

**Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

**Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

Graduate Thesis

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of the requirements

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by

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## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

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## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

### **Abstract**

Children who are exposed to early adversities, such as mistreatment, are more prone to develop chronic issues such as smoking, alcohol misuse, and obesity. In children, early adversity is linked to depression, cardiovascular disease, and metabolic syndrome. These activities may interfere with a children's development of values such as teamwork, empathy, and sensitivity (Brent, Silverstein, 2013). As we delve into this research, the author shares her journey with disadvantage and explores the negative effects these experiences had on herself and the people around her. She shares how, by claiming a growing mind and tapping into resilience, she was able to disrupt the preconceived life trajectory of children of a similar disadvantaged status. As the author considers her story she looks at actionable solutions (backed by other researchers) such as growth mindset, resilience and wholistic education and considers each learner within in the child and youth context to be the author of their own story, with the propensity to claim positive futures. The author also considers the children and youth as a whole being that can boost their learning capacity while also teaching a growth mindset and resilience, thus potentially evoking the realization that each child and each youth can be masters of their own destiny. The mental and emotional space of children and youth is a delicate space and ascribing the belief that the mind is a powerful thing, or as an old Jamaican saying (passed down through oral tradition) says, “belief kill ahn belief cur” translating to ‘belief kill and belief cure. Research conversations of this nature can illuminate the discussions surrounding practical strategies on why preventative methods are important and how to effectively execute preventative or treatments plans and programs to maintain the mental health of children and youth through adversity.

*Keywords:* disadvantage, disrupt, children and youth, Black culture, lower socio-economic culture

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### **Preamble**

Each expression of autoethnography carries with it creativity and diversity unique because of its author. This work will be no different. Within these pages expect to see how the author has capitalized on the use of her story to expose the reader to learning opportunities. As you read, it is the hope that you will be pleasantly surprised by the slight diversions from the traditional outline of a thesis and embrace the format that is intentionally structured to enrich your experience.

You will find elements, such as storytelling, poetry, literature insights and lessons of resilience, all strategically geared towards helping the reader understand disadvantage from the author's perspective, how the author was able to interrupt the disadvantage trajectory in her life, and how you, the reader, can do, or teach others to do the same.

As you turn the pages, you will notice that the author's story has been advantageously placed at the beginning, setting the stage for all other elements to follow. The reader should be mindful of each subtopic and preambular note, intentionally placed to give the reader insight into what they are about to find out. This is especially important because there is content that can be emotionally triggering for the reader such as physical and sexual abuse. Pay keen attention so that those sections can be passed over to preserve your mental health. Although what will be read is potentially traumatizing, take comfort in the fact that the author has healed from her past and is stronger today as you are about to discover.

Each artistic piece had been recorded and may be found via the following hyperlink:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJ5LgxjLvzdCtGg0W1mJ07Q4gkJBMIjZd>

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### **Impetus for Research**

Most autobiographies centre on “epiphanies,” or remembered events that have a significant impact on a person's life path (Couser, 1997; Denzin, 1989; Ellis & Bochner, 1992). The epiphanies sometimes are incidents that necessitate paying attention to and studying life experiences (Zaner, 2004). Researchers choose a method of autoethnography because it allows for space to share their stories or firsthand experience in a certain context.

Dakshina-Murthy and Vetrivel (2011), in their paper, “Education for Disadvantaged Children,” state that disadvantaged children “are those who cannot afford necessities of life from the early stage, these are children whose parents or guardians cannot afford to pay for either their education, feeding, clothing or in some cases even shelter, the result is that these children end up less than their peers both intellectually and morally as they grow ” (Dakshina-Murthy & Vetrivel, 2011, p.1). Whilst this definition bears some truth, there are so many other factors to be considered to create a more holistic picture of what being ‘disadvantaged’ truly means. One could say that disadvantaged children are those who have their rights violated. That would also be correct, but still not completely. The scope of disadvantage is so broad that it may take several years of study and hundreds more pages of research to capture truly what disadvantage is from all its angles.

To generate a context for this study, I will share six key types of disadvantaged children and youth that may be considered universal. These are taken from the Plan for Protection of Children in Especially Difficult Circumstance (DEDC) 2002-2006 (Vetrivel & Dakshina-Murthy, 2011 page #). These are:

- (1) abandoned and neglected children;



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- (2) abused children—physically, sexually, and otherwise;
- (3) children with behaviours that are seen as undesirable;
- (4) children with disabilities—physical, mental, learning, mental and emotional;
- (5) socially deprived/poor children; and
- (6) children infected or affected by HIV.

Various agencies have given thought to children and disadvantages and explored the effects disadvantage has on the quality of life and learning of children and youth. Extensive research has also been done, in controlled environments or observations, to understand just how these factors influence the way a child learns, or if they affect them in any way. All this could be an attempt to shed light on issues that are vital not just for now but for the future of humankind. Nelson Mandela, a South African political leader, philanthropist and anti-apartheid revolutionary, said, while speaking at a National Men's March in Pretoria, South Africa, that "Children are our greatest treasure. They are our Future. Those who abuse them tear at the fabric of our society and weaken our nation" Mandela (1997). Woodhead and Keynes (1996) in their book, *In Search of the Rainbow: Pathways to Quality in Large-scale Programmes for Young Disadvantaged Children* state:

Young children are a precious gift. Early childhood is a special time. Through the care and education of young children, a society constructs and reconstructs community and economy, ensures continuity of tradition between generations, and makes innovation and transformation possible. But human immaturity is not just a resource – it is also a responsibility. Children are not incomplete human beings to be shaped into society's mould. They have needs and aspirations of their own, and rights which must be respected. Above all, their childhood is an opportunity. Each young child has a unique

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potential for development of human capacities, for communication and cooperation, for skill and feeling, for reason and imagination, for practicality and spirituality, for determination and compassion. (Woodhead & Keynes, 1996, p. 6)

Despite all the research accounts and profound words, how can we positively influence lives on an individual level, especially using research? As a social practitioner, I have always chosen to see people as individuals and taken a micro approach to influence change. If it is believed that a research approach is vital to comprehending the issues stated above and how they influence the lives of individuals, then I believe an autoethnographic perspective on disadvantages and the process of disruption can be valuable. It cannot be generalized that every child who is born to or lives in disadvantaged circumstances remains impoverished, stays victimized, festers in stupidity, becomes pregnant before the age of 18, joins gangs, becomes addicted to drugs and alcohol or, worse, dies as statistics have shown or stigma dictates. Also, not everyone who faces these obstacles in life defies the odds and becomes wealthy or has a champion story to tell years later.

