

**“Set our spirits free: Exploring the role of spirituality as an anti-oppressive agent in the  
formal education of African Nova Scotian learners”**

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By

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***Dear Ugly Duckling...***

*By: Késa Munroe-Anderson*

I write to you because you are too familiar.  
Do you not find it strange that I'd seen you,  
read you a hundred times before,  
but never felt the pain that I now feel?  
I did not recognize you then,  
I was blinded by Hans Christian Andersen's pen  
The simple tale that was meant to teach me a lesson

My lived experience has made me see  
I am much like you  
You are much like me  
And when I look around in my community  
My spirit aches for the countless reflections  
of you  
Who named you so and why?  
Your story made my heart cry  
And how long did you have to wait  
To belong to a crowd that would not negate  
Your very existence?

From whence did your endurance come?  
Waiting between the covers three decades and some  
Patiently, but sometimes in despair  
To find your voice and whisper  
"There is something wrong here!"  
Seize it, retell it, don't let it go!  
You must know, they must know  
that Ugly Ducklings exist  
inside the covers of countless texts,  
between title and credits on movie screens,  
inside the walls of schools, colleges, and universities  
silenced, illegitimately named and dying inside.  
They wander along the margins their true selves to find,  
society's pawns,  
because no one has yet told them  
...they truly are swans.

## Introduction

Far from helping learners heal their wounded souls, contemporary forms of education have depersonalized learners and derooted us from our histories, cultures, identities, traditions and spiritualities (Dei, 2012, p. 829)

The stories of African Nova Scotians' (ANS) formal learning experiences throughout their province's education systems have been needlessly tragic ones. Over the years, these learners have endured alienation, racial and cultural oppression, and inequity in formal education experiences (BLAC, 1994; Lee & Marshall, 2009, Parris & Brigham, 2010; Africville Genealogy Society, 2010; Hamilton, 2011) which have stunted their opportunity to attain a holistic formal education and fair chance at achieving academic success. Further, the historic, pervasive silence around the knowledge and contributions of African peoples in public schools and universities within Nova Scotia has been deafening. Forced to borrow the dominant culture and its knowledge and denied the right to bring their histories, heritage, lived experiences and ways of knowing to formal education sites, these learners struggle in school environments that threaten their self-image (Asante, 2012) and invalidate their very existence. As the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development turns its attention towards adopting culturally relevant teaching practices as one means of addressing the academic gaps facing African Nova Scotian and Indigenous students, the atmosphere in formal education is ripe for change. Moreover, the oppressive educational realities ANS learners face urgently demand that the formal education systems employ culturally relevant practices, engaging ANS communities and indigenous knowledges, to provide for equitable education and innovative solutions to these challenges.



My exploration into the role that spirituality plays as a transformative, emancipative mode of knowledge production in the lives of persons of African descent (Wane, 2008; Dei, 2012) offers solutions to combat the oppression and inequity ANS learners generally experience in formal education. Spirituality is a multi-dimensional, relational "way of being in the world where one is connected to one's cultural knowledge" and others - including community, nature, higher powers, and ancestors (Shahjahan, 2009, p.122). A key coping strategy which serves as a reservoir of strength and resilience for African peoples (Ani, 1980; Richards, 1990; hooks, 2003; Este & Bernard, 2006; James et al., 2010), spirituality is action-oriented and transformative, empowering people to reclaim their identity and resist colonial and intellectual subordination (Dei, 2012). Including African-centered spirituality in the classroom for marginalized learners like ANSs could be a critical step towards dismantling oppression, using its knowledge to address issues of power, systemic inequities, alienation and social oppression (Dei, 2012).

## **The Research**

With these convictions, solidified by research I conducted with sixteen ANS adult learners within three Story Circles set in their home communities of North Preston, Upper Hammonds Plains and North End Halifax, I explored how embracing spirituality as an anti-oppressive agent may impact the formal education experiences of African Nova Scotian learners in general. My doctoral research examined how the spirits of this group of First African Nova Scotian (FANS) learners - ages 18 to 50 - are nurtured. I explored how African Nova Scotians define spirituality, and how they understand spirituality as cultural knowledge. I examined how these participants practice spirituality, and the role it plays in their daily lives, particularly in their communities. I also explored whether or not spirituality is understood as an anti-oppressive agent in the lives of

ANS people. To do this, I posed the following research questions: In what ways do African Nova Scotians define spirituality? What is its role in their everyday lives? What role might spirituality play in fostering anti-oppressive, transformative formal learning spaces that support the educational success and well being of ANS learners? A comparison of ANS learners' experiences in formal learning spaces with that of their experiences in informal learning in their home communities was an important aspect of my study. Altogether, the stories of my sixteen participants bear witness to the liberating possibilities and equitable opportunities which could be realized for ANS learners should our formal education system embrace and practice inclusive strategies which centre their spiritualities.

## **Summary**

I begin by reviewing the historic and on-going challenges that affect African Nova Scotian learners as recorded in the literature. Through the literature, I examine the impact that non-inclusive education has had on the spirit - the heart and soul- of these learners, primarily by looking at historical challenges that have faced African Canadian learners, generally, and African Nova Scotian learners, specifically. Secondly, I explore the significance of African-centered spirituality in the lives of persons of African descent, particularly African Nova Scotians, and how this may impact their education. I explore the possibilities that including spirituality in the education of ANS could hold for their academic success and well-being. I also investigate the consequences of non-inclusive education on the whole person of the learner and look at how incorporating African-centred, culture-based spirituality as an alternative and indigenous way of knowing can support these learners as they search to find meaning and knowledge in educational experiences which have not coincided with their lived realities (Sheared, 1999).

As a researcher of African descent who has voluntarily immigrated to Canada from the Bahamas, it is important to me that I situate myself within this research as an insider/outsider in a responsible and transparent way. Therefore, I discuss the role I play as a participant with the ANS community in this research, the challenges and benefits of this role, and my own spirituality as it impacts the research. I engage the theories of Africentricity, postcolonialism, anti-colonialism, African/ Black feminism and womanism, and anti-racist methodology to build my theoretical framework. These theories legitimize African centered spirituality as knowledge, and call for a centering of African peoples, their knowledge, and their lived experiences. I explain the significance of using the spiritual and relational research methodology and method of storytelling to conduct my research and share how the concepts of Community Narratives, "Going Home" and Spiritual Spaces became manifested within the research. Most importantly, I link the stories of the sixteen SOSF participants to answer the research questions noted above and to provide a centered perspective on ways to ameliorate Nova Scotia's formal education system for the spiritual well-being of ANS learners. Ultimately, through the participants' storytelling, I answer the research question: "Could African-centered spirituality play an anti-oppressive role in the formal education of African Nova Scotian learners?"

### **Situating myself in the Research**

As a person of African descent, my heritage, culture, history and lived experiences have shaped who I am as an educator and researcher and focused my passion towards the inequities suffered by African Nova Scotian learners in the educational system in this province. I am an African Nova Scotian woman, a mother of three children of African descent, all of whom are either in public elementary or middle school, an adult educator, and a lifelong learner.

Therefore, I bring to my work in community and in academia a specific African-centered focus,

a different awareness of the power of inclusion, a sensitivity to the need for the silenced voices of the oppressed to be heard, and marginalized knowledges to be centered. Since my self definition itself shapes my participation and responsibility to my community, I bring to my work a spiritual pursuit and calling to expand the knowledge base and capacity that currently exist in education for African Nova Scotians (Dillard, 2006; Cutts, 2016).

Although, my status as a more recent immigrant to Nova Scotia makes me an outsider to my research in some regards, I must acknowledge that my spirituality connects me to the ANS community as an insider as I explore the role of spirituality in education for ANS learners. In fact, it has been my cleaving to this community and the growing knowledge of and experience with the deplorable state of affairs of African Nova Scotian learners in education that has developed in me a passion to conduct research that will positively impact their education across this province. Although, admittedly, my passion is partially guided by a personal interest due to my dreams of a formal education system that serves the intellectual and spiritual needs of my three ANS children, interwoven throughout this passion is a communal interest. Spiritually, I cannot separate my biological children from any other ANS children. I believe wholeheartedly in the words of African Canadian activist, politician Rosemary Brown who said that "Until all of us have made it, none of us have made it" (Bellett, 2011,n.p.). As a Black woman, it is important to me that I engage in research that is reciprocal and caring (Dillard, 2006; Cutts, 2015) cognizant of the fact that my strong sense of self-identity is a prerequisite to the community engagement required for this research (Cutts, 2015). My varied employment experiences as an adult educator, director of a youth learning program, youth employment counselor, program manager of a literacy program, and CollegePrep Coordinator in Nova Scotia, which contrast starkly with my formal educational experience in the Bahamas have persuaded me that the spiritual injury

generally experienced by ANS learners in formal education must cease. While many in the dominant culture who have the power to effect change in this area turn a blind eye or simply bandage the issue through the added observances of once per year events like African Heritage Month, or the addition of one Student Support Worker charged with ameliorating the educational issues of ANS learners in multiple public schools at a time, I am compelled to look deeper to find solutions that will work to address this spiritual injury in these institutions. This is the source of my passion.

Willis (2001) highlights the significance of Sonya Sanchez's words of advice about conducting passionate research:

Without asking, she spoke to my struggle to have my voice heard within academia. Her advice to me and others, came in a response to a query from someone in the audience. Sanchez observed, 'The very best writing comes when you write about something you are passionate about.' I held on to these words, as they helped me to understand better the voice that was missing in my work. Sanchez continued by asking, 'If you cannot write passionately about a topic, why write at all?' It was clear to me that my writing lacked passion. (p. 45)

In concurrence with Sanchez, I firmly believe that passion must have an important place in my choice of topic as a researcher. It is precisely my passion and commitment to my fellow African Nova Scotian learners, my community of children, sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins and elders, that bring me to this point and topic of research today. It is my aim that through this research, my voice and the voices of other African Nova Scotians, whose

experiences in formal education spaces have been silenced, would be heard, validated and acted upon.

### **Historical Challenges: Education for African Nova Scotian learners**

To obtain a more holistic view of the educational challenges facing African Nova Scotians, I believe it is important to look at the historical struggle to obtain equitable formal education in which African Canadians have been engaged. The unwavering advocacy, and staunch commitment of African Canadian parents, community leaders, educators and other community members to fight for equitable education opportunities for their children over the past years speaks to the fact that obtaining formal education has historically been a priority within African Canadian communities, a rich legacy which extends to the present day (Moreau, 1990; Hamilton, 2011). Therefore, the *academic under-achievement* of learners of African descent has long been a topic of passionate discussion amongst African Canadians across the country. Codjoe (2006) explains that this discussion about academic achievement is "'one of the most troublesome and contentious issues in [North] American education'" (p. 34). Essentialist ideologies have been used to rationalize that natural differences in inherited intelligence or some lack in the value of scholarship have caused this low-achievement. However, numerous researchers concur that systemic racism in Canadian society - linked specifically to the legacy of slavery - is the key significant barrier that severely limits the academic achievement of African Canadian students (Dei, 1996; Codjoe, 2001; Codjoe, 2006, p. 35).

Various manifestations of systemic racism present in Canadian public-school systems have been noted over the years. Speaking to one such manifestation evident in the curriculum of

Ontario's schools, Njoki Wane (2007) shares her disdain concerning the blatant exclusion of the histories and contributions of persons of African descent from public school programming:

The silence around our histories is instructive, reinforcing the message that our histories are neither relevant nor valid. The implication is that if the wisdom and accomplishments of our past are not worthy of validation, then neither are our contributions in the present...Taken as a whole, the silence is deafening. The curriculum confers illegitimacy upon those it excludes. For students schooled in privilege the message is clear: you, your history, your accomplishments and your struggles matter. For racialized students, the opposite message is equally apparent: *you are not the point* [italics added]. (pp. 134-137)

Film maker and historian Sylvia Hamilton (2011) speaks to this same denial of the contributions and existence of African Canadians in formal school curriculum when she writes about segregated schools in Black communities in Canada in the 1960s, which occurred many decades earlier than Wane's (2007) reference. Hamilton (2011) states:

At the same time as students were being segregated, general curriculum material either ignored African-descended people or presented them in a stereotypical fashion...Advocates within African Canadian communities were not only concerned with the quality of education offered their students, but also with the representation of Black people in school texts that were available to all students in the public education system. Generations of African people fought against racist content in the school curriculum, and the invisibility of African people in discussions about Canadian nation building. (p. 96)

When one compares Hamilton's (2011) comments to Wane's (2007), it is clear that even after the physical integration of schools following the abolition of segregation, very little changed in the quality of education African Canadian students received. In addition to an inadequate and irrelevant curriculum, other major contributors to the crisis for African descendant learners include teacher insensitivity and low expectation; the under-representation of Black teachers and principals; labelling, stereotyping, name-calling and racial slurs; and lack of student supports and financial resources (BLAC, 1994; Codjoe, 2006). Therefore, although African Canadian parents continue to emphasize the importance of their children attaining an education because they believe that this is key to socio-economic advancement, James et al. (2010) reveal that "the education system remains a source of enormous stress for these parents and their children" (p. 90). Contrary to their hopes and expectations that education will provide a better life for their children, a large number of parents see the education system as making a minimal contribution to the nurturing and support of African Canadian students and their learning (James et al., 2010). Parents expressed anger and frustration because the system not only failed to meet their children's needs, but furthermore heightened their health risks and lowered their life opportunities (James et al., 2010, p. 91).

An inward look at the historically low educational achievements of African Nova Scotians suggests that the case for these learners is even worse than that of Black learners in some other parts of the country. Acknowledging the role played by systemic and institutional racism in this educational crisis, The Black Learners Advisory Committee (BLAC, 1994) writes:

The history of Black education in Nova Scotia is largely one of exclusion and neglect legalized through discriminatory legislation and enforced by the racial attitudes of White society. For more than two hundred years, the Black population of this province



has been systematically denied an education on an equal footing with the White population leading one Canadian historian to write of Nova Scotia that '*In education we find the most significant manifestation of colour prejudice in Canadian history.*' (p. 9)

The findings are similar in a more recent James et al. (2010) study on race and well-being involving African Canadians across Canada. These writers found that in their examination of racism and violence, when they considered "racial and cultural issues in the classroom, racial tensions in the schools, and violence in the schools", their Halifax participants were "having more frequent and more stressful experiences than were their counterparts in Toronto and Calgary" (p. 91). In comparison to 30% in Toronto and 40% in Calgary, over 50% of the Halifax questionnaire respondents reported having experienced cultural and racial issues in the classroom (James et al., 2010, p. 92).

When addressing the underachievement of ANSs in formal education, I believe it is important to reiterate the arduous pains that our communities have endured in the fight for equal opportunities in public and post-secondary education. In fact, advocacy efforts by ANS communities to address the achievement gap of their learners have been well documented, by the BLAC (1994) and others:

For almost two centuries, Black Communities have demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the content, context and teaching styles of the curriculum of the public school system by actions ranging from the numerous petitions to logging class action complaints with the Human Rights Commission. Parents and students have questioned the absence of a curriculum that is culturally relevant or reflective of their experiences. (p. 40)

One hundred years prior to the publication of the *BLAC Report on Education: Redressing Inequity-Empowering Black Learners*, Black parents in Halifax dared to openly protest their dissatisfaction with the government's decision to introduce segregated and unequal education, by sending two petitions to the Provincial House of Assembly (Moreau, 1990). White legislators were surprised to have received this response from the Black community as they did not expect advocacy from a group they thought accepted their place as inferior to the White population in society (Moreau, 1990). Also, there were some in the Black community who felt powerless to fight against the racist policies of this system and did accept them for this reason (Moreau, 1990). Despite the unexpected petition of George Davis and others from the Black community, the legislators still maintained their decision to segregate schools based on the reasoning that “the laws were made for the greatest good of the greatest number, those being White” (Nova Scotia Legislature, 1884 as cited in Moreau, p.33, 1990). Such a rationale points to a conscious effort on the part of government at the time to suppress persons of African descent through the denial of equal formal education. Acknowledging this method of oppression, Hamilton (2011) points out:

Whether we wish to remember or not, the educational segregation of children of African descent in Canada...is a direct by-product of the system of chattel slavery, an institution whose goal was to strip African people of their dignity and humanity in order to use them as vehicles of cheap labour for a profit-making system. (p. 98)

In light of the pervasiveness of this ideology in their society, it is remarkable that African Nova Scotians continued to fight, despite the odds stacked against them, for better educational opportunities. Rather than deny their children the opportunity of some kind of formal education, even when denied access to public school education, African Nova Scotian parents lobbied

government for funds to establish their own schools and for teaching staff (Hamilton, 2011, p.100). Public school segregation remained legal in Nova Scotia until 1954. However, it is interesting to note that whereas the last segregated school in Ontario closed in 1965, even with this law in place in Nova Scotia, the last segregated school remained open there until 1983 (Décoste, 2013; Black History Canada, 2018). BLAC (1994) notes that the situation in Nova Scotia was a disgrace as it became infamously known as the province "most consistently hostile" to African Canadian school children (BLAC, 1994, p. 9).

The tradition of government turning a deaf ear to the valid complaints of African Nova Scotians concerning educational inequities has continued throughout the ages, and has led the African Nova Scotian community to have a lack of faith in civil leaders, and in some regards, even despair that change will ever take place. However, in some cases, the annoyance with government officials' inattention to the severity of this issue has urged the communities to take matters of change into their own hands. Hence, the impetus for the *BLAC Report on Education* (BLAC, 1994). In this report, BLAC (1994) attributes the absence of change in education of African Nova Scotian learners in part to the government's unwillingness to acknowledge that racism and institutional discrimination exist in public schools and to contest them.

Although the results of BLAC's (1994) research and reporting on the inequities was comprehensive and numerous strategic recommendations were made demanding the attention of government and seeking response and action, more than twenty-five years since the release of this report some question the severity with which these matters were received. However minimal, it cannot be denied that positive steps were made towards the amelioration of the state of affairs of ANS learners. Then Minister of Education, the Honorable John MacEarchern, in his June 1995 response to the presentation of this report and its thirty recommendations praised the

BLAC (1994) for presenting such a thorough report on the subject of racial discrimination in Nova Scotia's education system, which he said raised significant issues warranting the attention of his government and the Department of Education (1995). MacEachern's (1995) acknowledgement of the significant role that systemic and institutional racism has played in the educational disadvantages revealed in the *BLAC Report on Education* is monumental. The minister agreed with BLAC (1994) that African Nova Scotians were "severely disadvantaged" and that this was due in large part to systemic and institutionalised racism and the failure of the education system to attend to the needs of the Black community. Promising "real change with lasting benefit to Black Nova Scotians", MacEachern (1995) led his department and government in a commitment to fulfilling the thirty recommendations of this report (p.1).

Fifteen years later, *Reality Check*, a review of twelve recommendations from the *BLAC Report on Education*, was conducted to ascertain the effectiveness of program areas in improving the educational achievement and opportunities of African Nova Scotian learners. With community accountability and involvement as key to this review, Dr. Enid Lee and Clem Marshall (2009) state, "It's time for community organizations, parents and educators to do a reality check into what is working and what is not for African Nova Scotian students" (p. 8).

The African Nova Scotian Student Scholarship program, which has contributed to the increase in these students' enrollment in post-secondary education institutions; the Student Support Worker program; the addition of English 12: African Heritage course; and the Race Relations, Cross Cultural Understanding and Human Rights (RCH) Coordinators all resulted from the BLAC Report (Lee & Marshall, 2009, p. 8-10). These programs and support services have all been put in place for ANS students by the African Canadian Services Division of the Nova Scotia Department of Education and school boards across Nova Scotia.

Despite these efforts, in the Minister of Education's response to *Reality Check*, entitled *Expanding from Equity Supports to Leadership and Results*, she admits that many African Nova Scotian students are still not as academically successful as they should be (2010, p.3). In fact, the severity of this underachievement as revealed by Victor Thiessen in his 2009 report entitled "Identity, equity and performance: Mathematics and reading performance in Nova Scotia public schools" suggests that the Minister's response is an understatement. In this report, which compares the academic achievement of Nova Scotian students of various cultural identities, Thiessen (2009) reports that African Nova Scotians typically "fared worst" than First Nations, Acadians and European descendant students in provincial assessments in math and reading (p. 1). "Sizable gaps characterize the performances of learners of different cultural heritage", Thiessen (2009) explains, with learners of European heritage having the highest average score on all assessments and being most likely to score in the top 25 percent of achievers and least likely to score in the bottom 25 percent (p. 1). Whereas in recent years the performance gap appears to be declining for First Nations and Acadian learners, Thiessen (2009) found that this was not the case with African Nova Scotian learners (p.1). Although Thiessen's (2009) two indicators - which give evidence of the difficulty that African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq learners experience in school - are troubling, they provide scientific evidence for sentiments and concerns that African Nova Scotian parents, educators and other community members have expressed for a number of years. Based on his study which reviewed learners in grades 3 to 9, Thiessen (2009) established that African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq learners 1) "are especially likely to be below grade for their age" and that 2) "a higher proportion of them require test adaptations" (2009, p. 1). Lee and Marshall (2009) also point to the large number of African Nova Scotian students on

Individual Program Plans as an institutional barrier and reality that limits access and the academic achievement of these learners.

When such results are considered, and the huge achievement gap which persists between European descendant learners and those of African descent, Mi'kmaq, and Acadian heritage is placed into perspective, the question must be raised as to why such a gap continues to exist. Of particular interest to me is why students of European descent consistently perform much higher than learners of the three other cultural backgrounds. Although Thiessen (2009) informs that the purpose of his study was not to determine a cause for the academic performance of students of various cultural heritage, based on research conducted by others, he offers some possibilities for the results of his report. Differences in socio-economic resources of parents as well as individual learner characteristics, the researcher says, would account for most of the variance in performance. However, Thiessen (2009) quickly points out that “this does not deny the pernicious effects of systemic racism on all aspects of children's lives”, as the disparity between resources of African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq families in comparison to those of European descent is seen by many as irrefutable evidence of the existence of systemic racism (p. 29). Rather, Thiessen (2009) offers two implications from his report: “First, achievement gaps likely exist prior to learners entering school” (p. 29). And, “Second, schools have not adequately addressed the *persistence* of performance gaps, since over the course of public schooling the racial gaps remain as wide as ever” (p. 29). Despite the dismal results, Thiessen (2009) is hopeful that the findings of his report may assist in finding ways for schools to close the achievement gaps and cultivate success amongst culturally diverse learners (p. 29).

Lee and Marshall (2009) propose an explanation for the persisting academic underachievement of African Nova Scotian learners. “In order to uproot the causes of

educational failure”, they argue, “there must be an institutional and community commitment to naming racism and wrestling it to the ground in all those educational settings in which it is found” (Lee & Marshall, 2009, p.10). Although, in response to BLAC (1994) the government acknowledged institutional racism as a main factor serving as a barrier to the opportunities and achievement of ANS learners, the *Reality Check* consultants warn during the time of their report that the concept of institutional racism seemed to have “slipped out of focus” (Lee & Marshall, 2009, p. 10). The numerous testimonies about ANS students' and parents' encounters with racism in the school system demonstrated for Lee and Marshall (2009) that anti-racist policy needs to be a high priority in education.

In two of the four areas where the consultants have identified that improvements can be made, anti-racism is the focal topic. These two specific areas include: 1) continuing to provide learning opportunities on the subject of anti-racism and 2) remaining committed in enforcing anti-racism policies (Lee & Marshall, 2009). The Minister of Education at that time, Ramona Jennex (2010), agrees with this stance as she says, “we cannot lose sight of the fact that African Nova Scotian learners face greater obstacles, which have their roots in racism” (p. 4). She also concurs that sufficient evidence is available to prove racism as a root cause because systemic racism in the education system in Nova Scotia has been well documented (Jennex, 2010). Accepting the education system's responsibility to actively work towards ameliorating this problem and building inclusive school communities, Minister Jennex (2010) admits that not everyone in the Department of Education, school boards, and schools has taken on the challenge to address the problems faced by African Nova Scotian learners, and, for this reason, progress has been slow.

As Lee and Marshall (2009) informed, ANS community members resent the fact that the responsibility of providing a good education to African Nova Scotian learners was seen as resting *exclusively* on the shoulders of educators from their community. In response to this issue, Jennex (2010) pledges that whereas this has been the case in the past, with only specific groups, organizations, and individuals being tasked with attaining improved results for African Nova Scotian students, school boards and the Department would need a renewed commitment to playing a leading role in this work. Therefore, when one questions why, with the tireless work of the Black community and organizations composed of African Nova Scotians, educational achievement remains so discouragingly substandard for African descendant learners, the attention must be directed towards the education system and how it has failed these learners.

### **Where do we go from here?**

In light of the slow movement of school systems to act on the results of the aforementioned studies, many are left to question, "Where do we go from here?" Sadly, after multiple recommendations to the Department of Education, responses from several Ministers of Education and gargantuan efforts of agencies including the Council of African Canadian Education, The African Canadian Services Division of the Department of Education and The Black Educators Association, the plight of African Nova Scotian learners remains largely unchanged. Whilst the bulk of the responsibility to fix this problem has been left to the victims, the perpetrators - schools and post-secondary institutions - remain slow or seemingly unwilling to make necessary changes to improve the academic well-being of these students. As Minister Jennex (2010) suggests in her response to *Reality Check*, the onus is on these institutions and those with the political power to make such essential change a reality, to become the inclusive



educational environments that African Nova Scotian students need them to be so they can succeed and thrive.

As those concerned about the formal education of African Nova Scotians devise next steps to address these issues, there is an apparent disconnect preventing positive change from taking place. One reason for this could be that while the emphasis of the research that does exist focuses on the *academic impact* of non-inclusive education for ANS, very little examines the significant *spiritual impact* that Eurocentric education has on these learners. There appears to be a gap in recognizing that in order for the academic underachievement of ANS learners to be acknowledged, taken seriously, and acted upon in an effective and efficient manner, the root of the problem - the oppression that these learners face in formal educational institutions - must be acknowledged and addressed. Perhaps we should turn our attention to the spiritual amputation/dislocation suffered by ANS learners in their educational institutions, as an exploration into this experience may lead to part of the solution for this academic problem.

In a study entitled "Spirituality among African Nova Scotians: A key to survival in Canadian society", Este and Bernard (2006) found that African Nova Scotians experience spiritual alienation on a daily basis and that this spiritual alienation can be seen as a direct result of oppression caused by the racism, sexism and classism in society's structures (Este, Bernard, 2006, n.p.). In fact, the writers inform that African Nova Scotians are known to be one of the most oppressed and exploited groups in Canada, noted by the fact that for more than two hundred years, their community has "consistently experienced severe forms of racism, discrimination and exclusion at the hands of the dominant group" (Este and Bernard, 2006, n.p.). Defining spiritual alienation as "the disconnection of non-material and morally affirming values from concepts of human self-worth and from the character of social relationships", Este and

Bernard (2006; n.p.) state that African Nova Scotians likely experience such oppression as a consequence of a daily encounter with racism and discrimination in the society in which they live. Because of this reality, Akbar (2003) insists that there is a need to improve spiritual development in all of society's institutions, especially those responsible for formal education. Therefore, in addition to Este and Bernard's (2006) focus on the need for change in the field of social work, it is time for the education system, too, to develop alternative configurations that will empower people of African descent by confronting the supremacy of current systems and oppression and domination in structures. It is time for the educational system to use a different approach that represents African Nova Scotian learners, to address its ineffective traditional way of dealing with educational challenges affecting African Nova Scotians.

The educational crisis of ANS learners demands that formal education institutions be held accountable for the spiritual injury they have inflicted and continue to inflict upon these students. Sanctioning such a need in post-secondary institutions, Ruck-Simmonds (2006) interrogates the fact that these places of learning have been highly praised for their contributions to producing and distributing "progressive knowledge" when, in fact, they have been colonizing spaces "imposing spiritual injury upon minoritized bodies" (p. 271). Whereas these institutions present opportunities for individuals to improve themselves intellectually, this writer argues, "the act of learning or teaching within precarious environments often impairs and wounds [their] spirits" (Ruck-Simmonds, 2006, p. 274). The Eurocentric ideology these institutions perpetuate and practice does their learners more harm than good (Ruck-Simmonds, 2006, p. 271). The result is minoritized learners who suffer a physical and psychological dispossession and oppression within these spaces of learning because there they are often times stripped of the essence of their beings - their spirits - and not presented with opportunities to belong (Ruck-Simmonds, 2006).

Although Ruck-Simmonds (2006) focuses her comments on tertiary levels of learning, in seeking to remedy the problem of spiritual violence against African Nova Scotian learners in their public-school learning, it makes sense that attention be paid to how public schools can educate students differently with a priority placed on nurturing their spirits. It is important that all public schools become spaces where African Nova Scotians and all learners belong, feel welcome, and have an opportunity to attain their highest academic potential. The inclusion of African Nova Scotian spirituality in formal education may be the solution to addressing academic and social challenges these learners have traditionally faced.

### **Spirituality and Holistic Learning: Bridging the Gap for African Nova Scotian Learners**

We need a vision of a place where people of African origin can reconnect with the healing power that was in traditional societies. We need a place where we can begin to reconnect with who we are, from a spiritual place - not a religious place - but from a spiritual place, a cultural place we have drifted so far from. (James, Este, Bernard, Benjamin, Lloyd & Turner, 2010, pp. 144-145)

Whereas a “chilling silence” exists across cultures concerning the role that spirituality plays in formal education (Speck, 2005, p.6), this silence is exasperated for African Nova Scotians as the inclusion of African-centered spirituality in their education is hardly a current topic of discussion. The whole person of the African Nova Scotian (ANS) learner - spirit, soul, mind and body - has been ignored in public school, post-secondary institutions and their classroom spaces, where a “one size fits all” pedagogy and mentality prevail. The topics of spirituality and holistic learning implore educators to awaken to the fact that all learners are whole persons with spirits

that need to be nurtured, and that each learner brings their spiritualities, acknowledged or unacknowledged, to the site of learning (Dei, 2012). However, the school experiences of ANS students in general have not been influenced by such philosophies. Rather, the realities of race and culture and their close connection to spirituality often go unacknowledged in formal education settings. With the majority of researchers on spirituality being of European descent (Tisdell, et al., 2003, p. 376), neither the spiritual experiences of people of colour, including people of African descent, nor the function of this spirituality in education has been adequately explored to provide a balanced and inclusive view of the concept and its functions. Therefore, little attention has been paid to the reality that learners of African descent likely prescribe to a different worldview, a different ontology, from the dominant Eurocentric population and how this reality impacts the way they learn.

The reality that African Nova Scotian learners are bi-cultural eludes many practitioners in formal educational systems in this province. Although these learners live in a society dominated by Western, Eurocentric culture; the culture of African Nova Scotian communities where a number of them live and are nurtured is African-centered. The metanarrative of formal education into which these learners are immersed and assimilated does not include the expression of their African-centered spirituality, ignores the existence of counter stories and other ways of knowing and being that validate African-centered spirituality, and often times results in these learners experiencing internalized oppression. Such internalized oppression blocks the formation and development of a positive self-image and positive cultural identity, and hinders personal transformation (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). In light of the detrimental impact of internalized oppression acquired through formal educational processes and the growing body of literature which suggests that African-centered spirituality has a resistance power against such oppression, I believe it is imperative that

we consider the role that spirituality could play in the formal education of African Nova Scotian learners.

According to Tisdell (2008), “Engaging [spirituality] may be important for all learners in some contexts, but it might be particularly important for learners whose cultures have been marginalized; doing so often stimulates creativity for making change and thus gives hope” (p. 34). Wilson (2009) affirms the importance of spirituality as a key component to the healing of Aboriginal people (p.29). Acknowledging the conflicting ontology and epistemology of Aboriginal people as compared to Western society, Wilson (2009) asks, “How is it that spirituality is so important to Indigenous people when western society has so distanced itself from anything spiritual?” (p.29). The same question could be posed about African Nova Scotian people, or people of African descent in general. Este and Bernard (2006) confirm that spirituality plays a major role in the lives of African Nova Scotians, particularly in providing a means of survival against the pressures of Canadian society. These researchers acknowledge that for African Nova Scotians spirituality is a source of strength, a coping strategy against racism and discrimination and is an important aspect of health (Este & Bernard, 2006). Additionally, Wane (2006) concurs that as a “vital life force” which infuses all areas of the lives of African people, spirituality has historically been a “personal and communal source of liberation, solace, hope, meaning and forgiveness” (p. 88). Therefore, the inclusion of spirituality in the formal education of African Nova Scotians may offer significant purposeful possibilities for this population of learners.

The potential of centering ANSs in their learning in formal educational contexts through culturally relevant and transformative education could be revolutionary. Rather than developing oppressed ANS learners who will have little understanding of their identity as African people, a spiritually infused education has the potential to engage ANSs as agents of change who are

confident in their identity rather than marginalized and disengaged (Dei, 2002). Dei (2012) argues that since all learners engage their formal education experiences through their identities, with spiritual identity being one of our many identities, the prospects of a spirit-centered education for oppressed learners cannot be under-emphasized (p. 832). Dei (2012) continues:

It is through the powerfulness of the spirit that we reclaim ourselves and soul. Reclaiming our spirituality can help us to resist colonial and intellectual domination...We must see that our spiritualities are embedded in everyday action and our lived realities as learners. (p. 833)

## Chapter Two

### What is Spirituality?

It is important that I define what I mean by spirituality. Swinton and Pattison (2010) warn that we should not become tangled in all of the various definitions of spirituality, so it is vital to have a working definition of this term as a foundational starting point on which to investigate its transformative function. I must point out, however, that I believe a lack of consensus and the variety of definitions of spirituality demonstrate the problematic nature of attempting to universalize such a complex concept. Multiple meanings and voices are welcomed and celebrated in Africentric realms and it is from this worldview and through a collective of definitions by those in the field that I derive my definition.

Spirituality is relational (Wane & Neegan, 2007) with the maintenance of relationships being of utmost importance for providing individuals with a sense of purpose in life (Este and Bernard, 2006). It is the interdependent linkages between all elements in our universe, including the individual's connection to their world and others in it (community), nature and their environment, the cosmos, ancestors, and - for those who so believe - to a higher supreme being (Dei, 2002; Schiele, 1994). Africentric spirituality "offers a more holistic conception of human beings" (Schiele, 1994, p. 154); where the individual and the collective, the person and his/her community, are indistinguishable (Schiele, 1994; Merriweather-Hunn, 2004). Similarly, it is impossible to separate the spiritual and the physical, because they are one. According to Wane (2008), spirituality presents us with a space where we are able to reach past our social position to locate a place where we can establish relationships, and to continue to create these connections at another level (p.11). Through spirituality, people of African descent have a unique doorway to

understand the world and their place in it;"It centers us in us...", Wane (2008,p.11) states. "It is also...a collective consciousness" (Wane, 2008, p. 11) that is not founded on creeds or faith traditions but on the "ancient and abiding African quest for connectedness with our own souls, with one another, with the worlds of nature, and with the mystery of being alive" (Wane, 2006, p.88).

Spirituality simultaneously encompasses the uniqueness of individuals and their cultures as well as interconnectedness through shared commonalities between individuals (Merriweather-Hunn, 2004, p. 69). Shahjahan's (2009) definition of spirituality aligns with those previously noted and highlights the important role that culture plays in spirituality:

Spirituality... refers to a way of being in the world where one is connected to one's cultural knowledge and/or other beings (e.g. one's community, transcendental beings, and other parts of creation) and allows one to move forward to inward and outward action (p.122)

Shahjahan (2009) suggests that being connected to one's cultural knowledge is an important aspect of spirituality and this connection could be the impetus to further action. Tisdell (2003) too asserts that spirituality and culture are inseparable and that through this connection, transformation is possible. Dei (2012) addresses the significance of including spirituality in learning spaces by highlighting the significance of critically viewing spirituality as "action-oriented and transformative" and as a stimulus to educators' engagement in discussions about the "dynamics of power, knowledge, and social action" in education and beyond (p.833). However, Dei (2012) also acknowledges that spirituality is not merely a *way* of knowing, but *it is* embodied



knowledge which, as a form of indigenous knowledge, lives in bodies and in the cultural memories of a people (p.835).

The idea of embodied knowledge is both cultural and spiritual in nature. Demonstrating its spiritual attributes and in support of Minh-ha's (1999) view, Rodriguez (2011) says the body is where society and the individual meet (p.26). Dei (2005) makes this connection when he defines embodied knowledge as "bringing personal feelings, emotional and spiritual connectedness, and a deep passion and commitment to seek knowledge and using this knowledge to transform existing conditions as a worthy cause that emanates from within the self" (p. 8). Embodied knowledge, Dei (2009) believes, has the capacity to serve as the vehicle through which indigenous knowledge can enter traditional formal education classrooms and provide opportunity for dialogue around various forms of knowledge (p. 25). Rodriguez (2011) describes African and colonized peoples as being of different societies, civilizations and "literally of 'different bodies'" (p. 28). Expounding on this perspective, the writer says:

For many of us, everything resides in the body, which is to say that we believe that passion and knowledge come from the body. For all of us, Black, postcolonial and otherwise, the body represents ancestry and speaks to various processes of history...In fact history is written on our bodies and into our bodies. Thus when we have to submit to ways of articulating ourselves that demand we leave our bodies out of the equation, we have profound problems. (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 28)

Rodriguez (2011) supports the idea that nullifying the spirituality of Black learners results in serious negative issues for these learners. In fact, he asserts that when the history and heritage of African peoples are not included in formal curriculum, the message communicated is that the

bodies of these persons are not welcomed in these spaces. Ruck-Simmonds (2006) concurs with Rodriguez's assertion. Speaking to the significant quandary that the body poses for colonized peoples, particularly people of African descent in academe, Rodriguez (2011) encourages his readers to fight against the dominant intellectual tradition in academe that forces people of African descent to negate their bodies in formal education spaces. Embodiment, he argues, is imperative for Black and colonized peoples who oft times have been "imprisoned in [their] own skin" (p.27). Most importantly, Rodriguez (2011) insists that reclaiming the body opens the path to an alternative way of classifying knowledge, which results in societies which value and practice inclusion.

### **Spirituality, Culturally Relevant Education and Transformation**

We construct cultural knowledge through unconscious and symbolic processes, which have also been referred to as imaginal or presentational knowing (Heron, 1996; Tisdell, 2003, p.34, 55). Culture is the representation of spiritual experience (Tisdell, 2003, p.55). In a sense then the unconscious and symbolic components of a people's culture are experienced in their spirituality (Tisdell, 2003, p. 36). Making the connection between spirituality and culture, the writer informs, "...these aspects of how we construct knowledge, who we are, and how we make meaning are also cultural and thus connect us back to our cultural selves" (Tisdell, 2003, p. 34).

Tisdell (2003) proposes a spiritually grounded approach to culturally relevant pedagogy and argues that this approach has the capacity to transform the lives of learners in adult education and, I would suggest, (p.41) in public school systems and with students of all ages (Dei, 2012). Dei (2012) says spirituality presents a gateway to understanding all learners' lived experiences. Culturally relevant education places emphasis on the importance of educators being aware of various cultural groups and incorporating this awareness into their pedagogy in such a way that

learners are not excluded or marginalized (Tisdell, 2003, p. 40). Through culturally relevant education, the group-based identity for each cultural group of persons is "reconstructed" in formal learning spaces "from one that is negative to one that is positive" (Guy, 1999, p.13). Further, when spirituality is acknowledged within culturally relevant education its communal nature is evident as this approach encourages people to work together for social justice and equity globally (Tisdell, 2003, p. 41).

When the connection is made between spirituality and culture, with spirituality being viewed as knowledge, and as one of multiple ways of knowing, we can create classrooms that are spiritual spaces, decolonizing spaces, or what Dei (2012) calls "the trialectic space" (2012, p.833). Dei (2012) refers to the trialectic space as a space of spiritual centeredness where spirit, body and place are connected. In this spiritually centered space, the writer suggests, all parties benefit from the collective spiritualities (knowledges) which are present as part of each individual participating in the learning spaces. This exchange of various knowledges has more significance beyond a celebration of collective sharing of spiritualities. Rather, the *collective use* of the knowledges is shared to "address key issues of power, social oppression, injustice, and systemic inequity" (Dei, 2012, p. 834). Some key ways in which these issues are addressed in a trialectic /decolonizing space is through the recognition of multiple ways of knowing, the value of all voices and experiences, and its functioning as a collective consciousness working towards one common goal (Dei, 2013, p. 836). In so doing, trialectic/decolonizing spaces have no hierarchies of power and unbalanced power relations (Dei, 2012, p. 836). Noting the urgency of formal educational spaces to engage all members in the struggle to become decolonizing spaces of learning and social change for all learners, Dei (2012) explains, "Each learner cannot give or share knowledge in a space of oppression, hierarchies, privileging, and deprivileging of bodies. To create such a space of

community belonging with power hierarchies, there is responsibility on all. We are all implicated here" (p. 836).

### **Spirituality and Internalized Oppression**

Internalized oppression encompasses negative attitudes involving the belief that those of the dominant culture are more superior than others (Tisdell et al., 2003, p. 373). In the case of African Nova Scotians, these are typically persons of European descent. When a person encounters internalized oppression the only way of recovery is for them to go through a process of unlearning what they have internalized through a "reclaiming of their cultural identities" (Abalos, 1998, p. 373). Murrell (2002) agrees that pedagogy created for African American children refutes racist ideology by immunizing them against the internalization of White supremacy ideology, which enables them to negotiate their identities and their resistance to inequity manifested through "incompleteness" in American education (p. 76).

The Nova Scotian public and post-secondary school systems suffer from the same "incompleteness" in African-centered pedagogy. Therefore, I am interested in knowing whether or not including spirituality in educational systems on a regular basis would help to combat the psychological annihilation that threatens ANS learners. Resolute about the promise that including African indigenous spirituality in education holds for learners of African descent, Dei (2012) implores:

It is through the powerfulness of the spirit that we reclaim ourselves and souls. Reclaiming our spirituality can help us to resist colonial and intellectual domination. If we are to center spirituality in schooling and education, we must find ways to

pedagogically and methodologically teach and learn about our spiritualities. We must see that our spiritualities are embedded in everyday action and our lived realities as learners. (pp. 832-33)

For learners of African descent, then, the inclusion of spirituality in education to allow for their optimal educational experience, free of all forms of domination may be crucial. According to Vella (2000), “Learning is either a spirited partnership or domination” (p.14). Since we have not yet arrived at a place in public school and post-secondary education where African peoples have consistently experienced a spirited partnership in education, I believe it could be surmised that for many of these learners, formal education is a form of domination.

### **Theoretical Framework**

My research is informed by Africentricity, anti-racism, postcolonial and anti-colonial theories, and African/Black feminism/womanism, all of which validate the spirituality of African people as legitimate knowledge (Merriweather Hunn, 2004; Dei, 2005; Chilisa, 2012; Dei & Kempf, 2006). These theories all prioritize the centering of marginalized peoples, their knowledge and their lived experiences as the focal point of research (Asante, 1998; Dei, 2012; Dei & Johal, 2005). However, Africentricity specifies that *persons of African descent* must be positioned at the center of analysis as subjects rather than objects, so that their culture, history and ancestry become the focal point of research (Merriweather-Hunn, 2004). Africentricity challenges the right of the dominant culture to legitimize knowledge and those who construct it (Merriweather-Hunn, 2004). Similarly, by rejecting the dominant knowledge systems and perspectives that rule the world, postcolonial theory encourages marginalized peoples to question what counts as legitimate knowledge, who has the authority to define and produce this knowledge and why

(Chilisa, 2012). Postcolonial theory prioritizes the interests of colonized peoples, resisting the suppression of their ways of knowing and providing a space for them to speak for and represent themselves (Gandhi, 1998; Young, 2003). Anti-colonialism, which also emphasises the resistance of colonial imposition and control over all systems of knowledge, takes the agenda further by acknowledging the need for local knowledge, originating from collective experiences and actions, as necessary for empowerment (Nabavi, 2006, p. 187). Accordingly, anti-colonialism values collective or spiritual resistance by local movements as the producer of social change (Nabavi, 2006, p.175-6). Anti-racism theory, “places the minoritized at the center of analysis by focusing on their lived experiences and the ‘simultaneity of [their] oppressions’” (Dei, 2005, p.2). Primarily aimed at ending institutional and systemic forms of racism, anti-racist theory views local peoples as creators of knowledge, living and producing theory, rather than simply research subjects (Dei, 2005). African/Black feminisms and womanism demand a space for Black female perspectives and knowledge by placing the African woman’s experience at the centre of analysis (Hill Collins, 1990, p 221). These perspectives provide a platform to view the world from a “both/and conceptual lens of the simultaneity of race, class and gender oppression” and insist on a “humanist vision of community” which is congruent with Africentric thought (Hill Collins, 1990, p.221). African/Black feminism and womanism empower Black women’s participation in eradicating these intersecting oppressions while challenging and rejecting dominant ideology that universalize, homogenize, and simplify the lives and conditions of women, men, children and gender non-conforming people of African descent. All five theories advocate for a critical analysis of the normalization of certain knowledges, while validating spirituality as a form of indigenous knowledge. Through them, I explore spirituality as a decolonizing, anti-oppressive agent and refute the argument that spirituality has no place in formal education.

## Africentricity

Africentricity rests on the key premise that Africa and all persons of African descent must be positioned at the center of analysis so that the culture, history and ancestry of this continent and its people (on the continent and in the Diaspora) become the focal point of discussion (Merriweather Hunn, 2004, p. 68). Africentric philosophy combats racism by positing that "location in one's own cultural center is important" (Merriweather Hunn, 2004, p. 68), emphasizing an analysis based on African people as subjects of our own narratives (Asante, 2012, p.9). Asante (1998) expounds:

We cannot truly be ourselves or know our potential since we exist in a borrowed space... Our relationship to the culture that we have borrowed defines what and who we are at any given moment. By regaining our own platforms, standing in our own cultural spaces and believing that our way of viewing the universe is just as valid as any, we will achieve the transformation that we need to. (p. 8)

As Asante (1998) explains, Africentricity empowers African people to confidently re-align ourselves with our culture, defining ourselves instead of being defined by others, and validating our own knowledge, value system, and worldview. Este and Bernard (2006) argue that, particularly in social sciences, Africentricity counters the perception that all things of European descent create the measuring stick for a paradigmatic norm. It resists and refutes white racial supremacist ideas of African inferiority, challenging the way that such beliefs have been integrated into the lives of people of African descent, many times resulting in self-hatred and oppression (Asante, 2003, pp.2-3). Rather, through Africentricity's repositioning of African peoples to the center, psychological and material strongholds which denigrate this group are torn

down and a self-authoring reconstruction of their identity, with people of African descent as the builders, is able to take place. As Este and Bernard (2006) explain:

Afrocentric idea rests on the assertion of the primacy of the African experience for African people. Its aim is to give us our African, victorious consciousness back. In the process, it also means viewing the European voice as just one of many, and not necessarily the wisest one. (n.p.)

Therefore, Africentricity, as a theoretical perspective, functions as a liberating phenomenon as it esteems persons of African descent as being just as worthy as any others (Merriweather-Hunn, 2004, p. 69).

Africentric discourse encompasses a paradigmatic shift, which embraces educating others about different ways of knowing, derived from the historical and cultural experiences of African peoples (Dei, 1996, p. 92). Further, this theory problematizes the authority of dominant cultures to legitimize knowledge and knowledge producers (Merriweather-Hunn, 2004, p. 68). This philosophy guards African persons against oppression and racism as well by challenging the right of the dominant culture to legitimize knowledge and those who construct it. Therefore, contrary to notions that Africentricity promotes separation in a hegemonic manner, it is actually a "celebration of humanity", speaking to the importance of nurturing a multi-centric reality in which no culture is relegated to the margins of society (Asante, 2012, p.9). Africentricity conveys the perspective that "all cultures have something to bring to the table of humanity" (Asante, 2012, p. 9).

Africentricity articulates an ontology, axiology and epistemology which are all spiritual and different from that of the dominant cultural group, but which reflect the everyday lived



experiences of many persons of African descent. The nature of existence or reality, according to Africentricity, is spiritual, and based on the holistic concept that all living things, nature, a higher power (God), the ancestors and the environment are connected. Therefore, Africentric reality is based upon the spiritual nature of relationships. In fact, spirituality is the primary principle or "cornerstone" - the reality- upon which all other Africentric principles rest (Este & Bernard, 2006). All people are connected to each other, and the individual and the collective are bound to one another. Individual identity is synonymous to collective identity (Schiele, 1994). As a result, it is impossible for the individual to be understood as separate from the collective (Este & Bernard, 2006).

The Eurocentric ontology purports that reality is fragmented and compartmentalized. Reality in Eurocentric terms is rational, objective, and linear. Therefore, whereas Eurocentricity values the preservation of self above the group, Africentricity argues that since the individual and the group are inseparable, one's success is intricately connected to the success of the community. Drawing on the Ubuntu philosophy, from an Africentric perspective we understand that "I am because we are". Additionally, contrary to Eurocentric values which exalt individualism, independence, control, materialism, competition, social status, and power over others as a sign of success, axiologically, Africentricity values interconnectedness, interdependency, unity, balance, harmony, holism, human centeredness and spirituality (Merriweather-Hunn, 2004, pp. 67-69). Epistemologically, Africentricity emphasizes the affective - originating in the body and the emotions - as a valid way of obtaining knowledge. In fact, it has been established among Africentric theorists that an individual's emotions are a critical kind of self-exploration and knowledge production (Este & Bernard, 2006). In contrast,

Eurocentricity sees the rational and objective as the only true form of knowledge, whereas Africentricity emphasizes the connection between the affective and the rational.

To sum up the significant attributes of Africentricity, Cheryl J. Sanders (2001) shares:

Afrocentric scholarship seeks (1) to celebrate the achievements of African people and cultures; (2) to analyze critically the hegemony of the Eurocentric worldview and ways of knowing that have served the interests of racial oppression, especially as they have skewed the self-understanding of African American educators and leaders, and (3) to construct an alternative framework for understanding and evaluating human experience.

