felt like I didn't protect her and so not only are you dealing with grief, you're dealing with guilt, guilt is a huge part of it."</i></p>
Hindered Relationships	<p style="text-align: center;">The new normal <i>'Nothing is the same, nothing will be the same, and it'll never be the same</i></p> <p><i>"The injustice that I have done to my other children is horrible... all of my other kids had to live under this stress... there mother was never the same... I'm sure it has affected them.... I see it in how my other daughter treats my grandchild..."</i></p>
Resuscitated Trauma	<p style="text-align: center;">Trauma is Rekindled <i>~Every time a child is murdered it affects you~</i></p> <p><i>"Because of the continuous homicides, the pain is always rekindled, it's always rekindling that moment. It's like pouring salt on an open wound."</i></p>
Financial Despondency	<p style="text-align: center;">Can't rest until my child is buried <i>many of which don't get to grieve because they are trying to figure out how to bury their child</i></p>
Injurious Anticipation	<p style="text-align: center;">Anticipating Loss <i>~If they can fight to kill we can fight to live~</i></p> <p><i>"We carry in our hearts the ones we've lost and we fear for the ones we still have here"</i></p>

4.1.1.2 *Outer world*

Although the bereavement process is an internal activity the experience itself is strongly influenced by the external or outer world. The descriptions taken from the interviews in the following section form the heart of this work as the primary purpose of this study was to explore the social phenomena associated with losing a Black child to homicide. The following section will explore the intersection race, gender and class, as it relates to Black mother's bereaving the loss of a child to homicide. As mentioned previously, their narratives are explored with the hope of helping one begin to understand all that's is lost when a Black dies of homicide. This section is outlined by the categories of race, gender and class, the category is followed by the interview question and lastly the participant's response. I have deliberately chosen to limit my analysis in this section as the essential dynamics of grief for Black mothers shall be engaged rigorously in the following chapter. Again although the underlying dynamics of grief may be identifiable, when your child is dead and Black the grief is vastly different, this study was designed to explore this phenomena through the live experiences of Black mothers coping with such a traumatic tragedy. These are their stories of loss.

Before I Can Bury My Child

~No humanity in life, No humanity death~

Black mothers suffer irreparable assaults to their dignity as they as they are forced to watch their children, their legacy, their hope, their dignity destroyed

before the masses as their dead child is forced to stand trial before they are lowered into their grave. The following testimony bears witness to the true horror of watching your child be publically humiliated after death as this mother describes the true reality of what it means to be dead and Black in America.

Race

*“ when she was murdered the reporter kept saying...
 “a Black little girl was murdered on the way to school”
 “a Black little girl was found at the bottom of a stairwell”...
 I would said ‘excuse me, do you have any children?
 he said yes,
 I said so if they were murdered and there blood spilled on to the street
 what color would there blood be?
 “He said red”,
 I said just like my daughter, she wasn’t just a Black child murdered!
 She was a child! She was a child!
 and until you stop saying the color of her skin, and stop dehumanizing her
 because she’s BLACK,
 SHE HAD EVERY RIGHT TO LIVE!’*

When the media reports on Black children they try to dehumanize them, they say ‘well you know he had a record you know he was smoking marijuana, he was a juvenile delinquent, so now you’re trying to justify why he was murdered. Before their child is even in the ground, before they get to the funeral can you imagine?....

Gender/Class

they say well ‘the momma was on welfare’ listen and watch it’s any and all negative history when it comes to Black children there trying to dehumanize and justify their death]... My goodness and the things that they would say about my daughter I would say ‘until you see that this

was an injustice that was done to her, how are you going to investigate the crime?

they would try to say she was sleeping around!

I would say ' I don't care if she dropped her own 'drawers'

I'm serious that's the way I had to put it!

He didn't have a right to KILL HER!

Race

'Somebody bashed her head in....

I'm trying to show she had a right to LIFE, in spite of the color of her skin.

It shouldn't be! " When there's a Caucasian child it's a national epidemic... so they come up with Black lives Matter, but why do we even have to say that!"