Other researchers, cited throughout this work, share the view that, when children are exposed to violence, they may develop dysfunctional coping strategies and lose their feeling of security, autonomy, competence, and self-esteem. As a result, children may mistrust their parents and teachers, believing that they are powerless to protect them. In young children, these actions may interfere with the development of values such as collaboration, empathy, and sensitivity. Children who are exposed to adversity at a young age, such as mistreatment, are more prone to develop chronic disorders such as smoking, substance misuse, and obesity. Adversity at a young age contributes to depression, cardiovascular disease, and metabolic syndrome. Thus highlighting why becomes important to document. (Brent, Silverstein, 2013)

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Adversity in humans does not have the same effects as it has in animals. Extreme deprivation in infancy can harm children's neurobiological and cognitive development. Early adversity not only contributes to illness development but also harms treatment. Parental depression and poverty harm morbidity in patients with a history of maltreatment in children with chronic illnesses such as diabetes. Children who have suffered a family disruption do poorly in areas such as academic attainment, financial stability, and cognitive and emotional well-being into adolescence and adulthood (Brent, Silverstein, 2013).

Other authors such as Hobcraft (2000) share that family conflict and educational attainment have a negative relationship. The author expresses further that several children in some parts of the world who risk parental separation have evoked little political concern. There is some evidence that children of divorce have greater school troubles and lower academic accomplishment. When the family unit is disrupted, the non-resident or deceased parent's time and parenting contributions are lost. As a result, students who experience the loss of a parent may struggle in educational institutions, and their prospects of pursuing further education are diminished (Hobcraft, 2000).

This autoethnographic journey delves into the life of a disadvantaged individual who overcame adversity and altered the preconceived trajectory of what most researchers believe happens to underprivileged youth. In the conclusion, we see how a shift in perspective positively fuels direction and results. You will find creative pieces and lyrical lines strategically placed throughout this work to create a more welcoming reading environment. It is also important to note that the names of individuals have been changed to maintain the confidence of each person involved, but each story is recollected as I remember.

The following research questions guided the study:

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1. What protective factors promote resilience in the face of challenging circumstances?
2. How do these factors mediate the interplay between learning and self-actualization?
3. How might negative experiences promote resilience?

According to the Miriam-Webster dictionary online (n.d), *disrupting* from the root word *disrupt* means “to interrupt the normal course or unity of.” My intent is not to generalize or offer a cure for disadvantage; I aim only to provide a unique perspective on how I was able to interrupt the preconceived trajectory that statistics and others thought my life would have taken, based on my circumstances. Also, I will paint the picture of how I was able to influence disruptions in the lives of other individuals. Through literature reviews, I will share the perspectives of other researchers on what they had unravelled in line with this subject matter and share their agreement or disagreement with my perspective and experience.

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### Chapter 1: A Story of Disadvantage

#### *Through the Eyes of a Child*

<https://youtu.be/ta-FlQYRnq0>

I take this moment

To take you on a journey that began in the past.

Filled with tragedy, but also illuminated with lessons and laughter

Made real through the eyes of a child.

A child known only to you as a girl

So let me tell you this story

A story about a girl.

Staged in a space filled with poverty, violence, and desolation.

Her story though poor in origin, and a tainted soul, became rich in substance,  
and culture and power

A story written but will never have words

Until they are given.

Until they are taken

Until they are claimed

This story is one of disadvantage, but it is also one of a girl whose  
Elusive dreams of happiness were stifled and suffocated.

Was it lack of opportunity?

Was it lack of freedom?

Was it lack of validation?

Was it lack of power?

This is a story of a girl headed down a path that led nowhere

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Because a girl without a purpose is a girl no more.

She believed she was worthless because society said

She believed she was ugly because society said.

She believed she was broken and could never be mended because society said.

A girl defined by structures of hegemony she had never met but played such an important role in  
her self-perception.

This,

this is who I am she said because this is who they told her she should be.

Never have I seen such false ideology imprinted on a heart so pure.

She accepted her story because it had been placed with her.

Leaving her vulnerable

Never to love

Never to love herself

Never to desire

Never to desire anything

Never to be better

Never to be more

Never to think big

Never to grow

Her self-worth was like currency she could never spend

She cashed in capital paid out by societal norms and skewed values

Becoming a reflection of perverted thoughts

Symptoms of mental slavery

Trickling down from generation to generation.

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It is said, “as a man thinketh so is he”.

But what if it also meant ‘as a girl thinketh’?

If so....Then...

This girl could think

This girl could think and be

This girl could think and become whomever she wanted to be

“The story being written would [only] hold the legitimacy given to it.”

The girl saw that if we can dictate who holds true power

Then determining what comes next can be up to her.

Can be her choice.

A destiny no longer predetermined by biased trajectories.

Oppressors maintain control by disempowering and withholding what is not rightfully theirs.

But

If she could only take claim of what is rightfully hers.

Give spark to the autonomy and power buried deep with her.

The she could claim power

She could claim legitimate power.

This is a story about a girl who has a voice

only needing to use it.

A girl who thought her future was stagnated by her disadvantaged experiences

But refused to allow circumstance to define her outcomes.

Drawing the power, she needed from a story still being written

Penning each line that could only be told by her, with her words, in her own way.

For as she thinks, she is becoming, as she dreams, she is claiming.

Claiming ownership, over all that is and can be hers.

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This is the story of a girl, told by her.  
For I am the girl, and this is my story.  
And I take it and I claim it.  
and edit the narrative and trajectories  
and the flaws and hiccups and the messy truths,  
empowering failures and climatic successes  
I claim it all  
And it is all mine, because I say so.

And I urge you to do the same.  
Reject what you've been told,  
Question everything  
Experience free thought  
Challenge norms and ideologies,  
and dare to transform your spaces with authenticity and innovation.  
Do not allow your life to fall prey to circumstance.  
Marcus Garvey a great advocate for black human rights  
urged people to free themselves from mental slavery.

If he could have freed us, he would have but instead he gave us the secret to freedom.

“free yourself”  
Free yourself.  
But, what do I know?  
I'm just speaking through the eyes of a child.