(p. 11)

Although Sanders (2001) speaks from an African American location, her words also resonate for the African Canadian, and specifically, the African Nova Scotian reality. In fulfilling all of these roles, Africentricity actualizes African agency, action, which is founded on an African-centered lived reality. As a transforming worldview, Africentricity revolutionizes the beliefs, thoughts, attitudes, values, behaviors and perspectives of others in a liberating fashion. Therefore, including Africentricity as a theoretical perspective in my work to explore the role of spirituality as an anti-oppressive agent is crucial to the fulfillment of my research task.

## **Anti-racism**

Anti-racism and Africentricity are very similar in terms of the centering of persons of African descent, the legitimization of indigenous knowledge, and the focus on race as central to discourse. However, most significant for this theoretical perspective is that the powerful effects of race must not be minimized or trivialized, as anti-racism theory demands a critical analysis and understanding of the intersection between race and other kinds of difference including

gender, class, ability, sexuality, religion, etc. (Dei, 2006, p. 7). Dei (2005) says that the purpose of anti-racist research is to better comprehend social oppression and the way it aids in the internal and external creation and restraint of identities through practices that are inclusive and exclusive (Dei, 2005, p. 2). To do this, Dei (2005) directs that anti-racist research "places the minoritized at the center of analysis by focusing on their lived experiences and the 'simultaneity of [their] oppressions'" (p. 2).

Anti-racism research is action-oriented research aimed towards combating and ending racism, particularly institutional and systemic forms. This theoretical perspective demands that the issue of racism be brought to the center of discussion and understood as a significant aspect of social structures, and, therefore, of the sub-structures that make-up society. However, antiracist theorists argue that it is not enough to *know about* anti-racism. Anti-racism must be used to first redress inequality and fight for changes in society's institutions and structures. Additionally, since implementation of anti-racist practices and approaches is crucial to attaining the end goal of fighting and eliminating racism, individuals and institutions as a collective must be committed to taking on the responsibility of making this a reality.

In formal education, particularly, there is a call for school administrators, teachers and all involved in the teaching of students to acknowledge that racism is a structural problem at work in educational spaces and to recognize that society's dominant group must understand and take responsibility for the power and privilege that they have in relation to this. Further to this, anti-racist educators must encourage their learners to "identify, challenge and resist dominant values, structures and behaviours that perpetuate systemic racism and other forms of oppression" (Dei, 2006, p. 7). Space must also be provided in the classroom setting to allow those experiencing racial domination to be aware of the manner in which they are being oppressed and

to equip them with the tools to resist this oppression (Dei, 2006, p. 8). Dei (2006) also advises that anti-racism has a role to play in the healing process of those victimized by racism: "It is also a politics that anti-racism should be pursued as part of the healing of the physical and emotional wounds of racism, dealing with 'spirit injury' of racist oppressions of different bodies, and the need to make the self and the community whole" (p. 8).

Anti-racism research challenges the unidirectional flow of knowledge from subject to researcher and then to an epistemic community. In so doing, anti-racism research fosters the wholeness of self and community to facilitate healing required because of racism's injuries. From an anti-racist perspective, there is not only one type of knowledge such as conventional Eurocentric academic knowledge, but there are multiple knowledges, which are counter-hegemonic and belong to racialized persons on the margins of society. As with Africentricity, in anti-racism embodied knowledge - the bringing of one's feelings, emotions, spiritual connectedness, and a profound passion and devotion to seek knowledge at the site of knowledge production - is valued as a type of knowledge (Dei, 2005). Anti-racist researchers draw on alternative knowledge bases to formulate their view of the world (e.g. indigenous knowledge). More specifically, the research is guided by the holistic manner in which many people of colour build their worlds and connections with others and the natural world (Okolie, 2005). Dei (2005) acknowledges the strong connection between race identity and knowledge production insisting that our personal identities and political persuasions inform how we create knowledge and come to understand the world.

Anti-racism education is inclusive education, which demands that the knowledge present in marginalized communities be invited into the schools. Dei (1996) argues that strategies of inclusive schooling should take advantage of the "theoretical and practical" aspects of the body

of knowledge available in the "home[s] and off-school cultures of students" (p.94). This body of knowledge is part of their histories and lived experiences. Dei (1996) admonishes:

Schools have to constantly reflect on their teaching methodologies (both in terms of pedagogy and curriculum strategies) to ensure that they capture the wide body of community and off-school knowledge and expertise that students bring to the school and classroom environments. (p. 30)

Many times students are looked at as being empty vessels waiting to be filled by the knowledge that schools have to offer. However, Dei (1996) cautions that if we continue with such a perspective, if educators fail to recognize that students can be active participants in teaching and learning, the process of education will not be able to fulfill its role of positively transforming the lives of marginalized learners. Anti-racist theory insists that schools recognize marginalized peoples as knowledge producers capable of making important contributions to education.

"Schools stand to gain", Dei (1996) offers, "by seeking the *assistance of community members* with extensive cultural knowledge of the school's student population" (p. 30). More specifically, teachers should identify students, parents, community workers and care-givers as partners and allies in the dissemination and production of school and social knowledge (Dei, 1996, p. 87):

Local community knowledge is an important pedagogical tool and source of cultural information which educators can tap for the benefit of their students and the school.

Educators must find a way to involve community [members]...in their teaching practices. For example, schools would create space for members of the local community to walk in, share and teach students. (Dei, 1996, pp. 87-88)

Dei (1996) suggests that a revision of current definitions of the teacher might be required for this to take place. There would need to be a "redrawing of the boundaries of knowledge production, interrogation and dissemination" in order for space to be created for this demolition of the wall that now separates community knowers from those in the education system, and just as significantly, places formal educators as superior to everyone else in terms of their knowledge (Dei, 1996, p. 30).

### **Postcolonialism**

Postcolonialism, which is about reclaiming and endorsing new and diverse knowledge systems, offers strong challenges to validate African centred spirituality as legitimate ways of knowing. According to Rodriguez (2011), "Many scholars define postcolonialism in terms of peoples who have too long been marginalized and disenfranchised now openly challenging and rejecting the dominant knowledge systems that rule the world" (p.25). Postcolonialism encourages marginalized peoples and others to question what counts as knowledge and why, who has the authority to produce knowledge and why, and who has the authority to define knowledge.

Postcolonialism rejects the idea that there is one universal type of knowledge - namely the knowledge of persons of European descent - by refuting the limitations and the narrow scope that such concepts of knowledge offer to colonized persons. Derived from a poststructuralist worldview, postcolonial theory "deconstructs truths, beliefs, values, and norms that are presented as normal and natural and present[s] them as politically and socially constructed" (Chilisa, 2012, p. 49). The reclaiming of knowledges is crucial to the work of postcolonial theory, and to the lives of colonized people because "*subjugated knowledges* really represent subjugated peoples, subjugated realities, subjugated histories, subjugated experiences, subjugated cultures, and, ultimately, subjugated possibilities" (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 25). In fact, it can be said that the

hostile manner in which dominant knowledge systems respond to new or alternative knowledges mirrors the manner in which they respond to those who embody these types of knowledges (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 25). Therefore, postcolonialism also takes to task the dismantling of institutions which monopolize the production and legitimization of knowledge and which push other knowledges that do not fit the mainstream to the margins. In so doing, postcolonial theory disrupts and interrogates systems of power, particularly in academic discourses which "other" some groups, suppressing them to the periphery of existence.

Like Africentricity and anti-racist theory, postcolonialism also resists the positivist/empiricist epistemology, which states that knowledge must be purely logical and objective. It rejects the idea that in order to be valid, knowledge must be scientifically measured, have the ability to be tested, and use reason in one specific manner which is termed the only correct way. Through the positivist/empiricist model, science became the preferred method of investigation, observation and experimentation, and the idea prevailed that only through scientific investigation could knowledge be proven to be valid. Usher (1996) explains:

Thus if the knowledge claim is based on observation and measurement, systematically and methodologically carried out, and if logical rules of inference and confirmation have been used, then epistemologically this is taken as 'good grounds' for considering the knowledge claim to be valid or true. (pp.11-12)

Hence, the conflict that positivist/empiricist would have with the idea that African indigenous spirituality, which breaks out of the box of measurable, logical concepts, can count as valid knowledge.

Postcolonial theory involves the ongoing critical analysis of non-Western societies and their knowledges that have been colonized by Europeans., yet others such as Dei (2006) argue that this perspective does not go far enough in enforcing such resistance. Anti-colonialists contend that the term "postcolonial" is problematic because the manifestations of colonial and neo-colonial practices evident in public schools, post-secondary educational institutions, homes, families and places of employment demonstrate that colonialism has not ended (Dei, 2006, p.1). However, I see the vehement agenda of anti-colonialism as similar to that of Africentricity and postcolonialism; an agenda focused on the decolonization of the mind. Dei (2006) explains, "[Anti-colonialism] is about resistance to domination of the past, contamination of the present and the stealing of a people's future. The dominated/colonized subject survives despite attempts to deny her existence" (p. 11). Postcolonialism is directly concerned with analyzing the problem of colonization and the oppression it causes to marginalized peoples. However, anticolonialism takes the agenda further by seeking to resist and change colonialism, then to construct something new (Angod, 2006, p.165).

### **Anti-colonialism**

Wane (2006) contends that anti-colonial thought is an intricate discourse which underscores the various ways in which colonized people have countered their experiences with colonialism (p. 94). What makes this perspective different from postcolonial theory then is its focus on *collective* ways of countering colonialism, specifically highlighting spirituality. Such a focus has led me to draw on both anti-colonialism and post-colonialism despite their differences as I believe both theories offer significant tenets to build my theoretical framework for this research.



As Nabavi (2006) says, "the anti-colonial approach emphasizes the necessity for local knowledge derived from collective experiences and actions" (p. 187). Herein lies the relevance of connectedness and the relational to anti-colonial theorizing as the self/individual is significant only when connected to another/the group or community and it is through these spiritual interactions that knowledge is produced. No one person can claim ownership of this knowledge, as it is "owned" by the whole community. Additionally, there is a resistance to what Dei (2006) refers to as the "insulting idea" that as colonized subjects, "others know and understand us...better than we understand ourselves" (Dei, 2006, p. 7). In honouring indigenous knowledges, anti-colonialism seeks to unmute knowledges, which have been silenced by colonialism and to provide a space for the indigenous people who own them to reclaim them and their history and to challenge cultural domination and colonial history (Nabavi, 2006, p. 176). When marginalized people reclaim their traditional, historical systems of knowing, empowerment occurs as they move away from a space of victimization and toward a location where transformation becomes possible (Nabavi, 2006).

Anti-colonialism acknowledges spiritual resistance, based on the collective, as fundamental to the anti-colonialism struggle. Nabavi (2006) argues that this is so because spiritual resistance "provides outlets to critically revisit the past and provides a sense of hope in considering the future" (p.183). Embodied spiritual action, an engagement of mind, body and spirit, is "the powerful mobiliser for social change" because it "governs one's values, actions and worldviews" (Nabavi, 2006, p.183). Once a person's soul is liberated from colonialism, an internal transformation takes place which "sets the stage for outer social transformation". Political resistance does not take place without such a spiritual awakening and the collective spiritual awaking is what is necessary to bring about substantial resistance to institutional and

systemic power structures. In fact, anti-colonialism argues the importance of local peoples becoming unified to fight against oppression caused by social structures (Angod, 2006, p.165). The power to overcome colonial oppression does not rest on the shoulders of autonomous individuals, according to this perspective, but on the collective community. Rather than revitalizing the agency of *the individual* by liberating her/him from oppression, which is a postcolonial aim, anti-colonialism acknowledges that this mode of action is neither efficient nor effective for people of colour. Spirituality is anti-colonial discourse produced through a process of collective struggle, which produces wholeness and liberation (p. 88). Therefore, agency is collective and not individual. In fact, collective spiritualities enrich all involved but necessitate that the group uses the knowledge to confront important "issues of power, social oppression, injustice and systemic inequities" (Dei, 2012, p. 834).

Of much relevance to my research is the fact that anti-colonialism values the history of colonized peoples and confronts efforts of dominant groups to "amputate" a peoples' past and histories (Dei, 2006, p.1). Both history and context are significant for the anti-colonial agenda because "[u]nderstanding our collective past is significant for pursuing political resistance" (Dei, 2006, p.1). Knowing our roots historically and culturally is a way of understanding identity, and acts as a means of resistance, as well as an arrival at awareness of our place in the world (Dei, 2012, p. 837). Without reclaiming and retrieving what we can from the past from our memories and histories, decolonization cannot take place. Ruck Simmonds (2006) explains the importance of this reclaiming of history in relation to colonialism:

Colonialism, as revealed by Césaire, denies the legitimacy of an honorable past for indigenous peoples and acclaims the present as a progressive artifact of modern existence. Its deliberate displacement of indigenous indigenosities and its perseverance

in acknowledging only that which is fabricated as beneficial, obscures other realities through verbalizations which attest to and proliferate the myth of advancement and inevitability. (275)

Thus, the task of discoursing on the silences that exist in history cannot be adequately underscored as significant to anti-colonialism. Such silences persist throughout Nova Scotians' society and, consequently in public schools and post-secondary educational institutions, as well. However, the anti-colonialism agenda insists that history must be named and recounted so as not to deny that it occurred or risk it being dismissed by other discourses which serve to maintain the power of the dominant groups (Ruck Simmonds, 2006). Through such a process, colonized peoples have the power to write themselves into history (Ruck Simmonds, 2006).

Definitions of essentialism and the idea of "the authentic" lend themselves well to each other in describing the importance of history recovery to a collective of people who have been marginalized. Although the idea of capturing a "collective past" is seen by some to be essentialist since it is impossible to recapture the past in all of its intricacies due to the passage of time and change associated with this fact, Smith (1999) points out that such action is strategic because it is centered around claiming human rights and, for some, indigenous rights (p. 74). Smith's (1999) explanation of the term "essentialist" positively reflects the values of Indigenous peoples, and also resonates with African peoples and the role of spirituality in their lives. Smith (1999) says, "The significance of place, of land, of landscape, of other things in the universe, in defining the very essence of a people, makes for a very different rendering of the term 'essentialism' as used by indigenous peoples" (p. 74). Expounding on the significance of history recovery, Smith (1999) says:

The belief in an authentic self is framed within humanism but has been politicized by the colonized world in ways which invoke simultaneous meanings; it does appeal to an idealized past when there was no colonizer, to our strengths in surviving thus far, to our language as an interrupted link to our histories, to the ownership of our lands, to our abilities to create and control our own life and death, to a sense of balance among ourselves and with the environment, to our authentic selves as a people. Although this may seem overly idealized, these symbolic appeals remain strategically important in political struggles. (p. 73)

Through the use of collective histories, it is implicit that the past provides a foundation of our understanding. For people of African descent, a claiming of the past is significant in knowing who we are in relation to our heritage before colonization. One example of African people's determination to look to the past for help in problems faced today is seen through the Akan symbol of the Sankofa bird from Ghana (see Figure 1). This mythical bird is depicted with its head turned backwards and holding an egg that rests on its back is a symbolic reminder that it is crucial that African peoples seek out our collective histories to successfully move forward. The word Sankofa means "return and get it" for "it is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten". In fact, anti-colonialists would agree that this is the responsible course of action to take. The responsible use of collective histories will provide a platform where colonized peoples can find historical answers for current challenges (Trask,1991).



*Figure 1. Sankofa bird Adinkra symbol. Logo for Sankofa Global Project. From Wikimedia Commons, 2018.*

### **African/Black Feminism/Womanism**

As ten of my sixteen research participants are ANS women and I -the researcher - am also a woman of African descent, it is important that I engage the research from an African/Black Feminist and womanist perspective. African feminism raises awareness that historically, “[i]n many ancient African cultures women were active participants in advocating and demanding change in their communities” (Amadiume, 1997, cited in Timothy, 2007, p.158,). Through it African/Black women reject North American conceptions and perceptions of feminist activist spaces as whites only spaces (Reece, 2007). Womanism, coined by Alice Walker, is embraced as more inclusive of the histories and current lived experiences of African/Black women than feminism, which negates the intersections of women’s experiences across racial/inter-racial, class, culture, ability identities (Dove, 1998; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997; Heath, 2006). In this research, I embrace the concepts of both terms – womanism and African/Black feminism - and use them interchangeably.

Through Black Canadian feminism I situate the lived experiences and voices of ANS women in the context of their ANS communities. I locate African/Black Canadian feminism as

beginning with them: “[their] experiences, [and their] stories, both old and new” (Wane, 2007, p. 298). Research about ANS women’s existence and activism within Nova Scotia is important:

While researchers and historians have written generally about Nova Scotia’s ‘indigenous’ Black community, they have paid little attention to the specific condition of Black women in this community. Since Black women, for the most part, have been left out of this history, it has perhaps been assumed that their status and experiences were the same as that of males within the community, circumscribed only by race. While race has been a major determinant of the Black woman’s status, gender has also sharply delineated her condition in Nova Scotian society. (Hamilton, 1994, p. 13)

As Hamilton (1994) reminds us, a regional focus within Black Canadian feminists is required to be inclusive of the voices of all Black Canadian women, and in this case, ANS women.

Within African/Black feminism and womanism, Black women are valued as holders of knowledge as well as credible sources of knowledge; our knowledge can be used to support multiple ways of researching, teaching and being (Cutts, 2015). The knowledge of Black women is especially necessary because we contribute a “particular black consciousness”, articulating and disseminating our knowledge from unique positions (Collins, 2000, p.38; Reece, 2007). Through this perspective, it is understood that “those who live in a particular situation are best situated to speak, educate, and transform that situation” (Brigham & Parris, 2017, p. 75). Also, within a cultural context, as Black women engage in dialogue with ourselves, we develop wisdom which is necessary to heal the human spirit (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2011, p.65). As agents of knowledge, Black women can self-determine our own identities, gain liberation from those

forced upon us and know that the solutions we require to solve gender inequality problems lie in African philosophical worldview (Chilisa, 2012).

Unlike the other theoretical perspectives, for African/Black feminism and womanism spirituality is not only “the very essence” of African *people* throughout the world, but moreover, in the lives of African/Black *women*, spirituality is paramount (Dillard, 2008, p. 278). It encompasses an African conceptualization of reality as relational, cultural and religious, interconnecting all things and all people in community: the living and the non-living (Heath, 2006). Spirituality “gives Black women meaning to life and their existence (Heath, 2006, p.161). As epistemology it is a tool for resistance, survival and resiliency, a coping mechanism against oppression (Bobb-Smith, 2007; Heath, 2006). Spirituality empowers and informs our activism, intellectual and academic pursuits through a sense of responsibility and reciprocity to community (Wane & Neegan, 2007). If research involving women of African descent is to be successful, then, it is crucial that it employs an awareness that spirituality “is a lens through which [African women] come to understand our lived realities and how to navigate the everyday world that is shaped by those realities” (Wane & Neegan, 2007, p. 31). Critical to my research is the principle that research is not only an intellectual pursuit, but also a spiritual quest, connected to purpose (Dillard, 2006; Cutts, 2015).

As is true in the definition of spirituality from an Africentric and anti-racist perspective, from the womanist perspective, community and spirituality are intertwined because, for Black women, spirituality is also grounded in sources of African traditions through our African heritage. These traditions include the expertise of oral tradition through narratives, life notes, stories and other forms of orality, spiritual perceptions, music, dance and calling on ancestors for help in solving problems. Through the concept of community, research is participatory,

inclusive of the community, reflects the values of the community and benefits the community (Chilisa, 2012). It is only within the context of community that the individual appears (Palmer, 1983, Cutts, 2015). Being inclusive of the whole community means paying attention to the vital values of interdependence, interrelationships and interconnectedness between women, men, children and others, which is another way in which womanism and African/Black feminisms differ from western feminisms. Womanism and African/Black feminism identify men as allies in the battle, fighting with women against gender oppression (Dove, 1998; Chilisa, 2012).

The underscored centrality of motherhood in African communities, households, family organizations and the influence of mothers as the source of solidarity is a focal characteristic of African/Black feminism and is relevant to my research (Chilisa, 2012; Dove, 1998). Africa, which is known as the Motherland and where humanity began, developed matriarchal societies which were complementary and non-hierarchical (Dove, 1998). In these societies, “The woman is revered in her role as the mother who is the bringer of life, the conduit for the spiritual regeneration of the ancestors, the bearer of culture, and the center of social organization” (Dove, 1998, p. 520). The motherhood or mothering role extends beyond bloodlines transcending gender and is not limited to those who are biological mothers. Motherhood is more about the “communal responsibilities involved in the raising of children and the caring of others” (Dove, 1998, p.521). Patricia Hill Collins (1990) refers to this relationship as “othermothering”. Bernard (2000) et al. discuss that “Black mothers have been given the responsibility for providing education, social and political awareness to their own children, as well as the children in their communities” (p.68). Not only do Black women play a crucial role of developing a community that is non-hostile as othermothers, but so can men and others who are gender non-conforming. Within the academy, othermothering or “mothering of the mind” is also manifested



between Black women teachers and their Black female or male students. It is “a sharing of self, an interactive and collective process, a spiritual connectedness that epitomizes the Africentric values of sharing, caring and accountability” (Bernard et al., 2000, p. 68). The concept of othermothering reveals cultural ways in which Black women have addressed and opposed oppression and domination traditionally. Through African/Black feminist and womanist thought, Africa is honoured as the “ground from which Black women emerge”, the material and metaphoric mother” (Davis, 2015, p. 154).

### **Embodied Knowledge, Subjectivity and Honest Research**

In validating the lived experiences of persons of African descent and bringing them to the center of analysis, the research methodologies of Africentricity, postcolonialism, anti-racism, anti-colonialism and African/Black feminism and womanism validate *embodied knowledge*, distinguishing this kind of knowing from *disembodied*, Eurocentric knowledge. In fact, everything about African-centred philosophy, because of its deeply spiritual qualities, is connected to a relational body, whether it be within the self, between the self and others, people and their ancestors, or people and their environment. Such connections and embodiments are the antithesis of the positivist/empiricist way of scientifically knowing and carrying out research as an "individualistic enterprise, as something carried out by individuals who can detach themselves from the world they are researching" (Usher, 1996, p. 15). Usher (1996) goes on to state:

[I]t is certainly the case that a great deal of research is done by individuals. But the 'individual' of positivist/empiricist research is unlike anyone recognisable in the real

world. These are abstracted individuals with no history and unaffected by culture, values, discourses and social structure. (p. 15)

The detached, disembodied kind of research of which Usher (1996) speaks is not only unrealistic, but it has traditionally been the kind of research which has been carried out *on* persons of African descent and other marginalized peoples. However, in my role as researcher I aimed to be embodied; completely engaged in this process of research. As an African woman researcher, I am the nurturing othermother who facilitates healing through an acknowledgement of body, mind and spirit connections in the research, rather than privileging our minds or personalities (Okpalaoka & Dillard, p. 70). This is unlike the positivist individual researchers Usher (1996) describes, whom he says, in reference to Archibald (1970), conduct research in communities which are "fairly invisible", "fragmented and incoherent" (p. 15). Usher (1996) says this probably explains why some scientific researchers feel that they are alone when conducting research, and that they do not belong to a research community. However, as Mazama (2002) insists, when we think of our identity as African people, we must resist any individualistic approach because we are part of a whole configuration of material and spiritual entities. Instead, a distancing and disassociation are implied in the disembodied relationship between researcher and researched in situations mentioned by Usher (1996) which demonstrate the process of "othering" people of colour. Huber (2009) informs her readers that a number of scholars recognize the source of scientific research on people of colour as a colonial construction that is entrenched in racist ideas about the subjugated other.

Speaking from a post-colonial perspective, which also values and validates embodied knowledge, Chawla (2011) shares her experience as a researcher:

In the decade or so that I have been in the academy, I find it a hard task to dissociate myself from my research...My research process and my stance in it, the research origins and my own, the representations which invariably include my presence, have always been intertwined...My own mind, body, and emotions are a continuity in the research process. So, it follows that I am a palpable presence in all my writing because position, self, and identity (of the researcher and the participants) are, for me recursive components of scholarly research...To be 'apart' from what I do is alien to me. (pp. 14-15)

Rodriguez (2011) too agrees with Chawla (2011) about the importance of embodied knowledge, particularly for postcolonial peoples. This theorist says that "embodiment is an imperative for postcolonial people", specifically those who have a devotion to the body but who are also many times imprisoned by their own skins and by elite discourses (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 26). A centering of the self through spiritual forms including performance studies, Rodriguez (2011) suggests, is one way of allowing people of African descent to "reclaim our body in epistemological pursuits" which negate the Eurocentric philosophy that opposes knowledge of the body as equal to knowledge of the mind (p. 26). My research focuses on the reclaiming of the body, or the embodiment of knowledge of multi-generational African Nova Scotians through storytelling and story-testimonies, which speak to their lived experiences in the Eurocentric public school and post-secondary educational learning. Through re-claimed embodied knowledge types like storytelling, dancing, drumming, singing, praying, basket-weaving and others, researchers such as myself "allow[...] for a different way of defining and framing knowledge and, in so doing, allow[...]for a more inclusive world" (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 26).

According to Rodriguez (2011), it is imperative that theory includes the body because it is through the body that the community and the individual meet. In fact, postcolonial, anti-

colonial, Africentric, African/Black feminism and womanism, and anti-racism theories all embrace the wisdom of embodied knowledge. It was the encounter between the colonizer and people of colour that moulded the existence of embodied knowledge as we know it today. It can be argued that ownership of their own bodies was what people of African descent and postcolonial peoples lost most during slavery and colonialism (Rodriguez, 2011). For most persons of African descent, Rodriguez (2011) says, the body symbolizes ancestry and tells the story of various courses of action in history. The body houses everything, including passion and knowledge; into our bodies and onto our bodies history is written (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 28).

Wane and Neegan (2007) expound on this loss:

The outcomes of colonialism are numerous, the most significant being trauma, silence, absence, erasure, and denial...Colonial education has silenced and invalidated African women's spirituality...Many scholars of African descent provide analyses of the destruction and fragmentation of African spirituality as well as the social fabric of their communities. (p. 44)

However, these Black Canadian feminists encourage African descendant persons to reclaim their embodied knowledge which was suppressed during colonialism and slavery, and which, they argue, is still suppressed today. They urge that it is important for African people to reclaim our roots and cultural expressions which have been generated from the resilience of our ancestors (Wane & Neegan, 2007).

Wane and Neegan (2007) say, "Bearing witness to our lives as deeply spiritual women and human beings remains key to our identity and spirituality as people of African ancestry" (2007, p. 44). Some of the ways in which African people participate in this act of "bearing

witness" or embodying knowledge, include "our laughter, and our music, our drumming, walking, and standing" (Wane & Neegan, 2007, p. 44). Describing the spiritual embodied knowledge which they say is inherent in African women, Wane and Neegan (2007) explain that "we carry a creative life force within us" (p. 36). "This force is around us, beneath and above us, it is a dynamic force that resides everywhere and in everything...To be spiritual is to maintain an awareness of this dynamism as it moves through and around our being" (Wane & Neegan, 2007, p. 36). Therefore, African people, and African women specifically, experience severe problems when we are made to submit to ways of expressing ourselves that demand that we divorce our minds from our bodies. However, since our bodies are also sites of oppression having been the only tangible thing that we had, and in some instances, all that we have, our liberation has been "intertwined with the liberation and celebration of our bodies - literally, figuratively, and intellectually" (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 29). Of course, the liberation and celebration of our bodies are also intertwined with the liberation and celebration of our embodied African centred spirituality which connects us to all things and helps African people to make sense of the world.

The positivist/empiricist way of thinking also conflicts with the subjective nature of spirituality as indigenous knowledge by naming objectivity as a necessary component of doing research. Wane and Neegan (2007) inform that "Spirituality is not a neat pile of rules and regulations" but it is a "way of life guided by a set of unwritten principles" (p. 34). Specifically, African centred spirituality breaks the rule of objectivity where research is concerned. The idea of a researcher as objective, unbiased and value free is used in positivist/empiricist circles to ensure that the knowledge produced in research is unaffected by the researchers themselves; "that personal considerations did not intrude into the research process - in other words, that the researcher's subjectivity has been eliminated as a factor in the knowledge claim" (Usher, 1996,

p.12). By following such criteria, a positivist researcher can become the "ideal universal knower" (Usher, 1996, p. 12). Therefore, in positivist research, the researcher is the sole knower, and the subjects are those who seek to know or to be known. All of these positivist premises are the anti-thesis of African centred spirituality which, as a way of knowing, insists on a collective way of producing knowledge that invokes all parts of the researchers' being, including the body, mind and emotions. Additionally, this spirituality is value-laden, rather than being value-free; it encourages researchers to speak to the values they hold.

Through its acknowledgement that research is a subjective process, an Africentric research methodology refocuses the processes of research on the well-being of the people being researched, rather than being strictly focused on the process of knowledge production (Reviere, 2001, p. 709). From this theoretical perspective, Reviere (2001) offers that there is no other way to truthfully and inclusively conduct research than through this admission of subjectivity. This is particularly true in Africentric, anti-racist, postcolonial and, African/Black feminism and womanism, and anti-colonial paradigms which are interested in placing race and culture - for Africentricity, specifically the race and culture of African peoples - at the centre of the research. Reviere (2001) shares that a

principal advantage of an Afr[i]centric approach is that it compels the researcher to challenge the use of the traditional Eurocentric research criteria of objectivity, reliability, and validity in the inquiry process. The researcher is expected to examine and place in the foreground of the inquiry any and all subjectivities or societal baggage that would otherwise remain hidden, and, hence, covertly influence the research activity. (p. 710)

Research that is carried out otherwise, Reviere (2001) posits, is ultimately deceptive and ineffective. Therefore, her objective in writing "Towards an Afrocentric research methodology"

is to use a new orientation to study knowledge construction which will provide a more honest way of conducting research (Reviere, 2001). She aims to challenge the Eurocentric creation and interpretation of data, which she feels are not honest, especially where humans are being researched (p.710). An acknowledgement of the relational/social aspect of research, places Reviere's (2001) suggestions into context:

Research is a social practice carried out by research communities and what constitutes 'knowledge', 'truth', 'objectivity' and correct method' is defined by the community and through the paradigm of normal science which shapes its work. This means that how the rules will be understood and applied will differ between communities and within communities particularly at times when the dominant paradigm is under threat. Research therefore is never simply a technical process involving the invariant application of universal rules of 'scientific method'. (Usher, 1996, p. 17)

Here, Usher (1996) validates the work that persons such as Reviere (2001) are doing to question a universal manner of approaching and conducting research and to include the subjective perspectives and knowledge of marginalized peoples.

"Objectivity is an impossible standard to which to hold researchers"(Reviere, 2001, p.714). From an African/Black feminist perspective Evans-Winters (2015) concurs that "all research is subjective" and also notes that this theoretical lens welcomes Black women writers to reflect on their personal lived experiences and engage their perspectives in the research process ( p. 135). "Rather, researchers should be judged on the fairness and honesty of their work" (Reviere, 2001, p.714). The ultimate way of validating research as truth from an Africentric perspective is by ensuring that it is grounded in the lived experiences of community members,

signified by the Swahili word *Ukweli* which means truth (Reviere, 2001, p.713). Hill Collins (1990) agrees with this position stating, "for most African American women, those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences" (p. 209). Dei (2000, p.114) agrees stating, "[T]rust in knowledge is tied ... to integrity, familiarity and perceptiveness of the 'speaker'", Dei (2000) says (p.114). Furthermore, fairness which promotes accountability, an Africentric principle, is a consideration that positivists researchers never contemplate. Hill Collins (1990) states that "people are expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims" (p. 218) because "both what was said and who said it give meaning and interpretation to claims" (p.156). Reviere (2001) advocates for researchers to "make implicit interest explicit" when conducting their research (p. 714). In so doing, they would be demonstrating a recognition of the subjectivity of research and their understanding of the importance of their accountability to the community as a researcher. Therefore, this writer insists that "the researcher should present sufficient information about herself or himself to enable readers to assess how, and to what extent the researcher's presence influenced the choice, conduct, and outcomes of the research"(Reviere, 2001), p. 714). Further, to this, the researcher must give her/himself over to the process of self-examination, self-reflection, introspection and retrospection. Says Reviere (2001), "One has to delve deeply into oneself to understand the motivations and the perspectives one brings to the research exercise" (p. 715).

### **My Spirit Bears Witness: Spirituality and the Researcher**

As the primary researcher, I approached my research question with an acute awareness of my position as an African Nova Scotian woman who has immigrated from the island country of



the Bahamas. Like Wane & Neegan (2007), and the other women of whom they write, I too situate myself as a Black immigrant woman who experiences spirituality as "an entry point to search for meaning and value within the Canadian landscape" (p. 31). As these authors concur, "Spirituality for us is not about Africa or Jamaica, but about our situatedness here, in this place where we now both live and work" (Wane & Neegan, 2007, p. 31). My spirituality, though it extends from my Afro-Bahamian roots and culture, is now situated in my connectedness to another identity as an African Nova Scotian woman. And this identity, though bestowed upon me by the mere fact that I am a woman of African descent living in Nova Scotia, is one that I value and embrace. My spirituality has become the lens through which I understand my lived realities and how I navigate my place in a world controlled by those realities (Wane & Neegan, 2007, p. 31).

When I first began to reside in Nova Scotia, I asked myself "What does it mean to be a Black woman living in Nova Scotia? What does this make me?" I had known all my life what it meant to be an Afro-Bahamian woman, but this new landscape seemed to demand something new of me. So, I have embraced my identity as an African Nova Scotian woman because, in a new environment, it has given me a sense of family and belonging; I know that I am connected to a huge community of people, history and culture that understand me. As a Black woman from the African Diaspora, there are many aspects of my Bahamian history concerning African heritage, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and colonialism that connect me to multi-generational African Nova Scotians. This identity and the new parts of my identity developed in Nova Scotia connect me to other African Nova Scotians through shared lived experiences that I have encountered since my arrival here.

In particular, my personal experiences with the infiltration of racism in my everyday life in Nova Scotia, which I never before experienced while living in the Bahamas have led me to appreciate these new connections and new identity. I have embraced them as a form of protection from the racist elements of my life. I have seen racism at work at every level of life in this province. Racism is not only something I have read about, it is something that I have experienced, the most painful experience ironically being while working in a post-secondary institution nationally acclaimed for its inclusive policies on diversity. Unfortunately, I have had the misfortune to experience firsthand how spirituality and difference are snuffed out by the dominant group, the neo-colonizers, when people of colour challenge the status quo in educational institutions. Additionally, as a post-secondary student and a mother of three children in the Nova Scotia public school education system, I have seen the imbalance, the inequities that cause spirit injury for our children and adult learners. I have worked with African Nova Scotian learners, both of multi-generational and immigrant background and been made glaringly aware of the obstacles, systemic and institutional, which not only limit their success, but make it utterly impossible for some learners to succeed. At these overwhelming times of my lifework, I have turned inwards and outwards to my spirit to find the strength that I need to persevere, to continue the work, and to make a positive difference for them.

Like Wane and Neegan (2007), I see spirituality as being relational. These writers describe spirituality as being about "social justice, peace, and harmony" and about "making meaning of our lives and the lives of those around us, whether students, colleagues, friends or family members" (Wane & Neegan, 2007, p. 43). It is this relational quality of spirituality at work in my life as a researcher that brings me to the site and topic of my research. This relational principle of spirituality guides my research and the manner in which I interact with my

research participants, for I recognize that research is a social process (Usher, 1996, p. 17). My relational qualities as a researcher cause me to be seen as an insider in numerous regards in my researcher role. For example, I have been adopted into the African Nova Scotian community of Upper Hammonds Plains, the community into which my spouse was born and raised, where our children were born and are being raised and where we are home. I have acquired numerous family members here since my marriage, and as the spouse of the pastor of the community church the term "family" is understood by me and others of the community as extending beyond blood relatives to a multitude of sisters, brothers, aunts and uncles, mothers and fathers and children. Such a concept aligns with Dei's (2002) argument that the "self is intrinsically and conceptually connected with the community" and "[a]n individual develops her or his sense of self through relationships within the community or collective (p. 355).

Having devoted much of my time to educational, recreational and spiritual work with children, youth, women and seniors in the church and community of Upper Hammonds Plains, I have been engaged in the building up of this community as I believe that this is a part of my communal responsibility as an African woman who lives by Africentric principles including interconnectedness, holism, unity, and communalism (Merriweather Hunn, 2004, p. 69). In this tight bond, I have shared in the community's joys and pains. We have grown together to the point that I am a part of it and it is a part of me, of my spirit. I concur with Merriweather Hunn (2004) who speaks to the Africentric manner in which the individual and the community become complexly connected and bound to one another, for this unity encompasses a sense of accountability and respect. The same must be true in research terms and relationships. Although Eurocentric, particularly, positivist research preaches the importance of separating the researcher from the researched, Africentricity values the inseparability between the researcher and the

researched (Reviere, 2001, p. 713). Rather, both are brought to a centered place of research on an equal playing field without binary or hierarchy, but in community.

I am a researcher who trusts and respects emotional intelligence as central to my work, therefore my passion guides my research. By balancing systems of thought that glorify rational reason as being superior with affective /feeling intellect, "[f]eeling the knowledge ...becomes just as important as experiencing it cognitively - that is, from a perspective of reasoning" (Schiele, 1994, p. 158). Cooper (1997) sees emotions as the "domain of core feeling, gut-level instincts and emotional sensations" and believes that when we value and trust emotional intelligence it "provides a deeper, more fully formed understanding of oneself and those around us" (as quoted in Dei, 2002, p. 341). Noting the close relationship between emotions and spirituality, Dei (2002) argues that we can use the power and wisdom of the affective as a valuable source of knowledge/ information, human energy, and influence in research (pp. 340-341). An absence of passion is not effective for any involved (Willis, 2001). I used my enthusiasm for this research, demonstrated through my emotional intelligence, to ensure that effective and useful research is produced for the good of African Nova Scotian learners.

I have engaged in relationally passionate research that connects me directly to my participants and the interest I have in the topic. Explaining the crucial role that interconnectedness plays in African women's Indigenous spirituality, Wane and Neegan (2007) say that this spirituality as "a way of life" expresses a communal awareness and community/relationship building (p. 28). In fact, these writers say that this practice of spirituality is defined by relationships, not material belongings and stresses the revival of a community consciousness that flourishes because people feel engaged with one another (Wane & Neegan, 2007, p. 28). Hence, I have carried out my research through the relationships I have

established in ANS communities to fulfil the goals of spirituality, which according to Wane and Neegan (2007), are to "procure, secure, and address the community's well-being" (p. 29).

In acknowledging my position as an insider in this research process, I recognize that I may also be seen as an outsider, since I am an immigrant, not a person of multi-generational ANS lineage who was born in Nova Scotia. Additionally, I acknowledge that although all of my post-secondary education was completed at universities in Nova Scotia, my elementary and high school education was completed in the Bahamas where my learning experience was very different from that encountered by ANS learners. My lived experiences do not allow me to speak to the disadvantages of public school education from personal experience as a learner in this system; therefore, I rely heavily on the testimonies and stories of other ANS learners who have had this lived experience. I draw on my experience as a parent of three children in the public-school system to assist me in this process. Also, I have and will continue to rely on written accounts of this experience to provide this view. Additionally, both my paid work as an educator, my community work, and relationships with ANS in the community have provided me with opportunities to work with learners, teachers, administrators and others in the public-school system. These experiences have been valuable in my study.

Whereas there may be some disadvantages for me not having shared the same public - school experiences as my participants, this factor also presents some benefits to my research topic. My formal education in the Bahamas nurtured within me a positive sense of spirituality as I learned through cultural education about my Bahamian history and heritage, and the freedom of religious expression. Therefore, I arrived at the site of research with the positive outlook and lived experience of what education *could be* for African descendant learners when they are

allowed to embrace their spirituality in the classroom and the school. This is an experience that I believe adds another important dimension to my research.

As is the case with my African Nova Scotian research participants, spirituality is central to my being as a Black woman, and therefore indispensable to my work as a researcher. Wane and Neegan (2007) state the significance of Black women acknowledging and honouring the spiritual aspects of ourselves. Our spirit selves, these writers say, are founded in the heritage and ways of living and being of our ancestors and through this part of our beings we can access the power to fight against colonial oppression and build a Black Canadian feminist theoretical framework that demonstrates that spirituality is central to our lives (Wane and Neegan, 2007). Emphasizing the costly consequences of ignoring our spirituality in our academic work, Wane and Neegan (2007) ask, "What has been the impact of separating the spiritual aspect of our upbringing from our everyday experience in Canada?" (p. 43). The authors answer their question by looking at the ways in which Black women have failed to admit to the limitations of Western ways of life. This is specifically true in the way we are intellectually trained and educated, which has perpetuated a dualistic way of thinking and living and distinguished the ways of reason from that of "traditional spiritual upbringing and personal commitment" (Wane & Neegan, p. 43). They warn that by ignoring or discounting the ancient wisdom of African traditional spirituality, we have abandoned the soul of our labour and our lives (Wane & Neegan, 2007).

Responding to the need to engage spirituality to aid her in her work as an academic, Willis (2001) speaks to seeking "the Lord's help" to figure out how to present her viewpoints in writing (p. 44). In my researcher role, I too constantly called on the Lord for spiritual guidance, direction and encouragement during the research process in my personal times of devotion,

prayer and Bible-reading, fellowship and worship times at church during Sunday services, gaining inspiration from Sunday sermons, and asking friends and relatives to remember me in their prayers. Since my spirituality is such an integral power source in my life, unlike numerous other researchers who may choose to overlook rather than acknowledge theirs, ignoring my spirituality was not an option for me. My relationship with God in addition to my family and community relationships are what energized me throughout this research process. Without them, this work would have been meaningless.

I honoured and engaged spirituality and ancient wisdom, the soul of my labour and life, to remain empowered throughout my research. From the onset of this research, from the time the idea on African-centered spirituality as it affects the formal education of ANS learners resonated with me, the ancient wisdom of Nommo (the spoken word) rose up within me like a freshly sprung well, existing solely for the purpose of refreshing me, my fellow Ph.D. cohort classmates and others with whom I shared my work at conferences and other presentations along this journey. Although I had dabbled in poetry as a young girl, never had I experienced such a steady stream of words flowing through me to bring clarity, healing, and expression. Time and time again, I poured out my spirit in writing. This poetry was life giving; it was the most precious gift at a time when I felt pressured to produce research that I hoped would make a difference in the lives of ANSs. Cutts (2015) refers to these poetic narratives as "life notes" and she incorporates these musings - her spiritual jolts - on her experiences as a Black woman in academia as well into her writing (p. 197). Like Cutts (2015), I include some of my spoken word poetry throughout this dissertation. They are evidence of how "the spirit showed up" in my work to inspire, revive, sustain and encourage me throughout this important journey (p.197).

***I am Centred***

*By: Késa Munroe-Anderson*

I am centered

As the words on this page

In my skin

And there is a comfort in this centeredness

I am neither left nor right aligned, no margins here

I am centered

As the words on this page

In my story

Told with my own voice and I like the sound of it

Which echoes my forebears in sweet refrain

When we tell our stories

We are centered

As the words on this page

In our world.



## Chapter Three

### Storytelling as Research Methodology: Let the Lions speak!

*"Until the lions have their own historian, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."*

(African proverb)

The way we choose to frame a story is important (Langdon, 2009). The frame we choose not only determines how the story is received, but it is ultimately responsible for how the story helps us to construct our understanding of the world (Langdon, 2009). In fact, stories and the way they are framed offer us an avenue through which we can contend for our place in the world. Stories have the capacity to serve as the primary site of social justice and social change. And, for marginalized people like African Nova Scotians, significant power accompanies opportunities to do both: tell our own stories and to choose the frame.

Making room for “the lions” to speak, "Set our Spirits Free" frames the stories of sixteen First African Nova Scotian (FAN) participants from the historic African Nova Scotian communities of North Preston, Upper Hammonds Plains, and North End Halifax. All between the ages of 18 and 50, participants included six persons from North Preston, five from Upper Hammonds Plains, and six from the North End, Halifax. Ten participants were females and six were males, with each group having at least one male participant and several female participants: 1) one male and five females in North Preston; 2) three males and two females in Upper Hammonds Plains, 3) two males and four females in North End, Halifax. All research participants met the following research guidelines:

- 1) they identify as First African Nova Scotian (meaning, they are a descendent of enslaved African peoples, the Black Loyalists, War of 1812 Freed Refugees, or the Maroons);
- 2) they currently live in the communities of either Upper Hammonds Plains, North Preston, or North End Halifax, or had lived in one of these communities during their public school education;
- 3) they received formal education in the public-school education system of Nova Scotia; and
- 4) they are between the ages of 18 and 50 years

These sixteen FANS were the storytellers, the lions speaking in first voice about their own personal experiences within public school and post-secondary education, their communities, and society in general. In my research, Wendell, Dean, Jareeca, Zhané, Myles, Archy, Erin, Melissa D., Roxanne, Reeny, Cynamon, Chriselle, Nadia, Stephen, Sheldon, and Melissa C. are the historians, the co-researchers who spoke for themselves and about themselves and allowed me as the researcher to join in and listen.

In choosing a qualitative approach to my research I consciously challenged the dominant "hunters"/researchers of traditional research paradigms and the ideologies produced by these paradigms. "Qualitative research is characterized by multiple realities and therefore multiple truths" which disrupt what Huber (2009) calls the apartheid of knowledge, making way for new ways of seeking answers to questions and new knowledges to emerge (Chilisa, 2012, p. 165). In this apartheid of knowledge, historically, the scientific, positivist manner of conducting research has been upheld as the only valid way of seeking answers to questions (Huber, 2009). As a

result, this apartheid system has been an established way of marginalizing and othering people of colour in research (Usher, 1996). In fact, Huber (2009) links the apartheid of knowledge with white supremacy. Since scientific research on people of colour was historically used to verify racist ideology, some scholars see the roots of these types of research as a "colonial project" founded on othering (Huber, 2009, p. 641). Therefore, Western positivist approaches are inappropriate for research on people of colour because of the abusive power, the spirit injury that has been inflicted on them when positivist research is named as the only way to produce legitimate knowledge (Huber, 2009, p. 641).

By conducting qualitative research, I honor the spiritual knowledge of African Nova Scotians, which is derived from an African-centered epistemological, theoretical and methodological worldview which lives inside African Nova Scotian communities, but has traditionally been relegated outside of academia. Usher (1996) says that "All approaches to research are a reflection of cultural beliefs about the world we live in and want to live in" and such is the case with my research (p. 25). Primarily, through qualitative research, I reflect the epistemology of African Nova Scotian culture. However, my research methodology also confronts and challenges the racial divisions that separate dominant Eurocentric epistemologies from other epistemologies seen as less valid in academia, and the fact that these dominant knowledges direct mainstream research in the academy (Huber, 2009). Huber (2009) says, "In the field of education, dominant ideologies of meritocracy, individualism and colour blindness can mask the complex struggles of oppression that create the conditions for those struggles" (p. 640). Additionally, Eurocentric measures of objectivity, reliability, and validity are inappropriate and inadequate for research with people of African descent. By engaging in qualitative research in a non-traditional African centered way, then, my research makes room for

the researched African Nova Scotians to be the lions spoken of in the aforementioned proverb, and to have their lives validated through a research process that does not compromise who we are as a people.

Building on the importance of centering the knowledge and voices of marginalized peoples in research, storytelling is the most culturally appropriate methodology to conduct my research because of its relationship-based approach (Chapman, 2005; Solórozo & Yosso, 2002, Kovach, 2009). A deeply spiritual process and valued tradition for people of African descent, storytelling engages our relational selves in shared knowledge production involving our experiences, and results in a collective understanding of the meaning of change (Mucina, 2011). Storytelling resists the dominant practice of “othering” people of colour by validating their communal memory and ways of constructing knowledge (Huber, 2009; Mucina, 2011; Chilisa, 2012). Dialogue, an element of storytelling, is instrumental in assessing knowledge claims, demonstrating the co-construction of knowledge by researcher *and* researched in ways that resist *domination* (Willis, 2001; Collins, 1990). This process requires the co-researchers to listen intently to one another, allowing research to be a holistic effort rather than a fragmented one (Dei, 2012; Kovach, 2009). Storytelling acknowledges the inseparability of story and knowing, narrative and research, and the fact that both researcher and subject share responsibility as co-researchers (Kovach, 2009; Parris & Brigham, 2010; Wilson, 2008). These humanizing methods demonstrate the significance the researcher places on centering the knowledge, oral traditions, lived experiences and voices of those represented (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Chapman, 2005). Through them people of African descent are invited to be active participants in research, to tell their stories.

The articulation of voice is a significant consideration in my study. Errante (2000) argues that voice is the centre of human dignity (p. 17). For that reason, "to deny a person the possibility to narrate his or her own experience is to deny a person's human dignity...And so we celebrate, struggle with, and presume the ability to give, authorize, and enable voice" (Errante, 2000, p.17). Unfortunately, however, the denial of voice to people of African descent is not a new phenomenon. Historically, the legacies of slavery and colonialism warranted that persons of African descent were incapable of having a voice, because they were essentially non-human. Such an ideology was necessary to legitimize and justify the murderous and oppressive terrors of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the exploitative tragedies - both physical and spiritual- of colonialism, the aftermath of which African descendant persons are still enduring today. In explaining the early ideas of race as being purely a biological, scientific concept, Dei (1996) informs:

In the biological sense, the race concept was based on a categorization of people on the basis of perceived differences in intelligence levels. One justification by European scientists for the enslavement of African peoples was that they were, it was believed, a 'sub-human' species, like cattle. They supposedly did not have the same capacities for language, communication and culture as their European oppressors. Most of this discourse rose out of the 'neutral, rational science' of biology. (p.42)

Such a definition of persons of African descent makes it clear why we have historically been denied a voice to tell our own stories for centuries. Smith (1999) expounds on this rationale:

The objects of research do not have a voice and do not contribute to research or science, In fact, the logic of the argument would suggest that it is simply impossible, ridiculous even, to suggest that the object of research can contribute to anything. An object has no

life force, no humanity, no spirit of its own, so therefore 'it' cannot make an active contribution. (p. 61)

By centering the voices and stories of First African Nova Scotian learners, my research refutes these oppressive ideologies. As subjects rather than objects of the research, the sixteen participants have names, lives and stories. It is important that they each be named as contributors to the knowledge developed during this research, underscoring their humanity and validating the crucial role they play as tellers and carriers of ANS community experiences and stories, not only in this research, but in their everyday lives.