Race/ Gender/Class

~Our grief is burdensome~

When asked if this experience is unique to Black mothers, the conversations revolved around the historical implications of being a Black woman in America, and the actual burden of the way their child died as articulated in the following passage;

Well I have to say Black mothers we carry a different burden... Most of the time when I hear other races talk about how their child died they say oh my child was sick or they got hit by a car.... So we also have the way our child dies to carry as a burden...Our grief is a little different because it's burdensome.

Another mother exclaims,

We've been targets since the beginning of time!

When asked if it seemed that your social status has affected how you were responded by authorities? One mother vividly describes the intersectionality of oppression that mother grieving the loss of a child to homicide as she distressingly explains;

*When they come to our neighborhood to investigate a crime the go in with the expectation of who is on the other side of the door that the mother doesn't care, or those mothers are incapable of loving.... they don't think we have tenacity or intelligence... so when they come to our door they are like this is what goes on... here's the information have a good day!
I'm like where did this disconnect come from? Where did this come from, who told white officers that they could murder our children?
Who told you that about us?
Who told you that we ought to be feared?
Who told you that Black women are skanks, or on welfare and incapable of loving?*

The toll of the intersectionality's of oppressions affecting Black mother's is described and synthesized by the following mother as she frustratingly exclaims;

*We survive horrific stuff but whose gonna tell our story?
Where's our book deal, hey where's our movie deal,
That's what I mean when I say Black mothers.... they don't even see us.*

Like many mothers who have felt violated and betrayed by the media and social justice after their child's murder, these mother's sought to challenge the oppressive structures by creating and joining organizations that supported victims of tragedy which in return created a platform for resistance them. The helplessness from the trauma was annexed by their participation in advocacy and activism, which has helped to restore personal agency as one mother

testifies:

That's why I speak all over the country and internationally as a symbol of hope, I'm not an angry Black mother,

People say to me all time " you don't act like a mother whose child was murdered...why...how?"

Because I opted to choose Gods grace and his mercy and love as my weapon. They expect me to come as they have determined that we all are, and they can't believe it, "you mean you mean they have and compassion in spite of all that they have gone thru."

It's Okay, To Not Be Okay

One of the final questions in the interviews explored the idea of counseling other mothers as all of the mothers where and have worked directly with other mothers as first responders giving grief support, in lieu of this as a researcher I was interested in knowing how they console the mothers this is one of responses to question, what do you tell other mothers?

What you tell the mothers, or what I say is it's okay not to be okay' you give them permission to feel the grief, the anger, the depression all of that is an important part of it.

But then you tell them "when you get through with that you have to become adamant about how you eradicate this problem so that it won't happen to anyone else, you can't stick your head in the sand.

You have to find out what you can do, from the position that you now occupy to make the world a better place.

Can you go into schools to talk to the young people?

Can you go to the detention home and speak to the young gangs, what is it that you are going to do to show that your child did not die in vain

I know you don't feel like it right now cause I've been there you don't even wanna comb your hair, you can't even brush your teeth, but when you're ready, let's keep it movin.

There is Life After

~I choose to dance~

The last final and excerpt was shared at the beginning of one of the interviews. I am intentionally sharing this narrative in the end because it acquiescently describes what life is like after death. This specific mother is speaking about how she feels now that her daughter's killer has been sentenced to life in prison. The mother was asked what is life like for you now? This is was her response:

How am I now?

What I have to say to people is there is life after, you have to get through it to get to it. So many people stop midcourse. They decide 'I'm not going any further.

*But my driving force was knowing who did this...
So when that was revealed,
I have to say it took me to a familiar place, it wasn't a good place
It was the strangest thing
Because I hadn't realized that this news would impact me negatively
I was afloat all of these years focusing on the killer
That was my motivation
So when the case came to a rest, it was like the pin was stuck in the wound again, I fizzled back down to reality and that reality was
What do I do now? Cause this is what I've been living for...*

*It literally felt that my life had come to an end again.
It came to an end when she was murderd
And now its coming to an end again.
I had to ask myself literally, how many times can one person be born again?*

How am I now?