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*Simmer your mind, deep breaths. Take a whiff of the air around you and let your mind take over. As you read beware, the stories speak raw truth of a life lived, hearts broken, and minds shattered. Just remember all that will break can be mended, each tear can be dried, and healing has already been done.*

---

### **Jamaica: Economic Background and Context**

Allow me to share some background of where I am from and the socio-economic culture that will paint a clearer picture in your mind and increase understanding. I was born and raised in Manchester, on the island of Jamaica. Jamaica consists of fourteen parishes, and each parish is known for its captivating unique piece of paradise. Manchester, although it has no above-ground rivers or beaches, is very well known for farming, bauxite (mined from the rich soil to make aluminum) and its cool weather. Manchester in a town called Mandeville would be where my parents, Jackie and Frank, met and had eight children together. By order of birth, they had Jordan, Shack, Danny, Kaydence, Kellesha, Myself, Jaron, and Shevaughn; five boys and three girls. While my father Frank had five children (one boy and four girls) before marrying my mother Jackie, my siblings and I had limited opportunities to interact with them while growing up. My parents grew up under similar circumstances, as did many persons within their generation.

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### *Generational Disadvantage*

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*As the parent so is the child. We make their lives better, so they don't miss what we never had. We seize every opportunity in every moment to make the light in the everyday count, to make the time count, to make life count, to make the child better. For what is success without the work? What is life without the child?*

---

Jackie grew up in a family with five other siblings. Her mother (Grandma T) worked at the banana boxing station two days a week, where she would wash and prepare bananas for exportation. When she wasn't working there, Grandma T would be on her farm, clearing and planting ground provisions to sell in the market. In those days, having a gas or electric stove was a luxury only the wealthy could afford, and so people within the lower caste system would prepare their meals and baked goods on wood fires. Wood fires were constructed by placing three medium-sized stones on the ground, the pot would rest on the stone, or a grill would be placed on the stones and the pot would rest on top. The firewood would be placed in between the stones with smaller sticks called bramble. This made it easier to catch the fire and burn long enough to turn the thicker firewood into coal to keep the fire going. To ensure meals were prepared on time, Jackie and her siblings had to scavenge through the bushes and the forest to stockpile firewood. There was no running water, throughout their community, so people had to venture to collect water from rivers and streams, using donkeys to carry water, or carrying it on their heads. This was the norm, so no one complained. This water was used for cooking, cleaning the house and bathing. As for the toilet, they used outhouses.

Jackie and her siblings all went to All-Age School; students would attend from as young as six years old and up to age eighteen. The school was miles away from where Jackie lived with

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her family and so Jackie and her siblings would walk there barefooted. It wasn't out of the ordinary for children to walk to school, especially without shoes among low-income earning families. During that period; in the 1950s, it was a rare occurrence for one to have more than one pair of shoes, and an even greater rarity to have shoes to wear to school every day during the school year. Since shoes were a luxury, each child would receive one pair of shoes in December, and these were worn to church for the new year. The old shoe would be worn to school at this point, but most often that old shoe would only last an additional two months and then, for the remainder of the year, each child would revert to making the trek to school barefooted.

Although the importance of having an education was known, a much greater demand was the need for the continuity of income in the home. As a result, Jackie would have to stay home from school on Fridays to help with various income-earning opportunities. Sometimes she would need to sell items in the market such as breadfruit and ground produce such as yams and cassava. Other times she would attend the slaughterhouse and assist in cleaning various parts of the animal meats.

By the age of fourteen, Jackie withdrew from school which turned out to be the end of formal education for her. After leaving school she went to work in a grocery shop, then learned to sew. These jobs were a means to an end but hardly paid much, so when a lady turned up at Jackie's house to enquire if Grandma T would allow Jackie to work for her as a housekeeper and babysitter of her children, Grandma T agreed. The lady heard about Jackie from a friend of the family and thought she would be a great fit to help her nurture her children and care for her home. Although this meant being away from her child, Grandma T knew this was a great opportunity for the family and her daughter. They would have another stream of income for the

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home but still one less mouth to feed. The lady lived in Manchester; the same parish Jackie was from, but her home was about forty-five minutes away, in Mandeville, which doesn't seem like such a long distance today; however, during the 1950s the main modes of transportation were donkeys, trains and busses, so the travelling time would be way more than it is today. This meant that it was too far to travel home often. Jackie had to make her new environment her home, and she did. Mandeville would become the place where Jackie would find love, get married, and have a family of her own.

Frank grew up under similar circumstances as Jackie. He left school at age fourteen. On the days he wasn't at school, he would be found helping his mother (whom I will call Grandma Addi) on their farmlands. Grandma Addi didn't have a formal profession or steady job, she just did whatever jobs she could to put food on the table and provide for the basic needs of her family. The most regular job for Grandma Addi was to weed lawns for people in her community and sometimes neighbouring communities as well. She would oftentimes walk for miles to find work and, when a job presented itself that seemed too much for her, she would recruit her children to offer support.

Grandma Addi did the best she could to feed her family but was not always able to do so. As a result, meals were scheduled twice per day, morning and evening. This was to ensure everyone had food in their bellies to start their day and to prevent them from going to bed hungry. In between these meals, when Frank and his siblings got hungry, they would have had to be skillful and hunt for food. To fill the gap of absent meals, Frank and his siblings would raid fruit trees on the way home from school. St Elizabeth, where Frank lived, is popularly known in Jamaica as 'the basket parish' because it's one of the parishes known for its fertile earth and

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variety of sweet fruit trees. There you can find the greatest variety of mango trees on the island. So, it wasn't difficult to find fruits ripe for the picking. They would pass mango trees, apple trees, tangerine trees, and even plum and cherry trees. The only issue was that these trees had owners who weren't always receptive to kids skipping onto their lands to climb their trees because most persons with fruits on their property sold them at the markets to support their families. Nonetheless, after picking and eating their bellies would be full up to dinner time which was about six o'clock in the evening. At home, Frank and his brothers and sisters had their fair share of chores. First on their list was to chop and gather wood which Grandma Addi would use to make dinner when Jackie came home. Other chores would be washing up after dinner, sweeping the yard and house and ensuring their uniforms were clean and ironed for school.

Like Jackie, age fourteen marked the end of formal education for Frank. When he left, it was expected that he would begin to work and contribute to the household. He got a job working in cane fields as a reaper. Tasked to chop thirteen tons of cane to fill the sugar cane trucks every week, Frank recruited his brother to help him but recruiting his brother meant that he was responsible for paying him. So, when he got paid his brother got half the money, hardly enough to help their mother offset costs at home.