**Jareeca** is a 25-year-old resident of Upper Hammonds Plains and descendent of the War of 1812 Refugees. Jareeca has lived in this community since birth and both of her parents and grandparents have a long lineage and currently reside there as well. She attended the elementary, middle school and high school in the Hammonds Plains area: Hammonds Plains Consolidated School, Madelyn Symonds Middle School and Charles P. Allen. Jareeca is a mother of an elementary school-aged child who is currently attending Hammonds Plains Consolidated School. She is a St. Mary's University graduate with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Sociology and has held various jobs within customer service. Jareeca has also been involved in various youth initiatives within the community of Upper Hammonds Plains(UHP) including attending and serving as junior counselor for the annual UHP Day Camp for children, serving as tutor for the Black Educator's Association's (BEA) Cultural and Academic Enrichment Program (CAEP), and as a member of the church's youth group. She volunteers with the Seniors of Upper Hammonds Plains and the UHP Community Development Association. At the time of this study, Jareeca was employed as a customer services agent. Since this study, Jareeca has gained employment as

a Community Engagement Intern with the African Nova Scotian Affairs Integration Office of Halifax Regional Municipality.

**Wendell** is a 47-year-old resident of Upper Hammonds Plains and descendent of the War of 1812 Refugees. Born and raised in the community of Upper Hammonds Plains, Wendell also has family connections to North Preston as one of his parents is originally from that African Nova Scotian community. Wendell is married and is the father of a university student and an elementary school-aged student at the time of this study. He is actively involved in the men's ministry of his church within the community of Upper Hammonds Plains. Wendell attained his public-school education in Hammonds Plains and its feeder schools including Hammonds Plains Consolidated, Tantallon Junior High and C.P. Allen High at that time. He completed vocational school and was employed as a driver and installer at the time of the research.

**Zhané** is a 20-year-old descendant of Upper Hammonds Plains with lineage to War of 1812 Refugees who settled this community. Raised by her paternal grandparents who were both residents of the community, Zhané grew up in Upper Hammonds Plains and completed her public-school education at Hammonds Plains Consolidated, Madeline Symonds Middle School, and C.P. Allen High. She was also involved in the Summer Day Camp which is run annually by the Community Development Association. Zhané was a member of the church's youth group, she had leading roles in church musicals and was a member of Word in Motion dance group. As a teen, Zhané also played a lead role in my Masters of Education practicum project in UHP entitled the Africentric Heritage Circle along with two other teenage girls and three senior women of UHP. She was also a Peer Helper in elementary school and a member of the Heritage

Club in middle school. Zhané is a student at Dalhousie University within the Transition Program for Indigenous Black and Mi'kmaw students. She is interested in pursuing a degree in Nursing.

**Dean** is a 50-year-old descendant of the War of 1812 Refugees who settled in Upper Hammonds Plains. Although Dean resides outside of the community at the time of this study, he was raised in Upper Hammonds Plains and attended Hammonds Plains Consolidated School, Tantallon Junior High and Charles P. Allen High School. During his upbringing in this community, Dean was very active in his community's church – Emmanuel Baptist Church - and both of his parents occupied various positions in this institution, including his father's role as deacon. Dean was involved in the Provincial Baptist Youth Fellowship of the AUBA and the Sunday School. A father of two adult children who received their public schooling in HRSB schools, Dean attained a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics and Computer Science and Bachelor of Education (Math) degree. Dean also served as a substitute teacher within HRSB schools. He is employed with the provincial government and is an accomplished entrepreneur at the time of this study.

**Myles** is a 36-year old Upper Hammonds Plains resident and descendent of the Black Loyalists and War of 1812 Refugees. Myles was raised in Upper Hammonds Plains and attended Hammonds Plains Consolidated, Tantallon Junior High and C.P. Allen High. While at C.P. Allen, he was a member of the Cultural Youth Awareness Group at this school, which was organized by David Woods. During his youth, Myles was also involved in his community as a Summer Day Camp Counselor, Math Tutor for BEA's Cultural and Academic Enrichment Program (CAEP) in UHP, and volunteer for the annual CanJam UHP community celebration held during the Canada Day holiday which involves a basketball tournament and other community festivities. He serves as Executive Board Member for Melvin Tract and President of the UHP Community Cemetery. Myles is married, is the father of two public school aged



children, completed numerous university business courses and is employed in Finance and Administration.

**Archy** is a 49-year-old descendent of Black Loyalists of North Preston. He is married and is the father of two public school-aged children. He grew up and attended school within his community at Nelson Whynder Elementary, and was bussed out to Ross Road School and Cole Harbour High. Although he resides outside of North Preston, he is deeply connected to his community through his membership and service to his church as a choir member, involvement in the Men's Brotherhood, and numerous other capacities over the years. Archy has served on the board of the Council of African Canadian Education (CACE), the Advisory Council for African Canadian Students at the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) and as a member of the Black Learners Advisory Committee (BLAC) who produced the BLAC Report on Education in 1994. At the time of this study he had served for more than twenty years as Coordinator of African Canadian Student Success at NSCC where he was the first person to fulfill this role which was created as a result of the BLAC Report. Archy has attained a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Master of Education (Lifelong Learning) with a focus on Africentric leadership. Since this study, Archy ran in the municipal elections of 2016 and was successful in gaining the position of African Nova Scotian Representative on the Halifax Regional School Board

**Melissa D.** is a 34-year old resident of North Preston and descendant of the War of 1812 Refugees and the Jamaican Maroons. Melissa was raised in North Preston and attended all schools connected to this community including Nelson Whynder Elementary, Ross Road, and Cole Harbour High. Melissa D. is also active in her home church – St. Thomas Baptist Church – and her community at large. During her Master of Education, she and another Master student from the community conducted a practicum project that brought North Preston youth and seniors

together to explore their genealogy. An elementary school teacher in the community of North Preston, Melissa has attained a Bachelor of Arts degree, a Bachelor of Education and a Master of Education (Lifelong Learning) degree with a focus on Africentric Policy.

**Cynamon** is a 24-year-old resident of North Preston and descendent of Black Loyalists, War of 1812 Refugees and Maroons. Before this study, Cynamon had recently graduated from Cole Harbour High School. She also attended Ross Road Junior High and Nelson Wynder Elementary School. Cynamon started her first year of a Community College diploma program in Office Administration during this study and graduated from this program in 2016. She is currently enrolled in the Dental Assisting II program at NSCC and her aim is to become a Certified Dental Assistant, then further her education in the dentistry field in the future. Cynamon has worked as a secretary with the Halifax Regional School Board. She volunteers with the seniors of her community at the North Preston Community Centre.

**Reeny**, a 24-year old community member of North Preston, is an accomplished singer, songwriter and performing and recording artist. Coming from a musical family which has deep roots in the church – her grandfather is a pastor and her father is a deacon - Reeny started singing and playing the piano at age five. Reeny credits her time spent making music with her family and friends in the community church – Saint Thomas Baptist – as her inspiration. She developed her musical skills within the church, but also studies music at university level at St. Francis Xavier, with a major in jazz vocals. This songstress has attained numerous awards and honours including The Portia White Award for Excellence in Vocal Performance (2011), the African Nova Scotian Music Association's (ANSMA) Up and Coming Artist Award (2011), ANSMA's Rising Star Award (2012) and their Artist of the Year Award in 2015. Reeny has performed at various venues including the East Coast Music Awards (2016, 2017) and the Halifax Jazz

Festival. Additionally, Reeny serves as a musician in her church, where she sings and plays for three choirs connected to St. Thomas Baptist Church.

**Erin** is a 33-year-old resident of North Preston and descendent of War of 1812 Refugees. She attended elementary school in the community of North Preston at Nelson Whynder Elementary and in its feeder schools outside the community including Ross Road Junior High in Lawrence Town and Cole Harbour District High. Erin is a poet and also enjoys drawing and painting. During the time of this study, she started a Bachelor of Theology degree program at Acadia Divinity College. Erin has held a career in retail for numerous years and feels called to Christian ministry, hence her pursuit of higher education in theology. Erin is currently in her final year of her Bachelor of Theology degree at Acadia University.

**Roxanne** is a 50- year- old resident of North Preston and descendent of Black Loyalists. She was born and raised in the community of North Preston and is active there through her membership in church choirs, various ministries within Saint Thomas Baptist Church where her father is the pastor, and within Nelson Whynder School as a former member of the Student Advisory Council. She is a wife and mother of public school and post-secondary school aged children. She attended Nelson Whynder Elementary School, Ross Road School and Cole Harbour High. Roxanne serves as a manager within a communications corporation.

**Stephen** is a 35- year-old former resident who grew up in the North End of Halifax and who also has roots to North Preston through one of his parents. Stephen attended Joseph Howe Elementary School, Oxford Junior High and St. Patrick's High School. Husband and father of a toddler and Director of the Community Y in the North End, where many of this community's recreational activities take place, Stephen also played basketball for the University of Cape

Breton. He attained a Bachelor of Arts degree from University of Cape Breton in Sports and Recreation. Stephen has served as an Outreach Worker for Ceasefire, as Program Coordinator for Leave Out Violence (LOVE) and taught English as a second language in Korea for several years. Stephen volunteers as head coach of a Community Y boys' basketball team, and devotes much of his time to providing opportunities for youth, particularly those from within his North End community, to have a safe space where they can participate in recreational activities.

**Nadia** is a 40-year old resident of the North End community who grew up in Mulgrave Park. and attended public school there as well. A mother of elementary school -aged children, Nadia has a Bachelor of Arts degree, and has taken numerous university courses in Education. She has also been employed in the fields of education, finance and customer service.

**Melissa C.** is a 39-year old descendent of the communities of Africville and East Preston. She grew up in the North End of Halifax and attended school there as well. Melissa is a mother to an elementary school-aged child. She completed the Transition Year Program at Dalhousie University and worked in customer service at the time of this research. Melissa has volunteered at the Community YMCA, George Dixon Centre, and worked as at the Summer Day Camp at the Needham Centre and Ward 5. She has also volunteered in the women's group at New Beginnings Ministries and the youth group at Emmanuel Baptist Church. Melissa is now enrolled in the Social Services program at NSCC and aims to become a Youth Worker. She enjoys braiding hair, writing, drawing and photography and is the lead singer in the R&B group "Dyversity".

**Chriselle** is a 50-year old descendent of the War of 1812 Refugees and has lived in the North End Halifax all her life. Chriselle is mother to one public school aged child and two adult

children, one of whom completed a law degree. She completed her public-school education in the North End Halifax at St. Patrick's Alexander, Queen Elizabeth High and St. Patrick's High School. Chriselle has also attended college and numerous other adult and community education programs. Chriselle is an active member of her community and has worked in programming at the George Dixon Centre, in programming and childcare at the Parent Resource Centre, and has volunteered at the Black Educator's Association's Cultural and Academic Enrichment Program (CAEP). Chriselle is passionate about her community and her work as an Education Program Assistant which is the role in which she was employed at the time of this study.

**Sheldon** is a 43-year-old descendent of the Jamaican Maroons living in North End, Halifax. Having grown up in the North End Halifax community, Sheldon credits his upbringing in the church – Cornwallis Street Baptist Church – as playing an instrumental role in molding him into the person is today. Sheldon is a father to a public school-aged child holds a Corrections certificate and Bachelor of Arts Degree (Majoring in Criminology). He has had a career in Sherriff Services, Restorative Justice and as a Parole Officer in Nova Scotia. Since the study, Sheldon gained a position as African Canadian Student Support Worker within Halifax Regional School Board.

It is from the perspective for these adult learners that I took my lead. It is my aim that this research gives evidence of their value as historians, carriers of the culture and protectors of community stories. They are our modern-day griots.

### **The Significance of African-centered Storytelling**

It is important for me to emphasize that although stories and storytelling are universal, meaning that everyone appreciates stories and that across cultures they are a valuable resource

for attaining knowledge and understanding the world (Kovach, 2009, p. 97), storytelling and story hold particular significance for African peoples. Therefore, it is crucial that the storytelling, which took place during my research not be understood from a Western, Eurocentric perspective. Moreover, my research contests any idea or suggestion, which implies that storytelling and story are "apolitical" and "acultural" and "can be applied without consideration of the knowledge system that sustains [them]" (Kovach, 2009, p. 97). Rather, I argue the opposite. The way in which cultures use stories varies across the board (Kovach, 2009, p. 96). Without an understanding of the epistemological appreciation that inspires its use, the application of story and storytelling are weakened (Kovach, 2009). It is important that, for the purposes of my research, attention be directed towards African-centered storytelling and story because if this point is missed, more harm than good could result (Kovach, 2009).

Storytelling has traditionally been a social phenomenon for African peoples, therefore my use of it as research methodology emphasizes the significance of spiritual and relational knowledge production to my work. Historically, storytelling consisted of the griot - storyteller - who was respected as oral historian and who told stories to other community members (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 412). The griot was an honourable role in traditional African society as this person had the responsibility of ensuring that the connection between the cultural and historical past and present continued (Banks-Wallace, 2002). The relationship between the griot and others in the community is important to the stories that were being produced by this union. From an African centered perspective, stories signify relationships and bear witness to the spiritual/relational ontology, axiology and epistemology prevalent amongst people of African descent (Kovach, 2009; Chilisa, 2012). Generally, African peoples relate to each other through stories and as Mucina (2011) says, storytelling helps us to engage in a sincere way, a manner that

reflects the spiritual nature of our connections to each other in our daily lives. By acknowledging the Ubuntu worldview at work in the relational significance of storytelling and stories, Mucina (2011) explains that these research methodologies express the African centered reality that "I am because you are" (p.3). Such a philosophy lends itself to a relational accountability, not only of one person to another; not only with interpersonal relationships like those between research participants and researcher, but also with the entirety of creation.

Describing this relational accountability, Wilson (2008) explains:

It is with the cosmos; it is with the animals, with plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge. It goes beyond the individual's knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge...you are answerable to all your relations when you are doing research. (p.56)

Metaphorically, Wilson (2008) refers to research that is orchestrated in this relational manner, as a ceremony. Although Wilson (2008) is specifically speaking about research involving Indigenous peoples, the relational elements of traditional storytelling in research involving people of African Nova Scotian descent also is a ceremony.

### **Ethical Consideration**

A major characteristic of stories/storytelling is the idea that they are/it is constructed in a collective, collaborative manner, which does not support purely individualistic learning. In fact, this knowledge brings to view the fact that *all* community members, including the ancestors who have gone on before us, play a significant role in this knowledge production. From the anti-racist perspective, there is an acknowledgement that all parties involved in the research contribute knowledge to storying: researcher and participant (Dei, 2005). The community plays a pivotal role in the research. Anti-racist researchers recognize their participants as “knowers”,

as the “theorists”, the “experts”, and the “knowledge makers” (Dei, 2005). The community’s collective knowledge is the primary source of knowing. It is also a source of knowing from within the political location of race. As was my experience as lead researcher, these co-researchers also participated with me in the research as expert knowers called on to share their own lived experiences as knowledge in the research process. Knowledge-making was a community effort, thus the significance of the sixteen SOSF participants working with the lead researcher as co-researcher and centering the participants’ voices in this research.

Whereas in colonial/imperial contexts the colonizers lay claim to knowledge, taking possession of it as their own, the stories/storytelling of African-centered/Indigenous knowledge belongs to the community and no one person can claim ownership of it. "Members of the family generated this form of knowledge, and then passed it on to the next generation through storytelling, observation, ceremonies, or traditional rituals" (Wane, 2008, p.192). Because it is passed on orally, African Indigenous knowledge is stored in the mind; and since it is not recorded, "no one can claim title to it" (Wane, 2008, p. 192). Contrary to colonial knowledge, this collective process of knowledge production makes African Indigenous knowledge "accessible to everyone" (p. 192). In fact, the term "indigenous" specifies that this type of knowledge is accumulated by a community of persons which has had centuries of continued residence in a particular place and have a deep understanding of their place in the world (Dei, 2000, p. 114).

Storytelling also encourages a collaborative analysis of data when used in research. Huber (2009) incorporates collaborative data analysis in her use of a storytelling methodology called *testimonio*. *Testimonio* is described as "a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of



healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future" (p. 644).

Additionally, Huber says that through this dialogue participants were given an opportunity to connect their experiences with others and reflect on how major social and institutional structures have impacted these experiences. Through dialogue, the participants had a chance to "member-check" to exchange their lived experiences and theorize possible reasons for their experiences with racism, nativism, sexism, and classism during the course of their education (Huber, 2009, p. 647).

The Story Circle sessions provided a similar opportunity for the sixteen participants. As each participant shared their story, their fellow community members felt that their lived experiences which were usually comparable, were being validated. Hill Collins (1990) also speaks to the importance of using dialogue to assess knowledge claims. Although she directs her comments to Black women, I believe that they can also be applied to all people of colour. Hill Collins (1990) says, "new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community" (p. 212). Dialogue acknowledges the research participants as knowing objects and not unknowing subjects: "[D]ialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination" (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 47).

### **Stories and Knowledge Production**

The productive quality of stories as it relates to the ability to foster change also makes storytelling the ideal research methodology for my research. Describing knowledge production which is birthed through stories, Kovach (2009) states:

In oral tradition, stories can never be decontextualized from the teller. They are active agents within a relational world, pivotal in gaining insight into a phenomenon. Oral stories are born of connections within the world, and are thus recounted relationally. They tie us with our past and provide a basis for our continuity with future generations. (p. 94)

Stories serve a significant purpose in these spiritual relationships; that of providing "insight into a phenomenon" (Kovach, 2009, p. 94). Chilisa (2012) too speaks of the creative ability of stories and storytelling to engage both listeners and storytellers in the process of learning, enabling self-analysis and decision-making that foster "research-driven interventions and development programs" (p. 139).

Through the power of *Nommo*, an African term meaning "the productive word", persons engaged in storytelling are actually involved in the "creation of knowledge as a vehicle for improvement in human relations" (Reviere, 2001, p. 71). A dynamic force, Rodriguez (2011) also notes that unlike the written word and the read word, the "spoken word ...emphasizes action" (pp. 37, 38). Although the academy encourages us to read a lot to acquire knowledge and to write a lot to learn how to articulate knowledge, these forms of knowledge become secondary in importance to the spoken word to African descendant people, because the written and read word hardly ever "penetrates us" (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 38). "It remains outside of us - like a mango on the stomach of a hungry man" and "calls forth no courage" (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 38). Rodriguez (2011) says unlike the spoken word, reading and writing encourage contemplation instead of action and therefore do not threaten the status quo (p. 38). Whereas the written and read word may inspire different thinking, it is the spoken word that urges active resistance to colonization. For example, the African oral tradition and not the written or read

word was responsible for the survival of African people's history, heritage and culture, particularly in the diaspora, despite the horrific experiences faced by African people. Elabor-Idemudia says orality provides a "sense of strength, courage, and self-identity and ...give[s] voice to a range of cultural, social and political, aesthetic and linguistic systems...long muted by centuries of colonialism and cultural imperialism" (as cited in Nabavi, 2006, p.179). The spiritual nature of the spoken word which connects the speaker to those in her community, past, present and future, as well as aspects such as the land, nature and a higher power.

Rodriguez (2011) warns against the trend and pressures to "entrust everything" to the print and written word (p. 35). Through colonial/imperialist hegemony, we have been led to believe that the spoken word, because of its variability and changeability, is, therefore, unreliable, primitive, and "susceptible to chaos and anarchy" (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 35). However, the writer reminds us of the "epistemic violence" that the written and print word have constituted for oral-based peoples (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 36). "It requires us to believe things about the world that are simply foreign to us", Rodriguez (2011) says, and "[e]ventually, the anxieties these beliefs generate get hold of us, and this is where our anguish and torment begin" (p. 36). What Rodriguez (2011) describes here is precisely the displacement that ANS students encounter in public and post-secondary schools as they are faced with the tasks of reading and writing everything that is foreign and irrelevant to them because of the monovocal way knowledge is typically presented. However, it is the spoken word that connects to our spirits as African peoples, and which must be called upon to assist us in finding solutions to problems regarding culturally responsive education which is inclusive to all marginalized learners, including those of African descent. The spoken word provides us with the freedom to be our multi-storied selves;it

is unyielding and unrestrictive to one single history, life experience, option, reality, or perspective of the world (Rodriguez, 2011).

### **Multi-vocality versus the Single Story**

African-centered storytelling problematizes, resists, and rejects the telling of a single story about African people from a Western perspective and through my research, allows people of African descent to speak for and represent themselves. Nigerian storyteller Chimamanda Adichie (2009), explores the power of monovocality, particularly in further marginalizing colonized peoples in her lecture entitled, "The danger of a single story" (2009). In this presentation, Adichie (2009) discusses how people, specifically African people, have been dispossessed of our multiplicity of stories because one story, created about us by the dominant voice, has been enforced on us and its negative ideology perpetuated globally. Literature, Adichie (2009) argues, is the main culprit for the projection of the single story. Historically, through literature and the media a single story has been created about particular groups of people. When this story shows people as "one thing, as only one thing, over and over again [...] that is what they become" (Adichie, 2009, n.p.). The dehumanizing elements of monovocalism and the absence of balance of stories "robs people of dignity" (Adichie, 2009, n.p.). Chilisa (2012) warns: "Researchers need to be aware...that not all stories are valuable to the building of communities. Some stories are written from the perspective of the powerful and are therefore oppressive" (p. 139). Rather than falling into the trap of a single story, Chilisa (2012) encourages researchers to "critique androcentric, anthropocentric, racist, heterosexual-centered or ethically biased and stigmatizing stories that build communities on foundations of exclusion, silencing, exploitation, and oppression" (p. 139). It is impossible to connect with a person without

connecting with all of the stories of this person (Adichie, 2009). African-centered storytelling dismantles the dominant power of the West which does not only tell one negative story of African peoples, but which makes it that individual's or group's definitive story (Adichie, 2009). As Chilisa (2012) admonishes, it is also imperative that research participants are aware of the danger of perpetuating single stories that are exclusionary and hegemonic in the process of telling their own stories. Through this methodology, people of African descent can speak for themselves without marginalizing others, filling the gaps missing in research methodologies, literature, theories, and conceptual framework.

Just as it is important to acknowledge an individual as being multi-storied, it is equally critical to recognize the significance of the notion of a collective story. The collective story helps people of African descent to remember our Blackness, our spirituality (Mucina, 2011). In other words, it helps us to remember who we are as African people, an awareness that assists us in surviving the difficulties of everyday life. Even in cases where only fragments of our story remain because slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism caused some of us to forget, stifle and conceal our Blackness to survive, we can use these fragments to create a more holistic representation of African knowledges and help us appreciate our identities (Mucina, 2011). Mucina (2011) argues that within storytelling the individual and community connect and in this way "critical regeneration and honest self-criticism" can occur while the community is engaged in the creation of a collective vision (p.7). The Ubuntu structure is aimed at encouraging people of African descent to use their stories to communicate with other African people in intricate and challenging ways (Mucina, 2011). Mucina (2011) proposes that both the comfort and discomfort produced by these storying conversations are important. In such communication, solutions to difficulties faced by the community and creative strategies for community development can be

pursued collectively. Additionally, as people share various experiences in storytelling, teaching takes place (Mucina, 2011). The storytellers teach and the listeners learn as all are engaged in this informal classroom setting. This format models traditional African oral storytelling, which has been a teaching tool in various African societies.

### **Storytelling and Counter-stories**

Storytelling offers counter-stories, which challenge dominant ideologies and ways of knowing that further marginalize African Nova Scotians (Brigham, 2013; Huber, 2009). Storytelling challenges the norms and "wisdom" centered by society's dominant groups by providing a perspective through which we can understand entrenched belief systems differently and transform these beliefs (Chilisa, 2012, p.140). For persons pushed to society's margins, counter-stories can reveal new possibilities about their reality by presenting new options, which extend past their present state of being (Chilisa, 2012). Counter-stories also show those on the margins that they are not the only ones living in their position (Chilisa, 2012). They teach others that by combining components from the story and present reality, something new can be created, which Chilisa (2012) refers to as "another world which is richer than either the story or the reality alone" (Chilisa, 2012, p 140).

Whereas traditional ways of knowing typically ignore race, "Counter-stories play an important role in helping to develop a critique of liberalism, including colour blindness, meritocracy, and neutrality" (Brigham, 2013, p.123). It is important that counter-stories challenge these elements if the oppression facing African Nova Scotians in their formal education is ever to be taken seriously (Brigham, 2013, p.123). Recognized as one of the most essential traditions of African culture (Banks-Wallace, 2002), storytelling demonstrates the

significance that the researcher places on the cultural traditions of the research participants and their lived experiences (Chapman, 2005). Historically, African peoples in general, and multi-generational African Nova Scotians specifically have engaged in storytelling to have a 'voice' in an environment which was designed (consciously and unconsciously) to silence them (Gates, 1989). Counter-stories provide that opportunity for voice.

### **Resistance and Survival**

From a post-colonial theoretical perspective, traditionally, African peoples have told stories as a means of resisting colonial hegemony and, more specifically because of their experience with slavery, as a strategy for survival (Carter-Black, 2007). Africentricity joins postcolonial and anti-colonial theories in centering African peoples within their embodied cultural spaces, de-marginalizing the oral tradition and imploring multi-generational African Nova Scotian learners to tell their stories. Anti-racism, like the aforementioned theories, ties all three theories together because of its ability to empower marginalized, racialized persons by making their voices central to the research process. Anti-racist research values the emancipation of marginalized persons, engaging them in this emancipation, and centering oral communication as the main approach to knowledge-making and knowledge analysis (Okolie, 2005). Through the implementation of storytelling as counter-stories, my research highlights the importance of centering race in the stories we tell in academia and that alternative ways of answering questions pertaining to race exist (Chilisa, 2012). Counter-stories also provide an opportunity for critical reflection, specifically on issues like racism (Clover, 2006). Also, using storytelling will emphasize the importance of continuing to develop additional ways to center groups that have been marginalized in society and in research (Chilisa, 2012). Clover (2006) concurs, stating that

we need to pursue the development of innovative and "diverse learning activities aimed at interracial, cross-cultural, and antiracist dialogue and learning" (p. 48). The result of such strategies could be that learners previously marginalized are placed in a position where they can see themselves as being creators of culture and of novel cultural expressions and symbols (Clover, 2006). Such an experience has the potential of bringing freedom to these learners (Clover, 2006).

### **Stories and Identity**

Chawla (2011) says, "A people without stories are a people without a history. They are a people who could very well be obliterated from the earth because their stories are invisible and unheard" (p. 16). Stories do not only articulate a people's history, they articulate a people's identity and their reality, which in truth, are intimately connected to their history. In fact, the power of oral tradition manifests itself in stories that reclaim and confirm cultural identity and self-identity (Nabavi, 2006, pp. 175, 178). It is through stories that we are reminded of who we are and where and to whom we belong (Kovach, 2009, p. 94). Errante (2000) says all narratives are "narratives of identity" and therefore, they are representations of voice and reality (p. 16). Additionally, the way we tell our stories, the voice we use reflects what we think of ourselves and how we see ourselves. "Our notions of 'who we are' and how we express this in the stories we tell and remember, are influenced by local constructions of personhood" (Errante, 2000, p.26). Therefore, the participants' stories do not only present testimonies of their experiences in education in Nova Scotia, but also demonstrate the impact of the education they have received on their sense of identity as African descendant people.



The research speaks to the reality that stories also "give voice" not only to cultural identity, but also to an array of cultural, social and political, artistic and lexical systems, which Nabavi (2006) says have long been muted by the colonialism and cultural imperialism experienced by marginalized peoples for hundreds of years (p. 179). From anti-racist and Critical Race Theory perspectives, Clover (2006) and Brigham (2013) agree that since racism is so difficult to experience, discuss, and transform due to the pain, guilt, and reproof involved in such encounters, using the arts is often an effective way of engaging learners. Learners become engaged in "dialogue, critical and creative thinking, interacting, and racially connecting in new ways" (Brigham, 2013, p. 125). With the liberation of voice and of story comes the liberation of all forms of embodied expressions of marginalized peoples. Stories present a space where justice can be measured out to marginalized people who have suffered generations of identity distortion (Nabavi, 2006, p. 180). Smith (1999) reminds us that although our stories have been spaces of marginalization, "they have also become spaces of resistance and hope" (p. 4).

Having a memory that will not forget the cruelties of oppressive eras like slavery and colonialism is crucial to the validation of voice. Errante (2000) explains:

The voice of the oral history narrative not only emerges from the relationship between history and biography...but also within and between narrator and historian. Moreover, the historian - narrator dynamic is mediated in oral history work by the social construction of memory. (p. 25)

In terms of the educational experiences faced by persons of African descent, today such a memory would aid us in asking ourselves the questions about the colonization that presently takes place in public education, as Dei (1996) queries, "What voices, opinions and experiences

are being heard? Who is being silenced and how?" (p. 84). Dei (1996) notes the importance of including multiple voices from multiple locations in society in order to disrupt institutional and systemic racism and to tackle questions on social credibility, justice, fairness, and equity (p. 18) My research provided an opportunity for African Nova Scotian learners to speak about their experiences in their formal education and in so doing disrupt institutional and systemic racism which has been a traditional stronghold in the Nova Scotia public education system for centuries. Through the participants' sharing of their stories of experiences in formal education in comparison with their informal education experiences in their communities, they collaboratively discuss how African centered spirituality serves as an anti-oppressive agent for ANSs in their formal education. In these storytelling sessions, participants had an opportunity to address injustice, inequity, unfairness and lack of social credibility on the part of the Nova Scotia Department of Education which has already been well documented in the literature. Additionally, this research question required participants to reflect on their formal education system.

Errante (2000) also notes that qualitative researchers have recently taken an increasing interest in "the personal narrative as a valid articulation of individual and collective experience with the social, political, and cultural worlds of education" (p.16). In my research, I honour the personal narrative, the individual story told by one person to others, by the participant to other participants and to the researcher. I also value this opportunity to create what Errante (2000) calls an "interpersonal bridge" between myself, the narrator and the other participants, acknowledging the spiritual connections between the individual and the group and the inseparability of the two. This interpersonal bridge "is the emotional bond that ties people together... Such a bridge involves trust and makes possible experiences of vulnerability and

openness. The bridge becomes a vehicle to facilitate mutual understanding, growth and change" (Errante, 2000, p. 6).

### **The Story Circles**

My research took on the format of Story Circle sessions, involving groups of learners sharing their stories with each other in various formats. Story Circles are a type of focus group method which give each participant equal opportunity to be heard, a benefit that interview techniques which are Western-based do not allow (Chilisa, 2012; Archibald, 2008). In fact, the circle itself represents equality, as it is not hierarchical, positioning each person in it as equal to the others (Archibald, 2008). The circle symbolizes the holistic connections of all people with each other, nature, the ancestors and others in the world. The act of forming a circle during traditional storytelling, around a fire, singing, playing games, or during other special occasions is a common cultural occurrence amongst African and Indigenous peoples across the world (Chilisa, 2012). The cultural significance of the circle as a format in which African people come together for a specific purpose inspired me to incorporate it as the way the participants of my study would meet, interact and communicate. During Story Circle sessions, participants sat in a circle and because of this, all communication was face-to-face. This arrangement was the antithesis to having them sit in linear rows where some participants would have to speak to the backs of others.



*Figure 2.* This photo shows the Story Circle formation and seating arrangements used in all sessions (this one in Upper Hammonds Plains) and also depicts a display table of items reflective of African heritage. Photo by Dean Anderson, 2014. Used with permission.

The physical positioning of the participants in the circle fostered communalism and unity, and contributed to the building of trust amongst them, with the intention of making the Story Circle a place where each participant felt safe to share their stories. Errante (2000) suggests that "some memories shared by specific communities may require a group sharing experience to remember and tell..." (p.26). Therefore, it was crucial that the interpersonal bridge be built between all participants and to establish trust with the circle. Participants were invited to be a part of non-judgemental, respectful communication in which the group listened silently while each person shared their story (Chilisa, 2012). Chilisa (2012) explains, "The talking circle symbolizes and encourages sharing of ideas, respect for each other's ideas, togetherness, and a continuous and unending compassion and love for one another" (p. 213).

Like the Talking Circle in the *No More Secrets* two-part video series produced by Hamilton (1999) which provided insight to the African Nova Scotian community and others on

domestic violence against women connected to the African United Baptist Association's Women's Institute, the SOSF Story Circles also provided a safe space for sharing and layering of stories particular to formal education and community. Hamilton's (1999) film included African Nova Scotian women sharing experiences about abuse in the format of a story circle, similar to the format in my study.



*Figures 3, 4, 5. Participants passing ANS Walking Stick during Story Circle sessions in North Preston (3,5) and Upper Hammonds Plains (4). Centre photo shows Késa receiving the Walking stick from a participant. Photos by Dean Anderson, 2014. Used with permission.*



A sacred object - like a talking stick, a stone or basket - is commonly used to facilitate the communion of members of talking-circles. Such objects represent "collective construction of knowledge and the relations among group members" (Chilisa, 2012). In my research, we used an African Nova Scotian walking stick, carved from the roots of local trees by Avery Crawley, an African Nova Scotian from the community of East Preston, as the sacred object that was

passed to each speaker in the circle to indicate their turn (Archibald, 2008). In addition to the above stated significance of the sacred object, the walking stick also symbolized the fact that all participants of the Story Circle were committed to journeying together in this research project by sharing their experiences, their stories, with others in the circle. This was a journey that required the capacity to listen, learn and teach and give and receive respect throughout the process.

## **Method**

The topic and nature of my research, and my theoretical stance necessitated that I invite FANS to take center stage as knowers to answer the main research question, "What is the role of African centred spirituality in the education of First African Nova Scotian students?" As the primary researcher, I believe the most truthful and valid way I could gain answers to this question is by centering the voices and stories of First African Nova Scotian learners of all ages, who possess the lived experiences of being educated in the school system and post-secondary systems of Nova Scotia. Therefore, I situated First African Nova Scotians from three traditional and historic ANS communities - Upper Hammonds Plains, North Preston, and North End Halifax - as the expert knowers, the co-producers of knowledge with me in this research. My definition of First African Nova Scotians refers to descendants of the original settlers of African descent who have a long and continued history of residence in Nova Scotia. These African Nova Scotians are descendants of enslaved Africans (1686-1808), Black Loyalists (1775-1783), the Maroons (1796), and the Black Refugees (free and enslaved) from the War of 1812 (1813-1816) (Pachai & Bishop, 2006). The participants played the role of modern day griots sharing their experiences as learners with one another, engaging in dialogue and in so doing, validating each other's experiences. Their voices engage with each other's and mine throughout the study. I

believe that the collection of these stories reflects a powerful communal honesty, which represents authentic and valid answers to the research question.

I recruited participants in various ways to take part in the research. First, I circulated throughout the North Preston, Upper Hammonds Plains and North End Halifax communities print and digital copies of the poster/flyer advertising the opportunity and stating the criteria to be involved, as well as my contact email and phone number. I delivered copies of this poster to community centres within each of the three targeted communities: North Preston Community Centre, Upper Hammonds Plains Community Centre, and the Community YMCA and George Dixon Centre in the North End Halifax. I also posted advertisements in other main hub locations in these communities including the North Branch Library, YMCA Employment Centre, and churches including Cornwallis Street Baptist Church, Emmanuel Baptist Church and Saint Thomas Baptist Church. The flyer was circulated through various community email networks including that of the Association of Black Social Workers, Community Development Associations and those of various ANS community members. Additionally, I held two Information Sessions at the North Preston Community Centre for anyone who was interested in learning more about my research. Information about the research was announced during the Africville Reunion celebrations, during live announcements at all churches and I also attended an Association of Black Social Workers meeting to share the research with their members. I circulated information about the research by word of mouth to numerous leaders of community organizations including youth group leaders to promote the research opportunity. Of those interested, sixteen persons were eligible and available to participate in SOSF. Therefore, I invited these sixteen First African Nova Scotians to engage as Story Circle participants, to talk about

their experiences in public school and post-secondary education in Nova Scotia as well as their informal education experiences growing up in their home communities.

Participants aged 18 to 50 agreed to take part in six, two-hour Story Circle sessions on a weekly basis in their respective home communities: Upper Hammonds Plains, North Preston and North End, Halifax. They also agreed to the video-recording of each session to allow for accurate transcription of conversations. Involvement in the Story Circles was voluntary and appealed to the sixteen SOSF participants because of their genuine interest in the subject matter and the capacity to commit to six two-hour sessions to complete the research. No monetary compensation was offered to participants. However, at the end of each of the three Story Circles, in appreciation and acknowledgement of their contributions to the research as co-researchers, I presented each participant with an Africentric gift as a memento of their experience and symbolic of the relationship we had established as a circle of co-researchers. Each two-hour Story Circle involved a group of approximately 5-6 persons: five participants in Upper Hammonds Plains, six in North Preston, and five in North End, Halifax.

During the first half of each Story Circle, I invited local artists to present workshops on specific African-centred art forms which demonstrate the diversity of ways African people have historically told our stories. Eight community artists of African descent including Victoria Aidoo, Allister Johnston and David Woods, Connie Glasgow-White, Abena Green, Wendie Lee Poitras, and Marko Simmonds and Murlletta Williams presented interactive workshops on 1) African drumming and dance, 2) storytelling, 3) quilting, 4) spoken word poetry, 5) visual art, and 6) music/singing respectively. Each African-centred art form explored in the session's first half was



aligned with a main theme for the evening including: 1) Informal Education; 2) Community; 3) Spirituality; 4) ANS culture; 5) Formal Education; and 6) Racism and Oppression.



*Figure 6. Community Artists: Marko Simmonds, Abena Green, Victoria Aidoo, Wendie Poitras, Connie Glasgow-White, Allister Johnson, Murleta Williams, David Woods (left to right). Photos by Dean Anderson, 2014, 2015. Used with permission.*

<b>African Art-based Workshop</b>	<b>Story Circle Session Theme</b>
<i>Visual Art</i> Facilitator - Wendie Lee Poitras	Informal Education
<i>African Drumming and Dance</i> Facilitator - Victoria Aidoo	Formal Education
<i>Music and Singing</i> Facilitators: Marko Simmonds; Murleta Williams	Spirituality
<i>Storytelling</i> Facilitators: David Woods; Allister Johnston	African Nova Scotian Culture
<i>Quilting</i> Facilitator: Connie Glasgow-White	Community
<i>Spoken Word Poetry</i> Facilitator: Abena Green	Racism and Oppression

During the second half of the Story Circle sessions, participants were given the chance to connect the contents of the workshop with the telling of stories related to one of the six significant themes. I engaged the participants in conversation by asking prompt questions. We passed the Walking Stick from one speaker to another to demonstrate our respectful journey together of knowledge-making in this research. As we talked, we shared stories connected to each respective theme.

Throughout the research project I engaged in what Kovach (2009) refers to as "honouring 'the talk'" to acknowledge the privileging of story and provide openings for narrative in my research (p. 99). Whereas researchers have used various methods including interviews, research

circles and conversations to create openings for narrative, I employed different forms of embodied knowledge to offer diverse ways in which the participants could engage in storytelling within Story Circle sessions and beyond these sessions in their daily lives. Whereas participants were invited to tell their stories orally in a traditional African format, they were also given the opportunity to learn about other embodied forms including singing, spoken word, visual art, quilting, dancing, and drumming as alternative ways of telling their stories. Paying careful attention to the need for reciprocal appropriation by the researcher in a manner that will benefit the participants as much as the researcher, I arranged for ANS community "experts"/ local talents skilled in the above-mentioned art forms to present one-hour long workshops to the participant groups. Where appropriate, I compensated the Community Artists who facilitated these sessions with gift cards to local service stations or money to cover the cost of fuel for their vehicles for each session they led. When the Circle session was being held in the facilitator's home community making travel unnecessary, I gave the facilitator an Africentric gift of equal value to the cost of the fuel card. These workshops provided participants with an opportunity to learn about another art-informed method through which they could tell their stories about their experiences.

As participants learned about traditional and innovative ways in which African people have been telling our stories over time, I also invited them to feel free to use any of the techniques or ideas inspired by these different art forms, including the art-form itself, to express stories about their own experiences. It was my hope that participants would develop skills in telling stories using these various embodied knowledge/arts informed formats and decide to express themselves through these ways of storytelling during the research project, in response to my prompt questions. Although my expectation was not realized as envisioned, some

participants made deep connections with various art-forms as it relates to African Nova Scotian identity, culture, history and heritage, and as you will read in upcoming chapters, expressed great appreciation for the opportunity to learn about these important aspects of African culture.

Participants shared with me that these research sessions were their first opportunity to learn about these art-forms, so, I respected their choice to use traditional storytelling to respond to my prompts, rather than using any of the art-forms shared. Upon reflection, I realized that my aspirations may have been too ambitious for the time-frame and nature of my study. The Artists involved spent years developing their craft, so a one-hour session would have been insufficient to teach the novice participants the art in a way that they would be comfortable using it to tell their stories during the second portion of the Story Circle. However, I was successful in demonstrating the significant value I placed on the knowledge participants shared with me in this research by reciprocating knowledge sharing with them through the workshops. Since the sessions also demonstrated the important link between the significance of African people telling their stories the Story Circle were essential to the success of the research. The offering of a variety of ways to tell their stories gave participants a forum "to relate their stories in a holistic fashion" which is unfragmented and non-structured (Kovach, 2009, p. 99).

I also gave participants the option of sharing their stories at the end of the research sessions, in whatever form they chose, with an audience of community members. Clover (2006) notes that such a showcase is an important aspect of the dissemination of knowledge produced by the research project, and has the potential of adding further insight on the data collected. Sharing what one has learned is also a way of reciprocating in the research process. Archibald (2008) speaks to this responsibility on the part of research participants as reflecting one's conscientiousness of others in a way that one desires to share new knowledge with others. I left

the option for this showcase up to them and for various reasons including the need for additional time to plan and coordinate efforts for such a showcase, participants decided against this option.

In designing this research, I considered various factors that would facilitate and support my participants' participation in Story Circle sessions. All sessions took place in the evening to allow for their work and class schedules as most participants held daytime jobs and some were enrolled in university classes. As was previously mentioned, Story Circles were held in the community centre of participants' local community, which also facilitated access and eliminated transportation as a barrier for those without personal means of transportation. Since most participants still lived within their home community and the community centre is centrally located to these communities, they did not have far to travel – some could walk – to participate in Story Circle sessions. Those who lived outside of the community were able and willing to drive in for each session. Additionally, it was important to me that the spaces where these sessions were held were spaces where participants would feel safe and free to express themselves.

Childcare was available upon request and in the case of the North End Story Circle, childcare was provided throughout the six sessions to three participants' families who required this service in order to participate. This arrangement made sessions more accessible to participants with small children. I also arranged to have access to culturally appropriate, complimentary counseling support for my participants, should the need arise. Through my relationships with numerous members of the Association of Black Social Workers, I was able to arrange for two counselors from that group to provide free counselling, however, no participants accessed these services. Interestingly, participants spoke to the therapeutic nature of the research

process as they felt the Story Circle sessions provided them with an opportunity to vent or “get some things off their chest” so they could better cope with the realities of their day-to-day lives.

All Story Circle sessions were video-recorded by one of the research participants of the Upper Hammonds Plains group. During the Story Circle sessions in this participant’s group, they set the camera in focus before the session and adjusted it during the session as required. In the other two Circles, I used these video recordings to transcribe the stories of each session and formulate a thematic analysis to investigate the research questions. At the end of the study, I reviewed the information gathered to arrive at common themes throughout the three Story Circles and examined stories presented under each theme. I also analyzed themes that were unique to a particular Story Circle group. The video recordings provided me the privilege to re-live each Story Circle session, as an observer, rather than as a participant.

The processes of story-gathering and theory-building provided me with a better understanding of the role that spirituality and storytelling can play in the education of African Nova Scotians and other learners. The arts, or embodied knowledge offer "accessible, appropriate, and valuable tools of learning for change" (Clover, 2006, p. 47). Such tools are useful in re-focusing education on equality, empowerment, and critical awareness of racism and the hidden assumptions of White privilege (Clover, 2006). A thorough understanding of these matters is important for future intervention in the field of education, particularly if public school and adult education spaces are to be inclusive spaces where all races, cultures, and knowledges are represented and none are relegated to the margins of formal education.

In addition to the traditional functions of storytelling, in the diaspora a new and primary function has emerged: its significant role of nurturing and healing the spirit self (Banks-Wallace, 2002). It is my hope that through the findings and dissemination of this research, resulting from

the participants' remembering and voicing of educational experiences, that additional options for facilitating positive change in education and healing for ANS learners will be readily available as resources for educators and education systems. My research demands that we all ask ourselves the question, "How can students be expected to learn and thrive in educational institutions that negate their voices, hearts and spirits?" When we reflect upon history, not much has changed in education for ANS learners. Though time has moved on, the movement in education seems to be cyclic for these students and the communities to whom they belong. African peoples and their allies need to continue to question and present our views on why this is so. We need to find new approaches and engage our spirits to address the haunting issues facing ANS in education. These approaches need to be action-oriented, placing race and ANS people at the center of the analysis. It is my belief that storytelling and Story Circles, through the lens of Africentric, postcolonial, anti-colonial, anti-racist, African/Black feminism and womanism philosophies, can help to deliver on that. Through storytelling and Story Circles I examine the prospects of including African-centered spirituality in the education of ANS learners and, in so doing, possibly envision a future in education that breaks out of the historic cycle and into a movement towards holistic learning for persons of African descent, and all others.



## ***Set Our Spirits Free***

*By: Késa Munroe-Anderson*

Let our spirits be! Set our spirits free!  
 These stories validate our cultural memory!  
 Let our spirits be! Set our spirits free!  
 We embrace African Centred spirituality!

In these Africentric circles our spirits find voice,  
 Sweet release to speak our stories, African Nova Scotian stories,  
 silenced in ivory towers - schools and academia,  
 but cradled like a foetus in the wombs of our spirits.  
 The circle forms - the birthing begins and brothers and sisters  
 Encourage the delivery of a complexity of stories.  
 Griots push and drum and dance our stories,  
 Push and quilt and sing our stories,  
 Push and preach the Spoken Word of our stories,  
 Push, take pen and draw, take tongue and story-tell the stories of our lives  
 "Remove the cord from round your neck and join in!", the griots beckon  
 And remember that there are many African ways to birth a story.

Let our spirits be! Set our spirits free!  
 Make room, centre our voices and our identities!  
 Let our spirits be! Set our spirits free!  
 Recognize the wealth of knowledge in our communities!

And who will be the midwives and make way for our knowledge to unfold  
 Which researchers will unearth the stories rarely sought out or hardly told?  
 And "truth" - who will define it? Midwife or community?  
 Will you validate our knowledge, truth, stories and identity?  
 When baby born, who will protect her, who reserves the right to give her a name?  
 Who will take credit as her mother? We all did the work, but who will gain?  
 Will one voice further subjugate us? Will the "lions" have space to speak?  
 We must do this work together, partnership and collaboration seek.  
 Academia and community, hand in hand our strengths reveal.  
 Spirituality in action, moving forward the past to heal

### *(Negro Spiritual)*

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child  
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless child  
 Sometimes I feel like a motherless child  
 A long way from home  
 A long way from home...

## Chapter Four

### **“Going Home”: Claiming our Spiritual Spaces**

Majoritarian stories have been used to enchain, disempower and disengage people of African descent. Therefore, it is only logical that the stories of African people are used proactively by African peoples to liberate, empower and engage ourselves. A crucial first step towards this move of liberation and empowerment involves creating spaces for the recovery of stories. By serving as spaces where the reclaiming of African-centred knowledge could occur, the Story Circle sessions exemplified the principle of Sankofa: returning home to recover the best of African culture (Akua, 2012). The stories/testimonials do not only chronicle the existence of ANS people, but they validate their lived experiences. In this way, the stories shared in the Story Circle sessions counter the "single story" of deficiency often told about African Nova Scotians, and specifically African Nova Scotian learners and their communities by uncovering aspects of ANS culture, history and heritage connected to our ancestral home of Africa and often omitted in formal education settings.

Both the structure and content of Story Circle sessions, modelled on various forms of African indigenous knowledges, demonstrate the wealth of knowledge that ANSs have available for formal systems of education. Each session represented a validation of these learners and their knowledge, a kind of "going home" to accessible and familiar ways of knowing, culture, history and heritage. The Story Circle sessions epitomize a strengths and value-based approach to formal education that is founded on a perspective of abundance showing the invaluable contributions to education that African Nova Scotian knowledge can make if embraced as legitimate.

The response of Stephen, a North End Halifax participant, during the African drumming and dancing workshop led by Victoria Aidoo emphasizes the significance of adult educators creating a learning space where learners can return "home" to engage their own knowledge in an affirming environment. Stephen says, "When I came [to tonight's session] the first thing I said was 'We're going home.' That's what I said when I saw the drums, I saw the instruments, I said, 'We're going home.'" (Stephen). Merely *seeing* Victoria's drums and instruments in the Story Circle workshop gave Stephen a sense of comfort, and a relational connection to the space, the other participants in the space, and the knowledge that was about to be made in the room.