*I want to be who I once was....
 but she no longer exists
 I am fighting to identify this new location,
 if you can imagine Harriet Tubman on the plantation always knowing
 there was more...
 God this can't be it, and she went through the struggle to get there but
 when she got there the newness was so unfamiliar that there probably
 was a place in her that wanted what was old.*

*I know who did it...
 now what do I do?
 So, I am in the process of putting one foot in front of the other just to
 exist....*

*My brother had a party recently and everybody laughed because
 I danced the whole night
 My niece turned to me and said in the 45 years that I've known you I've
 never seen you dance....
 and I thought maybe had she not been murdered,
 maybe I would have danced...
 so now that my life is back to normal,
 or should I say the new normal... because it will never be normal,
 but now because there is nothing between me and life...
 I can choose and I choose to dance.*

Table 2 Outer Demography of Grief

Theme	Significant Statement/Quote
Public Mortification	<p style="text-align: center;">Before you can bury your child ~No humanity in life, No humanity death~ <i>“Somebody bashed her head in....I'm trying to show she had a right to LIFE, in spite of the color of her skin. It shouldn't be! When it's a Caucasian child it's a national epidemic... so they come up with Black lives Matter, but why do we even have to say that!”</i></p>

Race, Gender and Class Discomfiture	<p style="text-align: center;">Black mothers.... they don't even see us <i>"Who told you that Black women are skanks, or on welfare and incapable of loving? Who told them that they could murder our children?"</i></p>
Fatal Stigmatization	<p style="text-align: center;">Double burden <i>~Our grief is burdensome~</i> <i>"we also have the way our child dies to carry as a burden...Our grief is a little different because it's burdensome"</i></p>
Mobilized Grief	<p style="text-align: center;">I've got to try and save our Black children <i>'Only way to do something about it, is to get in the streets'</i></p>

5 DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I didn't want that body....That couldn't be mine. But I stared at his feet and could identify his ankles. I said, those are my ankles. Those are my knees. I knew the knees...and then I began to come on up...until I got to the chin and mouth...those were Emmett's teeth, and was looking for his ear. You notice how mine sort of curls up...Emmett had the same ears...The one eye that was left, that was definitely his eye, the hazel color confirmed that, and I had to admit that, that this is my son. (Thomas, 2) ~ Mamie Till Mobley's description of the moment when she first saw her child dead.

For those of us who study race, gender, and class in America the quote above is an instant reminder of the millions of Black mothers who have lost children to a system that considers their offspring disposable property. For centuries women throughout the diaspora have suffered silently as their children were snatched, raped, beat, sold and often killed by the hands of a malevolent regime. As the enslaved, frantic mothers screamed, moaned and often collapsed from grief as they faced one of life's most devastating and

disruptive losses. For Black women, the experience of watching their children become ancestors was far from unique and often inevitable.

While millions painfully watched their children sold, beat, raped and murdered, there were some who defiantly murdered their own. For Mothers like Margaret Garner the cloud of death, the anticipation of loss and the fear of the known “unknown” was too heavy of a burden to bear. As an act of resistance Garner like countless other Black women took the lives of their own children to save them from the calamitous life that awaited them. As loss became customary, grief became salient for Black mothers plagued by the permanence of an aching soul. Beset by the inevitability of death, their relationship with grief became both intimate and clandestine, chronic and unremitting.

While the relationship between Black motherhood and grief is a subject that has received some intellectual attention, overall the dialectics of this phenomena remains outside most discourses. As mentioned in the literature review, Patricia Hill Collins stands amongst the few that have examined this complex phenomena from a critical standpoint. She notes in her chapter on Black women and motherhood, “the pain of knowing what lies ahead for Black children while feeling powerless to protect them is another problematic dimension of Black mothering” (Collins, 135.) The complete lack of control that Black women have over the lives of their children has placed Black mothers in a unique position where they often contemplate the possibility of loss while raising their children. Collins further notes, that “Black Motherhood is a

fundamentally contradictory institution. African American communities value motherhood, but Black mothers' ability to cope with the intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality and nation should not be confused with transcending the injustices characterizing these oppressions" (Collins, 2009). Although their suffering is often acknowledged as a consequence of the intersectionality of oppression, there is still much to be examined about the calamity of the institution.