Frank and his brother had limited options for work and so they continued to toil in the fields until one day there came a man to their community. The man was seeking able-bodied men to assist in cutting grass to be replanted in another parish. So, Frank opted to go. He left his parents' house in St. Elizabeth and moved to work with the man for three months in Manchester. Frank had a sister who lived in Manchester and, since he was now in the same parish, he decided to visit with her. That visit turned into a long-term stay and, while he lived with her, he engaged

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in various income-earning opportunities: construction, bartending, print shop attendant and eventually landed a job at a bakery in Mandeville just a few minutes from where Jackie lived and worked. At the bakery, he started as a dishwasher and worked his way up to baker and eventually production supervisor. At age thirty-two he already had five children with three women and had started to date Jackie who would later become my mother. He and Jackie married and shortly after they both became Christians and got baptized in the Seventh-Day Adventist church (a religious denomination that worships on Saturdays).

Frank's position at the factory was made redundant which meant he had to find another job to support his five children along with his now wife and three additional children they were parenting together. With a settlement of six thousand dollars from the bakery, Frank paid off what he was owing for rent at his current residence and went in search of a home for his wife and children. He found a house in the May Day District on a hill that overlooked many farmlands, the main roads and a reservoir used to service a nearby horse farm. It wasn't a large space, but Jackie worked diligently to transform the house into a home. The love between Jackie and Frank blossomed into an additional five children. They loved their children; however, they slowly began to see that the ratio of mouths to feed versus their financial resources was not adding up. It took creativity, grit, and hard work to survive each day, but they did it. Jackie had a steady job, but Frank maintained work at short intervals, so he nurtured a farm between employment.

Soon enough, word came from the owner of the house. The house was to be sold, which meant that Frank and Jackie would need to move their family into a new space. Not sure what to do, Frank and Jackie prayed that God would send them a solution that would help them and their children find an affordable place to move into. As luck would have it, Frank heard about a lady

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who had a four-bedroom house in Old England, a neighbouring community that the owner was wanting someone to stay there until the house could be sold. So Frank took up the offer. By this time, he and my mom had eight children together, so it was a lot to pack up and relocate, but they did it with the help of volunteers from their church.

The house in Old England was lovely and much larger than the one in Mayday, especially for eight kids. There were five boys and three girls in addition to my parents. As usual, my parents had their room, I had a room with my two sisters, and the other two rooms were shared by my five brothers. It was a much larger space, and we needed it because we were all growing up so quickly. Despite the larger house, the yard was smaller than we were used to, and the house was located very close to the main road, making it difficult to play cricket and other games in the yard. Whenever the balls landed in front of the house, they would either go onto the road or threaten to break the glass that protected the electricity meter.

We had many fruit trees on the property, like pear trees, grapevines, grapefruit, ackee, oranges, tangerines, coconut and guava trees (where Jackie would find her new whips for us). We also had two tanks to collect rainwater on the property which I made sure to stay far away from. There was a lot of space behind the house, and so my parents explored additional income-earning opportunities. Jackie decided to raise chickens and so she built a chicken coop just behind the house. Frank started a vegetable garden and the produce was shared between the house and sold for income when he was between jobs. We didn't have running water at the house nor did any of the other homes in the community. Everyone sourced water from the community standpipe, which wasn't too far from our house.

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

After four years, the landlord requested that my parents pay rent. My parents were happy they had four years living rent-free because that was indeed a rare opportunity, so when the landlord asked for rent, they graciously agreed. The bauxite company offered my father a stable job after he had worked on and off in different jobs for years. His employment at the company lasted quite some time before being bought out in 2012. He never worked again after that.

Within a short time, my parents had the option to purchase the house from the landlord. The house was not of interest to Jackie, but she did encourage my dad to look around to see what other options were available for purchase, so that they may finally be able to purchase it. Their expectations were disappointed when the house sold ahead of schedule, and they were given the notice to leave. As luck would have it, or as prayers were answered; a house was recommended to Frank by a man from his church. It would be in Cedar Grove District; a neighbouring community to where my dad had worked as a baker before he met my mom. Most importantly, it was a stone's throw from where my mom was currently working. Frank took time off to visit the property with his friend so that he could make an informed decision. The idea of having his own home excited him and he knew he had to choose the perfect space. On this property, there was a half-built two-bedroom, bathroom house and several graves on the property. The yard space was nice but cluttered with several old cars and scrap metal. There was an apparent upstairs section to the house, but it was just block and steel and far from being completed. Despite all these elements, Frank felt connected to this new space and envisioned his family and children spending the rest of their days, growing up there, even leaving home and coming back for family reunions. Scenes of the future played across his mind like a film, and he knew he just had to have it. In the coming days, Frank went ahead and placed a bid on the house and won. Without



## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

hesitation, he packed the family up, and off they went to plant a seed where they hoped to never have to worry about uprooting the family again.

A short while after the family of ten moved, Frank and Jackie realized they would need to still to pay rent to the owner because of the lag in paperwork to finalize the sale of the house. It would take another eight years before the sale would be finalized and my parents would officially be rent-free, homeowners.

The family settled into their new home and were content. There was a lot of cleaning to be done to the house as it had been abandoned for some time, and homeless people and animals used it as a base of operations. Since there were only two rooms, my parents got a room for themselves and the other room was shared among my sisters, my nephew and my younger brother (my eldest sister got pregnant at age 17 and so, by the time we moved, she had her young baby son with her). I slept in the living room with my youngest brother. My remaining three brothers had moved out on their own by this time. As the family settled in, they worked together to make it a home, and planted fruit trees and flowers, painted and decorated and soon enough felt comfortable.

There the family lived and, as Frank had envisioned, each of his children grew up and grew out of the space to start their own homes, only returning for family visits and reunions.

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

### *Feeding the Multitude*

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*We do what we must, even when life is not the best. Every day will feel like a test. Every day the same sunrise and dawning sunsets. Nothing but challenges to build each player, still nothing matters, nothing counts but to win the prize, the final meal. As scarce as gold still you wish to win and feel the taste of luxury.*

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Both my parents shared the financial responsibilities in the house; however, there became intervals when Frank wasn't working due to layoffs and so most of the financial responsibilities fell on my mother. A year after I was born, Jackie got a job at West Indies College (now Northern Caribbean University). This job paid a little more than what Jackie was earning before as a house helper, but it was still not enough for a woman raising eight children. Every two weeks Jackie would receive her paycheck of two hundred dollars, which was just about enough to cover the rent of the May Day Home. As you can imagine, rent was only one expense a mother of eight children had to worry about. In addition to rent, there were other financial demands, so the bills started to pile up. At times Jackie would receive her paycheck and had to immediately sign it over to the school to cover the fees for school tuition. Childcare also became a luxury we could not afford, and so my older siblings would take turns staying home from school to babysit. Food became an even scarcer commodity and Jackie had to get creative. She would collect the rice scrapings at the bottom of the pots at the end of her shift at the cafeteria where she worked, which she took home for my siblings and me to eat. There were people at church who donated groceries at times to us and, as kids, we would make adventures to fruit trees in the community to keep our bellies full when we could. My older siblings, as soon as they could, took on small jobs to make extra monies for school or for personal care items they needed.