*Figure 7.* Participants in the North End Halifax Story Circle participating in Victoria Aidoo's African drumming workshop. Photo by Dean Anderson, 2015. Used with permission.

Metaphorically in this research, "Going home" signifies a return to:

- A place and state of belonging and ownership
- A space where we can feel free to be ourselves
- Our knowledge and ways of knowing
- A centering of African Nova Scotians as the experts in our own experiences and knowledge and
- A validation of African Nova Scotian people as knowers, actively producing knowledge.

According to Stephen, as a consequence of African Nova Scotians generally not having the opportunity to "go home" in our formal learning and everyday spaces, "[W]e're so far gone from who we were", "[W]e're losing touch" (Stephen). I agree with Stephen that there is a need to "go home" to reclaim wholeness and to resist alienation, oppression, subjugation, and marginalization, which threaten self-determination and identity. Rather, a return "home" encourages the embrace of the whole selves of ANS learners, which cannot be separated from their communities. "Going home" precludes a call for the acknowledgment of ANS knowledge and the ANS individuals and communities that produce this knowledge.

### *Community Narrative*

Story Circle sessions represented a kind of "homecoming" in form and function. These sessions were the ideal incubator to produce what I call "Community Narratives": stories, knowledge about community, produced by community which connect its past, present and future. Community Narratives provide a space for self-identity/self-praise stories which convey important information about community (e.g. the history, families, valued attributes of community, significant historical developments, etc.) (Chilisa & Preece, 2012). Based on an

African-centred view of spirituality in which community members' way of seeing and understanding the world and being in the world is founded on relationships, these self-definition stories emerge from people's relationships with others. Community Narratives and their subset self-identity stories arise from the lived reality of community members and a concept of reality that everything and everyone in the community - all people, land, structures, ancestors, nature, etc. - are connected. The worldview is holistic and the individual and community are inseparable (Chilisa 2012).

Distinctly Africentric, Community Narratives validate the perspective that individuals cannot be understood as separate from their environment and that knowledge is a socially constructed phenomenon which occurs only through relationships existing between people, the environment and those who have gone on before us (Chilisa & Preece, 2012). Hence the significance of situating the collection of data within the participants' home community and in Story Circles rather than one-on-one interviews. It was important that the sessions be held in a physical space with which participants and their communities shared a spiritual connection or relationship. Additionally, hosting Story Circles of community members over the course of six weeks provided an opportunity for participants to bond, gain affirmation from each other's stories and knowledge-make together. Although all participants within each circle knew each other prior to the first session, the journey of story-sharing throughout the six sessions brought them closer in relationship. As the lead researcher, the development of relationships was also key for me during the Story Circle process. I was acquainted with most of the participants prior to the research, however, the exchange of stories nurtured a deeper relationship between me and each of the participants. We all entered into a more intimate relationship which reflected community due to our Circle experiences.

The participants' tellings of Community Narratives were used as tools for the construction of meaning, identity, community organization and development. From an Africentric perspective, it is important that processes (e.g. Community Consultations, research, etc.) on and with the community be centred in the community, involving community members (a diverse representation) who define themselves and speak for themselves in relation to their communities. Community Narratives, from this perspective, centre community members in identifying, analysing and solving problems. Therefore, community members are the knowers, the griots and the knowledge producers/ “owners” in this community narrative process. My research exemplified all of these characteristics. Community members from North Preston, Upper Hammonds Plains and North End -Halifax were the expert co-researchers and problem solvers working along with me, the lead researcher, and sessions were held within each of these communities, the centres of knowledge production, as a result.

As co-researchers are owners of the knowledge of this research, it was crucial for me to acknowledge their right to be named and not remain anonymous in this study. Not only is naming these participants critical to the building of the relationship between me and the co-researchers, but as important, it underscores the significance of tracing and accrediting the knowledge back to those who produced it. From the relational perspective, which is pivotal to this research, the power of the stories told by the co-researchers would be lost if tellers remained anonymous (Chilisa, 2012). Fifteen of the sixteen research participants agreed to have their names used in the research while one person chose to have a pseudonym substitute used. The result was a group of co-researchers as participants including Jareeca, Wendell, Myles, Dean, Zhané, Roxanne, Archy, Reeny, Cynamon, Erin, Melissa C., Nadia, Sheldon, Melissa D., Stephen, and Chriselle. The Community Narratives that these co-researchers produced throughout the research created a space

of liberation where they had room to reclaim "lost identities", "dignity, respect...knowledge and values" and to create spaces for significant expressions of the self in community (Chilisa & Preece, 2005, p. 45).

Stories also provide an entryway for dialogue to happen where information can be shared, clarification can be brought, and analysis can take place. Narrative, from the perspective of storytelling in the African tradition, is significantly valued as a central, spiritual and respected aspect of the African oral tradition. As was true of African stories in the past (Chilisa & Preece, 2005), stories told by my participants and workshop facilitators were/are being used to “collect, deposit, store, and disseminate information”, particularly history over the course of time (p. 51). Stories have been used as tools of socialization, they have had a didactic purpose and they comment on society and life of African peoples. Similarly, relationships between community members were deepened during the Story Circle sessions. Participants learnt together and taught each other through the sharing of information about community and community members' experiences. Both teaching and socialization also resulted from the one-hour arts-based workshops where participants were led by local artists into a closer relationship with their cultural selves. Reminiscent of traditional African storytelling, the stories told by Set Our Spirits Free (SOSF) participants reflect the values, belief systems, relationships, and family and community histories of their ANS communities. Stories take on the power of Nommo - the spoken word - which demands action. In my research, stories were not told for the sake of speaking, sharing and analysing, but to incite positive action.

Three characteristics distinguish Community Narrative-led processes from other processes (Chilisa & Preece, p. 49, 2005) and these were also significant aspects considered throughout the design, process and methodology of my study:

- The spaces where knowledge is produced
- The dialogue during the knowledge production
- The power relations between facilitators and participants

*The spaces where knowledge is produced* describes physical spaces that suit the nature of the knowledge being constructed. Such places might include a community centre, church, common gathering spot within the community, a place within the community where members feel most comfortable and welcomed; a space “owned” by the community. The preparation of this physical space also plays an important role in nurturing the process of knowledge production.

*The dialogue during the knowledge production* is a critical aspect of my study and is crucial to stories being told by the community in an inclusive fashion, which honours all voices in the community. Dialogue is humanizing speech (Freire, 1970; Taylor, 2016) which makes room for marginalized voices. Through it knowledge is created and solutions found to address specific issues faced by community members.

*The Power Relations Between Facilitator and Participants* exemplifies the non-hierarchical way knowledge is created, shared and received through Community Narratives. Everyone engaged in the making of these stories is a knowledge producer and to equalize the ground within the circle, the knowledge shared belongs to everyone. Everyone had the responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of all stories told and information shared within the Story Circles. Also, each participant is a learner and a teacher, simultaneously.

I will further explain the significance of these three characteristics of Community Narratives to my study in the following sections.



## **The Spaces where Knowledge is Produced**

A significant component of this research was the selection and preparation of the physical Story Circle space for each session. Generally, in African cultures, community-centred knowledge is best produced in particular spaces that suit the production of that kind of knowledge (Chilisa & Preece, 2005). Since my research was based in African Nova Scotian communities and engaged African Nova Scotians as participants, the unconventional design of my research methodology required this distinct departure from traditional ways of carrying out research and more traditional sites for knowledge production and collection. Therefore, I took special care in choosing suitable physical spaces to reflect the spiritual process planned for the research. Each community centre's historic and geographic location, and its presence as a central gathering place and spiritual structure in the community explains the importance of holding sessions in these spaces.

Contrary to the belief that they are naturally occurring, spaces are socially produced and result from historical events, interactions, policies and trials, whether planned or haphazard (Nelson, 2008). Hence the significance of me paying careful attention to space in my research as a resistance to the colonial, dominant culture trajectory which has historically “defined, confined, regulated, and eradicated groups marked as racially inferior through the control of space” (Nelson, 2008, p. 28). Not only is it important to consider the physicality of space, but also the metaphorical implications of what spaces symbolize and how they impact upon persons who reside in them. The power of spaces to dictate “how their occupants know themselves” and how outsiders come to know them is significant (Nelson, 2008, p. 30). Particularly, in my research, like Nelson (2008), I understand the severity of the “dynamic relationship between space and subjects: we understand who we are according to the place we inhabit; the place we inhabit, in part, determines who we can be” (Nelson, 2008, p. 32). Thus, the importance of staking out a space for my research which

is a place of “home”, belonging, and ownership to research participants. It was imperative that the research spaces be places where participants have the freedom to define themselves, and where their stories and identities are not at risk of being regulated, invalidated or eradicated through the processes of space as has been the case for First African Peoples (FAPS) throughout the course of history. In numerous ways, the significance of space to this research sets it apart from other more traditional Eurocentric research processes.



*Figure 8.* The Upper Hammonds Plains Community Centre, site of one Story Circle group. Photo by Késa Munroe-Anderson, 2018.

### **Upper Hammonds Plains Community Center**

The Upper Hammonds Plains Community Center (Figure 6) is the site of that community's one room schoolhouse. This building was a segregated school for the African Nova Scotians living in that community which remained open until 1968 when these learners were integrated into the Hammonds Plains Consolidated School with their White counterparts. In 1816, one year after the arrival of the War of 1812 Black Refugees to Upper Hammonds Plains, a one-room schoolhouse

and a small house for a Schoolmaster were built for the Black community through government funding (Pachai, 1990, p. 50; Clayton, 1984). The same occurred previously in the same year for the community of Preston. As in Preston, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel also provided a White Teacher for this school in Upper Hammonds Plains (Pachai, 1990). A formal school for African Nova Scotians in Upper Hammonds Plains was built in 1859, but was destroyed by fire in 1870. The sporadic, inequitable and careless manner in which formal education was provided to this community was a reflection of the provision of this service to other ANS communities, as well. A report on “Coloured Schools” for the period 1895-96 states that:

The African section above Hammonds Plains, with a school population of upwards of 50, has been without a school for the last five years. After much laudable effort they have succeeded in providing suitable, accommodation, and will commence a section in August, 1894. (cited in Pachai, 1990, p. 89)

Under the leadership of Madeline Symonds, a revered ANS educator, community members lobbied government in the early 1940s for funding to build a new school to replace their school house which, by this time, had been condemned. The new school was built in 1946 with expansions taking place in the 1950s and 1960s. However, with the racial integration of schools, the building was repurposed as a replacement for a smaller building being used as a community hall. The one room schoolhouse built in 1946 is part of the present structure of the Upper Hammonds Plains Community Centre. In 1816, the Crown (the government of the day) gave the Black Refugees one hundred pounds and the reserved lands for a school, and this property later became the home of the current center (Evans, 1993). The "School House", as the centre of the UHP community is still affectionately called by community members, is a physical reminder of the significant role that formal education played in the lives of ANS.



*Figure 9. The North Preston Community Centre, site of the second Story Circle Sessions. Photo by Viola Fraser, 2017. Used with permission*

### **The North Preston Community Centre**

The North Preston Community Centre was built on land, which is said to have belonged to Charles Whynder, the son of Nelson Whynder - a renowned businessman and farmer from North Preston after whom the community's elementary school is named. Whereas Nelson Whynder donated the land for the building of the school which is now named after him (Mahoney, 2005), his son, Charles Whynder, also donated land to his community for recreation purposes. This selfless investment of land into the social development of their community demonstrates a legacy of North Preston community members giving back to their community for the good of all. Years after the community's previous center was destroyed by fire caused by arson in 2000, the Halifax Regional Municipality in collaboration with the federal and provincial governments funded a new multi-purpose building as a result of North Preston community members' urging that such a facility was a "top priority" for the community (Nova Scotia Provincial Government, 2002). Whereas the former community centre was a space used for various kinds of community gatherings including wedding receptions, parties and meetings, the new center has been expanded to include

an indoor basketball court, a gym, Senior's Room, recording studio, craft room, multi-purpose rooms and offices for full-time staff. Additionally, this building houses RCMP, health and social services. The centre continues to serve as a main hub in the community for persons of all ages.



*Figure 10.* The Community YMCA in North End Halifax, site of the third Story Circle sessions. Photo by Késa Munroe-Anderson, 2018.

### **The Community YMCA – North End, Halifax**

Described as “More than just a building”, the Community YMCA is “the centre of the North End community” (YMCA, n.d.). Opened in 1951 under the name “Brunswick Street Division”, the Community YMCA was established in the Old Children’s Library (YMCA(b), n.d).

Currently, it is a space where all community members are welcome and programs offered are designed to nurture the spirit, body and mind of individuals, families and the community as a whole. Although the North End's cultural make-up, at the time of the study - unlike Upper Hammonds Plains and North Preston - includes people from a mosaic of cultural and racial backgrounds, the non-White residents of the North End community have historically been predominantly African Nova Scotian. African Nova Scotian presence in the North End Halifax spans several centuries. It has been documented that enslaved African people were sold at public auctions, which took place in Halifax (Erickson, 2004; Grant, 1990; Grant 1980). Oral history also maintains that enslaved Africans who served at Governor's Farm which was established in 1780, raising produce to be sold to the military and nearby population, were the first to settle in Africville, in close proximity to the farm (DBDLI, 2015). Although, it is not certain that all were enslaved Africans, there were 400 African people living in Halifax in the 1780s (Africville Genealogy Society, 110). According to Erickson (2004):

Traditionally, most black Haligonians have lived in the North End, beginning not only in Africville but also around Maynard and Creighton Streets. Black Haligonians have owned property around Maynard and Creighton for more than 150 years, going back to when the streets developed out of Maynard's and Creighton's fields. (p.128)

Also, when the Jamaican Maroons arrived in Halifax in 1795, through the Crown's mandate, they were also housed along the Bedford Basin. These Maroons helped build Citadel Hill as well as the Governor's house. War of 1812 refugees who found themselves in desperate circumstances after their arrival in Halifax too are said to be amongst those who comprised the population of the North End in the early days. An additional dimension to the social fabric of the North End, Halifax, particularly as it relates to the composition of First African Nova Scotians

who live in this community, is the story of the City of Halifax's expropriation of Africville between 1967-1970. A large number of Africville community members were forced from their homes and community to public housing in Uniacke Square. With such displacement and alienation from the land they once called home, there was a need to establish a sense of belonging and ownership in this new place. The Community YMCA, then, became one site where these ANSs could feel a sense of belonging, ownership and home. This centre continues to offer numerous recreational programs including basketball and various camps, which foster excellent citizenship and leadership skills and behaviours to serve, particularly, the youth of this community.

Beyond the physical structures of the buildings, which housed the research sessions was the consideration of the land on which the buildings rest, as sacred. Although historically African Nova Scotian communities were perceived as the essential "Promised Land" and refuge from the oppression of slavery in the United States for First African Nova Scotian Peoples including the Black Loyalists and War of 1812 Refugees, this single story requires an expansion. Another story would speak to land as representations of a political will to contain ANSs to marginalized areas, far away from the resources required to survive and thrive, and geographically separate from the dominant population. Another narrative would question if "the powers that be" intended for these First African Peoples (FAPS) to live in desperate conditions. Some Black Loyalists and War of 1812 Refugees suffered from death or near-death conditions because of starvation and a harsh climate to which they were not accustomed. The refrain of African people being granted rocky, unproductive land which was difficult to toil as a disingenuous fulfillment of a Crown promise is too common a story (Erickson, 2004; Pachai & Bishop, 2006 Smith 2011). Often added to this was their receipt of less land than promised and often without title deeds to the lands as was the case with Black Loyalists who arrived between 1783 and 1785 (Smith, 2011; Hamilton, 1994) and were

promised land if they fought for the British; the Jamaican Maroons who were brought from Jamaica to Halifax by force in 1796 (Grant, 2002) and were given land on which they would settle in the Preston and Maroon Hill areas; and the War of 1812 Refugees who arrived between 1813 and 1815 and were promised land for fighting with the British against the Americans (Pachai, 1997). This reflected the sentiment of the dominant culture who were in competition with these new arrivals for resources and employment and who saw these African Americans as a threat to their wellbeing. People of African descent were seen as a gross inconvenience, racism reigned rampant, and they were treated as second-class citizens (Pachai, 1997).

History makes it clear that Nova Scotia as a home destination was *chosen for* enslaved African peoples, the Black Loyalists, Maroons, and War of 1812 Refugees (Pachai & Bishop, 2006). When First African Nova Scotians were given a choice in the land they could call their own, they chose prime land in ideal locations. An example of this was the two ANSs from Upper Hammonds Plains - William Brown and William Arnold - who in 1848 each purchased title deeds to two hectares of land previously owned by White settlers on the Bedford Basin in a community, which later became known as Africville. (Erickson, 2004; Pachai, 2007; Africville Genealogy Society, 2010; Smith, 2011). Other ANSs from Preston and surrounding areas including the Carvery, Hill and Fletcher families, also moved to Africville (Pachai, 2007). When questioning why persons who had already received land grants in Upper Hammonds Plains and Preston would venture out to purchase and/or settle in Africville, Pachai (2007) informs on the indomitable determination of these persons to survive and thrive:

Bedford Basin provided good fishing prospects; wage labour was promising in Halifax where a steamship mail service was introduced in 1839; shipbuilding, dockyard work, road construction on Campbell Road and the beginning of the intercontinental railroad in 1854



added to the prospects generated by a booming trade with the United States. When pioneering blacks were responding seriously to employment opportunities, and buying pieces of land which they could call their own, they were certainly combatting the myth that it was only welfare grants that were keeping them alive. (p.98)

Therefore, Africville represents chosen land, purchased by ANSs who have been empowered economically to make such a choice.

Whereas, two of the three locations for my research are similar in that they exist on the community land of ANSs in Upper Hammonds Plains and North Preston, the story of the Community Y in the North End Halifax is different. With the expulsion and forced removal of Africville community members and the destruction of Africville by government in the 1960s and up to 1970 came the relocation of the former Africville residents to government housing in North End Halifax. The Community Y, which was established in 1951, became a main hub of recreation and social development for ANSs and others within this community. All three research spaces were chosen because of their representation of spaces where ANSs express and sense a pride of ownership.

Further to the representation of space in the specified community land and structures, paying careful attention to details of the physical environment of each community centre's meeting room was crucial to my research. I set out to create a space where spirituality would not only be welcomed, but also nurtured and cultivated. It was important for me that my participants felt a sense of ownership and pride within the Story Circle environment. The space needed to reflect them; their histories, culture, heritage, and look and feel like "home". Tables were draped with brightly coloured and richly designed African fabric including kente cloth and displayed artifacts

including a djembe drum, quilt, and African Nova Scotian made baskets created by Clara Gough - a descendent of renowned basket-maker Edith Clayton. I displayed, newspaper clippings of well-known African Nova Scotians and books on African Nova Scotian history like *The Spirit of Africville* and Carrie Best's autobiography, *That Lonesome Road*, children's books including Shauntay Grant's *Up Home* and *Viola Desmond Won't Be Budged*, and photos of famous persons of African descent like Portia White, Viola Desmond, Maya Angelou, President Barak Obama, Nelson Mandela and others. Various kinds of ornaments portraying aspects of African significance like the Sankofa bird, the unity circle symbol and jazz figures; as well as other forms of visual arts including prints and Black dolls were displayed in and around the periphery of the Story Circle.



*Figure 11.* Display table at Upper Hammonds Plains Story Circle session, showing a collage of items including books, art, clothing, ornaments and other items produced by and/or depicting people of African descent. Photo by Dean Anderson, 2014. Used with



*Figure 12,13.* Additional display tables during the Upper Hammonds Plains Story Circle sessions, showing various items of African heritage. Photo by Dean Anderson, 2014. Used with permission.

An antithesis to typical school spaces in Nova Scotia which alienate and further marginalize ANS students, the environment which enclosed the Story Circle reflected the lived experiences of African people in general and African Nova Scotians in particular. During her final workshop with the North End Story Circle, after having facilitated two previous Story Circles sessions in Upper Hammonds Plains and North Preston, artist Wendie Poitras commented on the significance of such an environment:

I realize every time you set up all these artifacts how important it is to our community to see ourselves reflected in the materials, in the stamps, in the... books, in the statues, in the dolls. And how these things are little things, but they're really, really big things.

Poitras' statement reflects my efforts – in the physical Story Circle surroundings - to represent the multiple realities (Sheared, 1994) of the research participants' lived experiences, culture, history and heritage which are often excluded in the surroundings of formal education institutions. Some North Preston participants did acknowledge that although the number of teachers of African descent at Nelson Whynder Elementary School - the school within their community - was not representative of their community, recently they noticed more of an effort to reflect images of people of African descent within the school. Roxanne's recognition of the connection between what students see in the physical environment and the development of their sense of identity is clear here:

One thing that they do now at the school though, is when you go into the school there's pictures of community people that have made a difference...[T]here's blackness all over the walls. So, the kids are learning all the time. When they leave [for another school, however], *that's it*. But they can at least say that at *this* school, this is where they got the good foundation of who they are. (Roxanne)

As Roxanne expressed, the norm in Nova Scotia is that the physical surroundings in schools do not reflect the contributions of people of African descent. Like Wendie Poitras and Roxanne, other participants also emphasized the value of African Nova Scotian students seeing themselves reflected within their schools and post-secondary institutions and the impact of this, or the lack thereof on their identity and self-esteem.

Cognizant of this reality, it was my intention that these Story Circles would counter the norm of Nova Scotian schools and wider society. I also hoped that these visual representations of African peoples and their contributions could counteract any internalized oppression that

participants might be experiencing by resisting the limited and negative representations of people of African descent more widely accessible in the media and mainstream society (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). For example, Sheldon spoke to the negative affect that his environment, void of representations of people of African descent in authority in society, had had on his view of the world and the place of Black people in it. When he visited Atlanta, Georgia in the United States, he saw people of African descent prospering, owning businesses and holding positions of authority within society. Sheldon admitted that at the time, he thought that there was something wrong with the reality he saw and experienced there, because his lived experiences and his reality in Nova Scotia taught him otherwise: Black people belong at the margins and not at the centre of society. Sheldon's story articulates the necessity of people of African descent and all other marginalized groups seeing themselves reflected in society in order for self-actualization to take place, enabling them to know that they can attain any aspiration they wish to hold. The space I created within Story Circles, strategically including items that represent ANSs and people of African descent in general, were meant to reflect the need to relocate African peoples from the periphery of formal education spaces to the centre. The space helped to connect participants to their inherent value and to others within their community and the wider African diaspora, past and present. The Story Circle space emphasized a concept raised by Merriweather-Hunn (2004) which is that adult learners learn best when given the opportunity to "stand in their own cultural centres rather than being forced to stand in a foreign one" (2004, p.70). I would argue that such is the case, not only for adult learners, but for learners of all ages.

### **The Dialogue During Knowledge Production**

Secondly, Community Narratives are defined by the distinct *dialogue during the knowledge production* which is one means of validating voice and providing space for the

articulation of histories from the perspective of the racialized and marginalized. The significance of the spoken word to African peoples, particularly as it relates to the African oral tradition and storytelling, is emphasized by Victoria Aidoo during the African Drumming and Dancing session:

It takes away the depression...[T]he sharing, the stories, that is the power...[T]hat is the African power. You can read it in a book, it's not the same thing. As you are singing here and you're listening, I bet you, you remember what was said a very, very long time. That is the power of the spoken word.

As Victoria explains, the power of dialogue is manifold; since African women are bearers of the oral culture, it is essential that women like Victoria participate in the process towards healing the soul. This is a process that encompasses dialogue focused on re-remembering the things we have been encouraged and socialized to forget (Dillard, 2006). In the research, dialogue incorporates the act of remembrance as a space for cultural healing in addition to spiritual traditions, which explore the making of new ways to teach and conduct academic research. The therapeutic properties of the spoken word are intrinsic to its ability to transport and preserve the memories of African peoples using a mechanism supported by collective relationality: African people sharing their stories with other African people. Dialogue through the spoken word is humanizing speech, which does not only acknowledge the humanity of the speaker, but also each participant's existence: their past, present and their future. Within Story Circles, participants had the chance to validate each other and themselves and to write history from their own perspectives, detailing the struggles and successes of their formal education and community experiences as they retold personal stories. At once, the spoken work is recognized as “a vessel of remembrance”, “a political catalyst” and “an art form” (Smithsonian, 2017). Speaking from an African American perspective, the Smithsonian Folkways website shares that:

The spoken word occupies a central and indispensable position in African American history and culture. As a vessel for remembrance, the oral tradition carried African narratives to a new continent and sustained them through bondage; as a political catalyst, speech defined the struggle for freedom and moved ordinary people to extraordinary acts of courage; and as an art form, the word has conveyed itself forcefully and dramatically by drawing on the rich African American musical heritage. (2017, para.1)

The excerpt above explicates the power of the spoken word to resist attempts to silence African peoples and to write them out of history, noted through the institutions of slavery, racism and colonialism. It is through dialogue – the oral tradition and, specifically, oral history, - that we can preserve identity, survive and fight exploitation and oppression.

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, the role of African/Black women as mother/others reproducing African culture, heritage and histories from generation to generation through the oral tradition is remarkable, particularly in light of the atrocities of slavery where Black women were victims of sexual, physical and psychological violence. During the time of slavery, Black women were only able to “transcend and transform” the horrific experiences designed to annihilate their African culture - the sexual abuse of Black women and the separation of their families - because of their spirituality (Heath, 2006, p. 162). The oral tradition was the vehicle upon which African spirituality was transported and through dialogue and stories this tradition was shared relationally. As a coping mechanism, the relational aspects of enslaved African women’s spirituality enabled them to survive: They attained hope from their interpersonal and community relationships (Heath, 2006). In times of crisis or conflict, spirituality is a way in which Black women are able to draw personal strength from their cultural

traditions and religious practices (Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994). It is because of their tenacity that the knowledge passed on through the oral tradition was preserved. Through dialogue, participants were provided their own opportunities to engage in the oral tradition, create their own knowledge, and to challenge knowledge constructed by others (Sheared, 1994). Therefore, dialogue, through the spoken word, offered SOSF female and male participants, and continues to offer all people of African descent, a freedom to define themselves, tell their own stories, and resist oppression.

Dialogue also offers a different, more culturally relevant approach to identifying, defining, and discussing problems and finding solutions than disseminating this information to community than in traditional research processes. A process known by "call and response" is the equivalent of dialogue where everyone is welcome to contribute and speak. The community can redefine problems in ways that reflect community values, perceptions of reality, and the needs and experiences of community members. This kind of dialogue was recognized and encouraged throughout the Story Circle. Therefore, active, rather than passive participation was key. Both affective and cognitive learning took place as an ethic of caring (Sheared, 1994) developed which is based on the interconnectedness that results from call and response dialogue. Empathy and trust emerged, depending on the depth of the dialogue, as participants grew increasingly connected, listening to each other observantly and responding accordingly as a preacher would with her or his congregants during call and response style sermon delivery.





*Figures, 14,15,16.*  
Victoria Aidoo dancing  
and participants  
drumming during the  
Upper Hammonds Plains  
Story Circle session on  
African drumming and  
Dance. Photo by Dean  
Anderson, 2014. Used  
with permission.



The rhythmic engagement of all participants during the African drumming and dancing workshop also reflected the interconnectedness created by a call and response process. Victoria explained that drumming was traditionally a male role and dancing a female role while the males drummed in her native country of Ghana. When formal education became more readily available and provided equal opportunity to boys *and girls* to attend school, she says, “the boys had to share the drum with the girls. But still for the very, very traditional ceremonies, it's just the men who drum. The girls aren't allowed to drum.”. However, as a drummer and dancer, Victoria breaks the cultural gender norms and teaches drumming and dance to both men and women, boys and girls.

In one of the dance-songs that Victoria shared with Story Circle participants, she demonstrated various roles played by women in the household, acted out these roles in song and dance, and invited the participants to guess “what the women are doing”. Participants correctly guessed Victoria’s dramatizations, which demonstrated traditional roles of women doing laundry, sweeping, planting, cooking and a leisure activity such as putting on make-up. Such a song and dance shows the need for an expansion of the view that women’s work is viewed, not only in communities that are non-African, but also in African communities. The ten women participants, five women Community Artists and Black women as lead researcher, all engaged in the anti-colonial, Canadian Black feminist work speak a significantly important activist role of African women and to the importance of giving full humanity to African women, restoring their integrity and the completeness of their roles and stories.

In African and African diasporic cultures, the beat of the drum – referred to metaphorically as the heartbeat of African people - is known to speak, or to communicate as well as serve the purpose of signifying celebratory or solemn occasions (Ong, 1977; Nzewi, Anyahuru & Ohiauraumunna, 2001; Mullins, 2003; Duby, 2015). In my research, the communicative nature of the drum was emphasized, validating drumming as another way of knowing/storytelling during these Story Circle sessions. Further than what has been documented in writing, of particular significance is the current existence of various forms of African drumming throughout the African diaspora, evidence of the indomitable power of African people to maintain our culture and transmit our oral histories through drumming in spite of the brutalities of enslavement. Underscoring the communal and participatory nature of drumming which also resonates in traditional African storytelling and in the Story Circles, Victoria Aidoo shared with participants:

[I]n the traditional, circle of drummers and dancers, everybody is a winner. It doesn't matter if you are a poor singer. They don't say, 'Oh! Your voice is bad, don't sing.

You're singing out of tune!' They encourage everybody to participate...So for me, I say music, African music, it doesn't matter what level you are at. We just, we just express ourselves. In traditional music, even if you hear people say 'Oh, I don't have a good voice. Oh, I don't want to sing.' Over in Ghana, *everybody sings. Everybody sings!*

*Everybody does it. It doesn't matter if you're not dancing well! The participation is what makes it so joyful. It feeds you. It nourishes you. It heals you. And it makes you feel that you belong.* (emphasis added)

All participants who were present at these Story Circle sessions thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to "express themselves" through drumming - as a group and individually. Speaking specifically about African drumming, Levine (2005), Woods, Ivery, Donovan and Lambin (2013) concur that the sound of the drum and the act of drumming itself enhance group identity and group cohesion, traditionally bringing people together and engaging them in collective activity (Levine, 2005). Beyond entertainment and recreation, drumming serves as a "vital healing and unifying force" (Levine, 2005). Speaking to the therapeutic powers of dialogue, Nadia said that hearing and playing the drums "move[d] our emotions", Chriselle saw it as a stress reliever and Stephen shared that playing the drums made him "feel[] good!" sensing that "this is actually helping my soul!" The learning experienced during the Story Circles could be compared to what Schiele (1994) calls "independent and bidirectional" as opposed to "independent and unidirectional" (p. 157). Individual creativity affected not only the individual making the art, but also those with whom that individual chose to share it. Through this process the African identity of each participant was affirmed in a communal, healing way.

*Figure 17, 18. Connie Glasgow-White shares knowledge on ANS quilting during a North Preston Story Circle session. Photo by Dean Anderson, 2014. Used with permission.*



The art of quilting is also representative of the participatory nature of call and response, in that in many regards, a collective of women work together to complete the quilt. An inclusive form of verbal communication represented in dialogue, like drumming, quilting honours community above the individual, so there is no sole person lecturing but many voices are provided the space to speak. Similarly, the arts-based workshop, which focussed on quilting expressed the "call and response" participatory method which is very important to communication:

When [Connie Glasgow White – Community Artist for the quilting workshops] talked about her quilting, she talked about how it brought people together for one common interest, common values. Even like the topics that they did. What they would decide to quilt about. Like when she would do the block quilt. When she talked about the

individual squares, that always seemed to be more of a group thing where everybody would decide what went into what square for the community as a whole. (Nadia)

First, the community artists who shared their expertise on specific art forms interacted in a call and response manner with the circle of participants in each community. As the community artists shared information on their art, they wove in their own personal experience with the art, speaking to how they became involved in this spiritual relationship with their various art forms. Likewise, they encouraged and inspired participants to do the same: weave in their personal knowledge and experiences within the Story Circle's knowledge-sharing space during the workshop hour and thereafter. Wendie Poitras spoke about the emerging importance of recognizing, embracing and welcoming learners' home knowledge and lived experiences in formal education spaces and how this connects to culturally relevant approaches currently being discussed within formal education institutions, particularly in the Halifax Regional School Board:

[W]hat that means to me is we're not talking... just about formal education, but informal education inside of a formal institution. So, having students bring what they already know, and know about their community or learn from their community, or from their parents or from just society in general and bringing those experiences into the classroom. And then linking that information to more formal information. But at least making that link because learning is scaffolding, you know, it's constructive. You have to start somewhere cause you don't come into a classroom not knowing anything. And for the most part our kids have been coming into classrooms and what they already know hasn't been validated. It's almost as if they don't know anything, but they do.

Although Wendie is speaking specifically from her experience as an elementary school teacher, I agree with Merriweather Hunn's (2004) convictions that the same is true for adult learners. She says, "Adult learners learn best when they can use their experiences as a source for learning...they learn best when they can stand in their own cultural centres and are not forced to stand in a foreign one" (Merriweather Hunn, 2004, p.70). The scaffolding of knowledge achieved by inviting students to share their knowledge within formal learning, is one way of demonstrating the "call and response" collaboration within participants. This method of communication does not only challenge the way that learning takes place within formal institutions but it is also resistant to the traditional positioning of power in the learning process.

### **The Power Relations Between Facilitator and Participants**

The final distinction in a Community Narrative-led process is that the *power relations between facilitator and participants* is different than in typical Eurocentric traditions. In an elitist, fragmented, hierarchical relationship between facilitator and participants, as is generally seen in schools/post-secondary institutions, the teacher/ professor is at the top of the hierarchy and the students are below. In the Story Circles, a humbler, interconnected and amiable posture was taken with both the facilitator and participants on equal ground. Typical Eurocentric educational systems "tend to alienate students from teachers as well as from other students" (Schiele, 1994, p. 157). The Story Circles were dependent upon positive, cooperative and trusting relationships being developed between me and the participants, community artists and participants, and participants and other participants. It is important that the teacher de-centers and disempowers her/himself to empower and give voice to participants, allowing them to have the responsibility of interpreting their world for themselves (Sheared, 1994). This process makes way for connectedness as all participants discover meaning and the world shaped by each others'

perceptions of reality in a collaborative manner. Therefore, from an Africentric perspective, no one person was perceived as being more important than the other to the research process because the exchange of knowledge was mutual. The non-hierarchical relationship at play during the research process demonstrated that we were all seen as knowers and learners simultaneously. Those considered “experts” in a particular area of study may be more privileged in terms of their knowledge, skills and talents, but these expertise should not be used to denigrate any learners’ lived experiences or other forms of knowledge as any less valuable.

As lead researcher in this project, my design and subsequent implementation of its process produced an environment that was conducive to equalized power-relations between participants and facilitators during the first hour of the Story Circles as well. During these arts based workshops, community artists who shared their knowledge on specific art forms engaged participants as equal players, demonstrating one strength of arts-based learning, which is to support and reinforce community leadership. Arts based processes are recognized for their resistance to voicelessness and emphasis on working and learning cooperatively to find new ways to value cultures, the aesthetic aspects of learners' identities, and offer a space for the recreation and repositioning of cultural identity (Clover and Stalker, 2007). Additionally, the implementation of an arts-based education is of value to SOSF because it is known to 1) include, 2) de-marginalize, 3) empower, and 4) foster social action. The idea of learning through African Nova Scotian/ African cultures presents an opportunity for stimulating critique of and reflection on participants' reality and community and formal education experiences (Merriweather, 2011).

The Community Artist’s efforts played a major role in facilitating a space where transformative and participatory learning could take place in a manner that is reminiscent of

Black feminist othermothering (Bernard et al., 2000; Collins, 1990) and ancient African philosophies of education (Akua, 2012). In these ways, the Community Artist acted as othermother, a primary agent of education and teaching cultural identity in African diasporic communities, and the Seba of Kemet (ancient Egypt) or Master Teacher who led learners in the process of transformation. Othermothering reflects the wisdom derived from an understanding that it is impossible for blood parents alone to bear the responsibility of raising and educating an individual (Bernard, Issairi, Moriah, Njiwaji, Ogban & Tolliver, 2012). Rather, othermothers take on the responsibility of educating community members, investing in their physical, emotional and intellectual wellbeing (Bernard, et al., 2012). Similarly, with the Seba it is understood that "[t]he teacher opens the door to the universe, that the student may shine like a star" (Akua, p.14, 2012).

By engaging in six aspects of their culture through various art-forms, participants experienced this transformation through the wisdom and knowledge of the othermother/Seba, through the Community Artist as well as through the second part of the Story Circle which allowed participants to each act as othermother/ Seba, imparting wisdom to each other. There was evidence of transformation even before the end of the research project. In the second session of the North Preston circles, Roxanne shared:

[W]hen I was asked to take part in this circle, I said, how am I gonna do this? I asked Sis. Kesa a question. I asked her what could I expect to get out of this. It's a lot of time for me. Oh, my God! Oh my God! [I got] so much. Especially last week [the session on quilting]. And I think what really works for me is actually seeing, when I compare last week and this week is seeing the work of the quilt, the picture of the quilts, the story of



the quilt through pictures, the story of the dance, you know, through the actions of the dance. I don't know - I'm so happy!

Roxanne passed the walking stick to me and all participants responded in laughter. Roxanne continues:

I don't think you realize just how much because it's out of my element to come to a place to see this type of thing, and see this - to take on the opportunity to be able to see this. I had no idea that these were the types of things that you would have been - that this would even be a part of it. And I just think this is one of those things that I needed to be a part of - Thank you, God! Because it made me appreciate things a little bit more.

Roxanne's appreciation for her experience as a participant in the research was shared within the second session of the six-week project. Her transformation was expressed through a deeper appreciation and value of various aspects of her culture that she had never had the opportunity to consider in such an intricate manner before participating in SOSF. The Community Artists - the othermothers and the Seba - played a major role in this transformation.

Those who facilitate Community Narratives, like the Community Artists, lead collaboratively, acknowledging the wealth of knowledge and opinions of community members and seek to be inclusive of the voices of all involved. Within this model, it is ideal for the facilitator to be known and respected by the community, preferably a member of the community or representative of the community in terms of race and cultural background. I believe that anyone who is a facilitator of Community Narratives should also be skilled at using the “call and response” relationship style of leadership which reflects the following proverbs: “A chief can only be successful through the help of the people, thus it is important to solicit their views” and

“the good and the bad views should be heard by the chief” (Chilisa & Preece, 2005, p. 50).

Throughout this study, Community Artists facilitated learning in various traditional and novel ways in which African Nova Scotians have told their stories. I chose each of these artists because of their relational ties to ANS communities and the subject matter of this study. These relational ties also tell of/ suggest unspoken shared experiences, histories, stories, and understandings that can only be fully comprehended and appreciated by a person of African descent.

Of significance during the Story Circle experience, then, was the fact that all Community Artists as well as the lead researcher are people of African descent who reside within Halifax Regional Municipality. The positioning of African people as presenters of the knowledge within the Circle juxtaposed the lived realities, experiences and memories of participants, specifically as it relates to their public-school education. Some participants spoke about having never had a teacher of African descent or having this opportunity on the rare occasion during their public-school career. Giving voice to this experience, Dean of the Upper Hammonds Plains Circle explained:

[The teacher is] typically of a different culture. The person that we have to adhere to is the teacher. Usually it's Caucasian. Very rarely in my experience [did I have a] Black teacher. I had none in elementary, none in junior high. Actually, I had none in high school either but I'd seen them but they were never my teacher. So, I never had a Black teacher [actually teach me]. (Dean)

Archy saw the lack of representation of ANS teachers within his school as a form of racism in his formal education experience. He experienced racism “from elementary school straight up to

university”. Archy explained, “Even though I went to Black schools in [North Preston], I don’t think I had one Black teacher in this community. I didn’t! ... No. I think my first ANS teacher was during the Master’s program [between 2008 and 2010].” It must be noted that Archy’s experience was fairly recent, that this university program had an Africentric focus and therefore included a majority of African descendant professors – the first of its kind in Canada - and that Archy was already a grown adult before he had this first opportunity to be taught by someone who racially represented him.

Sheldon of the North End Halifax Circle also expressed exasperation about not having Black teachers in their formal education experiences. However, Sheldon shared that not having had the opportunity to be taught by someone who reflected his race and lived experience was further compounded by the fact that his cultural/historical background was minimized to a single time during the school year: Black History/ African Heritage Month. In a Story Circle discussion, Sheldon explores the dichotomy created during African Heritage Month in school systems which rarely provide educators of African descent on a full-time basis or invite guest presenters of African descent at any other time during the school year, except February:

Sheldon: I told you. I never had a Black teacher in school. Not one!

Késa: Ahhhhhh! (in agreement) And not even to say - now it is important to have Black teachers, don't get me wrong. Now my kids told me they had a guest in their school yesterday. I didn't know anything about it. Somebody on a guitar. But why couldn't Wendie go? Why couldn't [Victoria] go? Why couldn't Murletta go? Why couldn't David Woods go. Why couldn't Allister Johnson go?

Sheldon: Now you know the joke during Black History Month?

Késa: Oh. All of them would be called on to go!

Sheldon: But after that? When March first hits, it's like "*Alright, let's go back to normal!*"

The "*normal*" public school experience referred to by Sheldon is one which all participants in all three communities agreed was generally Eurocentric, reflecting only European people, culture, history within the curriculum, and those providing the knowledge and instruction (teachers, principals and other administrators). The "*normal*" public school experience is one that marginalizes the lived, historical and cultural experiences of African Nova Scotians and all people of African descent in general and rarely includes teachers, principals, guidance counsellors and guest presenters/speakers others of African descent as knowledge givers. The return to the "*normal*" manner of schooling also emphasizes the "additive approach" to curricula rather than an inclusive one which is typically used within formal education to reflect cultural relevance and proficiency (Battiste, 2013, p.2013). Rather than having a curriculum that intentionally embeds the history, lived experiences and culture of all communities of Nova Scotia, these aspects are added on to the curriculum, often based on the will and knowledge of the teacher, giving the impression to people of African descent that such an addition is an afterthought.

Participants pointed to the wealth of knowledge held by African Nova Scotians like the Community Artists, which could be shared in public schools should African Nova Scotian community members be invited in to present this knowledge:

Chriselle: [T]he same people that [Késa] had here should be going into our schools and educating our kids, right now. But it's not happening. And these are local people.

Késa: Yes, up the road, back the road, down the road people.

Chriselle: And if *we* benefit from it, imagine how ...

Wendie: Well, you have to be invited into our schools first of all. (all agree)

This discussion underscores the fact that African Nova Scotians have been producing local and culturally derived knowledge for hundreds of years in this space and questions the exclusion of their knowledge from public schools as a sign of a concerted effort to maintain colonial regimes.

Despite the fact that most of the research participants identified the negative impact of the dearth of teachers of African descent in their public schools and university education, they spoke highly about the positive difference made by African Nova Scotian Student Support Workers to their school experiences:

Myles: In my days in high school they started to come up with these support workers:

African Student Support Workers. I felt they were... good cause we could like, we could go in there. If we had any issues, we could raise them with him. But now that I think back on it I don't know how much power this person really had to really deal with [issues]. Like he was there for a sound board for us cause we all used to hang in there, if we had an issue with - you know - a teacher or someone was saying something to us the wrong way, we'd go talk to him but I don't know if he had - like he had a connection to the principal - but I don't know if he had any authority... I think they need some role like that but someone who actually has more power. Power to actually get something done if there is an issue with a student

Késa: You mean to change.

Myles: To change things, Yeah! Because...it would have been grade 11 and 12, I think, the first time it happened. That would have been like '95 they got the first one. We had Perry Borden actually, was our first Student Support Worker at CPA and we'd go in there and sound off on him all the time when things [were] going on. But like I said, now that I reflect back, I don't know really how much influence he had.

Cynamon, a community college student also spoke about the importance of seeing herself reflected in her educational institution as a way to provide a sense of belonging and connectedness to others in this learning space. As Myles spoke about the value of the African Canadian Student Support Worker, Cynamon acknowledged the significance of having an African Canadian Coordinator of Student Success at her college campus:

Cynamon: [We should have] groups for students of African descent so you don't feel alone. At the College, the only one I can go to is I go to Archy. I don't see a lot of people that look like me. I don't see all kinds of different cultures in my class.

In spite of the fact that Myles questioned the authority of the African Nova Scotian student support workers to impact school policies, he believed these employees made a positive difference for him and his schoolmates during this school experience. Cynamon's experience with the African Canadian Coordinator of Student Success at her college demonstrates the importance of African Nova Scotian students having a visible representative of community support within learning spaces at all levels of education. In acknowledgement of this need, some universities within Nova Scotia including Saint Francis Xavier and Dalhousie University provide full-time student support staff specifically for this purpose.

In the absence of teachers, administrators and other employees from ANS communities employed within formal education institutions, participants reflected on most of their school experiences with sadness and regret. They expressed a sense that seeing themselves represented in those employed within public schools and post-secondary education could have made a positive difference in their educational experiences and sense of self. This reality, which continues to negatively impact the school experiences of African Nova Scotians today, emphasizes the implications of including community members as artists and creators, givers as well as facilitators of knowledge within Story Circle sessions.

The intimate connection between knowledge and relationships that is typically ignored altogether or minimized in Eurocentric interactions and research is emphasized in the Community Narrative model. As the lead researcher, my role in facilitating Story Circle sessions necessitated that I have a positive relationship within the African Nova Scotian communities included in this study, as well. Particularly, the relationships I have established within Upper Hammonds Plains, North Preston and North End Halifax are a result of my involvement with the AUBA churches connected to these communities, various paid work experiences that engaged ANSs from these communities and general involvement in community events and initiatives. The fact that I knew some research participants prior to their engagement in SOSF facilitated the continued growth and development of these relationships during the sessions. Additionally, these pre-existing relationships aided in the building of trust between researcher and participants, including those whom I did not previously know. As Wilson (2008) acknowledges: "[E]xisting relationships can be used to establish a context upon which new relationships can form. It is the forming of healthy and strong relationships that leads to us being healthy and strong researchers" (p. 86). Therefore, such a development did not only benefit the participants but also benefited me, the researcher.

Wilson (2008) adds, "[T]he research process may also build or strengthen a sense of community. Through maintaining accountability to the relationships that have been built, an increased sense of sharing common interests can be established" (p. 86).

As lead researcher of SOSF, my primary responsibility was to make room for the voices and knowledge systems of my FANS co-researchers (Chilisa, 2012). Therefore, the Community Narrative model reflected during the workshops and Story Circles of my research was an important way of ensuring that the worldviews of those who have "suffered a long history of oppression are given space to communicate from their frames of reference and worldviews" (Chilisa & Preece, 2005, p.23). As ten of the sixteen participants were women, and five of the eight Community Artists were women, the opportunity to give voice also served to resist the silences of African/Black Canadian women in history in general and in research specifically. This model was the most appropriate way for me to gather data given my research question and personal philosophy. Through it, I contribute to existing research that uses the knowledge systems of the marginalized. It is a perspective that allows for the marginalized to "name and communicate" their experiences to create "new concepts, terminology and categories of analysis". It allows for the adoption of a framework which provides for different ways of seeing the world. Community Narratives promote social change, inclusion, diversity, and therefore challenges the idea that there is a single story of a community by providing multiple perspectives. The engagement of the stories of community, being told by people from the community and being shared with the community, is one way to ensure that the FANS communities involved in my research benefit from it as much as I do. In fact, as researcher, I take my lead from these stories. It is the stories told by the FANS participants that shaped this study.



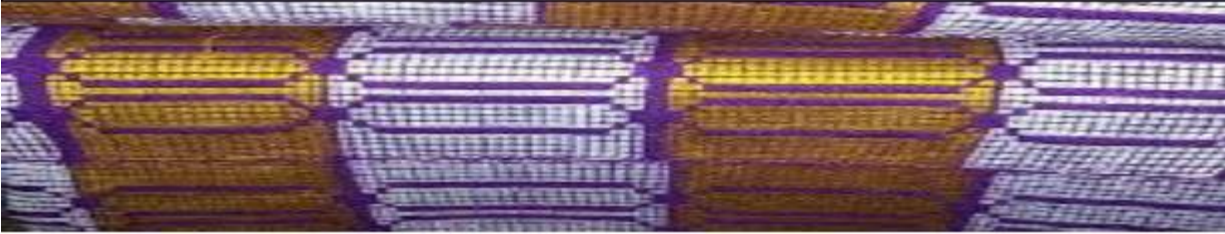
As discussed in this chapter, my research methodology – storytelling – and my method – Story Circles, set the stage for participants to explore the intricacies around spirituality from their perspectives. In Chapter Four, they answer the questions, “What is African -centred spirituality?” “What role does spirituality play in my life?” “What role does it play in my community?” This dialogue is key to our analysis of whether or not spirituality can play an anti-oppressive role in the formal education of ANS learners.



## MY BLACKNESS

By: Késa Munroe-Anderson

My Blackness is not an add-on  
Tacked on to a program like some drummers at the beginning  
Spoken word or song somewhere in the middle  
A prayer or affirmation at the end  
My Blackness runs through me like a river  
It saturates, envelopes, takes me over  
It is me. I am Blackness.  
So, don't insult me by asking me to use my Blackness as an addendum  
I am not an add-on  
A second, third, or last thought  
My Blackness flows throughout my being and cannot be abbreviated, condensed or  
summarised  
It is the whole story, from beginning to end  
It is all of my ancestors' stories: The living and the dead  
It is my present and my future stories: the good, the bad and the ugly  
It is me. All of this is my Blackness.  
So don't you dare seek to reduce that which you do not understand.