This research was aimed understanding the social phenomena associated with losing a Black child to homicide and how the intersection of race, gender and class shape the grieving and bereavement experience of the surviving mother. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe the grieving experience of Black Mothers who have lost a child to homicide. A qualitative research strategy was used in exploring this phenomena. The nature of grief ultimately dictated the approach to this study as such a phenomenon is an experience to be explored and described. The respective goal from start to finish was to learn about the lived experiences of Black women who have lost a child to homicide. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

3. How does the social experience of losing a "Black" child to homicide shape Black women's grieving experience?
4. How does the way a child dies shape Black mother's grieving experience?

5. How has the intersection of race, gender and class shape their grieving experience?

Three Black mothers that have lost a child to homicide were purposefully selected and interviewed. The interviews and demographic questionnaire served as the sole source of data for this study. A qualitative research design was used to explore how the intersection of race, gender and class shapes the grieving and bereavement experience of Black mothers who have lost a child to homicide. Themes were identified as a result of the combined process of making associations with the findings, theoretical framework and maternal bereavement literature. To ensure reliability, thematic data was “peer reviewed” by two additional researchers, for the purpose of providing an “external check of the research process” and to help verify and saturate categories for the purpose of revealing emerging themes (Creswell, 1998, p 202). One phone interview and two Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews and were conducted. Participants were recruited from the organization Peace in the Hood, in Cleveland, Ohio.

Discussion and Conclusion

From the research two major domains containing nine themes emerged. The two domains that emerged from the data are inner demography of grief and outer demography of grief. The inner demography of grief for Black mothers consisted of five themes *deceptive responsibility*, *hindered relationships*, *resuscitated trauma*, *injurious anticipation* and *financial despondency*. The

outer demography of grief for Black mothers consisted of *public mortification; race, gendered and class discomfiture; fatal stigmatization, mobilized grief.*

The qualitative findings highlight that following the loss of their children to homicide, Black mothers are trapped in a dialectical struggle between the inner and outer worlds of grief. Their grief is historically located, publically manipulated, and socially sustained. When examining the intersection of race, gender and class two categories emerged *public mortification* and *fatal stigmatization*. The Black mothers reported that the intersection of race gender and class came together to assault their dignity, destroy their legacy, and publically humiliate and demoralize them. When examining the same intersection with regards to their outer world the mothers maintained that there are social distinctions that were historically dictated and publically manipulated that determined whether or not their child's life would be mourned.

Black mothers grieving the loss of a child to homicide experiences were compounded by the struggle between the physical loss of their and child and the confrontation with race, gender and class based stigmatization by public officials. As the Black mothers confronted with their child's death by investigators reported being treated as worthless they noted that because police investigators have the expectations of who is on the other side of the door "as mothers that don't care and are incapable of loving," they are unfairly judged and their grief is either ignored or scrutinized.

The experience of having your Black child die of homicide for Black mother is burdensome, as many of the mother's reported not being able to grieve publically as one mother noted " I had to be strong publically, I felt as if I had a big hole, I had no privacy, everyone was looking through me and everything was there for the world to see." Therefore Black mother's grief is mitigated by factors beyond their control. As the mothers' struggled with the immediate trauma from death they were also met with the pain of having to watch their deceased child be publically dehumanized as their lives were opened/exposed for public scrutiny. The mothers also indicated that the same intersections activated and motivated them towards a social justice agenda and a commitment to use there unbearable situation for positive social change. Finally, in helping them transition from a place of powerlessness to one of dignity and grace mother's pointed to spiritual influences as on mother described:

there is no mental being that help you through this, the only way through this is with God, there is no other way, all the friends in the world, all of the family in the world, only one entity can put you on a level that you will be able to cope with this and that's not man.