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

Jackie was a great provider. Even though Frank wasn't able to contribute much financially, she fed us, provided a roof over our heads and clothed us. We didn't have much, but that made her creative and innovative in her approach to parenting. I remember she made all our uniforms for school and one thing she never withheld from us was our school supplies. Every September morning, we would have all the things on our book list to begin school. I honestly don't know how she did it. As my older siblings grew more independent, they also began offering monies to defray costs at home. Sometimes we would walk through the commons where farmers tied their cows. There we collected cow manure and filled bags to sell to other farmers in the community.

Although we had little, my parents were kind-hearted people who gave what they could to those who needed it. In the Jamaican culture, one could always find a home in the community where they could always go to be fed, and that was my home for a lot of people. My dad enjoyed hosting and sharing stories with our guests, and my mom enjoyed cooking and ensuring everyone was fed. On Saturday afternoons after church, I can recall crowds of people populating our house, all wanting a taste of Jackie's delicious rice and peas or her famous sweet potato pudding. It baffled me how everyone left with full bellies every week when most times we didn't have much to eat, but if you asked Jackie today, "How did you do it?" she would tell you that she prayed, and God multiplied the food every time.

Sabbaths were always a happy day in our home; there would be music, laughter and good food. Giving freely was one of the greatest things my mom was known for, and she received many miracles in the form of multiplication because, even when community members came asking for grocery items, my mother would never say no, or turn them away. She had a big heart, in a pocket full of holes.

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

### *Living with ‘the Brady Bunch’*

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*Oral Tradition is important to Jamaican culture. This ensures that our historical customs and family trade secrets are passed down from generation to generation. Our stories, special dishes, music, dance, and games each played a role in teaching us about our ancestors and carrying on traditions that were important to keep their memory alive. Stories with characters such as Brother Anancy (a trickster) and other animals were filled with lessons of obedience, honesty and trust.*

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The first house I remember growing up in, was our home in the May Day District. I don’t remember much about the inside of the house in May Day; the outside of the house had a long red stairway at the front that led to the veranda where my sisters and I would play games like dolly house and school. The nature of the game was just as it was called ‘School’. In this game, one of my siblings would be the teacher, and the others of us would be the students. Concepts and subject matters would be taught by the ‘teacher’ and then a series of problems to solve or questions to answer would be given to the participating ‘students’ as in a class to test our knowledge. In the end, our books would be marked, and we would get “sticky”: a checkmark that indicated the correct answers.

We also played “Mama Lashy” which was our version of playing house but, in this game, the mother would always find a reason to lash the child/children. For example, the mother would tell the child to wash the fake dishes, but the child would be sitting and playing with dolls instead. When the ‘mother’ realized this, she would begin to spank the ‘child’ until the child complied with her demands. It could have been that was just practicing what was happening in real life. The occasional spanking was nothing strange for us as children. We knew that if we

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

broke the rules or failed to complete chores, the appropriate punishment in the form of spanking would follow, which was a ‘plum tree whip’ spanking.

Some days we could find ourselves on the same red steps reading our schoolbooks or playing ‘ABC fast or slow’; a game that demanded you find nouns under varying categories starting with the letter of the alphabet chosen by each player. The yard was big to the front of the house, and we made full use of it when we played. Having eight siblings meant that we had the benefit of playing several games that demanded a certain number of people to be enjoyable. Games like football, cricket, hide and seek, ring games like “Bull Inna Pen”: a game played in a circle of kids with one child in the middle of the ring, and that child would try to break the circle to get out. The job of the circle participants was to maintain the chain links of the circle as tight as possible so the “bull” could not escape.

We played ‘Dandy Shandy’; Dandy Shandy is a game like a Dodgeball but with two persons throwing the ball. A group of people in the middle would try to ‘site’ or dodge the ball before being hit. The last person standing would be the winner.

There was a large plum tree in the front yard that would bear lots of small plums during its season. This tree served a dual function for feeding us plums and producing the whips Jackie would use to spank us when we broke the rules. Later when we moved to Old England, she would use whips from the guava tree. If we refused to go pick our own whips to be beaten with, one of the other siblings would run to break the whip from the tree and take it to her on our behalf. It was excruciating pain and it stung when we were being whipped.

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

When the lick settled in, we were reminded of our misdeeds by the swellings of blue and red tattooed to our skin. You would think fear of this made us perfect children without error; however, as soon as the scars were gone, so were the memories of ever having received them. While it made us fearful of punishment, it didn't stop us from trying to hide it when we were being bad such as breaking something we should not have been playing with or playing somewhere we should not be playing. We had other fruit trees as well, like tangerine, lemon, and pear trees. There were tall old trees that grew up out of the gully that had long vines growing from them. At intervals, my siblings and I would swing over the gully on these vines which terrified Jackie. She always warned us not to swing on them and pleaded with Frank to chop them down so that we wouldn't swing on the vines. One day as I and four of my older siblings swung on the vines, Frank chopped it down, and we all went rolling down the gully.

There was a tank for catching water because we didn't have running water. Most persons in the community where we lived didn't have running water. What they would do was build concrete tanks on their houses to collect water when the rain fell, others would use plastic or metal drums. When those options dried up, we would travel to the church we attended about thirty minutes' walk away to fill bottles with water and take them home for drinking and cooking. Our concrete tank had a 'barbecue' attached; a concrete plane, built at an angle to channel water into the tank.

Some might ask the question, "What is it like to grow up in such a big family?" To be honest, it's the only thing I have ever known, so I am not sure what to compare it to. We were close to the outside world and tried our best to not show animosity; however, we had sibling squabbles and fights just like any other home. When we fought our mother would ensure to give

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

us a fine spanking, but that didn't stop us. I can recall my brother Jaron and me fighting over something I don't even remember now, but Jaron retaliated by dropping a large stone on my head. Another time he flung a windshield wiper at me as I ran and it took a chunk out of my arm.

Funnily enough, I don't remember my brothers fighting a lot, but my sisters and I fought constantly, almost to the point of hatred. After years of fighting and animosity building, we just hated each other, and none of us remembered why. I don't think it was a lack of love or genuine hatred. Maybe we just didn't know how to process emotions or show love. Feelings and emotions were not shared. Outside of when we were spanked, I had never seen anyone in my family cry or hug each other or express any kind of emotions, and it showed in the way we related to each other at home. It was as though the other didn't exist.