## Chapter Five

### Centering Voices, Defining Spirituality

It is impossible to holistically discuss any issue related to African Nova Scotians in the absence of a serious, in-depth conversation about spirituality and its connection to that issue. Of course, the discourse around formal education is no different. So central is spirituality to the lives of all sixteen SOSF participants that various dimensions of it infiltrated all six sessions. It intertwined throughout all topics discussed, and dialogue around spirituality engaged participants in all three communities, regardless of the main theme for the evening. By the end of the eighteen Story Circle sessions in North Preston, Upper Hammonds Plains and North End, Halifax, spirituality emerged as the dominant theme, flowing through themes, uniting and tying together all of the session topics.

The storytelling sessions themselves, from the participants' perspectives, were spiritual experiences, providing an opportunity for participants and lead researcher to exist in relationship with each other. These sessions were a chance for all involved to create new and strengthen previous connections. As well, the Story Circles were a liberating space where we could freely embody and speak about the spirituality we all held as sacred. As the stories evolved between the first and last sessions, participants revealed that their African-centred spirituality is deeply rooted in community and their faith in God. Theirs are testimonies of the significant role that spirituality has played in preserving empowerment, resilience in the face of oppression, and survival above seemingly insurmountable odds for their communities.

## Defining spirituality

The complexities involved in attempting to define such an intricate term as African-centred spirituality are undeniable. Nevertheless, participants rose to this challenge by offering a plethora of components, which contribute to a comprehensive definition of what spirituality means to them as ANS adult learners. Their definitions offer a holistic view of spirituality, which they saw reflected in their own lived experiences as ANS women and ANS men, and those of their community. There is no clear cut, neat and tidy way to explain spirituality. However, these participants' definitions demonstrate a counter story, counter-reductionist process of describing that which is a central aspect of life for people of African descent.

According to the SOSF participants, African-centred spirituality is both knowledge and a way of knowing, understanding and establishing connections in our world. It is a faith belief; dependence on God for guidance; and reliance on sources outside of one's self for direction and support. This spirituality is rooted in the Black Baptist faith and traditions of the African United Baptist Church. However, it also encompasses community centeredness; unity and connectedness to family, others, the ancestors, African heritage and culture. It determines morals and values; empowers one to persevere and sustains one's self and others because it is the source of hope and passion. African-centred spirituality is passed down from one generation to another through family and community relationships. Participants defined spirituality as being connected to all things and all things as being connected to it and existing only because of its influence and power.

### **Spirituality: Faith Belief and the Black Baptist Church**

The historic centrality of the African United Baptist Association (AUBA) churches to the lives of North Preston, North End Halifax, and Upper Hammonds Plains community members was evident throughout all Story Circle sessions. Formed in 1854 by Father Richard Preston - a former enslaved African who escaped from the United States and traveled to Nova Scotia in search of his mother - the AUBA is the oldest ANS owned and operated institution (Clayton, 1984; Oliver, 1953; Grant, 1990; Paichai, 1990). In Pearline Oliver's (1953) documentation of the AUBA's history during its centennial year, her husband and esteemed ANS leader Rev. William Pearly Oliver describes the AUBA as a "place of worship that has been the spiritual home and a medium of self-expression for its members" (Oliver p.14, 1953). Further to this, Grant (1990) states that the AUBA was "the chief organized voice of blacks for many decades" (p.70). Pachai and Bishop (2006) remark that as there was no separation between ANS communities and AUBA churches, particularly with their histories, because these churches represented "black identity, black freedom, and black independence" (p.23).



*Figure 19. Cornwallis Street Baptist Church in North End Halifax. The "Mother Church" of the AUBA. Photo by Késa Munroe-Anderson, 2018.*



*Figures 20,21. Saint Thomas Baptist Church in North Preston (exterior). Photo by Micah Smith, 2018. Congregation of Saint Thomas Baptist during a service on September 11, 2017. in 2017. Photo courtesy of the Chronicle Herald.*

### **The Central Role of Women**

Though its pastors have been predominantly male, it is important to emphasize that the AUBA's legacy has only been as outstanding as it has been because of the strategic organization and activism of those who form most of its churches' membership: ANS women. ANS women were not immune from gender bias within the AUBA: the Association had met for 37 years before the names of women were listed as delegates (Oliver, 1953). Despite this fact, these churches were known as environments where ANS women received dignity and respect. Carrie Best (1977) asserts:

Her strength has been the Black church and the strength of the Black church has always been the Black woman. From this checkpoint she and her children took their first feeble hounded steps to freedom. Men write history; Women are history. (p. 172)

It is within the AUBA that ANS women were able to carve out their own spaces to organize through local groups like the Bright Lights Mission Band in Upper Hammonds Plains in 1909 and provincially, and the Ladies Auxiliary formed in 1919 at the legendary “Meeting at the Well” where ANS women organized around a well outside the church in East Preston. The trailblazers at that first Ladies Auxiliary meeting included Maude Sparks, Jane Hamilton, Martha Middleton, Rufus Marsman, Margaret Upshaw, Julia Williams, Bessie Wyse, Rachael Upshaw, Sarah Clayton, Louisa Bundy and C.M. Saunders (Oliver, 1953). The outstanding activism of AUBA women was evident on May 27, 1920 when the Ladies Auxiliary leaders organized the first Convention of Coloured Women in Canada, which drew 50 women and included progressive topics like Education and Womanhood, Social Service, and Domestic Girls’ Needs (Hamilton, 1993).

The Ladies Auxiliary is an excellent example of womanist work within ANS communities as this organization’s legacy is one of working in partnership and not in competition with the men of the AUBA. Pearlene Oliver (1953) wrote that, “The first organized work among the men of our Association was started by a woman” (p. 53). Although the Ladies Auxiliary of the AUBA had formed in 1917, Muriel.V. States called a meeting with young men in Hammonds Plains in 1929 and organized the first men’s group of the AUBA. The work of the Ladies Auxiliary is the quintessence of Black women demonstrating communal responsibility as the purpose of this provincial group was to stimulate the “spiritual, moral, social, educational, charitable, and financial work of all the AUBA’s local churches” (Hamilton, 1995, p. 89).

## **Lifeline of Safety, Support & Advocacy**

The AUBA has been historically regarded as a hub of safety and support for ANS communities spiritually, socially, educationally and in fighting for social justice involving systemic oppression due to racism which continues to plague these communities even today (Colaiacono, n.d.). Hamilton (1993) explains the central role of the Black Baptist Church as a significant institution within ANS communities:

Cut off from access to the main centres of commerce and social, economic and political resources, the communities coalesced around their churches. Churches became the single most important institution within the community, a sphere of independence for Black people where they controlled what happened. They were welcome havens from the daily indignities suffered by their members. Church leaders were also community leaders who championed the struggle for equality for the entire community. (p. 194)

AUBA churches often lobbied government for better school facilities as most of the segregated school buildings used as school houses were dilapidated, in need of repair or new structures, and in need of proper educational resources, including teachers (Hamilton, 1993). Rev. Dr. William Oliver, for example, helped to organize church and community members and advocated on behalf of the Beechville community for a new school with adequate equipment and professional teachers who could prepare the new post-war generation to succeed in society. As a result, government officials agreed and a new school was built for the community in 1949. One most recent example of this is the AUBA's support of Upper Hammonds Plains resident Andrella David in her Human Rights complaint against the retail grocery corporation, Sobeys. A Sobeys employee racially profiled David, wrongfully accusing her of shoplifting in May 2009. In August 2016, the AUBA



called a boycott against the chain of stores which resulted in support from the Atlantic Baptist Convention of Churches across the Maritimes and congregations of numerous other churches in Nova Scotia who stood united with the AUBA in fighting this cause (CBC, October 9, 2015). Prior to the AUBA calling the boycott, one church in the Association, Emmanuel Baptist Church, held a demonstration outside of the Sobeys Tantallon store where the racist incident took place. In 2016, Sobeys was found guilty of racially profiling Andrella David due to her race, colour and perceived source of income (Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission, 2016). The AUBA's vocal pursuit of social justice as it regards this issue was instrumental in raising awareness around the issue of consumer racial profiling and assisting David in fighting her case against this corporation (Borden Colley, 2016).



*Figure 22. Emmanuel Baptist Church in Upper Hammonds Plains. Photo taken by Kelland Sundahl, 2017. Used with permission.*

Additionally, in the absence of social assistance to aid community members in times of need, the AUBA churches, particularly through their auxiliary groups, often stepped in and served as the social support system created by the people and for the people. Pachai and Bishop (2006)

describe the AUBA as “more than places of worship”, but “institutions that members as well as non-members can turn to for help, guidance, and comfort” (p.23). Bringham and Parris (2016) explain that “The Black churches (such as the African Baptist Church) and their affiliated committees, auxiliaries, and institutes, in which women played central roles, helped to fulfill the social, economic, and spiritual needs of Black communities, while fighting for change”(p.74) For example, the Ladies Auxiliary group was noted as helping to raise money for the building and sustenance of the Nova Scotia Home for Coloured Children, particularly after the first building designated for this home for “orphaned and neglected” children was destroyed by the Halifax Explosion (Oliver, 1953, p.40). The Ladies Auxiliary’s fundraising efforts contributed to the establishment of the home, led by the AUBA in 1921(Oliver, 1953; Hamilton, 1994).

### **Training Ground for Leaders**

During times when it was most difficult for ANSs to gain leadership opportunities in wider society, the AUBA also provided numerous prospects where ANS people could develop their leadership skills and talents. Hamilton (1993) explains that ANS women were able to use their skills as well as acquire new ones in this space. Gender discrimination and racism would have barred these women from attaining such opportunities anywhere else, but through their women’s groups they could develop the following skills: leadership, financial management, negotiation, public speaking, conflict resolution and fund-raising” (Hamilton, 1993). In spite of the numerous inequities faced by ANS communities since their inception, it is remarkable that the AUBA has produced extraordinary leaders through its pastors, moderators and members (Paichai & Bishop, 2006, p.23). Murletta Williams, the SOSF community artist who facilitated a workshop on Music and Spirituality, told participants about the enormous influence her AUBA church, Second Baptist Church in New Glasgow had on her development as a musician and singer. Her church provided

a nurturing environment where she, a budding artist in her youth, had access to hone her skills and talents as well as learn from visiting and local musicians.

The importance of the AUBA's provision of leadership opportunities to people of African descent was emphasized through Community Artists David Woods and Allister Johnson when they spoke about the remarkable leadership and courage of AUBA founder Father Richard Preston, whose legacy continues to positively impact ANSs and others in current times. During their workshops on "Storytelling", Woods and Johnson spoke about the tenacious spirituality of Rev. Preston. In the North Preston and North End Halifax sessions, Johnson dramatized Rev. Preston's story including his arrival in Nova Scotia where he found his mother. During the UHP session, Woods recalls learning about Father Preston from community members when he arrived in North Preston in his early years:

[T]hey used to tell me about Richard Preston – the great Richard Preston whom somebody should write a book about - cause he was a runaway slave ...[A]fter the War of 1812, his mother came here and she was living in - near East Preston...[H]e had been sold as a little boy at about three or four [years old] to another master, and then he ran away. [T]hen when he got to his mother's plantation he was told that she had come here [to Nova Scotia]. So, he ran, he came here, he found her and then he stayed here and he founded most of the churches. I think [the church in Upper Hammonds Plains] too!

Yeah, most of the Black churches. And he was quite the guy – exceptional! He saw the fact that he met his mother was like an epiphany for the Lord, you know, - like a reuniting and he dedicated the rest of his life to fighting slavery, building churches, all by himself – horse and buggy [laughs]. You know! He would show up in a community and convince everybody to chip in...and that's how we ended up with our main institution.

Father Preston's legacy is reflective of the spirituality that not only lives on within AUBA churches, but which participants say is an integral part of their lives as African Nova Scotians. Further emphasizing the significance of the AUBA's leadership to SOSF participants, Cynamon pointed out that there is a need for ANS stories to be told in schools about leaders such as Rev. Donald Skeir who more recently served AUBA churches in North Preston, East Preston and Cherry Brook. Such stories are important to speak to "who we are", Cynamon states. Melissa D. adds that there is also a need for school curriculum to include the history of ANS organizations like the AUBA, particularly since the AUBA is the most established ANS organization in existence today.

### **The AUBA Churches as Centre**

In light of such a deep-rooted history and relationship within ANS communities, it is not surprising that during each session when the Story Circle theme was "Spirituality", the significant cultural connection of the church and God to spirituality and community was evident for these adult learners. Archy refers to the church as the "backbone" and the "centre of the community" as he validated the role of the church within ANS culture, also naming a "connection to the higher power" as important to this culture. Although participants insisted that spirituality and religion are not the same thing, in all three Story Circles, a faith/belief in God - specifically from a Christian, Black Baptist perspective - and the significance of the Black Baptist church in each community were noted as being interconnected with a sense of community. These intertwined subthemes, all contributed to participants' understanding of African-centred spirituality:

Yes, I agree 100%...I think more in the Black community especially, church spirituality has always been so important because it's kind of all we had to cling to - you

know - for hope because there were so many things stacked against us..., right from the start, from day one when we got here. But the church and community and our relation to God has always been the one constant and it's the one thing that hasn't really changed that much about us. Even as we as people have evolved and changed, that's the one thing that has remained steady: that relationship with God. (Erin)

In agreement with Erin, Archy expounds:

And if you look at the community...if we look at all our Black communities across this province, the church is basically the only institution in a lot of our communities. You know, look at things that have grown up around the community but have not come into the community, but the church has always been in the community.

Archy's description of the significant role of the church in ANS communities speaks to its ever-present influence and consistent presence as a significant part of the spirituality fabric of these communities. The fact that AUBA churches have traditionally been the heartbeat of ANS communities is also exemplified as Myles explains its integration throughout various aspects of family, ANS identity and community life in general. Myles points to the presence of an AUBA church in all ANS communities which may be a unifying aspect for these communities, as well as an important aspect of ANS culture. He states:

[T]o me, ...growing up here as a younger Black kid...- you're not like you're forced - but it's...a part of being a young Black kid in a Black community. On Sunday, you wake up, you go to Sunday school. And then when you get older, you'll just go to church with your grandmother, your parents, or whoever is in the church. So... being a young Black person, it's just part of me. It's more normal to me. It's a part of the community you live

in. Cause you can go around to every Black community, they'll have a church. No matter how big or how small, they'll all have a church. It was just part of, like [Wendell] was saying, it's part of your family and part of the churches. Part of both. (Myles)

Chriselle also compares the common thread of the AUBA churches in each ANS community to a sense of communalism that extends beyond one particular ANS community to encompass a sense of belonging and connection. She counts it a privilege to be connected to AUBA churches in any community as it is through the church, God and the love she experiences there that she gains the encouragement that she needs:

I'm a person that can go to all communities. Ain't probably been a church that I ain't been in and that I know really when I go in there, I feel good because at that one point that's one thing that we have in common - and that's God...[S]ince I have that spirituality, I can go to this community and get a little bit of love, and I can go to that community and get a little bit of love and that and pick up something. So, that's why I think we should - about the [AUBA] - we all [have] to live together and I try not to separate. [S]o by keeping things spiritual, I don't get that separation from each community and from [Mulgrave] Park and that's why I think my spirituality helps me keep myself together and everyone else around me and not see [anything] different. (Chriselle)

Here Chriselle also discussed her own sense of African -centered spirituality being synonymous to unity and communalism, which she also experiences within all AUBA churches that she attends. She sees this value of unity and togetherness as a common theme throughout AUBA churches and it is this spirituality that gives her a sense of welcome and belonging. Chriselle also said that these values inspired her to perceive all ANS communities as one, rather than as

separate. The commonality of the spirituality of the AUBA churches is a significant factor in providing a way of living and being that is cohesive, drawing all ANS communities together in common identity.

Chriselle, Myles, Archy and Erin articulated similar sentiments regarding the vital role that AUBA churches play in defining African-Centred spirituality. The constant influential presence of the AUBA churches in every ANS community, even in the form of the replica of the historic Seaview United Baptist Church on the site of Africville, demonstrates the powerful and influential positioning of the Black Baptist church within these communities. The replica of the Seaview church is a reminder to all who see it and are aware of the history of Africville and of this church's crucial role in the development of the spirituality of a people. In "The Spirit of Africville", scribing a visit to this community during the summer of 1959, in the words of a resident of this community, Charles Saunders wrote, "Can you hear the sound, coming from the church? It's like a heartbeat...the heartbeat of Africville. This church is the living breathing soul of our community. As long as this church is here, *we'll* be here" (Saunders, 2010, p. 16). The intrinsic inseparability of the church from the people, and the recognition of its role as the very source of this community's life is a common theme throughout ANS communities. It is no wonder, then that the suspicious razing of the Seaview United Baptist Church after nightfall in 1967 marked the eventual and complete razing of the physical aspects of the Africville community. The replica of the church and the museum it houses as well as the fact that Africville community members continue to gather on an annual basis on the grounds, culminating with a church service demonstrates that the spirituality generated by the church still lives on within the hearts and souls of Africville's people. Seaview United Baptist Church is one example of the continued legacy of AUBA churches today through the perspectives of SOSF

participants. These churches must be recognized for the significant role they play in fostering ANS identity formation, and providing and inspiring a sense of belonging, unity and interconnected that makes a tremendous contribution to the fabric of ANS culture, ways of being and knowing.

### **Spirituality: Religion or Faith-based Relationship**

It was recognized and discussed in all Story Circles that spirituality represents belief systems grounded in relationships, while religion focuses on habit and practice for the sake of routine. When I asked participants what spirituality means to them, Archy (North Preston Circle) and Dean (Upper Hammonds Plains Circle) explained what they see as the difference between spirituality and religion:

I think we confuse spirituality with religion. Spirituality is a belief and religion is a practice. So, for me spirituality is your belief. And I think we all have spirituality. Some of us practice it more than others... [S]pirituality is the belief that we all carry, that guides us whether or not we all think that it does or not, but it's something that ...we all have. (Archy)

Dean's thoughts are similar. He says, "I think it's safe to say that a lot of people have the misconception in they think that spirituality is religion, basically. And in attending church and whatever goes on in the church world, type of thing. That's common". Rather, Dean pointed out that he has met others who beg to differ:

Késa: So, you believe it's more than that?



Dean: Sure. It's the whole being...There's more and more people today who tell me straight out that they're not religious, but they have - how do they put it? - They have a solid set of morals and things along those lines, basically, that makes them feel that they are well rounded that they don't need to be labelled by a specific denomination in order to identify themselves as being spiritual or religious.

Not so with the 16 participants of SOSF. Even though some participants do not attend church regularly, they all have some affinity or membership with an AUBA church in their community or in other communities as well. Coupled with their relationship with their church – which was stronger for some than it was for others - participants also attributed a faith in God to their understanding of spirituality. However, this faith in God that they described is not a linear one that is disconnected from anything else. Instead, as was seen in participants' responses shared earlier in this chapter, a belief in God that is connected to family, church and community is intertwined in their understanding of spirituality. Some participants explained:

My first thought when it comes to spirituality is God...[A]nd it is probably stemming from growing up in the church and also with behaviours that I seem to exhibit. And so - you know - putting a spirit into something, ... when I feel deeply about something it always relates to God and because I associate spirituality with my walk with God, I don't know, that's basically what I do. What I see, what I do, how I feel. I try to touch God whom I can feel, realizing that that's the spirit I'm tapping into. But it's just...it's a deep word (everyone agrees)... It's a very deep word and yeah a lot of people have a lot of different views on what spirituality [is]... they relate to spirituality in a lot of different ways. But I just feel like I tap into the spirit of God or to what I feel is the spirit of God ...for direction or for a lot of different things. (Roxanne)

God just comes to mind when you say spirituality and thinking of...your upbringing with your family and your home and what they [teach] you, what you go through and what you see them express. And I think about my family relatives, and how they connect together just when they're all together... Church, it's kind a hard not to have church in spirituality. Even when I wasn't saved it's like you just, it seemed like it's just the root of your family, from grandparents to parents, to relatives and I guess, it was kind of hard, not easy not to have God as their strength and as the centre of their lives... It's like I said, trying to connect with your family, and I guess the church and God. The whole three together, to me. (Wendell)

So, people want to know about me. What's spirituality when it comes to me? It's all about God and the relationship I have with him and him molding me into the person that He wants me to be. (Reeny)

Spirituality to me is just like connections, I guess. Connections of believing in a higher power, and having that faith to believe that I am here for a higher purpose and that the people that enter my life are here for a purpose and with shared experiences, we can kind of share our spirituality with one another for connections. (Nadia)

I think it is bringing an understanding of self in relation to a higher power. Whether it is believing God as a Creator, or that there is something out there that's greater and you don't know. And it is relating the here and now with the unearthly being. (Dean)

Akbar (2007) argues that “[t]he centrality of God in the life space of Africans is intense and nondebtable” as “Africans overwhelmingly accept the reality of God without question”, even

though they have various ways of identifying, worshipping or acknowledging their God (p.52). This belief system is certainly reflected in the above statements by SOSF participants. Their holistic understanding of spirituality, relating and highly valuing the interconnectedness between the material and the immaterial, the secular and the sacred, bears witness to important distinctions between African-centred spirituality and what the dominant culture refers to as spirituality. African-centred spirituality is like a multi-strand cord, whereas the spirituality of the dominant culture can be likened to a single strand cord where the sacred and the secular never meet. Akbar (2007) clarifies that the “African concept of God’s presence is different from the European-American concept of ‘Theology’ or the study of religion” because the African understanding of life and education “require[s] that the sacred and the spiritual should be seen as one” (2007, p. 50). From the Eurocentric perspective, all discussions of God are contained under the umbrella of “religion” and never venture outside of those parameters. However, from an African perspective, God exists in everything and is worshipped in every part of life, as a matter of course (Akbar, 2007).

Inherently, for a person of African descent, the centralization of the presence of God in every aspect of life including formal education, poses a problem in Eurocentric, secular systems. Holistic education from an African-centred perspective requires an interrelationship between the body, mind and spirit rather than the individualized view of education solely from a materialistic perspective. As soon as the spirit is included, then, the material and the spiritual are married and as Akbar (2007) agrees, we have invited God into our studies (p. 50). The importance of this African-centered perception of spirituality is reflected in Chriselle’s feelings that the secularization of education impeded her spirituality. She explained that with the move to demonstrate a separation of church and state within schools came the discontinuation of open

praying aloud including "The Lord's Prayer" and the singing of religious songs which Chriselle said she was most appreciative of during her public schooling. According to Chriselle, this severing of the secular from the spiritual resulted in spiritual brokenness for ANS students in the school system, who, in their upbringing are taught that God is central to and a part of everything they do and, therefore, cannot be separated from themselves:

Because you can't say 'Our Father'... you can't sing certain songs in school and stuff, you know what I mean. So, I think everything is broken, because spirituality is broken, so that's why I think it's just dying with the rest of the things in this world...I feel that because we're not spiritual, that's why we're broken. I really think [our spirituality is] dying. (Chriselle)

This spirit injury described by Chriselle is caused by a forced separation, the prying apart of that which – according to African philosophies - cannot be separated void of causing harm, since God is a part of all facets of an African person's life. Akbar (2007) refers to the ban against prayer in school in the United States to clarify the positioning of the European American belief system in education. Although this was a time of great controversy and challenge, since an educator could be charged with a criminal offence for not observing the separation of church and state, Akbar (2007) shares that where African Americans were not subject to European Americans, school prayer continued. He says the same is true on sports fields, and during special occasions and other gatherings involving African Americans. What does this prove? This proves, according to Akbar (2007), that it is only in an African-based environment that the synthesis of material and spiritual could come together. Akbar (2007) informs that for most African peoples, "God is an inescapable component of the human life" (p.50). Since it is impossible for a person to know themselves without first knowing God, identity formation also depends on an African-centred

approach which acknowledges both the material and the spiritual. However, Akbar (2007) warns that it is only when an African perspective is adopted that the spiritual can be incorporated into an educational system. The African-centred spiritual world view shared by all participants also reflects the impossibility of separating the spiritual from the material and therefore a sense of identity conflict occurs in spaces which insist that this severing take place.

### **Spirituality as identity: Knowing One's Self**

Participants agreed that it is impossible to arrive at an awareness of one's spirituality without first knowing one's self because spirituality is connected to a knowledge of one's self. Jareeca saw spirituality as a way of gaining knowledge "because without spirituality we wouldn't know certain things". She continued by saying that spirituality "helps you [to] better understand[] yourself": "You have to know yourself to know other things" (Jareeca). Zhané shared that spirituality is about "Being connected with yourself and ... understanding yourself". Melissa C also explained that spirituality can be used as a catalyst to help others to gain their "sense of self". "Spirituality starts with you and then mushrooms out ", Melissa C says. Chriselle credits spirituality as that which "makes me who I am."

Further, a person's self-concept is not only dependent upon his/her own independent thoughts about the self, but is also largely dependent upon knowledge received about the self from others. Dean agrees that spirituality requires an "awareness of yourself and others". Myles also concurs that spirituality is knowledge gained through interactions with your community: "You learn things from people, older people in the community. You learn things from your family members through spirituality. So, you're gaining a form of knowledge, basically through spirituality to me." The experiences that result from these community connections are important

to this understanding of spirituality. As Wendell shares with his group, “[S]pirituality is knowledge because of the different things you experience in life through the people you interact with.” He adds that what one sees around them in their physical environment also provides this knowledge which contributes to a sense of spirituality and thereby, identity.

Various types of African musical instruments— like the Djembe drum – also serve as important spiritual symbols that represent cultural identity and serve as a conduit for the making of meaning in the lives of African peoples. During the study, Community Artist, Victoria Aidoo spoke to the significance of some of these aspects of African culture, particularly drumming, playing a key role in people of African descent knowing themselves because of the spiritual nature in which these aspects are positioned for their well-being. The spiritual communication that transpires through African drumming is an example of knowledge that is constructed by individuals within the community in a way that benefits both the individual and the whole community. Tisdell (2003) believes that such “[s]piritual experiences and the manifestations of these significant experiences anchor our lives in specific ways, and are generally related to how we live with others in the world” (p. 63). Victoria is convinced that the drum and drumming itself is intricately linked to African people’s understanding of self and value of self identity:

I found out that it is the drumming that is at the heart of the African people. And if we can claim it back and really incorporate it into the life we have to live, we would get rid of all these insecurities that we are having. And I know the system is working against us, ah, but there's always a starting point. The African people are a very resilient race. You know, we've been through slavery, we've come out...The spirit, the African spirit can never be done away with. We could be broken, but we always rise again. (Victoria Aidoo)

Wane and Neegan (2007) express similar sentiments concerning the tenacity of spirit represented by the drum: “Drums are symbols of Africa and the resistance of its people to slavery and colonization” (p.39). Therefore, the drum symbolizes the powerful history, heritage and resiliency of African people in the face of the greatest odds. Chriselle too spoke about a group of ANS elementary school students at her workplace who were aware of the powerful influence of the drums. These students, all apart of a musical group led by their ANS Student Support Worker, were on the bus, preparing to leave for a field trip but were more concerned about leaving the drums behind than ensuring that they had the required permission slips signed by parents and submitted to their teachers. Chriselle said the students screamed, “Get the drums! It keeps the beat!” “Nobody wants to get on the bus without the drums”, Chriselle explained. “So, it's so bad that [we're] sitting there and ... they were more worried about beating the drums than having their parents know[] they got a way on the bus. Cause they know the drum.” The central role that these students felt the drums played in grounding the rhythm of their music may be reflective of the significance of the drum in the lives of African people in general.

Although Victoria was referring to the historic significance of incorporating African drumming as a starting point for African people to reconnect with our ways of knowing and locating identity, during the research our engagement in singing/song writing and Spoken Word poetry seemed to have served a similar purpose. Tisdell (2003) agrees that “image and symbol, in their many manifestations, often speak louder than words in the ways human beings narrate spiritual experiences” (p. 59). Two of Tisdell's (2003) research participants speak to the deeply moving nature of music and its power to connect people to their cultural identity and spirituality and to speak to their hearts and souls. Much like the drumming, a spiritual meaning that supersedes words is attached to poetry and singing and this is deeper than any rational meaning

that would otherwise be associated with these symbols. For example, Ann Adams, an African American woman and one of Tisdell's (2003) participants explains that "music is an expression of a spiritual journey" as she speaks about the spiritual connection she experiences through Aretha Franklin's music:

[W]hen I listen to her sing now, I feel her! I feel her soul; she sings right into mine! There's a connection...she takes me into heights, she hits those notes and there's something about the power of her voice that connects me to something beyond myself, and that for me is the spirituality of Aretha Franklin, that takes me places that I can't go without her. (pp. 60-61)

When examining Ann's statement from a perspective of rationality, the influence of music on the hearer may seem incomprehensible and irrational. However, it is the cultural connection of the symbol to the one experiencing it too that communicates meaning. Some of the North End Halifax participants expressed similar sentiments after their experience playing the drums and other instruments with Victoria. Articulating his elation that the drumming reconnected him to the authentic African identity from which the Eurocentric society in which he lived has separated him, Stephen shared:

[T]he real essence was the spirit. So, the spirit came from the music... And today, playing the instruments was like, Oh! This feels good! I'm getting my stress out...[T]his is actually helping my soul! I feel like, okay, I don't know why I don't play drums more.

Chriselle agreed that playing the drums was therapeutic, a stress reliever for her as well. Moving her shoulders and smiling dreamingly, Nadia shared, "I could feel like, you know, the rhythm...The drums w[ere]...they move me!" It is the strong beat of the drum that Stephen says



makes every song, “the best song, cause that drum is just hitting”. The spiritual influence of the drum, Stephen says, affects everyone: “White people are even like ‘Oh, my goodness!’ Like it takes everyone. It’s like you can’t control it. That drum just draws you to the dance floor.” As he described the drum’s influence, Stephen began moving his arms and bouncing as if controlled by its beat in a hypnotic way. His fellow participants echoed his thoughts by affirmative nods.

North End participants also insisted that through the emotions, the drum communicates knowledge – messages - to its hearers. The “Boom! Boom!” of the drum channels the message that needs to be told. Therefore, the drum demonstrates the power of music to teach and to communicate information through the emotions to those connected to the music. As Nadia said about the drums:

It moves our emotions. Like, when we were playing earlier I was thinking, ‘Wow!’ Seems like we’re in a war. I can hear the war cry, right!’ And the thing is, that would be a symbol, and a signal to all around. Like trouble’s coming! Get yourself ready... The way each instrument would play off each other, can tell the mood, it can tell an emotion. [L]ike I said when we were playing the drums earlier, I felt like I was getting a war vibe. When we were doing just the bell things, I could feel like a party celebration vibe.

The drums get our attention (Stephen, Chriselle) and prepares us for action. Drumming reminds us of who we really are (Stephen) and the power that resides within African people not only to resist all forces that threaten our true identity but also that which seeks to separate rather than unite people of African descent. Therefore, like Jamaican reggae, the drum is political in its spiritual messaging. Nadia explained one aspect of the traditional significance of music for people of African descent:

[H]istorically, Black people have always used music as a form... Reggae's purely political - maybe not in the new style. That's 'Stand Tall' anyway...Bob Marley - 'One Love' right. Like he wasn't just singing just to sing. Everything he sang had a message behind it about togetherness and unity and I think music has always been a way to bring people together and the informal teachings that come[] through it, is ways in which...we communicate with each other.

Tisdell (2003) speaks to the important role played by symbols like music and other cultural forms from an ancestral and spiritual source that inspire people to stand against social injustices (2003). In fact, there is an intersection between spirituality, music, symbols and other cultural forms with the quest for social justice (Tisdell, 2003). And there is a blood memory that resonates culturally and ancestrally to pass on wisdom and values that extends beyond the lifetime of the hearers.

### **Spirituality as a Way of knowing: Affective Knowledge & "The Moment"**

A consideration of the arts as spiritual ways of knowing draws attention to the equal importance of affective/emotional knowledge and ways of knowing to the more traditionally accepted rational cognition as knowledge and ways of knowing (Merriweather, 2001). Some SOSF participants shared that their spirituality sometimes manifests itself in that which can only be felt and sometimes words are inadequate to express its true meaning. Wendell described it as being like a "sixth sense":

I think it's just a feeling...You know it by what you learn. It's like an inner thing. It is inner. It's in you. You have it *in* you, I find. Spirituality is just something that's inside and no one has to tell you. It's almost like, I gatta say, it's an example of a sixth sense.

You just know that it's knowledge. You learn from it by what you do, who you interact with, by your surroundings. Did I say feelings?... I think it is knowledge because someone doesn't have to tell you about it.

Validating SOSF participants' affective knowledge, two of the eight community artists - Marko Simmonds and Abena Green - directly encouraged participants to draw on the knowledge of their emotions as they wrote aspects of their stories through personal songs and poetry. Recognizing the creative power linked to the ability to express one's present emotions lyrically, Marko invited participants to write a song about how they were feeling "right now" in that specific moment. In a very similar fashion, Abena Green also asked participants to think about a significant moment in their lives and to call on their emotions and their five senses to vividly describe this "moment". Participants were encouraged to call on knowledge directly connected to their emotions because of an understanding that engaging their emotions was critical to their ability to accurately share knowledge in a way that was accessible to all in the group.

The participants' response to this opportunity to use their emotions to voice their perceptions of the world and their place in it with the Community Artists, their co-participants and the lead researcher demonstrates the relevance of tapping into emotions in order to know. This was an opportunity for participants to demonstrate their spirituality as a sense of hope and resistance despite the oppression they experienced daily. As they each wrote individual poems, some participants expressed a sense of hope amidst feelings of exasperation, fatigue and reflection on past struggles through the songs they wrote:

**Archy:**

Chorus:

I'm free,

I'm free.

I'm liberated.

I'm liberated and I'm free

**Roxanne:**

I'm tired and feeling a bit beat.

I'm rushed and uncertain.

It's okay. It will work out.

Things will get better.

The plan will work for me.

He's on my side. "

Chorus:

Things will get better.

**Erin:**

I am hopeful when I think about the future.

My past is behind me.

I'm moving ahead without fear.

I am a prisoner of hope

Chorus:

I am a prisoner of hope

Abena emphasized the significance of Spoken Word poetry as arts-based learning that provides an avenue for people to have voice and to participate in a way of knowing that honours creativity and emotions. As facilitator, Abena encouraged the participants to recognize that with a prompt from her, and without any restriction to a particular form of poetry, they were allowed to let their creativity flow unhindered as they each wrote about personal experiences. Abena also emphasized that the point of her leading the participants in the exercise - “Expressing your Moment” - was to encourage them to use their voices and tell their stories:

[E]ach of you does have something to write about and all of you did write about the same topic, but it came out uniquely. It came out in your own way, right? So, you may feel like, ‘Oh, I’m not a poet. I don’t really have anything dramatic happen.’ Or maybe ‘I do’, it shows you that you can put it down. You do have something important to say and here’s the simple way to get it out.

Particularly, Abena led participants in a discussion on the session’s theme of “Racism and Oppression”, subject matters that are rarely explored within formal classroom settings but to which all participants expressed deep emotions. Through this process, we witnessed participants’ sense of safety in challenging social paradigms that they feel oppress and limit the lives and potential of people of African descent, as she created a welcoming space to do this. When the Spoken Word artist asked the group to shout out words that come to mind when they see the word “oppression”, participants responded:

Stephen: Injustice

Késa: Chains

Stephen: Discrimination

Chriselle: Overcoming...

Nadia: Shame...

Sheldon: White supremacy

Nadia: Privilege

Participants offered Abena the following words that came to mind when they explored the term “Freedom”:

Nadia: “Equality, Equity”

Sheldon: "Canada"

Melissa: "Expression"

Chriselle: "Black"

Sheldon: "Music"

Nadia: "Politics"

Sheldon: "Voice"

Késa: “Identity”

Chriselle: "Heaven"

Sheldon: "Christ"

Nadia: "Laws"

Stephen: "Integration"

Nadia: "Inclusiveness"

Késa: "Education"

Nadia: "Diversity"

These North End Halifax participants shared that the words associated with “Freedom” came to them with ease and were numerous, but they struggled to provide words associated with “Oppression”. Sheldon admitted that it was more difficult for him to name words aligned with

“Oppression” because he “was trying to block out what is”. Nadia too explained, “who likes to think about oppression? *I live it all day long*. Why do I have to come up with all kinds of descriptors of it? *I live it!* I don't need to decompartmentalize that word and break it down. It kinds of just makes you feel a little bit more stressed out.”

Throughout this exercise, participants demonstrated their own power to name and define their own realities. For example, in an unorthodox manner Chriselle drew a parallel between “Freedom” and “racism”, and asked Abena to place this word under the “Freedom” column. She explains to Abena, “Even though we [have] freedom, we're still dealing with a lot of racism. It's not gone yet. So, like, what I'm saying is that with freedom it seems like it's always - gonna - be – here.” As Chriselle acknowledged the pervasiveness of racism in her life, Stephen affirmed her sentiments by adding the phrase “Waking up!”, which he insisted belonged, centered between the words “Freedom” and “Oppression” to express the constant struggle of attaining true freedom in their lives because of the constant presence of oppression impinging on them in society. Stephen explains, “Waking up! Just waking up. I think you put it in the middle cause I feel like you're waking up wanting freedom but you know where you live. (He laughs) So it's like...”:

Nadia: Like Spike Lee. "Wake up!"

Késa: Wake up!

Stephen: Wake Up!

Stephen is describing the struggle of trying to access freedom in a society that is bent on maintaining white privilege and therefore bent on their active participation in the oppression of ANS people. Abena encourages the participants to link one word from the “Oppression” list

with one word from the “Freedom” list, like, “We’re turning oppression into freedom”. The participants followed suit:

Nadia: Give "poverty" and "injustice" a voice.

Késa: Turn the "shame" into "love".

Sheldon: Now that's one that should be a song

Késa: Yeah, I think sometimes for us there is a lot of shame... I think it's acted out. It's not said in a way that we always know. We're acting out the shame that we feel about our own identities, but we need to turn that into self-love. (nods from Nadia and Melissa)

Chriselle: "Overcome racism"

Nadia: Ending discrimination through inclusiveness and diversity, education...

Abena: (writing) "Ending discrimination through..."?

Nadia: Through inclusiveness, which is different from diversity

Abena: Yes, it is!

Sheldon: Countering white supremacy with diversity

Stephen: How about "overcoming" "inequality" with "higher education"?

Melissa C.: "Stop our Blacks from being behind bars" (laughter)

Stephen: Be nice! (laughter)

Sheldon: Very nice!

Melissa C.: I'm just sayin'!

Abena: Stop our Blacks?

Melissa C.: From being behind bars

Melissa C.: I'm tired of seeing them.

Stephen: Some facts we don't say. Some facts we don't need to say... (inaudible). No, that is true.

Nadia: We gat to say something about the word "privilege" because oppression doesn't happen without privilege...



Sheldon: Okay. " Dealing with privilege to meet equality"

Stephen: What about, "Canada should be *shamed* of itself!" (joking with participants laughing)

Abena's words as well as the response, participation and sharing of all participants together demonstrate the power of Spoken Word poetry to reposition cultural identity, knowledge and consciousness, placing the power of storytelling and self-definition in the hands of the marginalized. North End participants took up their power by noting the following actions as necessary to overcoming oppression:

Turning oppression into freedom

Give poverty and injustice a voice

Turn shame into love

Overcoming racism

Ending discrimination through inclusiveness

Countering white supremacy with diversity

Overcoming inequality with higher education

Stop our Blacks from being behind bars

Dealing with privilege to meet equality

The experiences in these two sessions, gave participants agency to “challenge processes and practices that exclude, marginalize and disempower and new paradigms which foster social change” (Clover & Stalker, 2007).

This conversation, though jovial at times, spoke to somber issues that impact the everyday lives of African Nova Scotians. Most apparent was the freedom that participants felt in having the space to express their thoughts, feelings and ideas concerning their lived experiences with racism and oppression. Stephen's words above, for instance, though joking, reflect the serious constraints that participants throughout all Story Circles felt within mainstream society as it regards the space to honestly give voice to the challenges of oppression and racism. However, the need to embargo one's speech to protect against retribution did not apply within the Story Circle, as facilitators and participants alike created a secure, non-competitive and relational environment in which all felt free to share. The freedom taken by participants to voice their thoughts and feelings with transparency, honesty and authenticity is within itself a powerful anti-oppressive stance. Nadia took the opportunity at the end of the Spoken Word session to provide her response to the workshop on Racism and Oppression through a poem she wrote in the exercise led by Abena:

I'd like to break the chains of oppression  
 Throw poverty away.  
 Overcome discrimination  
 And shame their privilege in a way  
 I'm tired of injustice.  
 Can't we change the politics?  
 I'm done!

Chinua Achebe (2012) says the fact that people have not spoken does not mean that they do not have something to say. "Those who win tell the story; those who are defeated are not heard. But that has to change. It's in the interest of everybody including the winners to know that there's another story" (Achebe, 2012). Spirituality is the other story which when expressed, creates a

space for the telling of other stories of resistance to be defined by others. The expression of African Centred spirituality provides an opportunity for the creation of what Achebe refers to as a “balance of stories”, where everyone has an opportunity to tell their own stories with their own voices and no story becomes the dominant, single story of power and privilege.

### **Strength, Perseverance & Support**

Participants also spoke about spirituality as a source of fortitude enabling them to endure marginalization in a society where they have often been racialized and felt isolated outside of their physical communities. Wendell shares, for instance, that it was the spirituality of his family and community members that gave them the strength to leave their communities to make a living in the wider society where they would have had to endure the perils of racism. Their spirituality “help[ed] them to get through their everyday life as in just going out there in the world amongst people that weren't in our communities and just people you work [with]” (Wendell). Likewise, other SOSF participants spoke about gaining strength and tenacity through their spirituality. Melissa D. says she thinks about faith, hope and “those things that keep you going when you feel like it is too much” as she reflects on the meaning of spirituality. For her, spirituality encompasses supports that encourage her to persevere as opposed to those which bring discouragement: “persevering rather than trying to bring you down” (Melissa D.). When I asked the North End Halifax Story Circle if spirituality plays a role in their lives, Melissa C. told the group that her faith in God and family connections, particularly her relationship with her mother who had passed away, uplift her during times of need:

Yeah, I would say yes – with God, first of all, and family. Cause with my ups and downs, God gets me through. And then with my family, my mom...and that's just my heritage alone...and what she brought and taught. My parents together – yes, but my

mom, she was the outspoken [one] – and when something was going on, she fought for us...not saying that my dad doesn't. He's quiet though. But my mom was vociferous! You know, that was her thing. You know, don't try stuff on her ground or whatever, cause 'I'm gonna let you know how it is!' You know, old school that way. So, with values that I've received and...learned and still receiving and now...Yeah, spirituality and all the good stuff. Yeah! I just got a good feeling just now!

Melissa C.'s body shivers with excitement as she reflects on the memory of her mother's support, the legacy of strength she has left for Melissa C. to emulate and the central role of this kind of spirituality in her life. She shares that her mother's strength was so influential, that she is continuing to benefit from her example, which has developed within her a kind of resilience from the ups and downs of her life.

The legacy of Melissa C.'s mother embodies that of ANS women's persistent survival despite the hostile conditions they had to endure throughout their existence in Nova Scotia. Hamilton (1994) credits a dependence on spirituality as the impetus for their determined and successful resistance:

From her first arrival in Nova Scotia, the Black woman has been immersed in a struggle for survival. She has had to battle slavery, servitude, sexual and racial discrimination, and ridicule. Her tenacious spirit has been her strongest and most constant ally; she is surviving with a strong dignity and an admirable lack of self-pity and bitterness. She is surviving, but not without struggle. (p.13)

Through the indomitable culture and religious beliefs in which our spirituality is embedded, Black women have been able to resist eradication in the very worst of times. In contemporary

times as well, oppressions including poverty, gender discrimination and racism continuously act against the lives of Black women, seeking to impede them in their struggle to survive. However, “a relationship with God is the one thing that gives them hope in what seems to be a hopeless society” (Heath, 2006, p. 162). In this way, spirituality serves as a source of faith, which equips Black women with the endurance to stay on course, regardless of obstacles, helping them to create a strong sense of self, individually as well as collectively (Heath, 2006; Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994; McCloud & Ebron, 2003).

One female participant, Chriselle, explained the importance of her spirituality serving as a reservoir of strength and courage not only for herself, but also for other community members. Chriselle gave an example of a time when her spirituality carried her through a difficult situation and enabled her to support someone else as well. A young community member had miscarried her baby and Chriselle was called upon to provide comfort. Chriselle's spiritual strength did not only enable her to persevere personally, but it also equipped her to provide immediate support to this woman during a distressful time. Even during this difficult situation, as she reflects upon her spirituality she says, "I'm very, very fortunate...God has given me a blessing". Chriselle explained that the nursing staff was uncertain about how to support the woman because they knew that the baby would be a still birth:

I went there and I didn't expect the baby's already dead in her stomach but everybody is just at a standstill. I don't know where my strength comes from to get that young girl through this. But if it wasn't for being out in my neighbourhood and just having that spirituality and know that somebody had to be there for her. And I just think that if I didn't come from where I come from, that I would not have had the strength to go through that with [her] to get her [through this]...[T]he nurses and everybody said 'When

you come in, it just seemed like everything got right easy!' The nurses, the doctors, everyone said [to me]...'Where did you come from?'... And I said, 'I don't know'. But God just kept me through this and He told me to be here. He orders my steps, so that's where the spirituality really orders my steps.

Chriselle describes her spirituality as being a result of her community connectedness, heritage and belief in God. In this example, her sense of obligation to uphold the well-being of those in her community, particularly in their times of greatest need is outstanding. Additionally, Chriselle speaks to looking to God for direction on what she should do and a relationship with God that allows her to not only feel protected by Him in trying times, but to be in communication with her God in a way that allows her to receive guidance from Him. Chriselle's story provides an excellent example of the multiple facets that together form the SOSF participants' definition of African-centred spirituality.

Some participants speak to spirituality as resilience: "It helps you be a stronger person with all the bad things that are going on in the world." Speaking to the emotional and psychological wherewithal her spirituality afforded her over her lifetime, Chriselle says, "I would say spirituality helps me a lot, cause without spirituality I probably would have lost it". Cynamon describes it as a hope and passion that is always present, while Wendell explains that his spirituality is an everyday support in his interactions with people, but specifies that it is there to "help you through things."

When reflecting on their experiences within formal education, some participants discussed that while spirituality did not absolve them of the impact of oppression they felt as a result of the racism and marginalization they experienced in school, their spirituality did help

them to overcome this oppression. Since these experiences were not positive, Dean says "I think it's safe to say that [my spirituality] did not make me feel any better." Explaining further, he says, "The experiences were negative, I felt hurt, I felt offended. And I would say a better way of putting it is that my spirituality gave me the strength to endure and to overcome." Also, recalling his school experiences, Wendell shares, "I think that my spirituality helped me to get through times that I thought w[ere] negative in school. And it gave me the strength not to let, to show that it hurt me and by the things I went through and that I wasn't gonna let those things stop me from going forward for the rest of my life." Myles tells a story about this dogged type of resistance when he shares about his experience with a guidance counselor who had low academic expectations of him:

I have one example where I was in high school and I had a guidance counselor tell me in grade ten that, you know, you should just take General Math cause you know, that's what you need to be doing. And I don't know if it's my spirituality or it's my pride or both. It made me feel so angry inside that someone would say that to me without even knowing me that I then...Maybe it is a form of spirituality or something I picked up from my parents or whatever - make me want to just prove that person wrong. To me that could be a form of spirituality. It helped me get through.

Myles believes that his spirituality enabled him to turn the anger he felt into productive energy by taking and passing Academic Math. His spirituality gave him the strength he needed to move beyond the underestimation of his guidance counselor towards his own self-determination.

Expressing her spirituality differently in response to the school environment, Jareeca felt that spirituality was an anti-oppressive agent in her formal school experiences. "[I]t made me feel

good about myself so when hard times were there, where there was racism that I experienced, or what not, it made me be [prouder] of myself as a Black person".

### **Spirituality: Our connection with others**

Crucial to participants' understanding of spirituality is the significance of the body - spirit interdependence and its impact on their interactions with others. Some participants explored their belief that their spirits are really what makes them a person, and their spirits are housed within a human body, which enables them to relate to other people and things in their communities and society in general. Reeny put this in perspective for her North Preston Story Circle group:

When I think about spirituality[ ...] we all have a spirit inside which is wrapped in flesh. So, I guess... spirituality is what makes us human: That nature of being an inner being and not just physically human which gives us that connection outside of what we can see, or what we can hear and what we can touch. Something that's inside of you. For example, love. It's a spiritual thing more so than a physical thing. Anybody can give a hug or a kiss on the cheek or whatever, but it's the spirit that makes the action real.

Others felt that an awareness of their spirituality allowed them to be more empathetic to the needs of others. For example, Dean shares one experience of being able to offer comfort to someone who had recently lost a loved one:

I was able to very clearly understand being more sensitive of where this person may be and what would be a more appropriate way to come alongside and to lead and embrace



some support from putting [together] ...some materials for reading that would strengthen, make her feel better. And just to be constantly reminded that you're not alone, that there are family members on the extended family, there's friends. So, by understanding myself where I am spiritually and how I would feel, makes me more perceptive of what other people are feeling through their body language from what they express and share.

Myles feels that spirituality helps make a person more compassionate towards others, their beliefs, culture, feelings: "I feel that if you're more spiritual, it's easier for you to accept other ways and be able to communicate with other people and stuff like that." Jareeca shares similar sentiments as she finds that spirituality "helps you avoid ignorance about society, and people from different cultures".