Triadic Grief

The literature review on grief revealed two types of grief that are vital to understanding the nature of grief for Black mother's bereaving the loss of a child to homicide. As mentioned previously while studies involving grief

traditionally focuses on physical loss or the death of a loved one, there is burgeoning literature on anticipation of death and the subsequent unacknowledgement of loss. Intimately woven into the narratives of the three women interviewed, anticipatory grief and disenfranchised grief are two types of griefs that must be consulted when attempting to understand this social phenomena. Vastly different from the conditions of normal grief, anticipatory grief is preparing for the loss ahead.

Anticipatory Grief

Anticipatory grief as I labeled as Injurious anticipation as presented in the previous chapter, in essence is the grief experienced in anticipation of death. Indication of this type of grief is found in the theme *injurious anticipation* as the Black mothers interviewed explicitly describe the trauma and fear that lingers by their side throughout all the stages of their grief and their lives as survivors of such a tragedy. Although the grief they are experiencing is more silent than the grief experienced from actually losing their child, the anticipation and fear of losing their other children is ever-present in their relationship with their other children and how they navigate life after. As noted by one of the mothers the fear of pain she will someday experience, is the primary motivation behind her involvement in “getting in the streets” as she poignantly stated in her interview:

“if they can fight to kill we can fight to live, I’m fighting because I don’t want to lose my other two...or my grandkids.... I had to get out so I can

save my grandchildren...the only way to do something about it is to get in these street.”

Not to be confused as an exemption, from the five stages of grief and the four additional stages of maternal bereavement, I am suggesting that when a Black mother loses a child to homicide, anticipatory grief although unspoken is likely to be present and therefore must be understood.

Disenfranchised Grief

The intersectionality located in Black mother's grief is not unforeseen as their grief is as multifarious as their lives. Their cultural, social and political reality is with them in their grief. The social context of losing a Black child to homicide, for these mothers magnifies the intersectionality of their oppression, and therefore grief is disenfranchised. Kenneth Doka coined the term disenfranchised grief in 1989 to describe grief that does not fit into socially acceptable norms within a given society. Grief that a person experiences when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledge, mourned or socially supported is defined as disenfranchised grief. According the literature on disenfranchised grief the Mothers were faced with several manifestations of this grief as again their grief is predicated upon their status while living, whereas if you are dispossessed and disenfranchised in life, you are disenfranchised in death as the life cannot be “mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all” (Granek, 2014). Although the idea of disenfranchised grief in theory could be used to encapsulate and define

this whole experience I would like to limit my analysis to the theme of stigmatized death or what I have denoted as fatal stigmatization. Again I must reiterate that when Black people die of violence the focus on the flaws of the dead individual and the mother at the expense of the social conditions that may have caused the loss does make the grief of survivors disenfranchised. Whereas it must be understood that placing the focus on the type of death takes the focus away from the wider social forces that are producing these losses. The death is delegitimized therefore the pain, anger and grief of the survivors is disenfranchised. The themes of *Fatal Stigmatization and Public Mortification* articulate this condition and is found throughout the testimony from the three Black mothers. *Public Mortification* reflects the idea that before their child is memorialized the child's life is publically degraded. In this situation the mother is robbed of her right to mourn. Instead of or in addition to grieving their loss Black mothers in faced with this situation have to fight media, public and social discourses that victim blame and shame in effort to devalue, dehumanize and pacify their child's life and therefore death. This facet of their grief must be considered when investigating or seeking to explore Black mothers' bereaving the loss of a child to homicide. The blaming threatens the dignity, assaults her legacy and placates negative perceptions of all Black mothers and therefore humiliates, degrades, and destroys the vitality of the surviving mother.

Triadic Grief

As Black mothers are forced to they lay their children to rest, the dialectics of their grief is incalculable. I posit that their grief is triadic in nature, where as they deal with their loss they migrate through three different types of grief in addition to the five phases of grief that is noted in grief literature. The three types of grief that shape Black Mother's grieving experiences are:

1. Maternal Grief- As described by Edelstein 1984 as the Acute and Chronic grief mothers experience when their children die.
2. Disenfranchised Grief - Grief that a person experiences when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledge, mourned or socially supported. (Doka)
3. Anticipatory Grief – As defined by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross as the anticipation of loss, or the grief experienced in anticipation of death.