Feeling and emotions of vulnerability were not welcomed, and that was the unwritten rule. The times I observed emotions being shared, it was met with ridicule and sarcasm. So we each bore our burdens silently and taught ourselves how to process or deal with them alone. In some ways, it made us stronger and made us realists, in other ways we built impenetrable walls. So compared to what we went through and had been through, other problems we would face in the future life would seem minuscule, or could not penetrate us and we figured our way out without being mentally and emotionally harmed.

As time progressed, I withdrew as much as I could from family interactions, and became locked away in my fantasy world in my head with Brithomia; Brithomia was the white version of myself that I created. In my mind she lived a life I was not able to, she was my escape. I went to a different church, I withdrew from the Pathfinders club, I stopped playing with my siblings and,

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

as much as I possibly could, I didn't join in for family meals. As much as I could, I spent time away from home. I reclused myself and dwelled in isolation. When I was around my family, I didn't speak out of fear of being ridiculed because I believed I had nothing "sensible" or correct to say. Now that I look back, most of the hurt I was running from at home was exaggerated by my internal pain. As time went by, I experienced hurt after hurt that demanded support and safety from my family, but I never reached out because I never saw that as an option. The pain dug deeper, and I cuddled it alone.

### ***Dangerous Play and Near-Death Experiences***

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*The cold steer of death reaping the joy from the eyes of the naive children.  
Children whose innocence and ignorance chart each traitorous adventure with  
blind vigour and optimism. Shelter them, dear God, and protect them from  
their hubris.*

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While my siblings and I played at home, our mother would either be washing at the back of the house by the water tank, doing chores in the house or at work. So, she was not always able to monitor us to ensure we stayed safe and out of trouble. It meant that when we placed ourselves in precarious or dangerous situations, we had to figure a way out that would result in the least painful result or loss, which we weren't always able to do. There were several times we came face to face with death due to disobedience or mischief, either when we were playing, or trouble would find us as we went about our daily routine.

I recall a time I came face to face with the cold sterer of death when I fell into the water tank at home. As we would usually do, my sisters and I played a game similar to 'hide and seek', but not quite. One person would be blind folded and fumble around to find the others in the game



## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

who would run around trying to evade capture. This day, we decided that we would play on the ‘barbecue’ of the tank. As I fumbled around to locate my sisters, Kaydence and Kellesha, they ran evading me at every attempt to catch them. I heard a chuck and a giggle, and took off running in that direction, when my foot tripped, I felt my body make a flip and a deep descent into nothingness. I wondered where I could have fallen, and awaited to hit the ground, but instead I felt a soft watery bed take me in and drenched my body. It wasn't such a smart idea now that I think about it: to be playing a blinded game near an open water tank, but we were kids, and not much thought went into our playful decisions.

I was maybe three years old at the time and, as my small child-sized body sank to the bottom of what was a very large water tank, I could hear my mom and aunt who was staying with us at the time, screaming for someone “get the ladder! get the ladder!” As I slipped away into emptiness, my eldest brother Jordon, heroically dove to my rescue. By this time, my aunt had found the ladder, and she helped Jackie to lower it into the tank for us to climb out.

A short time after that incident I was going about my day, when I got thirsty. Wondering around the house and being too short to reach any table or chair, I perused for the perfect opportunity to get some water. As I passed the kitchen door, my eyes met a small bottle on the floor in the corner. “Eureka!” I had found something better than water: soda. I ceremoniously wet my lips before I sipped since soda was a rare treat during that time. I prepared myself to treasure the moment and, as the taste connected with my lips and seeped into my mouth, I envisioned the euphoric taste I would experience. As it flowed over my tongue, I could tell that something was wrong. This was not the treasured taste I knew and loved. It was something completely different. I coughed and spat trying to ride my mouth of the foul taste, forcing vomits

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

just to get rid of the horrid feeling. Jackie, who was washing outside, heard my vomiting and ran inside to investigate. I drank bleach that she was storing in a soda bottle. It was customary to purchase bleach and other household chemicals from corner shops in the community. These were sold in unlabeled and undesignated bottles, at a cheaper cost. Of course, I didn't know or consider this at five years old.

When Jackie realized what had happened, she quickly made a solution of charcoal and milk in a cup and gave me to drink. It was like soothing candy to my mouth compared to what I had just tasted. Thanks to Jackie's quick response, I survived the grave ordeal without having to see a doctor or be taken to a hospital. Jamaicans, especially low-income earners, could not afford doctors, so most ailments were treated at home, with herbal remedies. This was generational knowledge passed down through oral tradition. Hospitals and doctors were considered the last line of defense and would only be considered if a person's condition got worse after being treated.

If that wasn't scary enough, I would always follow my siblings and piggyback on Frank's truck as he drove down our driveway. When he neared the end of the driveway leading onto the main road everyone would safely jump from his truck before Jackie could see us, or before Frank got onto the main road where he would speed up. One day, as Frank climbed into his truck, we each found a hiding spot so Frank couldn't see us. As he began to pull out, we all ran and jumped on the back; each finding a spot to hang on with a firm grip. As we neared our gate my siblings jumped off but for some reason, I held on. I was both scared and excited. The truck began to increase its speed and my window of jumping down safely was closing.

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

The truck was going faster than what I was used to, and it felt amazing; almost like I was flying. Before I knew it, the truck had driven onto the road, and I was still on it. My window of safe departure had closed, and I needed to jump, or I was going to be in big trouble. I talked myself in to it but, each time I attempted to jump, it felt as though the truck was going even faster. It was decided, I had to just go for it. I would just jump and hope for the best. After all, all I had to do was land on my feet and I would be fine. I envisioned, practiced, and revised the plan in my mind and was ready for the execution. One... two... three... I counted, then off I went flying through the air and aiming my legs perfectly just like I planned, confident that I could stick the landing. As I came closer to the pavement, my perfectly positioned legs collided with the ground. The touch down was just as I planned but short-lived as a tug of vengeful gravity pulled my body to the ground. I tumbled and torpedoed several times before I came to a pitiful stop.

I hit the ground so hard I thought all my bones were broken. Thankfully I didn't break anything, but I was bruised all over. I cried, not because I was hurt, but because I knew Jackie was going to be upset and I was in big trouble. I slowly limped back to the house and climbed into bed; trying to hide from Jackie, so she wouldn't know what I had done. Little did I know that my siblings had already alerted her. She entered the room and silently inspected my wounds before returning to the chores she was completing. That was a lesson I needed to learn, and it was cemented in my brain, to never hop Frank's truck again and I never did.