Chriselle credits her community-bred spirituality as the resource which enables her to support students with whom she works as an Educational Program Assistant. She attributes her skills and proficiency in providing students with the necessary resources they need to her community connectedness which cannot be attained through any formal educational process:

There's a [student] for instance that I work with. If I'm not there, [they] get[] put out of school. Why? How can nobody with all these degrees [be] able to take care of the one kid? Then I [have] my kid that I could use a little help with. But if I didn't have the EPA workers up there, I wouldn't have no support. I wouldn't have none, but I'm there trying to support 149 [students], and there's but nobody wanting to support this one little kid, you know. So, to [that child], I'm a mother. I'm a teacher. But I thank God for my community because I wouldn't be able to do that. No papers and no books could have [given] me what I [have]. (Chriselle)

According to this participant, her engagement with her community, her church, and the guidance and support of elders in the community developed within her the abilities to perform her role as an EPA with excellence. And, although Chriselle acknowledges the success she is experiencing at age 49, she recognizes that she has received “all my energy and my knowledge from 48 years living in the neighbourhood”. Referring to other teachers and administrators who are ranked above her, have a higher salary than her and who have university degrees but who are not able to serve high need students as effectively as she, Chriselle explains, “People up there can't get what I gat. They just...they can't pay for it!” Chriselle is quick to point out that as she serves as an EPA, she proudly maintains her personality, “‘acting Black’ and letting my opinion [be known]. I don't let no one change my character”.

Chriselle tells of the important role that African-centered spirituality plays as knowledge which enriches the lives of those immersed in it in their communities. Careful to distinguish between book knowledge and the informal education she received from individuals like Mrs. Alvenia Cain - a community elder - and her experiences in church, reading the Bible, and growing up in her community, Chriselle credits her spirituality with giving her the knowledge that enables her to perform well at her job as an EPA. Not only does Chriselle benefit from the enriching spirituality she grew up in, but as a conduit employed in the formal education system, she in turn enriches the lives of her students, teachers and others in her community.

Zhané recalls what it was like being a part of an all girls dance group through the church when she was younger and the support system that this group became for her and others at that time:

It was kind of like we were our own little family cause we were always together and stuff. But I found it was helpful...cause we...could depend on each other and...we could go to each other like with questions and stuff like that. And you had like an option of people [so] if you...weren't comfortable with [one person in the group]...you could go to someone else and...that was very...helpful.

Zhané explained that being a member of this dance group boosted her self-confidence because although she describes herself as a shy person, she felt that prior to joining the group, she was extremely shy. The group leader encouraged her to step outside of her comfort zone by participating in the dance group and also by playing a leadership role as one of the older girls in the group. Zhané says this participation and the encouragement of her peers helped her because her low confidence negatively impacted her when she was responsible for giving class presentations for special projects in school. Zhané found a sense of belonging and support in this group that she describes as “more comforting than being by [herself]”. This participant found a similar kind of “family” support at the Transition Year Program at Dalhousie University for Black and Indigenous students. Although Zhané was reluctant to see her classmates as family because of the school setting, she noted the stark difference between the TYP and her high school experience. Zhané explains, “it kind of felt like a community in the sense that we all were – I don’t want to say family – but kind of like work but it just would be cause the class was small.” Zhané reflected critically on this atmosphere of family/community that was present for her in this university preparatory program. Her ambivalence about the nature of the environment may reflect on the fact that experiencing a sense of community within an academic program was new to her. Additionally, she had never before had an opportunity to attend school in an all Black and Mi’kmaw environment before this.

Archy also tells a personal story describing the positive impact of an expression of community connectedness on his life as a young child and how this experience continued to strengthen him into adulthood. During his first day in public school at Nelson Whynder Elementary School in North Preston, Archy explains how spirituality was a way of knowing for him, even at this tender age:

I remember as a kid growing up, always being immersed in spirituality, I was immersed in knowing ... And I think the first real introduction outside of my home was [in elementary school with] Uncle Bernard [reaction from all – laughter]. And I remember on a hot August day my mother dropping me off at school at 5 years old in the summer, getting ready to go to school in September. Back then you went for couple of weeks before school to get ready. And I remember crying so hard in front of everybody. The teacher standing beside me and I just laid on the floor and cried and Uncle Bern [caretaker employed at the school] took his coat and placed it under my head. And I knew he was a deacon at the church. So that was... my first real experience with connecting my spirit with who I was outside of my home [in a formal education setting] and connecting my spirit with what I do in my work. And it's so coincidental that it happened in an education setting, because now I work in an educational institution which ...can be hell at times. And you know, I say that with all honesty...[I]f I didn't have my sense of spirituality, my sense of who I am, I wouldn't have survived at the college for almost 20 years. I would have been gone a long time ago... I thank God for where He put me because I think because of the life that I live, I can help others along the journey knowing that I am who I am because of that first experience I had at Nelson Whynder.

In a similar way to Chriselle, Archy attributes the sense of community connectedness demonstrated by Uncle Bernard on his first day of school as the reason that he has been able to serve effectively and with tenacity within his role as Coordinator of African Canadian Student Success within a post-secondary institution. Uncle Bernard, he says, taught him his “first lesson in Africentric education”:

I had already discovered, in the innocence of my five years, that I would always be sheltered by my community, folks from North Preston. I would soon find out that the world outside was not friendly to those who looked like us. (Beals, 2012, p.116)

Uncle Bernard's expression of community connectedness made Archy feel that he belonged within a formal education environment that was before this foreign to him as this was his first day away from his family. Archy explains that during his experience as an African Nova Scotian learner going through the public school system, he and other ANSs always felt like peripheral “newcomer[s]”: “We were always on the outside looking in, wondering where we could fit in and what to do to get to fit in”, he states (Beals, 2012, p. 116). He was comforted by the gesture which communicated that he could be who he was within this space and in the presence of someone exhibiting familiar community values. Such a presence is critical to Archy feeling "at home" in his school environment as it showed the importance of the community being present within the school.

### **Spirituality: Moral Guide - Compass**

Some participants identified spirituality as their guide, source of direction, or their way of coming to know and understand the world. When I asked the Story Circle group in the North

End Halifax whether or not they see spirituality as being knowledge and as having a place in formal education, Nadia says:

I think spirituality could be like our moral guidance, our compass. So, of course automatically it has to have knowledge, right, because if you're going to be spiritual... you have to believe in something. So, spirituality, I'd say is more like a moral guide...and it helps you to further identify other people that you would like to make deeper connections with.

In the North Preston Story Circle, Archy shares similar sentiments that spirituality is knowledge that provides direction: "[O]ur spirit is what guides us". Melissa C. believes spirituality is intergenerational knowledge that is passed down within ANS communities through the elders to younger generations. She says:

[spirituality is] something that's taught to us and you know I always [have to] go back cause my grandmother.... - my mother's mother -...I was growing up closer to my mom's side cause we were a couple houses down from her... So, she was the one that was going to church and you go to her house and you're hearing about God - you know what I mean - and Aunt. Ruby and Aunt Roberta... and Uncle William and...also the elders, right...And [spirituality was] taught to us. That's what I'm trying to get at. It was something that was introduced to us by our elders. (Melissa C.)

### **Shifts in Spirituality**

Although all participants agreed that spirituality plays a vital role and is valued within their communities and in the lives of other African Nova Scotians, some of them concurred that they

have noticed a recent shift regarding the value of spirituality within ANS communities. Some participants compared this new trend to when they were being raised in their community. While they still see representations of their definition of spirituality within community, they feel that the sense of connectedness is not as prevalent as in the past. For example, Myles told his Story Circle participants that while he feels some community members of Upper Hammonds Plains value spirituality, he also feels that others do not. "I find now that I'm getting older, I'm noticing more that it's going more the other way", Myles explains. "[There are] not as many spiritual people in the community"(Myles). "[I]t's not as close knit as it was when I was say 10 years old or younger", Myles continues. This leaves him to conclude that, "[spirituality is] kind of getting lost a little bit at some points" (Myles). In agreement with Myles, Dean spoke to his sense that "there has been a steady decline within the community in terms of the involvement of families focussing on encouraging the children to attend and get involved in the church as a leader[] of spirituality." Like others, particularly those in the North End Halifax Story Circle, Dean attributes this shift to a new focus on the individual versus the community. He expressed that some community members are "caught up in their own individual lives" and personal agendas and schedules resulting in them "embracing a different form of spirituality than what we were accustomed to growing up" (Dean). Whereas, spirituality as he defines it involves a church and community centeredness, Dean finds that others are searching for relationships external to the church. These persons use entities outside of the church "as the nucleus in forming their relationships and associations within the spiritual realm" (Dean). Whereas both Dean and Myles express their concern that persons in the community are veering away from connecting with other persons living within the community, organizations including the church, and other networks to establish their relationships, their comments indicate that connections are being

made external to the community. These participants see these relationships differently from the African-centred spirituality they and others within their Circle and other Circles refer to as traditionally African Nova Scotian, and to which they both ascribe.

Participants of the North End Story Circle passionately voiced their concern that individualism was now being esteemed more highly than communalism in their community and was replacing the African-centred spirituality that they had traditionally valued and exemplified. They all agreed that this shift or change in thinking, living, knowing and understanding the world resulted in spirituality as they defined it being "broken" (Chriselle, Nadia, Melissa C., Sheldon, Stephen). Community members in this Circle attributed this change to specific factors. Melissa C. acknowledges that the quest for financial gain played a part in the spirituality shift:

My thing of why it's broken, everybody's out for that almighty dollar - you know what I mean? I don't think it was ever like that before. It may have been, but I don't think it was the way it is now, right.

While participants did not criticize the idea of ANSs striving for financial security and stability, Melissa C.'s statement points to the danger of elevating financial or material wealth as more important than community and community relationships. Jareeca was disappointed with her peers for making comments that reflect the low regard they generally have for community and the value of community

Like a couple of friends asked me, 'What are you doing down there at the centre? I said I'm doing this thing for a study. The first thing [ they said was], 'Are, are you getting paid?' No! It's not about that. It's about education. It's about me contributing my ideas. So, I'm not getting paid. So, like you said, it's about money and what I find now as a



university graduate, I find that the younger people are more either going away or participating in illegal things to make money because Nova Scotia itself for us it really doesn't give us opportunities and jobs.

Moreover, some participants named external factors, which impinged upon ANS communities and facilitated the changes in the way community members live out their spirituality.

Reminiscing on their earlier years - the 1980's and 90's - when participants said community members volunteered their time more readily for programs and activities involving youth, Nadia connects the decline in volunteerism with the need for financial retribution for work done. She explains:

Everything the Black community did prior to the 80's was volunteer based. It was because the moms, the dads, the uncles, big brothers, cousins wanted the children and everybody. I know my father was a part of that big group of people. But not just doing it within your own small community but connecting with a friend from Uniacke Square, with people from Cherry Brook or wherever. And what happened in the 80's was racket time. It became all about individualization. The individual striv[ing] for individual goal for more individual money.

Stephen characterizes this change in value systems as one that reflects a "Me, me, me!" mentality that was fueled by government funding and enabled community volunteers to receive financial compensation for work they had previously done for free. Elaborating on Stephen's comment, Nadia explains:

Those same guys that used to volunteer suddenly started getting paid money they never could imagine from jobs they worked their butts off at for years [for free] ... Suddenly they're getting more money doing what they love, which is volunteering with kids, than what they ever got at that job. That fades. That goes what? '87, '88, '89. Then there's no money but nobody wants to volunteer now. Everybody wants to be paid. Another break down of the Black community. It just shredded it. Because the couple of dads that were around - that were still left, they were all going, 'Well, he got paid to do it 3 years ago. Why should I do it now?'

Unfortunately, the situation described by Nadia is an example of how temporary government funding, meant to be a positive intervention, negatively impacted ANS communities.

Additionally, according to North End Halifax participants, the detriments of this government action are still being felt at the time of this study as community-developed support systems were undermined by a government system that probably did not understand its inner workings. As a result, these groups and organizations which were dependent upon community members serving as volunteers to run efficiently now find it difficult to recruit these volunteers because now a precedent has been set that people will be compensated for services that were historically volunteer positions.

Although North End Halifax participants recognized government funding as a pertinent contributor to the brokenness of their community's spirituality, Chriselle and Nadia also acknowledged some internal community responsibility as well. Providing examples of the change in spirituality in her community, Chriselle expounded on examples of differences in the way that community members relate to one another, in comparison to earlier years. Based on her

description, the sense of Ubuntu, which is grounded in care and concern for each other because of an interconnectedness, seems to be dwindling:

People don't do a lot of family things like they used to. We don't do a lot of community events. We don't worry about the next person's children. We don't worry about the next person laying in their house sick. Before, if you were sick, or your kids were doing something somebody would do something for you without asking and not talking about you. Everything's broken. Everybody points the finger now. And I think because we don't [practice]...more togetherness, that's why we're broken now. That's why everything's falling apart. (Chriselle)

Since community encompasses the interconnections of everyone, Chriselle sees the waning spirituality as negatively impacting their sense of community because "you feed off [of] when the community is unhappy." Nadia connects this new focus on individuality and individualism as superior to the communal for some in community. The competitive spirit of Eurocentric society which, because Eurocentricity is generally the ontology of the dominant society, has a heavy influence on smaller ANS communities. She says:

[We]'re actually encouraged by [the dominant] society too. So, if I get something and I get something good, I'm actually encouraged to keep [another community member] in the dark about it and don't let [them] even smell it a little. Right? And that there is actually causing division. Right?

Nadia's statement seems to reflect the divide and conquer tactics plantation owners and their overseers used during slavery days to prevent revolts and to ensure that the small minority maintained power and control over the majority - the enslaved African people. Pachai (2007)

speaks to the slave owners using a strategy that placed newly arrived enslaved Africans in the hands of older slaves to mould them into loyal and docile labourers by separating them from others of their tribes, teaching them the language of the master, breaking their spirit, and making them dependent on the slave owner.

By pointing out the influence of the dominant society in this process, Nadia indicates that the infiltration of the values of mainstream society continue to perpetuate this "divide and conquer" strategy. A disintegration of community bonds lessens the chance of oppressed people rising together against their oppressors. Nadia also criticized community members who attained a high level of education, socio-economic standing in relation to their professional careers and wished to dissociate themselves from those in their community who had not experienced the same success. Whereas, she felt these folks were apprehensive about associating with those from their community due to suspicions that they have ulterior motives for connecting - "All you want is something from me!" - Nadia classifies their new way of being as offensive and representative of individualism: "[N]ow that you have newfound money, you have newfound friends, you gat newfound family. Go on with yourself!" (Nadia).

Some North End Halifax participants continued their insiders' evaluation of the current state of their community's spirituality and crossed over into what, according to Nadia, could be evidence of internalized oppression at work within these individuals. During the conversation regarding the existence of individualism impeding community connections, participants began to compare their ANS community to Asian, Jewish and Lebanese communities, particularly emphasizing the superior ability of these communities to work together for the benefit of all members. However, Murletta cautioned the Story Circle participants about buying into the myth that Black communities are inferior to others and are incapable of working together. She

reminded them that individualism exists and is common in every family and community, regardless of race. Nadia acknowledged how a lack of knowledge about one's identity could lead African Nova Scotians to see themselves as inferior. Reflecting on the history of other racial groups, she says, "they have their historical culture that keeps them connected, but unfortunately as African Nova Scotians, it's not out there. We have a great culture, we have a great history, but not many of us know it" (Nadia). Again, participants emphasized the significance of knowing the history of one's people to understanding one's identity and to a sense of belonging in community.

Despite evidence of individualism emerging within their community as was noted by North End Halifax participants, they agreed that the strength of community connections overpower this individualistic element. In fact, some see this spirituality as imperative to the health and well-being of the community. Melissa C. and Nadia believe this is particularly seen in times of need and crisis, when the unity, selfless compassion and love indicative of African Nova Scotian community become evident. Nadia shared an example that demonstrated ANS community unity during the terminal illness of her uncle. At first, she explained that despite being a new mother, she tried to take care of her uncle by herself when relatives were not able to assist. However, as the weight of his care became too heavy for her to carry alone, and when community members became aware of the gravity of her uncle's condition, not only did they rise to help her take care of him, but she was chastised by elders for attempting to serve as his sole caregiver. Nadia recalls the day that her community, particularly the elder women, came to her aid as support and how this affected her life and that of her uncle:

I can honestly say that I went up there one day and he was in real rough shape, I couldn't even let him see a mirror - how swollen he'd gotten. [He said.]... 'I can't talk!' and I said,

‘Oh, everything's Ok. I'm just going to get you some ice. Your tongue's a little swollen’ and I went out on the door step and I cried like a baby because I knew that he had to be hospitalized and I couldn't do it anymore. And I [have to] say the older women in the community, they saw me on the step. They all just came out: ‘What are you crying for? What's wrong with [your Uncle]?’ And I was like, ‘I just can't do this by myself. He needs help all around the clock and I just cannot do it anymore. I have a little boy at home.’ And they said, ‘Whoa! You needed help all this time and never told us?’ From that day forward literally, those women took shifts, even some men, fathers in the community, [one man] who was dealing with his own sick father who had cancer at the time... took at least two hours out of every day. He showed me how to take care of my uncle.

Overwhelmed by emotions as she recounts this experience, Nadia attributed this demonstration of the group over the individual as being representative of the common desire held by her community members to see their community prosper, be “vibrant and healthy”, and to “have the best out of life”. She attributes occasional snide remarks made by one community member to another to be simply a part of human nature, echoing Murletta’s earlier advisement that all communities at some point in time also engage in such negative behavior. Through her own personal experiences, however, Nadia testifies to the faithfulness of her community when she needed them most: “[W]hen I needed the community to step up, no questions asked, like I'd get up there 8 o'clock in the morning somebody would already be in the house sitting with [my uncle]”. Constant support was provided to Nadia and her uncle by elders who were not blood relatives. These elders felt a collective responsibility for the well-being of Nadia, her newborn baby and her Uncle and stepped in to provide the care they needed. In caring for these

individuals, these elders also demonstrated a concern for community well being as they perceived these individuals as one with the community.

Nadia's story is an example of the invaluable and dynamic sustenance spirituality provides to ANS communities, particularly as it relates to bolstering the over-all health of these communities. According to Nadia, spirituality is "vitally important" to her community's health in general and to their mental and physical health, specifically. From an Africentric perspective, the individual is connected to the larger community and is therefore impacted by the community, but the individual also impacts upon the larger community (Merriweather-Hunn, 2003). Spirituality plays the important role of ensuring that individuals and the community as a whole remain in tact. It seems that in Nadia's case, her community members recognized this interconnection as they supported her during a time when both her mental and physical health were negatively impacted. Nadia recognized the spirituality of her community as helping her to maintain her health during this time. She explained:

I think spirituality keeps us together. When I was crying, I felt so - you know – 'Something's gatta give!' I'm gonna have to quit my job to take care of my uncle. I'm gonna have to like, not spend so much - and I'm already missing time with my baby because my uncle needs me! And you know, I kept waiting for like, my father or someone else in the family, like to hear me and they didn't, but who did? These people in the community that we had lived amongst, I personally had lived amongst them for the past thirty years.

Not only did community provide support to Nadia by helping to take care of her uncle, but they also affirmed her, acknowledging the mature and responsible person she proved herself to be in her caregiver and single parent roles. As a result of this experience, Nadia states:

[S]pirituality in the community is invaluable, unmatched... [T]he camaraderie, when people come together and stand together...that's where our true power and our spirituality lies, because from that moment, my uncle thought he had nothing but happiness.

### **African-centred spirituality compared to spirituality of other communities**

In light of comparisons of ANS communities to other communities, exploring with SOSF participants whether or not they saw a differentiation between African-centred spirituality and the spirituality of other cultures and communities was crucial. Participants in all three Story Circles believed that other communities also possess spirituality. Some participants also expressed that other communities value spirituality in a similar way to African Nova Scotians:

I think [their spirituality is] similar, because the one thing I learned over the years is that when it comes to individuals, we are more apt to think the same things, do the same things and it doesn't really matter your nationality or race. And I think that a lot of times we miss it. I think that [we think] because we don't look alike that we see things different, but really, when you get to know people, when you get to know [people of] different colours, it's pretty much the same. (Roxanne)

I'd say generally, I believe that [people of other backgrounds] probably believe that spirituality is something very similar [ to ANS]. It's about the connections, and faith and that being, super being, to do better and to want better, different. (Nadia)



[People of other backgrounds] come together as one, so you [have] to be spiritual or something to be like that, to come together as one. (Chriselle)

Although Archy agrees with his fellow participants that people of different racial and cultural backgrounds generally see spirituality similarly, he goes further to differentiate that it is *the expression* of spirituality that differs between cultures and communities. Archy sees people of African descent as "more expressive" and "more apt to express [their spirituality publicly] than others." Using himself as an example, he explains, "I use my spirituality every day at work and I'm not afraid to use it and not afraid to talk about spirituality and have conversations with students, but colleagues of mine wouldn't". In fact, Archy said a White colleague shared with him that generally, "White people feel uncomfortable talking about their spirituality in public". These distinctions may also give evidence of spirituality being more interconnected with all aspects of life for people of African descent, but more separable for those of European descent, who may seek to separate their spirituality from the more public parts of their lives.

Roxanne too compares the "bold" outward expression of ANS's spirituality to the more "conservative" expression that is generally seen within the dominant White society. She also refers to the absence of a constraining formalization to restrain the expression of African Nova Scotian spirituality. Dean acknowledges that this conservative nature is also manifested in the worship style of the Anglican denomination which is very different from that of the AUBA churches. Whereas the Anglican church's style is liturgical and scripted, the Black Baptist Church style provides more room for self-expression. However, in the North Preston Circle, Erin shares personal experiences that suggest that the difference in expression of spirituality spoken of by some participants extended beyond particular religious denominations and pin- points differences in culture. Erin shared one of her experiences during the chapel time of her Baptist

Divinity School program, explaining her cultural proclivity to verbally respond with an "Amen!" after the preacher/speaker. As the only student of African descent in Chapel, she soon realized that she was alone in this outward expression. Also, when the other students turned and looked at her, Erin was made aware of the difference between her expression of her spirituality and that of the other White students and professors in the room. It is noteworthy that although AUBA churches are Baptist and Erin's divinity college was also Baptist, her Africentric expression was deemed strange. I shared a similar story about sitting with a group of Black university students on the balcony of a church nearby my university during my undergraduate study in Nova Scotia. After we clapped in appreciation of a choral selection sung by the church choir, most of the White regular church attendees turned and looked up to the balcony to see who had broken the usual silence that followed the choir's song. Like Erin, mine and my university-mates' outward expression of our spirituality was received as being different and an anomaly in the dominant culture in which we studied.

Participants also identified the relational community-focused nature of connecting with others as an alternative way of expression that is different from the dominant culture in Nova Scotia society. Erin explores this idea of ANS people expressing their spirituality uniquely in relation to others in the dialogue below:

Erin: I have a friend who's a pastor [in a Baptist church] and she's White and...she said, one thing that she's always been envious of is how connected the Black churches are and how there seems to be like a family atmosphere cause she doesn't get that at the church that she goes to and she says each person understands. She says we all worship the same God and we all have the same beliefs but there's a disconnect where I go [to church]. But you know, she's been up here [in North Preston] a few times, [to Saint Thomas Baptist

Church], and she's been to Emmanuel [Baptist Church], and each time she's been embraced and she said, it doesn't happen where she goes...

Késa: So, it's what Archy was talking about - the expression of it?

Erin: Expressing it, yeah, they don't ...I don't know! It's almost like it's a little more individualistic almost. That's kind of what she was getting at. She said because we're more community-oriented, we kind of always have been, you know, out of necessity but for them they're kind of like a community, but they never really had [a sense of community].

Erin's friend suggests that her experience in White churches is reflective of the individualism that is usually affiliated with Eurocentricity while ANS communities are characterized by an Africentric way of being which exemplifies interconnectedness, an extended definition of family that extends beyond one's bloodline, and the importance of relationships. Clearly, this friend is deeply affected by the relational way of being of churches in the ANS communities she visited. She feels welcomed, valued and positively connected to others in these spaces. Resultantly, she experiences a sense of belonging and connection to a wider community, which is greater than her individual self when she visits these AUBA churches. Therefore, as Erin explains, despite the similarities in terms of both churches being Christian, the expression of Christianity tends to be more of an inward expression of spirituality in the dominant, White culture, and more outwardly vociferous and inclusive in churches who are more Africentric. Erin says, "even though...a lot of us are Baptist, a lot of us are Christian, just the way we express it is different" (Erin).

Aladejebi (2015) agrees that the interconnections between the Black church and the Black community is a primary factor in what sets it apart from other churches. Drawing on the

work of Elias (1993), Aladejebi explains, “As much as the Black church provides spiritual nourishment to its congregants, it also cultivates ‘personal growth, interpersonal support and fellowship and societal improvement and change’ (Elias, 1993, p.177)” (p. 27). Although my participants, define spirituality as a part of and not separate from their religious experiences and beliefs, Aladejebi (2015) makes a poignant connection between the lack of separation between the Black church and the community it serves which is key in understanding the differences between the Black church’s community-orientation and Eurocentric churches’ general individualistic orientation. “The history of involvement in the affairs of the Black community is a legacy that makes the Black church an endearing institution within the Black community (Walker, 1995) and a cultural womb of the Black community (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p. 8)” (p. 27). Taking on the role of mother as the life-giving being that breathes health into community, the Black church is nurturing, providing spiritual, cultural, social, political, and financial sustenance to ANS communities for centuries. It is no coincidence then that the church in which Rev. Richard Preston founded the AUBA, Cornwallis Street United Baptist, was honoured by being called “The Mother Church” of the Association in 1854 through a resolution approved at the Association meeting in Granville Mountain (Oliver, 1953). As mother looks after the holistic well-being of offspring and community, even so, the complex dialectical nature of the Black church demonstrates that:

[T]he Black church is not just ‘heaven’ focused, it is also ‘earthly’ oriented. Not only does the Black church build a human-divine relationship, it also wrestles with intricate human-to-human interactions. The ability to address these complexities allows the Black church to exert its influence on the overall (social, physical, mental, economic etc.) well-being of Black people (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Este and Bernard, 2006; Paris, 1989,

Hodge and Williams, 2002; Mattis, 2002; Isaac, 2005; Wells, 2006). (Aladejebi, 2016, p.27)

Aladejebi's (2015) discussion on the Black church provides insight on why Dean, Myles and Wendell do not see spirituality as being the same across cultures. Rather, they credit the *differences* between cultures as key factors which influence what they believe to be variations in spirituality.

Cultural differences between European culture and African culture which are pointed out by other SOSF participants, as well, reflect the relationally grounded characteristics central to traditional and historic African communities and culture prior to European contact and continuing today. For example, some participants reflected on the difference in the celebration of special occasions and observances like funerals and weddings which are based within African Nova Scotian communities and those based within the dominant European - descended culture. These participants felt that such occasions demonstrate particular differences between spirituality in the dominant culture as opposed to African cultures. The setting and various components of African Nova Scotian weddings and funerals epitomize relationships and the importance of connecting physically with others in your environment. Myles shares, "I've been to a wedding and it's not the same as going to a wedding at Emmanuel [Baptist Church in Upper Hammonds Plains]". Myles continues:

The people are different. They're just... It's a different culture altogether. Like, I went to a funeral at a Catholic church too, my daughter's grandmother. And you know, the priest is up front, they got a few people saying a few words, you're bending down, you're kneeling. But it's not like... I find in the Baptist Church in the Black community is like

people are singing, they're rejoicing, they're into it! Like, even at a funeral they're still upbeat. And...it's not the religion itself. Cause you could have maybe a Black Catholic person who's from Jamaica and it's gonna be different than the White Catholic person from Nova Scotia. It's not gonna be the same.

Myles emphasizes that the difference between the exuberance of Black celebrations and those in more European centered spaces of worship, is the infusion of African culture into such occasions and all that goes on during them. Dean also notes that the way relationships are central to such occasions within Black communities is not as apparent during these celebrations in White communities. Whereas typically, relational connections are central to the way the family and community are engaged and involved in these special services within ANS communities, in the dominant culture the focus is on the routine of the ceremony itself, rather than on the people and relationships of the people involved. There is a distinct difference between the manifestation of the cultural identity of each group (Aladejebi, 2016). Typically, where people of African descent are involved, the expression of the significance of these relationships is embodied, felt and known by all in the community.

Dean believes that differences in a people's sense of spirituality across cultures is directly tied to whether or not they have had to struggle and fight for survival in the face of oppression:

I think it's safe to say that spirituality differs depending upon what culture you're from. [T]hose who have experienced culture similar[ly] to those of African descent, like [Indigenous People], for instance, have a closer similarity in terms of understanding spirituality ...in terms of networking among the community and family and it's all about relationships. I think that it's because of the struggles that we've experienced that we've

gotten in tune with this concept of spirituality... both from the experience of slavery for the Africans and those from the Native Americans, the injustices that they [were] served.

Cultures outside of Natives and Africans, I think their realm of spirituality differs.

There's some similarities, but I don't think it is as profound, is my understanding... So that was a bit of an eye-opening experience for me, thinking that okay, outside of the African cultures there are some serious differences to be aware of.

The connection that Dean makes to histories of parallel struggle between Indigenous peoples and people of African descent is important to understanding how the ploys of racism through colonization similarly impacted both groups, especially within the Nova Scotian context. The shared experiences of both groups with racism includes a history of being denied employment regularly, being prohibited entry to most hotels, restaurants and other public places, and being the first to be blamed for committing crimes that occurred near to one of their communities without due investigation (Paul, 2006, pp.281-82). Both communities also share a history of colonial segregation with regard to their physical location with First Nations Reserves being pushed to the outskirts and ANS communities being placed on unwanted land far away from main hubs. Today, a mistrust of the criminal justice and police systems is still shared between ANS and Mi'kmaq people as both groups have an overrepresented contact with the law and a higher rate of incarceration in Nova Scotia in contrast with White persons. A "Corrections in Nova Scotia: Key Indicators" 2016 report reveals the glaring discrepancies between the actual population of Indigenous people and African Nova Scotians living in Nova Scotia in comparison with the population of these two groups within the prison system:

According to census data, African Nova Scotians comprise about 2% of the provincial population while those who identify as Aboriginal comprise about 4% of the population.

However, they represent a greater percentage of admissions to adult correctional facilities.

In 2015-16, those identifying as Aboriginal accounted for 10% of remand admissions and 7% of admissions to provincial sentenced custody in adult correctional facilities. Those identifying as African Nova Scotian represented 11% and 12% of admissions to remand and provincial sentenced custody in adult correctional facilities, respectively. (p.11)

Both groups also continue to experience challenges in the public-school system including academic achievement gaps (as was mentioned in Chapter One) and the exclusion of their culture and history from mainstream school curriculum. The Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) implores the federal government to provide funding for culturally relevant curricula and to “improving educational attainment levels and success rates” among other calls under the theme of education (p.2). During a visit to Canada in 2016, the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent in Canada in its report resulting from this trip recommended that that government of Canada:

(d) Implement a nationwide African Canadian education strategy to address the inordinately low educational attainment, high dropout rates, suspensions and expulsions experienced by African Canadian children and youth; (e) Strengthen Afrocentric education curricula and implement the recommendations made by the Black Learners Advisory Committee in its report on education, Redressing Inequity — Empowering Black Learners, and accepted by the Nova Scotia Department of Education in its report, Expanding from Equity Supports to Leadership and Results. The provincial ministries should collect disaggregated data and ensure adequate remedies are available to African



Canadian students impacted by discriminatory effects of disciplinary policies, including racial profiling. (p.95)

These issues align with inequities in education for Mi'kmaw people in Nova Scotia. Indigenous people in Nova Scotia also face a similar situation with high underemployment and unemployment. Both communities were “demonized” historically from the time of Columbus’s arrival for the First Nations peoples (Paul, 2006, p. 282) and from the legacy of the trade of enslaved African people for ANSs. These colonial legacies continue to impact negatively upon them today. According to Daniel Paul (2006):

Because of the way it badly mistreated both the Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotians, Nova Scotia has been deemed by many as among the most racially discriminatory jurisdictions on the continent. In fact, until recent times, some referred to it as ‘the Mississippi of Canada.’ (p. 281)

With such similar histories and experiences with racism in Nova Scotia, it is easy to see how the cultures of Mi'kmaq and ANS communities, with regard to their general reliance and focus on spirituality, are also very similar.

Additionally, George Elliott Clarke (2011) asserts that “African-heritage peoples and the First Nations are intertwined prodigiously in Nova Scotia, even if both entities are ignorant of this reality (and history), and they have as much in common, beginning with DNA and extending to cultural assertion” (p. 401). Additionally, the inter-unions between Mi'kmaq and ANSs is not widely and openly acknowledged within mainstream Nova Scotian society, but Dorothy Mills-Proctor (2010) explains that ANS and Mi'kmaq unions have been extensive. However, mammoth efforts were made to hide from the children of these unions their biracial and

bicultural heritage due to the fear that they would experience heightened discrimination in society if their identities were fully known. A child's lighter complexion would be explained as being derived from a White or European ancestor and the parents would hope these children would be able to pass as "mulatto" rather than "half-breed" (Clarke, 2011, p. 401). On both sides, ANS and Mi'kmaq, there was denial and rejection of the other's mixed heritage, as well as acceptance and acknowledgement of it (Madden, 2009). According to Clarke (2011):

Here is where any effective African-Canadian and First Nations reconciliation must begin, with an acknowledgement of each other's historical repression, genealogical bonds (as Métis), and our mutual efforts, sometimes in coalitions (usually not even of convenience, but of happenstance), to insist on our rights and respect – right in the stony, white supremacist face of the state. (p. 404)

Equally, for both groups, the colonization they experienced and continue to experience today impedes more collaboration and a stronger relationship between them, as existed with the earlier arrivals of African peoples to Nova Scotia when the Mi'kmaq people helped African people to survive (Madden, 2009). However, it appears that the demonized legacies produced by colonization which also make their experiences so similar, may also be blamed for keeping these two groups apart, each community preoccupied by their own struggle to survive.

Spirituality is the instrument through which we need to sound the counterstories of ANS learners. However, the whole "story" of African Nova Scotians, with a focus on their spirituality, must be brought to the centre of formal education spaces for this to take place. Often focussing on academic deficiencies, "single stories" *told about* ANS learners have generally been framed from a position of lack and deficits. Rather, the spirituality of which these participants

speak exemplifies tenacity, resilience, and courage as evident in the participants' stories, which reflect a resistance to intellectual, social and spiritual domination throughout the years. The telling of stories which speak to the contributions and benefits of ANSs and their communities to education and society in general, through the lens of spirituality, are long overdue. Spirituality, as defined by the sixteen SOSF participants, compels us to see through new eyes the communities, culture, heritage, histories of ANS learners and ANS learners themselves and to ask ourselves the question, "What is missing in our formal education institutions and what do ANS communities have to offer to bridge these gaps?"

## Chapter Six

### Stories of Community: Symbols of the Spirit

Joy DeGruy (2005) submits that “If a picture is worth a thousand words, from the African perspective the lessons that can be learned from stories and analogies are worth a thousand pictures” (p. 37). Likewise, the stories told by SOSF participants represent the symbolic imagery of their lived experiences, the ancient wisdom and collective, traditional knowledge of their communities. Through the stories, the storytellers themselves and those who listen come to understand and define their world, the nature of reality and what is of importance in their world. Through stories intricate pictures of communalism, interdependence and the Ubuntu worldview that “I am because you are” were developed. Community relationships emerged as an overarching and significant theme defining African-centred spirituality through the stories of community told by participants.

#### **Spirituality as Community: It takes a Village**

Africentric principles, which honour spirituality were interwoven throughout each Story Circle session through the prominent theme of “Community”. Through many stories, SOSF participants articulated that community is paramount to their worldview, ways of being in the world, understanding and knowing the world, and their value systems as ANSs. Stephen equated community to a “principle”, a fundamental system of beliefs or behaviors that guide those connected to ANS communities. Emphasizing the relational aspects of community, other participants defined it as, “togetherness”, “where you feel like you belong”, “where you feel comfortable”, “What you identify with and who you identify with” (Melissa D, Erin, Roxanne,

Jareeca, Archy). "Community is anybody and everybody who wants to be attached and connected", said Nadia. She adds, "So, it's not a defined area, a defined space. It's more like the connections and relationships and the development of relationships and nurturing those relationships to continue and ensuring that those relationships go [on]into the future" (Nadia). Others shared the sentiment that community refers to people working together towards the same goal. Such elements mirror those of Africentric spirituality, which see the individual and the community as indistinguishable: as one.

The stories shared by participants also suggest that their expressions of community were many times unwelcome, disrespected, or seen as ominous in formal education institutions. For example, Myles reported instances where public school administrators suspected a group of Black students of being up to ill will, simply because they were "hanging out in the hallway". Dean shared an experience of being asked to leave his junior high math class for a week because he helped classmates understand their work. After the teacher asked him not to help his classmates several times in front of the class, Dean expressed confusion given his "A+" average:

I got kicked out of [class] for being inspired to want to share my knowledge and help others. I was in a class once and the teacher was trying to teach a class of thirty and there was a line-up of about twelve people waiting to get some support and given that I had a very high academic reputation in math, some of the students got tired waiting in line and came to my desk and asked me to help them out. And after the third time of the teacher telling me directly in front of the class, I am not to help [because] she is the teacher in this class, I mean because of my home environment, I didn't want to be disrespectful. I just wrestled with...*this made no sense*. How could you teach everyone and you're doing one-on-one and there's such a line-up and I understand exactly what you're doing on the

same level of 100% was my average at the time? Why can't I share the knowledge? Her way of dealing with it was of course to kick me out of the class for a week to teach me a lesson.

Such stories exemplify how ANS learners are generally bi-cultural and have a spiritual/relational way of living, which eludes or is ignored many teachers in formal education. Often times, little attention is paid to the reality that learners of African descent likely prescribe to a different worldview from the dominant Eurocentric population. The school administrator in Myles' story seemed to be unaware of the importance of community identity to these students. In the case of Dean's experience, the teacher did not draw a connection between his African-centered, community world-view and his desire to assist his classmates. Also, lost during Dean's experience is the fact that knowledge-making is a community effort generally for people of African descent, and the community's collective knowledge is the primary source of knowing. Noting the dichotomy between the Eurocentric environment in his school and the Africentric realities of his home community, Dean explains the internal conflict this situation caused him:

I wrestled with that, cause again, in the community it's about you help one another. So that was one of the down sides that I didn't like about formal education...if she had been fair enough to even assess what I was doing, she would have made it more community-based...And coming from the community, setting, we are taught to help one another.

Such stories clearly demonstrate how the metanarrative of formal education denies ANSs the expression of their African-centered spirituality. Sadly, reflecting on their public-school education, participants in all three Circles expressed annoyance over the fact that the only time their spirituality - their community - seemed to be welcomed was once or twice a year in

February during African Heritage Month. Even then, aspects about ANS history, culture and heritage – a dancer, drummer, or speaker - were only temporarily tolerated and this knowledge is not truly embedded throughout the school system or curriculum.

Noting the collective work and responsibility associated with Africentric ideas of community one participant drew the following comparison:

[W]hen I s[ee] community, I think a village. It takes a village to raise a child. It takes a village to make a well. It takes a village to make a road. It takes a village to make a house. So, it takes a village to raise our children. So, that's what I think about my community... It takes a village to do almost anything. (Chriselle)

The perspective that ANS communities are villages with collective responsibility of caring for everyone, but particularly children and the elders was also mutual. The "village" way of being, knowing, and seeing, demonstrates that in ANS communities, community success is inseparable from individual success. Wendell agrees: "It takes a whole little village, and it's like, you help each other out. And someone can do this for you...people have different skills and...you work together. And that's what it should be." From the village perspective, preparing for and working towards the communities' future are valued. The idea of the future being important was also explained by Nadia, a North End - Halifax participant: "It's more like the connections and relationships and the development of relationships and nurturing those relationships to continue and ensuring that those relationships go into the future." Therefore, although the physical aspects are an important part of the definition of community for some, as Archy, a North Preston participant put it - "It is the person, the place, and the thing", all inclusively intermingled and working as one.

## Community as Quilt: Survival & Oppression

The quilt provides the ideal depiction of the process of knowledge making through the sharing of stories in each Story Circle. Our quilting workshops led by East Preston quilter Connie Glasgow-White inspired the participants to see the quilt, not only as a metaphor of storytelling, but as a representation of ANS community which stands as a symbol of resistance to oppression. However, when we reflect on the fact that quilts were created by ANS women, African American women, and Black women in general and that, as discussed in Chapter Two, ANS women are seen as the backbone of their communities, quilts represent ANS women's determination to foster survival for themselves and their families through resistance during dire circumstances. After the UHP quilting workshop, Jareeca initially expressed a profound sense of sadness as she reflected on the poverty early ANS women endured, making the creation of quilts a necessity for the survival of their families through cold winters in uninsulated houses. Therefore, through the resistance of ANS women, ANS communities survived treacherous winters for which they were otherwise, because of poverty, ill-prepared. Jareeca was deeply touched when she learned, through Connie's stories, that historically, ANSs faced extreme oppression that threatened their very existence. As she processed these stories, Jareeca thoughtfully envisioned the quilt as symbolic of ANS communities' resistance to oppression during these difficult times:

Jareeca: So, the quilt was like ... a sign of fighting oppression?...

Késa: What do you think?

Jareeca: I think it is, cause it gave them comfort.



Jareeca was not the only participant who experienced an awakening to a deeper sense of value for the ANS quilts which were common place in their homes and community during their upbringing. Dean also reminisced fondly on a quilt made by his grandmother which holds sentimental value for him:

From [Connie] talking about it, I remember [that] I have this quilt from my grandmother....and it's a very heavy quilt. It's made up of jeans, basically. And it's all in these different patches. It's the size of a double bed and I remember when she passed[away], the only thing I had wanted was that quilt. And I have it to this day. (Dean)

Dean's memory is also a reminder of the family and community history that ANS and other Black women passed down from generation to generation with the handing down of a quilt. Dean cherishes this quilt because of his connection to the person who made it – his grandmother – and the warmth that this quilt provides him in cold weather: “It is very heavy. It would be the equivalent to three comforters, easily...In the wintertime, it's awesome!” The physical warmth that Dean says is provided by his grandmother's quilt, is synonymous to emotional and relational security that ANS women provided to their families and wider community through their creations. These women made something – warm quilts – out of nothing and through them demonstrated the resilience and creativity of ANS people and ANS women, specifically, to survive against the odds.

In the North Preston Story Circle, Connie's workshop inspired Roxanne to recall memories from her childhood which emphasized the quilt as a symbol of the beauty of community survival and sharing interwoven with community creativity:

I just think about, you know, being a little girl, and my mom, even now that I think about it, it has more meaning of what was actually happening back then. Because when [my mom] used to take our clothing, and not to say that she actually went to the store and bought them, they could be hand-me-downs that w[ere] given to us, and how she would take that [to another house in the community] and that family would actually look through [the clothing] and see what items were good to wear and which ones they could use for the quilt. So not only was there a benefit of the connection of putting the patches together to come up with a design that, you know, you go into it and now you're realizing what you're gonna do and all of a sudden you have this amazing piece. Every little piece has a message. And then not only that but the fact that you had the quilt to keep the kids warm and the clothing was all a part of that same page. So, it was certainly, definitely part of the community for sure. It seems even more so relevant and more inspiring today than when it was actually happening.

The sorting process points to the fact that survival was a community effort led by ANS women. Roxanne's mother and the women of the other family made sure that nothing was wasted, but that every aspect of clothing, whether it would serve as a patch for a quilt or as an item to be worn, was put to good use. The process of selecting a pattern for the quilt and making the quilt itself was also done collectively between Roxanne's mother and other women of the community. Although Roxanne could not appreciate the value of quilt-making as the endeavour of a community of women as a child, her memory demonstrates the multifaceted significance of quilts as a symbol of survival, and the physical and spiritual warmth produced by the community's women. Connie also reminisced on the fact that while growing up, she did not have an appreciation for the art of quilting, although she grew up watching her mother make

quilts. This quilter said that her mother wanted to teach her to quilt, but she did not have an interest in learning this skill at that time:

And my mother used to make quilts, but...what I remember seeing my mother do is she used to actually cut up old clothes and stuff, like old coats and dresses and stuff like that and cut them up and make what you call a patchwork quilt. I don't know about you guys, but we lived out East Preston and the houses weren't insulated. You know when you're young you don't appreciate what people are doing until they're gone and you say, "I wish I had learned that?" (Story Circle members respond – "Uh huh!"). I used to watch her but I never took part in the quilting.

Connie, like Roxanne, recognized the value of quilting in adulthood. Not only does she appreciate her own quilts, but she also showed participants a treasured hand stitched quilt given to her by Edith Colley, a quilter from East Preston who since passed away. Connie also shared with participants pictures of quilts created by Harriet Powers, an ex-enslaved African American woman who hand sewed intricate designs known as Bible quilts, and information on quilts that were used as signals in the Underground Railroad escape routes for African American slaves to guide them safely North to freedom. Although she may not have inherited the quilting skill directly from her mother, since Connie learned how to quilt from another woman later on in life, she did inherit from her what she calls "the passion" to quilt. As other ANS women passed on this skill from one generation to the next, by sharing the skill with my Story Circle participants, she takes up her responsibility as an othermother passing on the knowledge about ANS quilting to ANS community members in the Story Circles.

Africentric values including interconnectedness, communalism, corporation and unity are expressed through the art of quilting as ANS women worked together to produce one quilt that was representative of a community effort. Demonstrating the unity reflected in the quilt, Archy explained:

[Quilts] were all individual pieces put together...sewn together for a purpose: 1) to keep you warm and 2) to tell a story. So, because we're so united as a community, even though a lot of times we feel disconnected, that quilt woven together for me shows unity.

For my participants, the quilt represents the stories of ANS community because of the communal process in which many of these quilts were made in a group setting, with shared and ingenious collection of materials including scraps and fabric cut-out from old clothing. Taken together, the processes surrounding the creation of ANS quilts and the purpose of the end products suggest that quilting was serious work. As North End participant Nadia recalled her childhood experience when she and some of her friends visited with an elderly woman in her community to learn how to quilt, she alluded to the dedication that quilters expected of those learning the art: "Me and my friend, we would go [ to the community member's house], put a couple of stitches in and she'd be like, 'You guys ain't serious! Put my quilt down. Bring your own stuff up.'" Although the girls did not demonstrate commitment to learning to quilt, the elderly ANS woman taught them the necessity of women's dedication to work of community, which the act of quilting represented as well. There was a shared duty and responsibility amongst ANS women towards a common end-goal: the creation of a warm and beautiful quilt. The attainment of this end goal required the dedication of all involved. Circle members saw quilts as serving the important role of protecting ANSs against the harsh elements of cold weather since most ANS homes were not insulated; but further, ANS quilts tell the story of

survival and resistance to oppression during difficult times, because of the activism of ANS women.

The idea that community is crucial to survival and serves as a buffer to oppression was evident throughout participants' stories. According to Dean the word community is derived from the term "commune", meaning, "to come together in fellowship as a concept of oneness, dealing with issues of oppression and survival". Similarly, other participants described community as a defense mechanism to resist subordination: "[Y]ou know, if it came to divide and conquer, Mulgrave Park and Uniacke Square would combine to fight against the masses before we let outsiders... come in and take away what we value in our community" (Nadia). Specifically, as it relates to formal education, North End participant Chriselle speaks to the necessity of solidarity to fight against oppression. "[W]hen you're in the community, people try to suppress you, but it's the community that sticks together and try to do better." Participants in all three Circles lamented the reality that principles of individualism seem to be infiltrating Black communities in Nova Scotia and affecting their spiritual way of being. However, some saw this shift as a result of oppressions faced by ANS communities:

[O]ur communities, ...are... different because of the oppression. We are such an oppressed society. When we're all together it's easier to see. Some people on the outside would say that there's no oppression or whatever. But I mean if you look at the schools, the education system here, the five worst performing schools are all located in Black communities in Nova Scotia! I'm sorry but there has to be more to it than we don't want better for our kids, right. It's systematic oppression. (Nadia)

Nadia alludes to a common misconception that ANS students are performing far below other groups of students because people of African descent in Nova Scotia do not value formal

education. To the contrary, participants spoke highly of community efforts to support education. They credit their attainment of high school diplomas and university and community college credentials to community members who helped them in various ways. Jareeca shared that the support she received from her family and community during formal education was so significant that it left "no room for failure". Dean too spoke about how an elder woman in his family helped him study for tests in high school and university. Participants shared that community members including the elders and young adults served as tutors and mentors, community programs, groups and organizations, especially African United Baptist Churches, and youth groups provided financial support through bursaries and scholarships, social support, encouragement and leadership opportunities through informal learning that became invaluable to them in their formal education. Two individuals in two separate Circles shared the importance of the philosophy behind community support with regards to their formal education with the identical African proverb:

There's an African proverb that says, 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together' and that's what comes to mind when I think of the togetherness, the value of education for me in my community. (Archy)

Dean acknowledges this support as well:

I gained an appreciation that it was my community that enabled me to go a further distance. I could have [gone] to university and graduated very quickly and that would have been it. But to have succeeded, to go into various places in the workforce that achieved ...milestones...I needed the support from my community.

The focus on collaborative, communal living as opposed to an individualized, independent way of living, particularly as it regards formal education was noted by all.

Story themes of survival despite oppression through the support system existing in community give evidence of its resistance power. Participants spoke proudly of ANS communities describing spirituality at work, especially when someone was in need. Wendell explains:

It's hard not to think about what you hear from people in the past. And also... people working together and people in the community making sure that everybody survived...through thick and thin...And not just looking at everyone like you're strange neighbours...You're not just worried about your own family, but you're worried about everyone in the community, that they make it through tough times.

Some participants told stories about sharing food, money, clothing, skills and other resources to ensure the well-being of other community members. Additionally, the intangible supports of encouragement and prayer freely available in ANS communities during bereavement and tragedies as well as during times of celebration are noteworthy:

I think it's ...such a strong sense of community...for support and encouragement...I feel your pain. Your happiness shared. For me that's priceless. You share the tragedy with other people and they don't even understand how you can be so strong with all the adversity that we face. But it's the community. (Reeny)

Reeny acknowledges the major role that African Nova Scotian communities have historically served as support systems to their members during times of crisis and a diversity of hardships. She also highlights the invaluable qualities of resilience and strength often times unrecognized by those in the dominant society.