Developing a critical understanding of theses specific types of grief in addition to the five stages of grief is imperative, for those seeking to under or explore this social phenomena. There is a belated need to study maternal grief from a cultural specific lens as current bereavement literature has not sufficiently examined the intersectionality of oppressions that shape the grieving experiences of Black mothers facing this type of a traumatic loss. The complexity of their grief must be rigorously engaged.

Again although the underlying dynamics of grief are noted, when your child is dead and Black the grief that follows is vastly and fundamentally

different and must be understood as such. As mentioned, when Black people die of violence the focus on the flaws of the dead individual and the mother at the expense of the social conditions that may have caused the loss makes the survivors grief disenfranchised. Whereas it must be understood that placing the focus on the type of death takes the focus away from the wider social forces that are producing these losses. The death is delegitimized therefore the pain, anger and grief of the survivors is disenfranchised. In this situation the mother or survivors are robbed of their right to mourn. Instead of or in addition to grieving their loss Black mothers faced with this situation often experience high levels of guilt and shame as watch media, public and social discourses that victim blame in effort to devalue, dehumanize and pacify their child's life and therefore death.

Triadic in nature, as they deal with the horror of losing a child Black mother's grief is intensified by the stigma associated with the way their child died, the fear of losing the surviving children, and the intimate and clandestine, chronic and unremitting grief of child loss itself. Whether their experience can be generalized to men other racial or socioeconomic or cultural groups is questionable, as this exploratory phenomenological study was designed to capture the stories of the historically neglected and socially disenfranchised. Again this study was designed to explore this phenomena through the live experiences of Black mothers coping with such a magnified and traumatic tragedy. Since nothing to my knowledge has been written or reported on regarding grief occurring in triads, I posit that we can turn to

Black mothers who have lost children to homicide or violence to understand or explore this dialectical struggle.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this research rest in sample size and the methods employed in conducting the study. The findings may have been affected by the small number of purposefully selected participants. In light of the fact that participants' thoughts were represented in words and not in numbers and that they participants were interviewed in-depth, the sample size was small in number when compared to most qualitative studies. Although I attempted assembled a sample with maximum variation I was unsuccessful in retaining my sample after initial contact, additionally my sample was not random and therefore the findings of this study are not generalizable to other populations in a statistical sense. In-depth understanding was the true goal of the study, however I am aware that some may see the lack of generalizability as a limitation.

Implications

Grief practitioners interested in assisting and effectively supporting mothers who grieve such a loss, must do so by developing culturally relevant interventions to address all aspects of their grief. Helping to facilitate healing must encompass a process of advocacy and activism to assist mothers in reclaiming their dignity and legacy. Grief therapist and workers should create interventions where surviving mothers are engaged in advocacy addressing the black community's needs to include mentoring programs, parenting classes our faith-based initiatives to support growth and recovery. Grief practitioners should also provide educational material that reflects their social reality, challenge the dominant narrative and portray stories of resilience. In closing because the influence of race, gender and class remains a grossly understudied factor in Black women's bereavement,' the work will never end in this field. The understanding of anticipatory and disenfranchised grief in homicide and bereavement literature that focuses on the Black experience is in need of urgent academic and public critique as it may be a proven way of understanding the complex and triadic nature of grief that Black mother's experience as a result of their cultural, social and political reality. Understanding the complex nature of their grief as mentioned previously is overdue, as the homicide rates for Black people continue to rise, so does the number of Black mothers forced to bury their children.

This project reflects my ongoing struggle to reconcile a seemingly inescapable reality for Black women who have children and Black women who are hoping to conceive. As a student and Black woman who has yet to conceive,

I like the millions of Black women who have come before me am at risk. I stand with a community of griever's, defenseless against the shadow of loss perpetuated by fear and power. I stand with the millions of mothers that have endured the most heinous of crimes as they were taxed with burying their murdered children, under the gaze of the world. Bound by the possibility of loss I, like the Black mothers that have come before me have realized that I too must be prepared for the inevitable before and after I conceive. Plagued by my own uncertainties, I have become desperate to understand how Black mothers exist with the wrath of grief by their side.

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