We did have incidents that demanded hospital visits. My brother, Danny went to high school some distance away from school. He was quite smart and it showed in his school work. To get home he would walk into the town along with his friends and then take a taxi home. As he

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

made his way across the road one day, a car came speeding down the road, and hit him. That incident caused him to have a broken leg and he stayed in the hospital for a while. When he finally came home, Danny spent several days home, and made trip with my mom to the clinic to have his wound redressed. I remember some days my mom would wake up very early in the morning to walk miles with my brother to get to the clinic, because she couldn't afford the transportation cost to hire a taxi to take them.

Jaron, my younger brother was also hit by a car. Jackie was running late for work, so this morning she asked my eight-year-old sister, who was just about two years older than I am; to take two of my younger brothers to Frank and to also collect money for lunch at school from him. Dad was working on his farm about a mile away as he did most mornings while he was unemployed. Jackie wasn't always able to pay for daycare and so this morning since she was expecting him to be returning home after planting on his farm, Jackie figured he should have been able to care for my younger brothers for the day. When we got to the farm where Frank was, he gave me money for school and asked my sister to return home with the babies.

On the way home Jaron dropped a cassette reel he was playing with and it rolled across the road. Not knowing any better, he yanked his hand from my sister's who was also carrying my youngest brother; Shevaughne; in her other arm. As Jaron ran across the road, a speeding car came around the corner a collided with him. Jaron was hit with such force that he was thrown into the air before hitting the ground. The driver of the car immediately exited his car and ran.

As my sister stood in disbelief, passengers that were travelling in the car that had hit Jaron, flagged down a passing car and asked them to take my brother to the hospital. Frank, who heard

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

the commotion, ran to the scene, collected my sister and brother, and asked someone to call me back (as I was on my way to school) and he took us home to pray for my brother. Jackie, who was at work, got a call to go to the hospital, which as you can imagine placed her in a state of shock. I don't know if our prayers worked, or if God saw that Jackie could not afford to take care of a sick child; because Jaron had no broken bones and only had a few scrapes on his back that healed over time. We chose to believe it was answered prayers, and prayer became a key element in our spiritual faith.

Music was also an important element in our family, the spiritual songs we played could be heard mostly on Friday afternoons leading into the sabbath. Each member of my family had a lovely singing voice, and Jackie prided herself in knowing that the neighbors could hear us as we sang melodiously at worship time. She would say, "It's our ministry". Our faith was very important to us, and when my sisters and I had a near-death experience and survived, it cemented our faith too.

Our parents always encouraged us to pray for the things we needed. One weekend, while preparing to welcome the sabbath, our electricity went out. It wasn't a strange occurrence so we had candles and lanterns waiting to mitigate the darkness. By candlelight, we conducted our family devotions as was our weekly ritual. After our devotions ended, Jackie sent my siblings and me to our beds. My sister, Kellesha, stayed up a bit longer to read by candlelight at the study table in the room we both shared with our eldest sister and read diligently. After some time, Kellesha started to get sleepy so she prepared for bed with the aid of the light from the candle. When she was finally ready for bed, Kellesha tucked herself into bed and nodded off. As we all slept, the candle stood keeping watch for as long as it could.

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

Slowly but surely, the candle burnt down to the last bit of wick and began its search for more fuel to sustain its light. Since the table was made out of wood, the candle's flame latched on to survive. In a matter of minutes, the table was engulfed in flames. My brother, Danny, was out late that night and came home to see the bright light in our room. Danny wondered to himself how such a bright light could be in our room during a power outage. Upon closer inspection, he realized that our room was on fire and immediately took heroic firefighting action to extinguish the flames; saving our lives. My sisters and I slept peacefully through the night unaware of what was going on, only to wake up to a half-blackened room in the morning. In that fire, we lost all our church dresses and most of our school supplies, which Jackie had just bought for the new school term that would begin that Monday morning; but no one was hurt.

### *Trauma*

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*When your innocence is taken you no longer feel the treasured safety, it is replaced with fear. The shield that once protected you leave and is no more. Stripped of everything and made bare, and you cling to the power you borrowed, the one you hold so dear.*

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I was a quiet child at church, and only spoke when I had to. Most of my time was spent holding on to my mother's dress never leaving her side. This lasted for the first few years of my life, she was my haven, because the world was scary, and the tail of her long motherly gown offered me protection as I clung to it for safety. I got into an argument with an adult one day at the church we attended. As I would always do, I reported the incident to my mother and clearly expressed to her what had happened. Jackie was furious and was ready and willing to defend my honour. When she confronted the adult the recollection of events was different. My memory of the event which I related to my mother was different from the version the adult recounted, and

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

Jackie felt embarrassed because she believed the adult. Due to this, my mother said to me “I will never trust you again”. Of course, I now know that she didn’t mean those words as harshly as I received them but, they played over and over in my mind like a broken record, and any time I had an experience that demanded her attention or protection, my mind convinced me it would be pointless to tell her.

Church beach trips were a regular occurrence during the summers. Each year would select a different beach to attend in rotating parishes. These exercises were to help church members socialize and bond. One year we visited Blue Fields Beach in Westmoreland. For church beach trips, everyone would be excited to attend, to the point of not being able to sleep the night before. Jackie was an excellent cook, and she would stay up all night cooking and preparing meals to take with us on the trip. My brothers would ensure to take their bats and balls to play cricket on the sand, and other people would take their games of dominoes and beachballs to have a good time.

We would all meet at the church yard early in the morning to get to the beach, before 9 o'clock and the beach was three hours away. Several buses parked waiting for us to load on and head on the way. As the buses drove off no kid could sit still as we all bubbled with excitement. When we got to the beach and offloaded our luggage everyone started to have fun immediately. On this trip, by the time I changed into my swimwear and got to the water, they had already started a game of “starvings”; with fellow church members, my older siblings and random strangers who wanted to join in the fun.

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

Starvings is a team ball game played with your hands. The opposing team would try to catch the ball as the other team throws it from one teammate to the other; if the opposing team caught the ball they would do the same to maintain possession of the ball. The team here was boys against girls, which made it easier to identify teammates since people we didn't know had joined in the game. I was much too young and short to catch the ball in the water over the older taller players but that didn't stop me from trying. As we played in the water, I felt a player behind me jump to catch the ball. I didn't think it strange because, in a game like this, close contact with a player is unavoidable.