## **Stories & Community Identity**

The connection of community to identity was also evident throughout participants' stories. In fact, the power of oral tradition manifests itself in stories that reclaim and confirm cultural identity and self-identity (Nabavi, 2006, pp. 175, 178). It is through stories that we are reminded of who we are and where and to whom we belong (Kovach, 2009, p. 94). Therefore, it is not surprising that participants' stories about community reflected a sense of cultural and racial identity as well as a resistance to a perceived identity imposed by the dominant culture. Errante (2000) says all narratives are "narratives of identity"; therefore, they are representations of voice and reality (p. 16). She continues by stating that "Our notions of 'who we are' and how we express this in the stories we tell and remember, are influenced by local constructions of personhood" (Errante, 2000, p. 26). The stories of my participants not only present testimonies of their experiences in education in Nova Scotia, but also demonstrate the impact of the education they have received on their sense of self and community, which is intricately connected to their identity as African descendant people.

## **The Legacy of Slavery: The Single Story**

Adichie (2009) speaks of the perils of relegating a people to a single story that is repeatedly told about them throughout history. Story Circle participants reminisced upon numerous instances in their formal education experiences when identity restrictive stories were told about people of African descent generally, and ANSs specifically. Metanarratives of African peoples as slave and enslaved, for example, was the prominent single story impacting my participants' sense of identity during public school. These stories bear witness to the legacy of slavery, which continues to impede the dominant culture's perceptions of African people as



equal to themselves and any responsibility on their part to use their privileges to pursue actions geared towards attaining equity for people of African descent. The differential treatment experienced by African Nova Scotian students within formal institutions in general is intricately connected to this legacy of slavery and the idea of a Black person as equivalent to a slave - which explicates the inferior way in which these learners have traditionally been viewed.

When asked which stories were told about ANS in their public-school education, two North Preston participants responded, "There was none!" They then remembered, "That we were slaves...That was it." Participants shared that they were left to "self-discover" their history through their own research outside of school. They spoke of being forced to read identity limiting books like "To Kill a Mockingbird" and "Tom Sawyer", which cast African peoples as subservient, helpless and ignorant. While leading the class in one of these novels, one teacher asked the class to read along out loud and failed to censure the "N" word. Another participant shared a story of his daughter being asked to sing "Shortening Bread", a racially pejorative song, in fourth grade:

You know I look at my oldest daughter who is very fair, could pass for white. You know, she knows that she will reap the benefits of privilege. But when things go, or when she don't feel comfortable with something, she'll let me know. You know I remember when she was in grade 4 or 5, she come home and said 'The teacher wanted us to sing *Shortening Bread* and I just stood there. I couldn't sing it.' And I'm like, 'She wanted you to sing *what?!*' She said, 'The song called '*Shortening Bread*.' And I said, 'So, why didn't you sing it?' And she said, 'I don't know'. But she couldn't sing it! You know and some little boy said to her, 'What did God say when he saw the first Black person?' And she said, 'What?' He said, 'Oh, kept him in the oven too long.' And she went up one side [ of

that boy]...and down the other and then went and told the principal. Now this is a White-looking child who people didn't think was Black. (Archy).

Archy later explained that for his daughter, whom he identified as bi-racial and able “to pass” as white, such experiences made her question her identity. Another participant, Jareeca, expressed the distress she experienced during an African Canadian Studies class in high school. As the only ANS student in the class, her classmates ridiculed and made fun of her as they watched the movie "Roots":

[S]ome kids were laughing, some kids were... staring at you. They were teasing. It felt really uncomfortable...I felt very saddened. I felt uncomfortable. I left class every time we watched 'Roots'...[T]o this day I have never watched the full 'Roots' because I had that experience in high school watching parts and being upset. (Jareeca)

During the Spoken Word poetry workshop led by Abena Green, in her poem, Jareeca recalls a significant “moment” during her high school experience which also demonstrates the culture of subordination created within public schools that not only impact on teachers, administrators, but also on other students of the dominant culture. Jareeca’s poem depicts a racially charged fight between a group of White students, and a group of ANS students, including Jareeca, from Upper Hammonds Plains, which was triggered by a White student calling them the “N” word:

She said ‘Come on, Niggers! Give me what you've got!’

We sat there shocked, bats waving in our hands.

By the time she stopped, everyone fought.

We took it in our own hands because to the school our story was nothing but a fraud.

In that moment cars were driving by.

We were so loud we weren't even properly breathing.

Although these incidents made me a strong believer,

now as an African Canadian I know how to inhale nasty perceptions by others

and just keep on breathing. (Jareeca)

Jareeca compared this physical altercation in the face of dehumanizing speech with the way she now has learned to cope when she encounters self-annihilating language aimed to submerge her identity: she now inhales the negativity and exhales knowing her true identity as an African Canadian woman. Other participants shared similar stories. Regardless of their age and when they left school, the stories regarding the reflection of community identity in the school system were relatively the same: negative and reflective of the legacy of slavery. Chriselle remembers returning to school after giving birth to a son and having her teacher tell her to "go back home to your Kunta Kinte!", comparing her baby to the main character in the movie "Roots". This macroaggressive comment resulted in a physical altercation between Chriselle and the teacher.

Wendell felt that the relegation of Black history to the single story of slavery was a deliberate institutional attempt by authority figures within the school system to make ANS students feel inferior to the others. Their actions, Wendell felt, were intended to "make Black kids...feel bad" and "to make us feel like we're less than the other students". Further, this negative school experience – as was and still is common with ANS learners - discouraged Wendell from post- secondary education and made him more eager to leave school:

[T]hat there was to knock the wind out of you not to succeed; It was just letting you know who Black people are, where they came from, but in a negative way, that you're a slave, you're less than a white person. That's all I can say. (Wendell)

Younger participants in the Story Circles, though expressing the same concerns as the older ones, spoke to the introduction of African Canadian Studies, a grade eleven course that covers history beyond slavery. However, some participants felt grade eleven is much too late to begin learning about their history in school. Others found the content of the history in this African Canadian Studies course to be more American than Canadian, and therefore not a reflection of their community identity.

Participants shared how single stories pervaded their informal interactions within formal education institutions as well. Jareeca remembers her community of Upper Hammonds Plains being negatively stereotyped by schoolmates in junior high school: "Oh, you Pockwock kids! Your community is poor. All you have are pimps and drug dealers!" These comments, she explained, were common while growing up. Archy also told a story about how he skillfully deflected the racist classification of his community made by a faculty member at a post-secondary institution: "He said to me, 'If I go to North Preston will Preston's Finest beat me up?' ...And then I said, 'if I go to Spryfield ' where he lives, 'will Hell's Angels beat me up?'" The faculty member got the message.

### **Kujichagalia: The Power of Naming**

Kujichagalia, a principle of the Nguzo Saba (seven principles in Swahili), speaks to the significance of people of African descent having the power to define, name, create and speak for ourselves rather than having our identity defined by others. This power is critical, especially as

we speak to spirituality and the importance of community connections. Knowing one's own identity in connection to that of those around you, the ancestors who have gone on before you, and for future generations is important. Though it is true that one's idea of one's self influences self-definition, it is also true that external factors can affect a person's self-image. SOSF participants shared stories of their resistance to identities that others, particularly those in the public-school system and society in general, tried to impose upon them.

North Preston participant Reeny shared an experience from junior high school, which connects to the legacy of slavery and one which she says was "normal" during her time in junior high. Her story gives evidence of how present-day perceptions of African people, African Nova Scotians, in particular, are still entrenched in a sordid history of African peoples being relegated to the status of animals, and our identities restricted to less than human. Reeny explains:

I have this one story. And I'll never forget because it was a very, very normal experience in junior high. Junior high school - Ross Road. I don't know if you remember? (To Roxanne) But...our teacher called us monkeys...I was the tattletale. I was the one... And I remember my mom...talking to the principal. She was very upset and before...he got the teacher's side, he was defending the teacher without even being there, without even hearing his side of the story. He just was like 'No this couldn't have happened. This didn't happen'. So, long story short, he did find out, the teacher admitted to doing it. He wasn't punished in any way, but...

Késa: Could I ask you a question? When you said he called 'you guys'[monkeys]...was this a class of students who were all Black? Or... who did he call[monkeys]?

Reeny: I will be honest, it was a mixed class. But, I mean, I don't know if you guys experience the same - the Black students tend to sit together in class. (Yes! - Erin. Right! - Késa) So it was our section of the classroom that he was referring to...

Késa: And he admitted to it.

Reeny: Yeah, he admitted to the principal. And they both had to apologize. They apologized to the class. And that was it.

Késa: Did they know? Did he know why he was apologizing? Did he know... you shouldn't do this because...?

Reeny: I don't think he knew. I don't think he knew the history of the word 'monkey' and saying it to Black people. I don't think he knew. I don't think he...

Késa: Someone needed to educate him.

Reeny: We were so young, we didn't, we didn't know. I just knew that - I mean I was still young. I just knew that that wasn't appropriate.

Késa: But, I'm a student...[Y]ou have...an authority figure in a classroom, [who] said it to a group of Black students, in the presence of a group of White students who're probably gonna go out on the playground or whatever and do the same thing because they think it's cool because our teacher did it - you know.

Such objectifying speech places limits on African people's identity, subjugating them to a pejorative single-story and denying them the right to establish their own identity. Reeny's experience is particularly poignant because the perpetrator is an educator, supported by a principal. Additionally, the situation takes place within a formal education institution, a public

junior high school which has historically served as a feeder school for the largest historic African Nova Scotian community and the largest community of First African People in Canada: North Preston. Akbar (2007) argues that the first goal of education is to bestow identity onto a person, with the understanding that our full potential is not realized at birth and needs to be brought forth - with the help of others - through education, in order to attain full humanity (p.2). The selection of a name, plays a major role in this process of becoming fully human, as it identifies a person's higher potential, their true humanity and serves as "the code for identifying the assets and history that they bring into the world" (p.4). When students are called names, as was the case with Reeny and her ANS classmates, the perpetrators are bestowing upon these learners an alien identity as they ignore true identity and potential.

The teacher's reference to ANS students as "monkeys" harkens back to perpetuated ideologies defining African peoples as evolving from ape-like creatures and therefore making it acceptable for them to be treated as sub-human. Similar ideologies, such as those of Canadian scientist Philippe Rushton, support this racist knowledge system. In 1989, Rushton claimed he determined through empirical research that African people had smaller brains, evidence of their inferior intellectual capacity, and larger penises, reflective of their unrestrained sexuality in comparison to all other races, with their White counterparts at the top of the hierarchy of intelligence and sexual restraint (Rushton, 1997). It is important to note that Rushton was an adult educator, having served as psychology professor at Western University at the time of this controversial study.

The language used by the teacher in Reeny's school situation is damaging, not only in the moment in which it is said, but because of its historical ties to racist ideologies which connect with the enslavement of African people and colonial propaganda. It also begs the question of

how the teacher's definition of these students may reflect on teacher-student expectations regarding ANS students? Do similar perspectives affect how teachers teach Black students and how Black students are disciplined in public schools? Although Reeny does not believe the teacher understood the severity of his speech and actions in calling her and her fellow ANS students “monkeys”, by referring to the situation as a “normal” occurrence in junior high, she too indicates the detriment of the normalization of these images and concepts in relation to ANS people.

Based on her experience in public school, Cynamon agrees that the pejorative language used to refer to ANS students reflects the attitudes and behaviours of formal institutions, which, in general, negatively impact the educational reality for ANS learners:

They say we're treated equal but being of African descent in the school system is like they expect the lowest out of you when you have potential but they don't expect potential out of you... I want to be treated as everybody else...I feel as though African Nova Scotian students are underestimated frequently. And not just in the way that [we're] educated and how some or a lot of us speak...[I]f you take the time to understand it, you can. But we're just underestimated ... Everybody is intelligent and...I'd like to be treated as everybody else...

Cynamon gives evidence of the negative view of learners of African descent and the subsequent discrimination she feels they are subjected to as a result of this perception. She alludes to her/community members' way of speaking, seen as inferior, unintelligible, and impenetrable in formal education systems because it does not conform to Standard English, the language of ‘the civilized’. Archy and Erin also noted the pejorative manner that persons in society view the



language of persons from their community. For example, Erin says when she discloses that she is from North Preston, people often say to her, “You don't sound like the rest of them!”. Her response to them is, “[W]hat do the rest of them sound like?” Archy agreed. Such statements, reflective of the dominant culture’s mores “others” those of non-dominant cultures forcing assimilation to the norm and emphasizing the White way of speaking, knowing and doing. Anything that does not align with this way of being is marginalized and un-civilized.

The low expectations that educators in general have of ANS students specifically, and African Canadian students more broadly, noted by Cynamon, is a problem that has been heralded in various reports including the BLAC Report on Education (1994), and Reality Check (2010) and has been written about by numerous educators (Brigham 2013, Codjoe 2001; Codjoe 1997). Cynamon also recounts her personal experiences in high school where she bore the brunt of low teacher expectation. An English teacher assumed that Cynamon was on an Individual Program Plan (IPP) but she was not. An IPP is an academic plan that is put in place for students who are considered unable to meet the curriculum outcomes of the public-school system or for those whom the outcomes are irrelevant. When this happens, all outcomes of the public-school program are replaced by the IPP and the outcomes are individualized (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2016, p. 5). When a student graduates from high school with an IPP, they are not able to apply to university and have an extremely limited opportunity to attend community college in Nova Scotia. Cynamon believed the teacher’s assumption reflected a general belief held amongst teachers that ANS students are incapable of completing the standard P-12 public school program. Additionally, Cynamon suspects that she had been labelled because she had been on a Math IPP during junior high school, but had worked her way off this program and into the mainstream math program. The wisdom, advice and encouragement from her ANS Student

Support Worker and her mother gave Cynamon the strength she needed to advocate for herself.

The Student Support Worker advised:

[Y]ou have to work twice as hard and nothing is given to us on a silver platter and don't look for easy - challenge yourself. And my mom... always told me like to love myself and accept myself for who I am. And if I didn't have that I probably would have been stuck on IPP cause it's been thrown at me my whole life since junior high to high school and I got off of that.

In the following dialogue, Cynamon explains how this situation impacted her and the way in which she served as a self-advocate to ensure that she received education at a level appropriate for her abilities:

Cynamon: I remember in my grade twelve year, my English teacher, she assumed I was on IPP so she started giving me IPP work or easy work - whatever. Like really short sentences and I'm really good at English. That's like my favourite subject - last year I got like a[n] 89. This year I got a 90 ... And I was like, 'Why you giving me this work?' Cause I'm passing, I'm getting 23 out of 23. I'm getting 100's on all this work. And I'm like, 'Why you giving me this work and you giving all the other children different work than me?' And [the teacher] said, 'Oh I thought you were...[the same as another ANS girl's name]'"... I had to go talk to my mom... cause really, I wasn't learning nothing.

Késa: And what did she say? Did your mom talk to [the teacher] or did you talk to her?

Cynamon: I talked to her. Actually, I went to the [Student Support Worker] to talk to her about this and it got all fixed out and I got the right work that I was supposed to be getting.

Késa: So, was the other girl getting your work? The work that you should have been getting?

Cynamon: No. She was getting the exact, same work. (The others roll their eyes, throw their hands in the air, etc.)- Yeah!... a lot of teachers do that. They think every...African Nova Scotian student is on IPP. So, they just give you this, they'll hand you this 'The cat went there' or 'Where's the noun in this?'

Késa: In grade 12!

Cynamon: Grade 12 - Academic English and that's what I'm getting.

African Nova Scotians see this differential treatment described by Cynamon as the new streaming method used by teachers and administrators to direct Black students towards non-academic, non-professional fields and career choices which are more suitable for their 'natural ability' and thereby maintain the status quo (Codjoe, 2001). Seen as one major aspect of the achievement gap crisis facing ANS and Aboriginal students in Nova Scotia, in the "Individual Program Plan (IPP) Review" of February 2016 produced by the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Minister of Education revealed the existence of a "disproportionately high number of IPPs for students who self-identified as African Nova Scotian or Aboriginal (Nova Scotia Department of Education, p.5). Self-identified ANS students were 1.5 times more likely to have an IPP in at least one subject area compared to other non-ANS students (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2016). Aboriginal students were 1.4 times more likely to be on IPP for one subject or more than non-Aboriginal students (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2016). These statistics point to a higher propensity for teachers to recommend that ANS and Aboriginal students are placed on IPPs. Since any biological

superiority of European- descendent students has long been negated, the only recourse for this overrepresentation of these two groups of students in the IPPs include racial bias, discrimination and stereotyping.

In other situations, Reeny recalled that her academic capabilities were negatively defined and called into question by her teacher on several occasions. One high school teacher gave her an extremely low mark on her mid-term report card that did not correlate with the work she had submitted. When Reeny's parents questioned the teacher about this during a parent-teacher meeting, showing him the work she had turned in, his excuse for giving Reeny a low mark was that "Everybody was pressuring me, so I just had to write something down". Such action begs the question why the teacher chose to give a low mark rather than a high one if he was indeed placed in a situation of having to guess a grade. Additionally, he was made to apologize to Reeny on the following day, and she was reassigned a grade based on her assignments. Additionally, Reeny also shared that it was this same teacher who, when she and other ANSs in her class requested help from him in class would always ask, "Would you like to go to Resource?" Reeny's response would be "No, I don't want to go to Resource!" The Resource classroom is the space reserved for students who require additional, specialized and direct teaching assistance with their studies, beyond that offered by the classroom teacher. Students on IPPs, students with Learning Disabilities, and those taking the general Public School Program curriculum who require additional supports can attain this service through Resource Teachers in the Resource Room who collaborate with other teachers to ensure that that all students access the assistance they require (HRSB, 2018). Reeny's teacher seems to be speaking from the assumptions that all ANS students require Resource support. One situation with this teacher left her dumbfounded. During her twelfth-grade year when the teacher was handing out the final exams for the class, the

teacher he asked her if she wanted to write her exam in the Resource Room. Describing her exasperation, Reeny explains, “I had never been to Resource a day in my life! ...And I didn't even know how to respond...I just sat there and I was like, ‘No, no!’” In these situations, Reeny’s teacher seemed to be relating to her based on a biased perception and stereotype of all ANS students as being academically incapable of performing well in school and as requiring additional, outside-of-the-classroom supports. Therefore, he was not prepared to equitably teach Reeny – a student with a strong academic record - based on his apparent view of ANS students as being intellectually inferior to others. Reeny reflected disparagingly on these high school experiences.

North End Halifax participants discussed with each other memories of the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about their community which adversely impacted not only the wider society's view of it but also their own sense of pride in community identity. During the Story Circle which focused on Visual Art and Formal Education, participants recounted the effects of imposed derogatory naming of their community - Uniacke Square - as "Maniac Square" and their park/playground as "The Dummy Field". Such negative "naming" stigmatizes North End Halifax as an undesirable and dangerous community inhabited by mentally deranged, wild, violent, unintelligent people. Participants and Community Artist Wendie Lee Poitras connected the negative connotations publicized about this community when they were growing up there to the continued stigma it endures today:

Sheldon: All the times we had to hear it, just in particular. We were from a community that was called ‘Maniac Square’.

Wendie: ‘Maniac Square’.

Késa: I never heard that!

Sheldon, Nadia, Wendie: [simultaneously] Oh yeah!

Nadia: That's an eighties term.

Chriselle: And our playground was called 'The Dummy field'.

Sheldon: 'The Dummy Field'. That's what it was called.

Nadia: Yeah, 'The Dummy Field'.

Késa: When did you say this was? Back in the...

Group: The 80's

Wendie: Yeah, like when I was in high school and people would say [this] and we would see it in print, in the paper.

Sheldon: You know, and you would feel good about going for a job until they go, "Where do you live? Oh, you live in *that* area?" And then you feel that feeling that just goes right through you, right. Why did you have to label all of us from a community, like we're all the same person?

Wendie: Who wants to say the name of it *now*?

Sheldon: You know what I mean?

This dialogue gives evidence of the injurious psychological, emotional, social, and economic implications of "naming" on a community of people whose power to define themselves has been usurped by the voice and influence of the dominant society. The imposed stigmatization of the community reflects pejoratively on its residents who by default are both named and identified as "Maniac" and "Dummy" and suffer the consequences of this stigma. The North End participants speak to the negative impact of this single story of their community on their schooling experience, on their ability to attain employment, and their sense of self.

Further, participants in the UHP Story Circle also discussed the impact of negative stereotyping of their community on their lives and the racism they endured on a daily basis because of it. Consumer racial profiling and racial profiling by police and other members of society were some ways in which these stereotypes were made manifest. UHP participant Myles spoke to his regular encounter with White persons who see him sitting in a car and presume that he is a criminal:

[My life] is affected by racism everyday. [I] could go to [my] local grocery store and I could be sitting there in my car, waiting on [my wife] and the kids to come out of the grocery store and people would walk by my car and see me and they'll clutch their purse, or they'll double-lock their door and if I take a walk in the parking lot, then I'll notice they stop and they'll [look over their shoulders] and then they'll go up by the door and they'll look back again. And I'm like, 'I don't want what you [have]! I got my own things!' I go through that on almost a weekly, a daily basis depending on where you are. It's not just around here. It happened when I lived in Toronto [too]. It's just an African Nova Scotian [experience] - anywhere you go!

The experience of African Nova Scotian males being stopped by police for no reason was also a prominent one for the UHP Circle. Myles expressed the sense that although he had worked since he was fifteen years old, if he drives down the main road of his community, sees police and "they look at me the wrong way and I look at them the wrong way, and I get stopped, they're treating me like I'm a criminal." This participant also conveyed an experience of his father and another community member with police within their own community. Myles said his father was the passenger while driving with another ANS male of the community and they were pulled over for

what Myles' father felt the officer's attempt to charge his friend, the driver, with a traffic violation. The driver did not have his license with him, but Myles' father did. Myles explained:

So, the police says to my dad, 'Do you have a mug shot?' This is my father!... And ...[my father] was irate after that. He was like, 'What's that supposed to mean, "Do I have a mug shot?" I'm sixty years old! I've worked every day of my life. Never been in any trouble and you're gonna ask me, 'Do I have a mug shot?'

Although Myles' father took further action by recording the badge number of the officer and calling his supervisor to report the matter, his complaint was not handled appropriately by the supervisor. The supervisor's response was "What do you want me to do about it?", suggesting that protocol for dealing with instances of discrimination are non-existent or loose at best and that no one cared about the complaint.

Wendell shared his experiences with consumer racial profiling and information provided to him by his wife who is White and had worked in retail in the past. Wendell's wife informed him that certain codes communicated on in-store PA systems refer to Black people in the store: "They'll say a code to let you know ...there's a black man in that aisle over there and they'll know and they'll send somebody to go out there". He also shared an experience when he and his wife shopped in a craft store in Halifax:

So, we went in ...and this [woman]...- It's so easy to pick up on that and I go into another aisle and I see you again! I want to turn around and say something so bad!...You're looking at me like I'm gonna steal something!

The irony of this, according to Wendell, is that while people of African descent – particularly Black girls were profiled as suspects if they traveled to the mall in a group as they were watched



like hawks while they shopped, White girls, “were going into those changing rooms and coming out with bags of stuff! They had security on the roof of ...[the] mall. They’re looking at the girls are they! Those White girls walking out with bags of stuff!”

Participants in both UHP and North Preston spoke of their experiences with Consumer Racial Profiling as it relates to a refusal of service or receiving poor or slow service. North Preston Story Circle members spoke to the refusal of a local pizza business to provide services to the Nelson Whynder Elementary School when the school placed an order for a special event held in the daytime, based on a previous bad experience in the community. The sentiment communicated by North Preston participants was that certain retailers discriminately use one negative experience within certain communities to paint everyone within that community with the same brush. UHP participants also flagged their negative experiences in restaurants in Halifax. Wendell spoke to the regular occurrence of being seated at the back side of a restaurant, near the kitchen, although there was lots of available seating in the room. Myles recalled an occasion when he, his wife, and another relative attempted to eat at a well-known restaurant in Halifax. Myles believe that because they were all dressed casually in jeans rather than business attire they were ignored by staff, made to wait in a long time, then when they did receive the staff’s attention, they were shown the menu before being seated to ensure that they could afford to eat at this establishment. Myles and his party left the restaurant because they were insulted by this inferior treatment, particularly since his wife, a Black business woman who worked downtown, often patronized this restaurant through catering for office parties. On this occasion, the staff did not recognize her because she was not dressed in business attire, and she in turn made a complaint with the manager upon her return to her office.

Hamilton (1994) argues that as people, and specifically as African women, “By naming we recognize, unify, and empower ourselves. It is key to the survival of a people” (p.14). Wendie Poitras, the Community Artist who facilitated the workshop on visual art, agrees and asserted the importance of ANSs naming themselves rather than waiting on the dominant society to affirm their identities. Poitras (2015) states, “I was always apprehensive about allowing society to determine what labels I should wear. Eventually, I would decide myself: middle class (I like it here), African Nova Scotian, womanist, artist” (n.p.). Poitras credits mobility opportunities made available to her through post-secondary education as allowing her to move from the lower-class sector she grew up in to the middle class where she feels she accessed more political power. She sees the importance of naming who she is culturally as ANS, which moves beyond race to the specifics of belonging to a distinct group. Poitras also speaks to her experience in a Master of Adult Education program in Africentric Leadership, which influenced her decision to name herself a womanist. Finding difficulty with identifying with feminism, Poitras felt that womanism more accurately reflected her circumstances, lived experiences and the community of ANS women of whom she is a part:

Many black women of past generations had belonged to this movement without naming it. A community mother, Alvena Cain, who has recently passed, ministered to women in prison for many years with no political agenda attached, other than reaching out to those in need. She asked for nothing in return. There are and have been many African Nova Scotian women like this over the years I could mention. From these community women I draw strength and inspiration. I choose to express that inspiration in the pieces of art I create.

Poitras reciprocates the work of ANS women of her community, not only by naming them, but by naming her artwork for them, acknowledging their work and the significance of it.



*Figure 23. "Mother Africa" by Wendie Lee Poitras.  
Photo by Wendie Poitras, 2016. Used with permission.*

Exemplifying this creative power and womanist stance, Poitras said, "There's not a lot of Black visual artists who named themselves as artists. I call *myself* an artist." Further, Wendie

identifies herself as an ANS womanist artist. During her workshop, Poitras encouraged ANSs to see hair braiding, the way we prepare food, and the way we dress as art:

Even though we didn't have - you know - the art supplies or the canvases. I think we do with whatever we have. Right? We are very creative...We need to name it. There's power in naming. We just really need to start naming.

As a womanist artist, Wendie identified and named the cultural traditions mainly carried out by African women historically, as art. In so doing, she spoke to the silencing of such stories, recognizing that the alternative to naming is remaining silent. There is healing in the breaking of silences as “[n]aming ourselves also allows us all to have a substantive and personal relationship with the thing named” (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2011).

As our naming is connected to the cultural traditions of our African ancestry, that this act is critical to survival, as noted by Hamilton (1994), cannot be over-emphasized. Wendie acknowledged that during her own journey to name herself as an artist, she came to the realization that her art is a manifestation of her “blood memory”, traditions that have been passed on to her from her African ancestors and which she connects directly to the Adinkra symbols:

I was very interested in finding out where the type of art I do comes from. People would ask me, “Where do you get your inspiration? Are you inspired by Inuit art or Native art or, you know, Japanese calligraphy...Where is your inspiration coming from? And I could actually say no to all those things because I knew that that's not where it came from. So, I started doing a little bit of research and trying to look for like other types of art that are similar to [mine]... I stumbled across the Adinkra symbols and I thought, ‘Oh, my God! This is what I do! This is what I love to do!’

Wendie continued by explaining that Adinkra symbols originate in Ghana, West Africa and all throughout West Africa these symbols are used to provide significant meaning to African people. These symbols “led people to... virtuous lives and [were] imprinted, etched in, drawn on...materials, so you could find the[m]... everywhere.” The artist goes beyond naming herself in the process of discovering the roots of her art to naming into consciousness the idea of Adinkra symbols as art, as knowledge. Since her ancestors probably were from West Africa, Wendie says this “makes wearing the label African Nova Scotian womanist artist even more meaningful” (Poitras, 2015). Speaking about the spiritual transference of the Adrinkra symbols throughout her lineage, Wendie says, “I think it was very important that these traits, or virtues, or proverbs be passed along from generation to generation in a very simplistic form”. Her insistence on naming herself, speaking the names of other ANS women artists and arts into the atmosphere demonstrate her womanist activism in resistance to the spiritual dislocation that Wane (2007) believes can result from a “[c]leavage between oneself and one’s history” (p. 134):

Separation from one’s past has a direct correlation to one’s ability (or inability) to relate to the present. The silence around our histories is instructive, reinforcing the message that our histories are neither relevant nor valid. The implication is that if the wisdom and accomplishments of our past are not worthy of validation, then neither are our contributions in the present. Silence begats silence... (Wane, 2007, p. 134)

In addition to having the power to name, it is also important that ANSs have productive spaces where they can be free to name themselves, remembering and sharing their stories of pain, dreams, hopes, disappointments and frustrations with each other as gifts (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2011). If we do not have these spaces, “we risk falling back into silence for the sake of self-preservation” (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2011, p. 68). Speaking about Black women, Okpalaoka &

Dillard lament, “It is a sad state when we are silenced by our oppressors only to find that we are also silenced in the very places we should feel safe” (p. 68). Cynamon found that even when given the space to name, there is a need for ANSs to have the power to interpret the identities imposed on them by the dominant group, as she felt that the identities of people of African descent are often misunderstood. Cynamon explains by sharing the poem entitled, “Too Black” by C'Moore Productions with her North Preston Story Circle participants:

They take my kindness for ...Weakness.  
They take my silence for...Speechless.  
They consider my uniqueness...Strange.  
They call my language....Slang.  
They see my confidence as...Conceit.  
They see my mistakes as...Defeat.  
They consider my success...Accidental.  
They minimize my intelligence to...Potential.  
My questions mean I'm...Unaware.  
My advancement is somehow...Unfair.  
Any praise is preferential...Treatment.  
To voice concern is...Discontentment.  
If I stand up for myself, I'm too...Defensive.  
If I don't trust them, I'm too ...Apprehensive.  
I'm deviant if I...Separate.  
I'm fake if I assimilate.  
My character's constantly under attack.

Pride for my race makes me "TOO BLACK".

The oppressive factors at work in the situations noted in this poem demonstrate the danger of imposed interpretation, stigmatization and mis-definition of a Black person's experience. The patriarchal, white supremacist, colonial hand of naming constitutes a form of spirit injury or even "spirit murder", eradicating a person's sense of self and identity. Wane (2007) describes Adrien Wing's (2002) interpretation of spirit murder which involves "hundreds if not thousands of spirit injuries and assaults, some major, some minor, the cumulative effect of which is the slow death of the psyche, the soul and the persona" (p.192). Wendell describes the psychological assault imposed upon Black students in public school through a curriculum that limited their contributions, history and heritage to slavery as deliberate and causing similar types of injuries. The curriculum during his public-school education, Wendell believed, was designed to "tak[e] the life out of the Black students." However, he identifies that like others from the community, he was determined to resist the oppression of these impinging factors and called on his inner strength to overcome. "So, it really made you stronger", Wendell says. "It didn't make me weaker... It made me stronger".

It was disheartening for me to hear most of my participants speak to the numerous instances during their lives that their spirituality has been unwelcome in formal education spaces. Erin shared that high school was not a place where she could learn about spirituality and even though "You could carry [your spirituality with you]...it wasn't something that you could express openly". Cynamon also told a story of how she felt that her spirituality was marginalized and considered strange during her college education. She says, "I had this test that I was studying for and I started praying and the woman beside me was just staring. She was like, 'Why are your eyes closed?' and 'Why is she praying?'" Cynamon expressed that the response of this student

made her feel that her spirituality was not welcome and out-of-place in that formal education environment.

Chriselle shared an experience involving an ANS third grade student in the elementary school where she worked in the North End, Halifax. During a lunchtime conversation, this student told her schoolmates that members of her family make music with spoons during family gatherings and special celebrations. Although Chriselle acknowledged that such musical skill and talent is admired and appreciated within their community and although the little girl was proud to tell her schoolmates about this aspect of her culture, Chriselle says the girl's schoolmates "looked at [her]and laughed". The students ridiculed, "Playing with spoons? What are you talking bout?!!" The third grader explained, "My nanny makes music off of spoons and so does my uncle". Taking advantage of this teaching moment, Chriselle supported the student's story by adding, "Yeah, you guys. They make music. When they have parties, this is what we dance off of. We listen to the same music as she plays in school to the bongos". Chriselle admired this elementary school student who, despite being the youngest in the lunch room, was not timid about educating her schoolmates about one aspect of her home culture, despite their negative response.

Even as an elementary school teacher, Melissa D. disclosed that, in general, she has not felt comfortable bringing her spirituality with her to school in her teaching role. One exception to this experience for Melissa D. is the year of this study as it was her first year teaching at a school in her North Preston community: Nelson Whynder Elementary School. Melissa D. says, "I find ... that this year has been for me the best year in teaching because I'm teaching 'Up Home' and I find that I can bring my spirituality with me." Melissa D. says being able to express her spirituality in her work environment has given her a feeling of hope.



Roxanne and Reeny explain that the general uninviting reception of African-centred spirituality within formal education spaces and society in general is the norm in Nova Scotia. In fact, it reflects society's reality which is that anything African-centred is typically marginalized, misunderstood, and seen as unimportant. Roxanne expounds on this:

It just seems to me...that people won't embrace what they're not comfortable with...what they can't be part of, what they really don't really understand. They're not comfortable embracing it. And so, for students to go into any formal learning education setting - unless it's a class of people that look like you, and experienced what you experienced, they're not going to appreciate it, from the teachers and students or the principals are not really going to really value it. (nods from others)

Reinforcing this idea as she writes about White Privilege, Kendall (2006) states that White people in general also have difficulty identifying something as a problem that does not directly impact them. What Roxanne seems to be referring to above is one result of White privilege, an institutional set of benefits given to people of European descent, only because of the race they were born into which resembles that of those who possess institutional power (Kendall, 2006). This could explain why African Centred spirituality appears to not be welcome into formal education spaces.

Since whiteness is privileged, it is normalized as a lived reality within racialized Canadian society (Brigham, 2013). From a Eurocentric perspective, whiteness is equated with superior and universal ways of being that invalidate other cultures and histories. Additionally, ingrained in behaviours and attitudes is racist ideology that acknowledges the way things are

done and this is severely impacted by racism. Reeny continues to explain why the dominant culture alienates African-centred spirituality within public schools as it relates to ANS people:

I think it's kind of tough because people aren't used to things that aren't normal for them. And here [in Nova Scotia], being Black isn't normal, although we've been here for so long. It's not normal. So, anything that we've experienced or anything that we feel is cultural is not normal to them. It's different than, we don't like change so it's tough to come into school with that type of spirituality and feel embraced by other people. It's tough. It doesn't usually happen.

The saliency of race in Nova Scotia is a taboo and marginalized topic. It is a significant marker of difference in this province but despite this fact, it is often ignored at all levels of society and formal education is no exception. Reeny spoke to the normalization of the dominant, White culture which occupies the central focus in society and then seeks to make race insignificant and invalid because of this focal positioning. Brigham (2013) agrees, arguing that race is a significant marker of difference in Nova Scotian society, which also defines identity and action.

## The “Hummingbird vs. the Scar” Phenomenon



*Figures 24,25. Wendie Poitras showing her artwork while leading a North Preston Story Circle session on Visual Art 9 (top photo). Photo by Dean Anderson, 2014. Poitras' art piece entitled "Scar". Photo by Wendie Poitras, 2018. Used with permission.*

Although it is crucial to raise awareness of the lasting impact that trauma rooted in anti-Black racism and discrimination have historically had on ANS communities, it is equally important to acknowledge the hardy spirit of ANS communities in the face of oppression. It is vital that we recognize a phenomenon which, inspired by one of Wendie Lee Poitras' art pieces, I call the "Hummingbird" versus the "Scar" phenomenon. During her workshop on Visual Art, Poitras shared with participants the story of how she came to name one of her black and white indigo art pieces "Scar":

Wendie: [A]t the very beginning I drew these lines, and I twist the paper around and I have it this way and I have it [that way] (twisting the art work on paper to demonstrate to group)[and]probably about three quarters of the way through I figured out, 'Oh, this is the way it's supposed to go!' and this picture right here wasn't completed until I put these two dots there and I knew it was a picture. It's a face. It's called 'Scar'...[M]y daughter said to me, 'Oh Mum I see, a hummingbird in there!' And I said, 'There's no hummingbird in there. What are you talking about?' And then...

Sheldon: The time you said it, I seen it! (looking at the painting)

Wendie: And some people see the hummingbird right away. I'm always interested when people see those themes. ...I didn't see a hummingbird right away. But some people [say]"hummingbird!" right away. Those people who see a hummingbird right away - so this is the beak... And this is the eye. This is the wing and this is the long hummingbird tail. The only thing that connects this to the rest of the picture is this beak right here. There's only one point of connection right here. So, when I thought about this piece, the first thing that came to my mind is "I want to call it 'Scar'". You know, a person's face

that's obviously scarred ...but the message that I received right away was that amongst the scars, there is beauty. And I think that really describes our community. Right? You know we have scars. We have some serious scars. But there's all this beauty that without the optimism, we don't see it.

Sheldon: Unless you look into it, you're not gonna see what's there.

It takes a spiritual connection to ANS communities to see beyond the “scars” of trauma to the “hummingbird” beauty that exists within them. As one African proverb states, “A stranger has eyes but cannot see” and it is precisely this reality – the absence of a relational knowledge of ANS communities and ANS people – that breeds the oppression which causes trauma to this group in the first place. The identity of ANS communities is multi-storied and to define a community by its deficits and the superficial definitions of others is not only a disservice to it but also threatens its ability to survive, thrive, develop as it should, and to create its own destiny. Poitras reminds us that perspective is everything as she marvels at the optimism of those who see the hummingbird and not the scars she saw right away as the artist.

North Preston participant Roxanne is one example of those who see with the “Hummingbird” perspective of which Wendie metaphorically speaks. Roxanne is the ideal example of the resistance power evident in the stories of all my research participants as she centres the positive of North Preston, rather than the negatively biased single stories perpetuated by the media, and the dominant society in general. In spite of the fact that an ANS person's livelihood could be at stake because of their community identity, Roxanne adamantly states that her strong sense of self and community identity makes her proud to openly declare that North Preston is her home:

I say to my kids don't you ever, ever deny where you're from, regardless of the rap, you put where you're from [on job applications] because this is what you're able to do and to me that's freedom...[I]t might be looked upon as being a bad thing to some, but it's freedom.

The freedom that Roxanne describes is the liberating power that African-centered spirituality offers a person. It is the power to define his or her identity, irrespective of the negative, discriminatory views others in society have on that identity. Roxanne advises that ANS people guard against these types of negative identities: "You have to be very strong, be very comfortable with yourself because otherwise you could be sucked into ...a very nasty hole."

### **Out of the “Box” of Oppression**

During the final minutes of the workshop on Spoken Word poetry, Abena challenged SOSF participants through an “Out of the Box” exercise to voice how they would emancipate themselves from the bonds of oppression. After asking them to draw a box in the centre of their sheets of paper, Abena instructed:

[P]retend you're a little teeny person and you're in that box - ok. I want you to write about how you are going to get out of that box...[Y]ou can do anything. So, will you erase the lines? This pencil is sort of like a metaphor. Will you write over the lines? Will you burst a hole in the top of it? Will you ask someone to come open it for you? Will you take ... your lighter out and melt it away? Will you burn it? [H]ow are you gonna get out of this little box...So you're gonna begin writing in the box and once you figure out how to get out, then I want you to write outside the box. Everybody get that?

As participants shared their mode of escape, Abena probed deeper to explore whether or not the way they planned to get out of the box was related to their personality. The following participants shared their responses:

I don't like to be hemmed in or forced into a corner or...be limited by [labels]. 'Ok well, you're this' like forever I've been labelled 'shy'... You know, I'm not afraid of people. I just don't like to talk a lot. So, that was a label that I had to force my way out of and that's kind of what I saw it as. So...even if I have to force my way out, I'm gonna, and that's what I wrote down. So, that's me. That's my way of getting my little person out of the box. (Erin)

Feeling boxed in on all sides in life, I choose to fall down and look up, knowing that if I can look up, I can get up and find the strength to rise again. Begin with resting in the arms of faith, seeking strength from above, focussing on identifying your condition and your position and then choosing to strategically become better and not bitter, moving forward, crawling, then walking, then running, then soaring. (Dean)

I'm gonna bust out of the box of life by running full speed. I busted through this box and these obstacles and I'm not gonna let anyone or anything stop me. (Myles)

I'm kind of an impatient person, so I would yell for someone to come and help and let me out. (Jareeca)

I guess I would ask for help - someone to open the box for me - cause I realize that I need help, that I can't do anything on my own...getting people to help me. Asking other people, be less prideful. (Wendell)

Outside the box, I wrote ‘I can do anything I set my will to do’ and ‘I will not accept no for an answer’. I’m gonna break my way out of this box. I will tear it down piece by piece. I am determined that I can do anything I put my mind to and that I believe where there’s a will, there’s a way. (Késa)

[I]n the box I had...four strings, oppression, hammer, chisel. And for me it was ‘Slow and steady wins the race’. So, [I was] chiselling outside of the box...[O]utside of the box, I had [written] ‘spirited’, ‘blessed’, ‘overcomer’ and ‘free’! So, I based my out of the box experience on my recent experience I had just a couple of days ago [at work].

(Archy)

Participants’ responses reflected various strategies and techniques they would employ to gain freedom from the “box” of oppression. They spoke to a resistance to labelling, using force and assertiveness, dependence on God for strength, patience, an acknowledgement of their interdependence on others for support, indomitable will, resolved determination and perseverance, all aspects of their spirituality. Abena suggested that each participant’s strategy to overcome oppression was also a reflection of their personalities and challenged them to consider alternative strategies that may also be effective in helping them to fight against oppressive forces in their lives. Noting the power of Spoken Word because people tend to remember the message of a poem from a span of “a few moments to a few years”, Abena encouraged participants to continue to write poetry on a regular basis as a tool to resist and “speak directly to oppression” they face in their daily lives.

Through the liberating methodology of storytelling, the participants of "Set Our Spirits Free" use their voices to define African-centered spirituality and the important role it plays in resisting



oppression in formal education systems. The significance of community as a way of life and being, as well as community identity are brought to the forefront as vital in fighting racial oppression, and in playing an important role in improving formal education systems. Stories present a space where justice can be measured out to marginalized people who have suffered generations of identity distortion (Nabavi, 2006, p. 180). The co-production of knowledge by my FANS participants represents a solid resistance to the perpetuation of colonial ideas that subjugate and "other" the stories of African peoples, our contributions to bodies of knowledge and actual people of African descent. These participants remind us that although ANS stories have been spaces of marginalization, "they have also become spaces of resistance and hope" (Smith, 1999, p. 4).

## UNTITLED

By: Késa Munroe-Anderson 2015

(Written during the North End Halifax Story Circle on Spoken Word Poetry and Racism & Oppression)

They say "Pick yourself up!"

"Dust yourself off!"

"Get over my White privilege,  
my White supremacist thinking"

"Swallow your shame!"

"You put yourself in those chains"

They say, "Canada is heaven!"

"Overcoming is your problem"

"Suck up your fight for equality!"

"Wake up from those dreams that will just never be!"

But I say, "Hell no!"

"I want equality now!"

"Freedom to be me, to speak in my voice"

"I want the choice,

Not tomorrow - but today!"

## Chapter Seven

### Where theory meets practice

As researcher of SOSF, at the completion of this work I ask myself, “How did my theoretical framework show up in my research?” In this chapter I discuss the alignment of theories and practice. In Chapter Two, I discussed the significance of Africentricity, anti-racism, postcolonialism, anti-colonialism and African/Black Canadian feminism and womanism as the foundational framework to my research. I chose these theories specifically because they provided agency for me to validate and legitimize the spirituality of African people as knowledge. Additionally, these perspectives emphasize the centrality of African people as knowledge producers, bringing their lived experiences and all of their knowledge to the centre of research. In poignant reflection on my analysis of the role of African-centred spirituality in the formal education of ANS learners, I identify numerous ways that my theoretical perspectives were exemplified throughout the research process.

#### Africentricity

Africentricity permeated throughout all aspects of SOSF. First of all, the research was designed to centre people of African descent as knowledge holders and knowledge givers in three different ways:

- 1) I recruited sixteen ANS adult learners from the historic ANS communities of North Preston, Upper Hammonds Plains and North End Halifax as my research participants, whom I refer to earlier in the research as my co-researchers. These participants took part in six Story Circle sessions;

2) I chose eight Community Artists to facilitate one-hour African-centred arts-based workshops which demonstrated various ways that African people have and continue to tell their stories. These artists were all persons of African descent including First African Peoples (FAP) and other African Canadians who originate from Africa and the Caribbean;

3) As an African Nova Scotian, Afro-Bahamian woman, I bring my own lived experiences to the research as an active researcher engaged with participants and artists in the research process and as the person with the ultimate responsibility of documenting the research.

In these ways, African Nova Scotians/people of African descent are situated as the expert storytellers; centred in the research and actively engaged subjects.

The structure of the research process was Africentric with the sixteen ANS participants and lead researcher all participating in Story Circles. These Story Circles were held within the three above-noted historic ANS communities, emphasizing these communities as places where knowledge has always been produced and legitimizing them as current spaces of knowledge production. Within the Story Circles, African knowledge was validated and centred through the voices, lived experiences, histories, culture and heritage of the participants, artists and researcher. The Community Artists' workshops on 1) Storytelling, 2) Music and Singing, 3) African Drumming and Dance, 4) Quilting, 5) Visual Art, and 6) Spoken Word Poetry immersed participants in knowledge they created ways that were antithetical to formal education institutions. The participants shared knowledge on their lived experiences connected to the following themes: 1) Spirituality, 2) Formal Education, 3) Informal Education, 4) African Nova

Scotian Culture, 5) Community, 6) Racism and Oppression. This formulated the data for this research. Together, the participants, Community Artists and researcher played a collective role in legitimizing African Nova Scotian/African knowledge and those who contributed to the research.

In my research, Spirituality is understood as knowledge and a core value of Africentricity which was central to the Story Circles as well. Particularly, the spiritual nature of relationships is underscored through Africentricity and epitomized through my research as numerous aspects were dependent upon the establishment of strong relationships. Relationships produce African-centred spirituality and are a necessary component of African-centred spirituality. The concept of Ubuntu – I am because you are – was paramount to the success of the Story Circles as each participant's stories were connected inextricably with that of other participants. Like the shape of a circle is spiritual indicating no beginning and no end, all participants were included in the research process. There is a shared sense of ANS history and culture and a collective understanding of experiences with racism and oppression that was unspoken and did not have to be explained to attain a common ground of understanding. As a result, trust was established between participants as the Story Circles served as a safe space where they often shared deeply troubling, challenging experiences with racism and oppression and also saw it as a space to “vent”. Participants were encouraged, inspired and even consoled by the stories of others in their Circle as well. This underscores the significance of the Story Circle format rather than individual interviews which would have produced more of a disconnected form of knowledge that would have lacked the spirituality which is critical to this research process. In the Circles, knowledge was produced in an interconnected way where participants and researcher alike learned from and shared their knowledge with other participants. I too was an engaged

participant, rather than an external observer during the research process. I took part in leading the storytelling and dialogue. It was important for me that the knowledge exchange during my research exemplified the Africentric wisdom of spirituality: “It is impossible for the individual to be understood as separate from the collective” (Este & Bernard, 2006, n.p.)

During the research, participants, Community Artists and I, the researcher also actively engaged in the Africentric imperative of self-definition, validating our own perspectives as significant and necessary for transformation. In the Story Circle sessions specifically, participants defined what African-centred spirituality meant to them, and how it was central to their sense of well being and belonging in any space, including formal education spaces. They see spirituality - which encompasses interpersonal connections between individuals and community, heritage, culture, history, the ancestors, and a higher power (where one believes in such) - as being crucial to self definition, self-knowledge, positioning African-centred spirituality as key to transformation. My research harkens to Asante’s (2012) plea that “We cannot truly be ourselves or know our potential since we exist in a borrowed space”, because “[o]ur relationship to the culture that we have borrowed defines what and who we are at any given moment” (p.9). Herein the Story Circles serve as a microcosm type of space which demonstrates the possibilities that could exist when ANS learners are allowed to define themselves as a people and to exist in their own learning spaces which reflect them and their culture. Through the participants’ and artists’ sharing of their knowledge in the Story Circles, I believe we have demonstrated what Asante (2012) suggests is the solution to this loss of self and the power of self-definition to overcome this loss. The Story Circles provide a space for participants to “regai[n] [their] own platforms, stan[d] in [their] own cultural spaces and believ[e] that [their] way of viewing the universe is just as valid as any” (Asante, 2012, p.9). Asante (2012) believes that transformation

is dependent upon self-definition and my research participants also believe that their opportunity to self-define during the course of the research could result in a transformation of the formal education systems in Nova Scotia.

Using an Africentric lens, my research also recognizes and centres African oral tradition as a historically significant mode of knowledge and means of transferring knowledge amongst African peoples, not only as a method but through the storytelling methodology. Value is placed on the participants' telling of the stories of their lived experiences, speaking to the past and connecting it to the present, serving as griots among griots in our Story Circles to explore new approaches to improving formal education. Contrary to the idea that European knowledge alone is superior (from a White supremacist idea of African inferiority) and that all other knowledge systems are inferior with African knowledge systems being placed at the bottom rung of the ladder, my research demonstrates that ANS knowledge can serve as its own measuring stick to determine the quality of formal education ANS learners receive in education institutions. In fact, my research argues that ANS knowledge *should* be used to measure and critique a Eurocentric formal education system which is failing many ANS learners. The voices of my participants are a reminder that the European voice is not the only voice that exists. It is one of many voices (Este and Bernard, 2006) and ANS voices need to be included on equal place with all others. As Asante (2012) admonishes, "[A]ll cultures have something to bring to the table of humanity" (p.9). My research demonstrates that ANS communities have a wealth of African -centred knowledge to offer formal education institutions locally, nationally and throughout the world. "Africentricity challenges the right of the dominant culture to legitimize knowledge and those who produce it" (p. 31).

## Anti-racism

Antiracism aligns with Africentricity in my research in terms of how I centre persons of African descent and legitimize African-centred knowledge. However, it is the way that antiracism actions the significance of centring race in analysis that is most outstanding in SOSF. My design of the Story Circles encouraged participants to talk about the saliency of race from the perspectives of racialized people living in Nova Scotia who grew up in historic and marginalized ANS communities and, for the most part, attended public schools, universities and colleges where they were minoritized. As I state earlier, space must be provided in the classroom setting to allow those experiencing racial domination to be aware of the manner in which they are being oppressed and equip them with the tools to resist this oppression (Dei, 2006, p.8). The Story Circles provided this space. The participants spoke about the negative ways their lives were and still are being impacted by racism. One excellent example of this was during the Spoken Word poetry workshop with Abena Green when the Story Circle theme was “Racism and Oppression”. As Abena encouraged the participants to articulate their experiences with the oppression caused by racism, she also challenged them to think about how they could liberate themselves from the “box” of racism/oppression that threatens to imprison them. Participants actively resisted the idea of being boxed by racism and its oppression and boldly shared their action plan for how they would free themselves from these limitations. Similarly, Dei (2006) reminds us that antiracist educators must encourage their learners to “identify, challenge and resist dominant values, structures and behaviours that perpetuate systemic racism and other forms of oppression” (p.7).

Beyond talking about race, though, my research exemplifies anti-racism research because it is action-oriented, directed at combating and ending racism, specifically institutional and



systemic racism that exists in formal education institutions (p.36). Through the exploration of African-centred spirituality as an anti-oppressive agent in the education of my sixteen participants, I action anti-racism in the work of the Story Circle with them to redress inequities, devise creative suggestions to improve the system and advocate for changes that will make a positive difference in these structures of society. Through this research, I make recommendations on how changes to curriculum, educational processes, teaching methodologies and practices, school culture and spaces from an anti-racism perspective can make formal education spaces more inclusive, welcoming and safe for ANS learners and all others who are marginalized. SOSF is anti-racism research because through it, my participants insist that the knowledge – the history, culture and heritage - of their African Nova Scotian communities and others must be included in school curriculum so that all students see themselves reflected, and understand that ANSs like themselves have been and continue to be important, contributing members of society. As I said in chapter one, anti-racism demands that all knowledge available in formal education reflect the communities they serve because, essentially, anti-racism education is inclusive education.

Anti-racism substantiates a value and appreciation of local knowledge that demolishes the petition which separates the community of knowers from the education system, thereby subjugating local knowledges (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p.39). Likewise, my research recognizes that ANS learners – including my sixteen participants – are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge when they enter formal education spaces, but they bring knowledge to the sites of education which contribute to academia and scholarly research. Therefore, there is a bi-directional exchange of knowledge with community members as both teachers and learners. Additionally, this research acknowledges that ANS communities are rich with knowledge that

educators need to tap into as “Schools stand to gain by seeking the assistance of community members with extensive cultural knowledge of the school’s ...population” (Dei, 1996, p.30). In my study, local knowledge comes from the participants who serve as adult learners, while the Community Artists represent the creative resources available in ANS communities, if these formal education institutions not only recognize but invite in the elders, parents, community historians, leaders, musicians, storytellers, scientists and technologists, entrepreneurs and the like to teach and share. As some of my participants pointed out, schools need not gravitate only to African American history to find this knowledge because a multiplicity of knowledge is available in Nova Scotia, in their own “backyards.”

### **Post-colonialism**

Evidence of a postcolonial framework is also seen throughout my research. Post-colonialism resists the subversion of perspectives, knowledge, and value systems that are non-dominant and non-Eurocentric. From a post-colonial perspective, when analyzed in its entirety, this research questions what counts as knowledge, who can define knowledge, who is qualified to produce knowledge, and who gets to be the judge on these matters. Whereas historically, the knowledge-makers, knowledge-definers and the authority on all things related to knowledge have been people of European descent, my research explicitly challenges Eurocentric authority upside down. Knowledge is understood as anything that helps my participants to make sense of their world. Therefore, as the spoken word is knowledge which is understood in my research as of equal significance to the written word. For people of African descent however, the spoken word is especially valuable because it is a part of our history, culture and heritage and its proper use in research reflects a culturally relevant mode of knowledge. In my research, I define African-centred knowledge as inclusive of affective knowledge, spirituality, stories, and lived

experiences. The knowledge producers are people of African descent and particularly, ANSs, who define what knowledge is. As lead researcher, I made a conscious decision that ANSs, and specifically First African Peoples with historic lineage in Nova Scotia are qualified to produce knowledge. And as lead researcher, and as a woman of African descent, I serve as the authority in framing the knowledge of this research. Therefore, my research serves as a decolonizing body of knowledge which defies the perpetuation of colonial oppression.

My research exemplifies the post-colonial agenda of prioritizing the interests of colonized peoples – ANSs. It is focused on ANS learners, the historic oppressions they have experienced within formal learning systems in Nova Scotia due to systemic racism, and seeking African-centred spirituality as a possible aid in ameliorating this experience. Whereas spirituality may be optional or not at all important for some folks, my participants describe it as being critical to ANS communities and to the very being of ANS people, and therefore critical to formal education. They connected the ANS interests in culturally relevant and culturally responsive education for their children, university and college students with African-centred spirituality and the interconnections of each. Participants emphasized the importance of community and how this value is being challenged in spaces outside of their communities. The idea that relationships, which form the core of ANS communities, and sense of community are not typically valued within schools, universities and colleges, was also concerning to my participants. They spoke about other interests including self-definition, and seeing themselves represented in the teachers, administrators, curriculum, practices, and physical spaces of formal education. I believe that this prioritization of ANS interests – this opportunity to “Go home”-- is what drew the sixteen participants to become involved in this study. In lieu of monetary payment, they all saw the value of having an opportunity to speak about, be the authority on

issues directly impacting them and a number of them expressed hope that their participation in this research would somehow help to make positive change in the education system in Nova Scotia. A postcolonial framework provides a space for colonized people to speak for and “represent themselves” (Gandhi, 1998; Young, 2003). My research is that space.

### **Anti-colonialism**

By encouraging my participants to reflect on and share their lived experiences of the past within formal education and community life, I demonstrate the value that anti-colonialism places on history and context. Anti-colonialism argues that colonized people must reclaim our memories and our histories for decolonization to take place. It challenges dominant societies which seek to “amputate” a people’s history (Dei, 2006, p.1), displacing them with myths (Ruck-Simmonds, 2006). Participants were able to recount memories of public school education at all levels, and their university/college education where relevant. They proudly told stories of their upbringing in family and community and the critical role that these groups played in their lives and an understanding of their existence as spiritual people connected to a community of others and a rich history and heritage. In this dissertation, I document those stories cognizant that claiming these memories is a crucial step in breaking the silence on the past for ANSs. A reflection of history from the perspective of the participants documents the racist, discriminatory, inequitable and unequal treatment of ANS learners in education spaces. It serves as a more current record to document that, despite the passage of time, ANSs are still being victimized, marginalized and oppressed in formal education as well as in their communities. This recollection of history also unearths lies told about why the academic gap exists for ANS learners by placing blame on ANS communities rather than the racist dominant class that rules these systems. However, the participants’ sharing of their stories also demonstrates ANSs as

resilient, resourceful people who continue to make outstanding contributions and to persevere in spite of seemingly insurmountable odds. In so doing, my research demonstrates the power that ANS people, who have a four-century presence in Nova Scotia, have to write themselves into history and into the present” (Ruck-Simmonds, 2006, p.273).

Through the spiritual agency of anti-colonialism, my participants demonstrate their powerful positioning as local people who unite as a collective to fight the oppression caused by social structures. It was evident to me that my participants understood the necessity of engaging in the colonial struggle to achieve liberation and wholeness as there was no other reason other than that of a vested interest in participating in a spiritual journey that they committed to this six-week process. In fact, this devotion was most evident in the North End Halifax group who, at the end of their final session discussed how they could continue the Story Circle group together because of the magnitude of support and power they felt in this group. This kind of anti-colonial discourse produces spirituality which does not only have healing capacity but also “enriches all involved” while making it mandatory that the group use the knowledge produced to confront ‘issues of power, social oppression, injustice and systemic inequities’” (Dei, 2012, p.834). As a unified group, my participants were also empowered through the knowledge that the time and contributions they made to this research could help to improve the conditions of education in Nova Scotia and elsewhere.

### **African/Black Feminism & Womanism**

Through African/Black feminism and womanism, my research exemplifies key roles served by ANS women as the responsible keepers and carriers of ANS spirituality, history and culture. Ten of the sixteen research participants were women, emphasizing the historic

responsibility that Black women in general and specifically ANS women have felt to be engaged in work that involves the enhancement of education, community building, preservation of ANS culture, or any initiative that could lead to the enhancement of the future of community life. Five of the eight Community Artists were also women of African descent, three First African Nova Scotians, one first generation Canadian with Ghanaian lineage, and one African Nova Scotian who was born and raised in Ghana. These five women brought continental and diasporic perspectives and knowledge to their workshops. Along with the three male Community Artists, they played the roles of griot, Seba and othermothers, passing on knowledge in a spiritual manner, to each Story Circle group of participants.

The historic role of ANS women and African women in general as knowledge makers and agents of knowledge was also prevalent throughout the research. The research names African/ ANS women as creators of knowledge and therefore preservers of African culture and heritage through quilting, music, African drumming and dance, Spoken Word, Visual Art and storytelling. The research also emphasizes that the role played by ANS/African women as knowledge makers is not only historic but also contemporary. The dialogue of each Story Circle was critical in providing a space for the development and sharing of knowledge and wisdom of all participants. However, from an African/Black Canadian feminist and womanist perspective the contributions of the women of each group gave an important gendered lens through the stories they shared. The exchange of stories shared between the participants and Community Artists, and the participants and me, as an ANS woman and the lead researcher was enriched by the multiple lens and locations from which we spoke. Pivotal to this research were the perspectives of the FANS women participants who shared for six weeks, engaging with the male participants, about their lived experiences growing up in their communities and within their

formal and informal education spaces, and who committed to the six-week journey to explore the role of spirituality in their lives. The Story Circles were a space of resistance to the marginalization of ANS women's voices and marginalization and erasure of ANS women's knowledge by validating them as significant and providing a platform for them to be centred in this research.

Evident throughout the research was the African/Black feminist centrality of motherhood and the endarkened feminist notion of othermothering. The research is rooted in the oral tradition and other traditions and knowledge passed down to ANSs and other people of African descent from Africa, the Motherland, through generations of mothers. This heritage underscores the resilience of this knowledge and these African women as knowledge carriers despite the tragedies of being torn from their Motherland, forced into enslavement, and brutalized during these processes. Victoria Aidoo and Wendie Lee Poitras speak directly to the connections of their art to the Motherland during their workshops, and all other artists speak to Africa as the beginning of all African art and culture. The idea of motherhood as being about the "communal responsibilities involved in the raising of children and the caring of others" (Dove, 1998, p.521) is reinforced through participants' stories, which either highlighted their biological mothers, themselves as mothers, or other ANS women - blood relatives and community members - who contributed to their lives. That Black mothers have been "given the responsibility for providing education, social and political awareness to their own children," and others in their communities is a common theme throughout the Story Circles (Bernard et al., 2000, p.68). Also significant is the responsibility that the participants, primarily the women, but also some of the men, have taken on as othermothers in caring for others in their inter-personal community relationships, paid work roles and volunteer work. Since these types of nurturing roles are traditionally carried

out by ANS women, the research emphasizes Hamilton's (1994) statement that ANS women are the "backbone" of their communities (p.36).

ANS women's spirituality plays a significant part in providing the platform for ANS women to name themselves as activists who fight the oppressions that infringe upon them, their families and their communities. My research shows that activist spaces are not male-only and White-only spaces. Activist spaces are also ANS women's spaces demonstrated through the way in which ANS women engage holistically in community with their minds, bodies and spirits, not for self-benefit, but for the betterment of their communities. The research participants and Community Artists engaged in the uncovering of herstories of ANS women activists, providing the spaces for ANS women to define themselves and their work in and for community. The women included in this research, each in their own way as participants and Community Artists, are activists resisting gender, race and class oppressions through their participation in the study and speaking out about the impact of racism on their communities, both in formal education and society in general. The reciprocal and devoted way in which ANS women engaged in this work represents the spiritual, connected way in which they live in community. As lead researcher, I too name myself as an ANS woman activist, embracing my African spirituality as the knowledge which guided the methodology and method of this research aimed at exploring options to improve upon ANS learners' experiences in formal education. Forging new territories in research in a way that honours my African ancestry takes courage. However, in community with my participants, Community Artists, those othermothers external to the research including my research supervisor, Dr. Susan Brigham and those in my community, I was empowered to produce research derived from the activist legacies passed on to me by my African mothers.



In totality, my theoretical framework provided a firm foundation upon which I was able to conduct research that was not only meaningful to my participants and to me, but also representative of the researched. Each theory played an explicit role in aiding me in answering the research question with the participation of ANS adult learners. The framework also supported my objective to be a researcher who is true to my African roots, my identity as an African woman and aspects of my culture, history and heritage that make me who I am. My cultural identity demands that I be a researcher who is actively engaged as a participant, rather than only an observer in the research process. That is part of what it meant for me to be an authentic researcher. In the following section, I reflect on challenges I encountered as I pursued this goal.

## Chapter Eight

### My Reflections on the Research

I compare the fruition of this research to the process of a woman giving birth after a time of arduous labour. However, my research has been so rewarding that I could easily forget the laborious intricacies that produced it in the first place, similar to a mother who holds her newborn baby for the first time and immediately forgets the pains of the birth process. If my research is to impact educators and lifelong learners in the way that I intend, and in a manner that will make it useful rather than “just another study”, it is important that I also outline the challenges that I faced as I journeyed from ideation to completion.

#### Time and Compensation

Determined to honour the tenets of Africentric, anti-racism, post-colonialism, anti-colonialism, and African/ Black feminism and womanism research by centring African Nova Scotian people within and throughout the research process as the producers, givers and receivers of knowledge, I dedicated many hours to enact this philosophy. First of all, the recruitment process was a time-consuming one, especially since my expectation was that each participant would commit to a six-week Story-Circle process for two hours during each week without any monetary compensation. The only form of gratitude I was able to offer the participants was a one hour, arts and culture-based workshop at the start of each session, and an Africentric gift at the end of each six-week round of sessions. During the recruitment process, I found that there were persons who were interested in participating in the research but their age, a requirement for participant selection (they were above the age of fifty), or their personal schedule, did not permit

them to take part. The Upper Hammonds Plains and North Preston Circles were the first ones to be completed and after numerous attempts, I had almost given up hope of recruiting enough participants to make the North End Halifax group a reality, when I gained the commitment of four persons. An additional person joined during the second week of the Circle. The North End Halifax group started five to six months after the North Preston and Upper Hammonds Plains groups. Then, because we began the final Story-Circle during the winter months, snowstorms also interfered with our schedule and caused delays as the research site was closed on these days of inclement weather.

Unlike a study that involves one-on-one interviews, which may be much easier to schedule with one participant at a time, the interconnectedness of the schedules of the multiple players involved in this study was a crucial element of this research. There were five essential factors critical to scheduling each Story Circle session. The availability of:

- 1) the participants;
- 2) the Researcher;
- 3) the meeting space;
- 4) the Community Artists, and
- 5) the videographer

Not only was it crucial to ensure that lead researcher and participants could meet on a mutually agreed upon day of the week, but the schedule of the Community Artists and videographer as well as the availability of the community centre all played a role in making the research possible in the way that I had envisioned it.

I was able to access space at all community centres free of charge; however, I had to work around other programs scheduled at these centres in order to use the space on the evening that worked best for all involved. For the Upper Hammonds Plains group, we were always able to access the main meeting room when required since this group's meetings were held primarily during the summer months when centre programming in the evenings was at a minimum. There was one meeting for both the North Preston and North End Halifax Circles when we were required to use another room in the respective centres because our meeting room had been previously booked for another gathering. In general, though, there was minimal disruption in our use of the selected spaces. It is important that I note that sometimes our dialogue was so enthralling that participants wished to continue their conversations beyond the two-hour time-frame I had planned. In two communities, this was not a problem due to the fact that I had a key to one of the centres and could let myself in and out as required, and the other centre's hours of operation extended beyond the completion time of each session. However, in one community centre, there were times when precisely at the two-hour mark- we would hear a knock on the door from the front desk staff alerting us that she was preparing to leave. At this location, then, there was no flexibility to continue conversations beyond the two hours as I also had to disassemble the artifact displays I had set up around the room. This constraint left little room for questions at the end of sessions in this Story Circle group.

While arranging a mutual meeting day and time which would also coincide with the availability of the meeting space for myself and the participants, I also had to coordinate the workshops of Community Artists to suit this schedule as well. There were times when I shuffled the order of each Circle's theme for the week to accommodate a Community Artist's schedule. For example, one of the Artists had an accident on the evening they had committed to facilitate a

workshop and I had to call on the services of another Artist to provide a workshop on that date. As a researcher, it was very important that I had the ability to think quickly on my feet and troubleshoot in times like these as the alternative would have been canceling that week's session when all others were able to attend. Cancelling a session would have meant a delay in the completion of that series of Story Circle meetings.

As I noted earlier, videography played an important role in this study because the video recordings of each session provided a record that I could revisit and transcribe for accuracy. Resultantly, I had the task of ensuring that the videographer's schedule aligned with that of each Story Circle's meeting time. Since the videographer was also a Story Circle participant whose evening schedule was flexible enough to accommodate the Circle sessions of the additional two sites, having his participation was not as complicated as it could have otherwise been. In fact, in conversations I had with the videographer following sessions, he expressed his appreciation in having an opportunity to compare his Story Circle experience with that of the other communities. Although I was not able to offer financial compensation to match the videographer's time and skills, I was pleased to know that he found his involvement in this research personally rewarding.

As I discussed earlier, I found not having the capacity to provide participants, Community Artists, and videographer with an honorarium or stipend for their participation in my study challenging. During the recruitment process, I sometimes wondered if I would have had an easier time finding participants had I been able to offer a monetary stipend for their time. However, as I reflect on the participants I was able to recruit and their devotion to the research process, I now recognize what I saw first as a disadvantage was actually a blessing. As lead researcher, at the end of week six of each Story Circle, and throughout the research process, all participants made it apparent that they were each fully invested in this study. Although there

were sessions that some participants had to miss because of other commitments that arose, there was never a doubt in my mind about the full commitment of all sixteen participants to the goals of the research. Therefore, it was my honour to provide each participant with Africentric gifts, including art produced by some of the Community Artists (e.g. art by Wendie Lee Poitras, a CD of Abena Green's Spoken Word Poetry; hand carvings from Victoria Aidoo's boutique) as a memento of our journey together and a reminder of the importance of centring and validating African knowledge in their everyday lives.

Of all the components of my research, the most time-consuming aspect was the painstaking task of transcribing the dialogue of Story Circle sessions, which took hundreds of hours. One Story Circle session easily produced at least forty pages of transcribed dialogue. Early on in the research process, as I transcribed dialogue from the first sessions, I realized that I may have made a mistake in deciding that I would fulfill the roles of both lead researcher and transcriber. Perhaps I should have contracted this work out to another person to take on this role for the sake of time efficiency. Initially, I felt the time I was taking to transcribe the dialogue could have been better spent on other aspects of the research, like analyzing the data. However, with limited finances, making this change to my proposed research plan was not an option. Additionally, and to my benefit, I began to see quickly that this laborious process actually allowed me to become more intimate with the stories told by my participants and the thoughts they had shared with each other and with me. I would have never had this revelation, nor would I have had the deeper appreciation for the knowledge these participants shared had I contracted this work out to someone else.

I had the honour of re-living the Story Circles over and over again as I transcribed these experiences. As I listened and viewed, I had the opportunity to sense the passion again, feel the

joy through my participants' laughter again, shed tears during their expressions of sadness again and to become angry at times of frustration again. Therefore, through the process of transcribing the dialogue, I became emotionally pregnant with the affective knowledge I spoke about in chapter two which is disregarded in positivist research and which is often frowned upon as being of no value, and rather a hindrance to any form of serious research because of its subjective nature. However, the transcription process reinforced for me the magnitude of this knowledge and its usefulness to inspiring and forging positive change in formal education spaces for First African Peoples in Nova Scotia. Therefore, the process of transcribing the dialogue was in itself a profoundly spiritual experience for me. I recognized the immense depth and breadth of the knowledge and lived experiences, which my participants had entrusted to me. At these moments, I experienced a kind of humility I have never experienced before and I resolved that, in this particular case, it was necessary for *me* – the lead researcher - to transcribe these sacred stories. Time is not most important. Relationships are key for understanding and it took time to develop a relationship between me and the material.

This leads me to my only regret during SOSF. Twenty years ago, when writing my Masters thesis entitled *Storyin': The National and Cultural Significance of Rejuvenating the Bahamian Ol' Story Through Transcription* (unpublished master's thesis, 2000), I wrestled with the impossibility of effectively transcribing the spoken word of Bahamian ol' stories. The reality was and still is that the art of telling Bahamian stories was/is dying out and it was important to capture them in writing to preserve and document their existence for the younger generations of Afro-Bahamians. In SOSF, it was important to me that I capture and centre the voices, stories, lived experiences of my sixteen research participants. Although I requested of participants and was granted permission by them to video record these sessions for the purpose of accurately

recording their voices, as I began to write this dissertation, I struggled with a feeling of inadequacy at being able to fully represent the spirituality evident in the Story Circle sessions in my writing. I challenged myself often on how I could write in a way that reflected the richness of all of the Community Artists' workshops on drumming and dancing. How could I capture the movements and the emotions that were evident? How could I express the spirit of SOSF in writing in a way that those reading about it could understand and experience it too? I found myself at a loss. Now that I am at the end of this journey, I know that the only way that I could have effectively reproduced the spirit of SOSF for the benefit of others, was by using the video recordings of the sessions, which would provide the opportunity for viewers for learn, understand, feel and know what the participants and I experienced.

Of course, on the other hand is the possibility that I may have had some of my participants not take part in the project at all, or not share as openly as they did, had the video recording been a part of the end product of the research. I may have had an even more difficult time recruiting participants. Unfortunately, I can only speculate about the alternative. However, I have learned from what I will call a misstep in my research as I will be launching a second phase of this research with junior high FANS students and the final product will be both a video documentary and a handbook for public school teachers. My revelation of the reality that my research was a time-intensive process is not meant to discourage other researchers from pursuing similar methodologies and processes, particularly when doing work with marginalized, racialized and other historically disadvantaged groups. Rather, I offer these details as an obligation to readers from a place of research integrity. I encourage researchers to critically analyze the steps I took in this research to investigate African-Centred spirituality through my sixteen participants and to use them as they stand or build upon them as needed in their own research.



Just as important, I wish to reiterate the significance of educators learning from the knowledge provided by participants, and through the research process itself. First of all is the importance of tapping into the knowledge present in the classroom. Each learner brings with them knowledge and wisdom through their histories, community heritage, lived experiences, skills and talents. Educators must find ways to access this latent knowledge and use it to create inclusive learning environments where the stories, lived experiences, histories of all learners are welcome in learning spaces and centred in their learning processes. Curriculum materials including books, audio and video resources must reflect the full story of African Nova Scotians, encompassing the histories, heritage, culture and contributions of people of African descent and from a local stand point, African Nova Scotians specifically. Certainly, it is crucial that the contributions of people of African descent in Nova Scotia, other parts of Canada and beyond be interwoven into the history, math, science and technology, social studies, and other courses. Where such gaps in representation exist in textbooks currently being used, such openly biased texts should be pulled from classrooms and other texts providing a balance of stories should replace them. Where there is a dearth in the existence of such texts, the DEECD, school boards and post secondary institutions within the province that have teacher education programs including Mount Saint Vincent University, Acadia University and St. Francis Xavier University, should work together to develop culturally appropriate texts.

Furthermore, there are a multiplicity of resources available in African Nova Scotian communities and other communities of African descent and educators must take the initiative, the time and the effort to acknowledge and invite these communities into their teaching spaces to make their teaching materials and practices more culturally responsive to ANS learners. It is critical that schools, universities and colleges partner with African Nova Scotian communities

and organizations and invite persons such as the Community Artists including Connie Glasgow White, Marko Simmonds, Abena Green, Victoria Aidoo, Allister Johnson, David Woods, Muretta Williams, Wendie Lee Poitras, who I engaged within my research, to educate learners and teachers alike on their knowledge. It is also imperative that the Halifax Regional School Board in collaboration with the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development hire African Nova Scotian and African descendent teachers, administrators, and guidance counsellors to reflect the Nova Scotian population and all of its founding peoples, and reflect ANS/African descendant learners currently in each school and district. The DEECD, also, must model ANS representation in its hiring of leaders and other decision makers who impact upon school policies, practices and curriculum. Just as urgent is the need for post-secondary institutions to hire and retain professors, instructors, deans, department chairs, presidents and others in leadership roles who are African Nova Scotian/persons of African descent. Where gaps in the number of currently qualified teachers/professors/instructors exist, each of these authority organizations needs to initiate strategic recruitment measures. These recruitment measures need to extend beyond university to target African Nova Scotian/African descendent students at the high school level for succession planning through to their first degree and Bachelor of Education degree programs and then into the classroom.

As I reflect on the process I chose to take – the road less travelled – particularly through the methodology of African-centred storytelling, I cannot overstate that this research was time intensive with complexities that complicate timelines and the schedules of all involved. However, I believe that my relational ontology was key to me being able to successfully complete this endeavor. SOSF would not have been the research that it turned out to be had it

not been for the relationships I held prior to starting this journey and those I developed and grew along the way. Africentricity speaks to the primary role of relationships in the work of any researcher who wishes to research from an Africentric place (Reviere, 2001). It is important that any researcher wishing to pursue such an undertaking be aware that in addition to a culturally relevant theoretical framework and methodology, the building and maintenance of strong positive community relationships is imperative to conducting research like this.

## Chapter Nine

### “She who Learns, Teaches”

Could African-centred spirituality play a role in fostering anti-oppressive, transformative formal learning spaces that support the educational success and well being of ANS learners? According to my sixteen research participants and the data I gathered throughout the eighteen Story Circle sessions, most definitely. Throughout the research, participants shared and gave evidence of the numerous ways in which their spirituality could be validated within formal education spaces as knowledge and ways of knowing to transform these institutions into more inclusive and engaging learning spaces. They imagined formal learning institutions at all levels that would honour and take the initiative to welcome in the knowledge evident in ANS communities in similar ways as were demonstrated during the Story Circles. Such examples would include opportunities for community knowers like the Community Artists who participated in the research to be invited into schools and universities to share their knowledge. Elders and other community members who are experts on particular subjects should be sought out to contribute to knowledge making and sharing in academia and public school. Also, formal education spaces should reflect ANS learners in their physical elements as well as in the intangible curriculum. Teaching practices and processes as well as the day-to-day operations of public schools and post-secondary institutions should be carried out in a manner that values collaboration, equity and community as central to promoting a sense of belonging for ANS and all learners.

My research underscores the critical need for transformation in the perspective of knowledge and how knowledge is defined to build inclusive and nurturing educational environments. For example, African-centred spiritual practices including African drumming and dancing, Spoken Word poetry, ANS quilts, storytelling, music and song writing, and visual art provide multiple ways in which ANSs have told and continue to tell their stories. Central to this need for transformation is the decentering of Eurocentric knowledge, history and culture as the be-all and end-all of knowledge through the dominant culture relinquishing power and privilege to make room for other knowledges including ANS knowledge through African-centred spirituality. It is essential that the inclusion of multiple stories and histories of ANS people be embedded into the foundation of formal education curriculums, not just as an addendum, a second thought, or a marginalized course, but as a part of Canadian history, Social Studies, English and all other aspects of curriculum. Further, the contributions of ANS people from the past like Father Richard Preston, Rose Fortune, Dr. Carrie Best, Viola Desmond, Rev. William P. Oliver, Daurene Lewis, and current people including Judge Corine Sparks, Senator Dr. Wanda Thomas Bernard, Brad Barton, and Gordon Earle, and organizations/groups including the AUBA, the No. 2 Construction Battalion must be included in school curriculum as recognition of the role that ANS people have played in the development of Nova Scotia as a province and Canada as a country.

Specifically, my chosen research methodology, African storytelling, has much to offer formal education processes, practice and curriculum. Whereas Western knowledge, particularly colonial education, has denied the existence of a culture and history of African peoples and gives us a "false status" of complete ignorance, Indigenous knowledges like African storytelling of the oral tradition gives evidence of the cultural heritage and histories of this group of people (Dei,

2000, p. 116). Like Dei (2000), as the researcher I see Indigenous knowledges as "a way to rupture the sense of comfort and complacency in conventional approaches to knowledge production, interrogation, validation and dissemination in Euro-American educational settings" (pp. 111-112). These knowledges can play an important role in academia if they were welcomed in this space. Using his decolonization agenda, Dei (2000) insists that Indigenous knowledges be "an integral part of the ongoing co-creation and re-creation of academic knowledge/work" (p. 113). Dei (2000) argues that Indigenous knowledges are examples of multiple knowledge systems that speak to different histories, lived experiences, events, and ideas that have affected the growth and development of humanity. Therefore, if academia is to truly represent *all* knowledges, African Indigenous knowledges like stories and storytelling would have to be included.

In addition to this, African-centered storytelling and stories can be implemented in the curriculum and pedagogy of academia in numerous ways resulting in a transformation of the traditional manner of formal education. It is accepted by most people in the field of education that "adult learners learn best when they can use their experiences as a source of learning" (Merriweather Hunn, 2004, p.70). Therefore, if an adult educator, through classroom lessons, discussions, and assignments, invites students to tell about their experiences, in a storytelling/storying manner, in the classroom, an inclusive learning environment could be created. The implementation of dialogue into education practice is a key way of doing this. When dialogue is deliberately encouraged, learners can give voice to their experiences; they have the space to share their stories. Sheared (1999) speaks about the use of the *Gumba ya ya* concept - which means everybody talking at once - in the classroom. This concept is inclusive, pushing no one to the margins of sharing or learning about their multi-stories experiences as all stories

are equal and welcome in the classroom or any learning space at once. Therefore, Gumba ya ya and like methods should be explored since they provide other opportunities for learners to gain an appreciation of their co-learners and instructor and to establish closer relationships between them. Learners may engage in this kind of dialogue to seek clarification or gain knowledge to help them to better participate in the class, whereas Eurocentric, linear approaches dictate only one person speaking at a time. In this way, both learners and educators engage as "colearners and coauthors of knowledge production" (Sheared, 1999). The educator may also use a "call and response" pedagogy in their teaching, which emulates the spirit of African storytelling in which the entire community can participate. In doing this, educators refrain from giving lectures and instead use a conversational method of communication in the classroom where all, both educator and learners, can participate. Merriweather Hunn (2004) agrees that adult learners learn best "when they can stand in their own cultural cent[ers] and are not forced to stand in a foreign one" (p.70). The incorporation of African-centered storytelling in the classroom through the hard curriculum of textbooks, reading material and class content is also required to transform the classroom into a familiar cultural center /spiritual space. When textbooks and class content reflect multiple experiences/stories rather than one dominant, European experience/story learners otherwise marginalized in the formal learning environment are brought to the center as multiple experiences are validated.

Through my research methodology, I emphasize the significance of the fact that storytelling is indicative of power. Therefore a "balance of stories" about people of African descent at all levels of formal education is critical to the well being of African Nova Scotian learners, learners of African descent in general, and is necessary for the proper education of all learners regardless of background. A "balance of stories" is "where every people will be able to

contribute to a definition of themselves, where we are not victims of other people's accounts” (2012). Achebe’s notion of a “balance of stories”, Delgado’s (1988/1989) counterstories and Rodriguez’s (2006) idea of narratives all demonstrate the significant power that stories possess as sites of resistance within formal education. Particularly for marginalized and minoritized groups of people like ANS and Indigenous learners, storytelling can serve as a powerful tool of emancipation and survival (Rodriguez, 2006). Within academia and public school, the telling, writing and reading of counterstories need to be a part of the way of educating learners because these stories can also play a critical role in “unmasking and challenging majoritarian stories” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) that subjugate African indigenous and other knowledges by perpetuating racial privilege and white supremacist values. As Rodriguez (2006) reinforces, “Stories can also serve as a means to destroy complacency and challenge the status quo” (p.1069).

My research demonstrates ways that stories and storytelling can produce trustworthy and appropriate research, which represent and respect the lived realities of ANSs. It shows that African Indigenous knowledges generally engage the spirituality of people of African descent, and therefore incorporating such knowledges involving this group in the research methodology is recommended if research is to be carried out responsibly and effectively. When this happens, research produces more accurate answers to questions that concern African peoples. Community Narratives, for example, are an important way of ensuring that the worldviews of those who have “suffered a long history of oppression are given space to communicate from their frames of reference and worldviews” (Chilisa & Preece, 2005, p. 23). Community Narratives form an improved way of gathering data that adds to existing knowledge which uses the knowledge systems of the marginalized” (Chilisa & Preece, 2005, p. 23). This perspective allows for the



marginalized to “name and communicate” their experiences to create “new concepts, terminology and categories of analysis” (Chilisa & Preece, 2005, p.23). Community Narratives also allow for the adoption of a framework which provides for different ways of seeing the world. As a tool, they promote social change, inclusion, diversity, and therefore challenge the idea that there is a single story of a community by providing multiple perspectives.

As a Black woman researcher, most empowering for me throughout the research process was having the intellectual space to develop, lead and participate in spiritually liberating, communally meaningful research where I could bring my whole self in an authentic and responsible way. “Set our spirits free” has provided me with the opportunity to boldly resist the “mask” (Rodriguez, 2006; Cutts, 2015) of traditional, Eurocentric ways of conducting research, which injuriously limit and confine African people, generally, and African women specifically. I made a conscious decision as I developed and participated in this research and as I analyzed the data provided to me by my participants, to be myself. In so doing, I created a space, through the Story Circle experience, for ANS adult learners to do the same: be themselves by “unmasking” identities imposed upon them, speaking for themselves and having the freedom to define themselves. Rodriguez (2006) inquires:

Compelled to wear our [masks] in a white supremacist world, how can we as people of colour unmask ourselves? Understanding the process of how we liberate ourselves lies in the question, ‘How do we create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle that also opposes dehumanization but as that movement that enables creative, expansive self-actualization?’ (hook, 2003, p.15 cited in Rodriguez, p.1069).

The kind of learning processes I developed and partook in with participants and Community Artists demonstrate much more than opposition to the Eurocentric way of research and ANSs' forced assimilation in formal education. I believe that "Set our spirits free" in theory and practice represents the kind of movement of which Rodriguez (2006) speaks. My research represents a movement that elevates African knowledges, ways of knowing and ways of engaging in teaching in a way that positions African worldviews as just as significant as any others. It is one that has the capacity to awaken the consciousness of all educators and learners towards the recreation of a healthy and positive identity of African peoples and knowledge within these systems. As Rodriguez (2006) argues, "Opposition is not enough; one must still 'make oneself anew'" (p.1069). "Set our spirits free" demonstrates the endless possibilities accessible to all formal education institutions and government departments to decolonize, unmask and re-make the curriculum, processes and practices of their systems to reflect the abundance of African knowledge available to them. These knowledges need to be readily accessed and embedded throughout such systems to ward against oppression and to truly create diverse and inclusive education.

In her Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (EFE), Dillard (2006) emphasizes that a strong self-identity is a requirement for community engagement because it forms one's participation and responsibility to one's community" (Cutts, 2016, 191). Because of my assurance in my identity as an African woman, and the passion I bring to my work as an African woman researcher, I can humbly admit that I did not choose this research. Rather it was this research that *called me*. Dillard (2006) reminds us that "Researching is both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose" (in Cutts, 2016, 191). This is precisely my view. In a spiritual sense, very much like my participants' definitions of what African-centred spirituality means to them, it was impossible for me to separate my being an African woman educator and researcher from my responsibility as a

member of the African Nova Scotian community. My spiritual connection to my community and faith in God would not release me to simply *know* about the spiritually dangerous ground on which ANS learners and educators tread as they seek to gain or provide a formal education, and *do nothing* about it. This knowledge compelled me to use my positioning and privilege as a doctoral student to engage my strong sense of racial and cultural identity to centre ANS people in their history, culture and heritage in the research. This spiritual connection implored me to explore the possibilities of what could happen if every ANS learner, all learners of African descent, had the opportunity to engage in a spiritually affirming experience of learning as is true for many of the dominant culture.

Citing Dillard (2006) and Palmer (1993), Cutts (2015) contends that “[o]nly within the context of community does the individual appear (Palmer, 1983) and, through dialogue continue to become” (Cutts, 2015, p.192). Because of my African-centred spiritual worldview, which emphasizes the South African concept of Ubuntu - I am because we are – I could not conduct this research in a vacuum outside of community. It was crucial for me as a researcher to centre the relational ontology of ANS community in the research, through the participants, location, methodology and all those who would create and share their knowledge. I will be forever grateful for the journey towards a deeper understanding of myself as a researcher and to those who selflessly gave up their time and offered their lived experiences, many of them painful ones, reliving them for the sake of my research and the hope of somehow inciting change in formal education. The rich dialogue we shared over the course of eighteen weeks in total reflected the Africentric wisdom of “going far together” as opposed to “going fast alone”. It was imperative for me that my research emphasize the fact that relationships and community matter and are central to everything that involves African people; therefore, relationships and community must also be

paramount in everything that happens within the walls of learning spaces. It was ANS community members' "[c]oncrete experience within everyday life that form[ed] the criterion of meaning, the 'matrix of meaning making' (Ephraim-Donker, 1997, p.8)" for my research. Without the knowledge, engagement, and collaboration with community, this research would have fallen flat.

I understand that because my ANS participants and their communities have given me so much in this research, in acting as a change partner with them, it is my duty to both receive and give (Waters, 2015). Unable to deny the African oral traditions that live in my blood, endowed to me by my foremothers and forefathers, my spirit spilled out beyond the traditional set text of the manuscript of this dissertation in Spoken Word poetry, or what Dillard (2006) and Cutts (2015) call "life notes" and Rodriguez (2006) calls "narratives of the self". From the first day of my PhD. studies till now, these narratives of mine flowed unrestrained from my spirit and to the page, then out of my mouth as knowledge as part of my journey. So, I stand as the griot among griots, taking on the responsibility traditionally bestowed on African mothers to pass on knowledge to others to preserve, protect our stories and histories for the sake of a better and brighter tomorrow. As I stand on the shoulders of generations of griots, I am most blessed. I humbly take up that charge.

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## Appendix A

### Connie Glasgow White

Connie Glasgow-White was born, raised and currently resides in East Preston, Nova Scotia. She is the mother of two adult children and a proud grandmother. Connie has been retired for ten years after having worked with the Halifax Regional School Board as a teacher, guidance counsellor, and a junior and senior high school administrator. Connie is presently involved in Adult Literacy in East Preston and Dartmouth, and is a past coordinator for an afterschool tutoring program sponsored by the Black Educators Association. Connie is passionate about quilting. She has been a quilter for ten and has made quilts for and donated them to family and friends. She particularly enjoys making baby quilts.

### Abena Green

Abena Beloved Green a.k.a. Roots n'Rhythm is a writer, spoken word artist and dancer. She is also credited as Abena Amoako-Tuffour. She uses spoken word to create, engage, express, and elevate. Her poems address cultural, social, and environmental issues, relationships, and reflect on everyday life as a small-town raised, semi-nomadic, first-generation Canadian.

She is the 2016 poetry prize winner of the Writer's Federation of Nova Scotia's Nova Writes competition (formerly, Atlantic Writing Competition). She represented Halifax at the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word in 2011 and 2016. In February 2014 Roots n' Rhythm made her first television appearance as a guest on Ghana's highly acclaimed entertainment program The KSM Show. Her poem "Ice Cream" was published in the Global Fund for Women's *Imagining*

*Equality* project that same year. As a recipient of Ontario Arts Council's *Word of Mouth* grant she produced her debut spoken album "Beloved" which she launched in July 2014.

Abena is a creative spirit able to tell stories through different writing styles and yet maintains a distinct and authentic voice. In addition to her love for writing and performing, Abena seeks to equip others to write and share their own poetry as a means towards personal fulfillment and empowerment.

### **Wendie Lee Poitras**

Wendie L. Poitras was born into one of the many First African Nova Scotian families living throughout Nova Scotia. She is an educator currently teaching in Halifax. Her past position was with the Department of Education where she worked as a Curriculum Consultant with the African Canadian Services Division. She is a graduate of Mount Saint Vincent's Africentric Leadership Masters in Adult Education in Lifelong Learning Cohort. Wendie's work as an educator is intertwined with her work as a self-taught artist. Many of her pieces are inspired by the ancient Adrinkra symbols conceived in West Africa.

### **Victoria Aidoo**

Victoria Aidoo, a passionate African music educator/performer/entrepreneur, moved to Nova Scotia from Ghana, West Africa in 1984 to obtain her teaching degree at St. Mary's University, then return to her homeland to head her mother's private school. Instead, she met and married the love of her life, Dr. Kwamena Aidoo and planted buttress roots in Nova Scotia as a teacher with the Halifax Regional School Board. She is a mother of three girls who are thoroughly versed in

the arts. Victoria holds degrees in Bachelors of Arts and Education from St. Mary's University; a certificate in Orff Schulwerk Music from University of Alberta; and a Masters in Educational Administration from St. Francis Xavier, University. Her research topic was on African drumming. In 1998, she discovered her love for drumming and has pursued it consistently ever since, discovering her identity and heritage in the process. She is best known for her work with African drumming, dancing, singing, storytelling and cultural activities within the school system and in the community. She has successfully incorporated African drum and dance into the elementary music curriculum, directed and toured with school-aged ensembles for the past fifteen years. Her passion for drumming has driven her to research and on-going training, and fuelled her desire to share her expertise with others through workshops, performances and school presentations. Victoria believes that all of her endeavors are helping to creating a greater awareness of the richness of the African culture through music, and helping break down racial barriers, prejudices, empowering the youth and bringing communities together.

Her vision is to promote peace relations among diverse cultures using traditional African drumming & dance and songs and stories as a tool while integrating it into the public school system at all levels – elementary, junior and high school. Toria has received awards from Nelson Whynder Elementary School, Ghanaian Canadian Friendship association, UACWA (United African Canadian Women's Association) and the African Festival of Arts & Culture for outstanding contributions to the community.

### **Marko Simmonds**

Sales Executive/Public Speaker/Music Director, award-winning artist and owner of RMS Music Productions, Marko Simmonds "MARKO" has established himself as a major player within the Nova Scotia Music industry. Creating shows for historical figures such as the late Dr. Rosa

Parks, Martin Luther King III and former Nova Scotia Lieutenant Governor, the Honorable Mayann Francis, Marko continues to seek new opportunities in the music, film and entertainment industry.

MARKO has directed and arranged music for numerous electrifying shows including the "I Have A Dream" concert, Nova Scotia Mass Choir, "Dream Girls" musical presented at Alderney Landing Theatre and "The Spirit Comes Through" with Jerry Brown and the Council on African Canadian Education (CACE). MARKO's music and arranging style has been able to cross many genres including Gospel, Rock, R&B, Classical, Jazz and Country with musical influences from Stevie Wonder, Jonny Reid, John Legend, and Michael Jackson. MARKO has won the Rising Star Award from the African Nova Scotian Music Association, and has enjoyed many nominations and appearances at the East Coast Music Awards and the Nova Scotia Music awards.

Through his music label, RMS Music and song writing, MARKO has worked with Charlie A'Court, Gary Beals, David Myles and many other artists. In addition to managing emerging Nova Scotia artists and arranging music for annual shows and special events, MARKO teaches youth of all ages to find and follow their dreams through his popular school presentation "YES I CAN", a motivational presentation inspiring young people (P-12).

**Murleta Williams**, born in New Glasgow, is an Actor-Singer-Musician-Choral Director-Vocal Coach-Music Teacher-Composer-Writer-Arranger-Producer-Director-Collaborator-Lecturer and administrator. She is the mother of two sons, Trevor (Deceased) and Tracey. She is formerly Minister of Music at Victoria Road United Baptist Church, Dartmouth; Emmanuel Baptist Church,

Upper Hammonds Plains; Cornwallis Street Baptist Church, Halifax; and Bethel Baptist Church, Dartmouth (to name a few). She is currently an on-call Supply Minister of Music when needed.

Murleta has trained music ministry teams throughout Nova Scotia and the Southern United States. A “trouble shooter”, Murleta coaches musicians and actors, and works with choirs in Canada and the United States. She is able to cut through performance stumbling blocks – breathing, choral technique and pitch. Murleta has lectured extensively at spiritual and educational institutions on *The Negro Spiritual as a Communications Medium in Pre-emancipation North America*. She has also lectured on health issues at national and international symposia. Murleta has written, directed and produced numerous cross-cultural exchanges; as well as musical and theatrical productions. Murleta received her early musical education in Nova Scotia and began her teaching career while still a student. She is recognized internationally as an extraordinary gospel soloist, choir director, arranger and accompanist.

### **Allister Johnson**

Allister Johnson is a resident of North Preston, Nova Scotia where he was born and has lived most of his life. Johnson is known in his community as the history man of North Preston. Like an African Nova Scotian griot, he is regularly consulted for historical and genealogical information and called upon to provide tours for visitors to the community. He is often engaged to do presentations on community affairs and workshops in education support. Johnson is co-author of *The Genealogy of William and Charlotte Cain*, 1999 and author of *A Brief History and Genealogy of Thomas J. Johnson*, 2003. He is also a contributing author to *A Journey to the Past, Condensed Histories of Dartmouth, Preston, Cole Harbour & Eastern Passage*, 2009. Johnson is very active in community development. He has served as vice president and president of the North Preston Community Development Association, president of the Watershed

Association Development Enterprises Ltd. and member of the North Preston Community Education Council. He has been involved in advocacy as a member of the Parents Students Association of Preston, coordinated the Cultural and Academic Enrichment Tutoring Program in North Preston, he is currently employed as the Administrator with the Preston Area Learning Skills Society, an adult education organization. He has also served as Student Support Worker with the Halifax County Bedford District School Board and African Canadian Education Consultant with the African Canadian Services Division of the Nova Scotia Department of Education.

Johnson is a member of Saint Thomas Baptist Church where he serves in the capacity of minister. Over the years he has served in the areas of music, Sunday school teaching, youth leadership, spiritual formation, finances and historical research. He is a member of the Brotherhood group of the church where he plays guitar for the group's choral ministry. He serves as the historian for Saint Thomas Baptist Church co-author of *We've Come This Far By Faith: The History of Saint Thomas Baptist Church*, published in 2016.

### **David Woods**

Dartmouth, Nova Scotia's multi-disciplinary artist and organization leader David Woods is well versed in the art of telling the stories of African Nova Scotians through various genres. Born in Trinidad, Woods immigrated to Dartmouth in 1972 with his parents and siblings. He attended Dalhousie University (1977-80) initially planning to study law, but a summer spent working with children from Preston at a cultural summer camp in Truro transformed Woods. The children insisted that Woods visit them in their home communities of North Preston, East Preston and Cherry Brook. He did, was embraced by their families and soon became part of the fabric of the



Preston communities. Woods tutored students, got young people involved in drama, and created organizations like "Youth on the Move", but most of all he found a home for his creative talents.

Woods saw much in the Prestons' history and culture that was unrecognized and uncelebrated. There were the residual antebellum American south cultural practices: the 'Gullah talk' and nicknaming traditions of North Preston, 'The Shout' (a derivative of the 'Ring Shout' religious dance from the Georgia Sea Islands) and 'Seeking' (a religious practice where Baptism candidates are sent into the woods to receive a vision from God). There were also wonderful oral histories such as the story of Richard Preston (1791-1861) a 'runaway slave' from Virginia who was re-united with his mother in Preston and became one of the province's great religious and social leaders. And there was gospel, blues, country and western music played in kitchens, and grand quilts and baskets made by the women. Woods began dreaming of presenting Preston's story to a larger audience. He would get his first chance with the Black United Front (BUF)—a noted Black community political and social advocacy organization in the 1980's -where he served as Program Director for Youth Programs. Later, Woods gathered support from community professionals and the Halifax North Branch Library to organize an independent society named the "Cultural Awareness Youth Group of Nova Scotia" (CAYG).

Among his many accomplishments, he published a collection of poetry and art entitled *Native Song* (1990), collaborated and created work for performers including Jackie Richardson; Joe Sealy, and the Nathaniel Dett Chorale. His paintings were exhibited in galleries in Halifax, Montreal and Toronto. Woods has written and produced dramas including *The Aunt Jemima Story* (1993), *Once: Africville Stories* (1996) and *Home* (2000). He has also organized numerous art exhibitions of Black Nova Scotians including *In This Place: Black Art in Nova Scotia* (curated by Woods and Dr. Harold Pearse of NSCAD), which promoted artists including painter

Justin Augustine and quiltmaker Myla Borden (New Glasgow). Woods has won numerous awards for his work in poetry, drama and art including the Harry Jerome Award for African Canadian Achievement (2016), National Black Poetry Competition (1998), George Elliot Clarke Literary Award (1997), and the Canada Millennium Arts Award (2000).