The game continued and, as I moved around trying to catch the ball, the player came up behind me again, but this time I felt he was a little too close, despite the nature of the game. I moved away from him but he followed. I moved again and he followed me again, this time he got behind me and jumped as though he was trying to catch the ball but, as he jumped, I felt his genitals rubbing against my body. It was uncomfortable for me and I didn't like it so I moved out of his way and closer to my sister, hoping he would retreat. He boldly followed me there. This time I felt his hand reach to touch me under the water. I moved away from my sister and closer to my brother, but he still followed me there.

This time he reached his hands down to touch my genitalia. I screamed out as loudly as I could, alerting everyone close by. They even turned around and looked in my direction but laughed and continued the game; maybe they thought I was just enjoying the game or throwing a tantrum because I couldn't catch the ball. I don't know the reason, but this player took that as consent. He refused to stop and, as I tried to fight him off, he persisted and took it a step further, escalating with his advances and growing confidence as he saw I was too small and weak to fight



## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

him off. I screamed my brother's name "Shack!", at the top of my lungs, "This man is raping me!" My brother looked over at me and turned his attention back to the game. At that moment I felt helpless, alone, and empty.

When he withdrew himself from me, I felt my power go with him and I was helpless to do anything. A feeling of satisfaction plastered his face as he turned with an evil grin, leaving me there in the water. With tears in my eyes, I pressed towards the shore hoping that I would exit to safety, and maybe even to realize what had just happened was a dream. As I moved towards the shoreline a log floated by and startled me, I angrily shoved it aside and continued towards the sand. As I neared the sand, I noticed the same player moving toward my sister Kellesha. He got behind her and playfully grabbed her by the waist. She looked around at him and laughed.

I knew what he wanted to do to her, and I could not allow it to happen. I moved as quickly as I could to grab the log I had seen before and swam as quickly as I could towards them. I raised the log as high as I could and swung with all the strength I could muster. As the log connected with his head, the other players and my sisters laughed, as though I was being dramatic and competitive in the game, but I knew what had happened, and I knew what would have happened again and this time to my sister. I wouldn't allow my sister to become prey to this perverted pedophile and I would protect her because no one else would have.

After this incident, I realized the feelings of safety and security I so desperately siphoned from my mother were no longer sufficient to shield me from the dangers in the world and I had to ween myself off of it or I would always be weak. I had to become my own safety net; teach

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

myself to be self-reliant. The more I relied on myself, the less I relied on other people, like my parents or my siblings.

I recall when my sister matriculated into high school, I went to grade five and then to grade six at the Old England Primary School; at which point the principal's nephew decided to take advantage of me sexually. The first time it happened I screamed "No" and tried to fight him off because it was uncomfortable and I didn't like it. Worst of all it reminded me of what happened at Blue Fields Beach and I felt my power being taken from me again. It kept happening and I didn't share it with anyone because I didn't think I would be believed. It was my word against the principal's nephew and I was just the ugly back girl; a nobody. Who would believe me? Over time I just felt ashamed. I had no idea what was happening but I knew I didn't like it. I feared telling my mother because I assumed she would think I was stupid for allowing that to happen and then blame me, or even worse, say she didn't believe me. So, I stayed silent and continued to withdraw.

I was relieved when I finally passed the Grade Six Achievement Tests (GSAT); my placement landed me at May Day High school where Kellesha was in ninth grade. I thought the nightmare would be over and I could just put everything behind me. On my first day of school, I saw him: the principal's nephew. He was to attend the same school I was, and, to make things worse, although I kept silent about what he did to me, he shared it with his friends. It was like showing off a trophy for his accomplishments. Adding insult to injury, he brought his friends to me asking that I corroborate what had happened and offered the impression that it was consensual.

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I dismissed the issue with an obvious denial, but I dreaded going to school each day for fear of encountering his presence. As luck would have it, he was a juvenile delinquent and placed himself in enough problematic situations at school to be expelled.

After school each day, Kellesha and I had to choose whether we would walk or take a taxi home. Jackie could only afford to give us fifty dollars each day to go to school which meant that, if we opted to travel by taxi to school, we would have to walk home. At the time a taxi cost thirty dollars, which soon after went up to fifty dollars. Kellesha opted not to purchase lunch at school in order to take a taxi home. I decided to walk home. Little did I know that my decision to walk home from school would expose me to pedophiles seeking to ease their urges. I was molested on two separate occasions while attempting to make my way home. I was held at gunpoint by a man who claimed he was my father's friend and offered me a ride home. He took a detour onto an abandoned road and pulled out his gun and demanded I strip my clothes off.

On another occasion a man I knew from the community I lived in, stopped to offer me a ride home. I accepted because I was exhausted from walking in the sun. After getting into the car, he drove to a spot on the road where no one could see us and proceeded to do whatever he wanted to do to me. Later, I would find out that the same man molested his nieces at home for years. I blamed myself and felt stupid for allowing that to happen to me. I felt dirty and broken. I entered a depressive state and turned to self-harm to cope, even attempting suicide to escape the agonizing pain.

After those events, I continued to walk home alone but I didn't accept rides from anyone, not even people I knew from safe settings. As I walked, I channeled Brithomia and transported

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

myself to her realm. Brithomia was the white version of myself I conjured when I was eight years old to escape all the deficits I believed I had. She had white skin, a better family and a partner who loved her. All the things I needed but never thought I deserved. By this time, she was my age, with only one friend who was her girlfriend. Of course, at the time, I didn't think of her as a girl in a homosexual relationship; I didn't know anything about lesbian and gay people at the time. That was just what my imagination created, and I was happy with it.

Brithomia experienced romantic feelings toward the girl in her world, and I wouldn't rob her of that. They enjoyed playing with each other and doing social activities together. At times Brithomia and her friend (who I don't recall her even having a name) just drove around in her red pickup truck and at night would lie in the back looking at the stars cuddled under blankets. Other times they would watch tv together and eat snacks that Brithomia's mother made. I didn't have a vast imagination back then, but also, I knew I didn't need much to be happy and the simplicity in the interactions between Brithomia and her friend was all I needed to feel safe in that space where only four people existed: Brithomia, her friend and their moms.

I sought help from friends at school by telling them about my experiences, hoping that the release of information and breaking my silence would help to ease some of the pain I was feeling. My friends, in return, told a teacher who referred me to the school counsellor. Because I was scared of what would happen, I never told the counsellor anything worth taking seriously. What sanity I had left I maintained with the one thing that made me happy: music. I would sing my heart out almost to the point of screaming as I walked home. It was my way of screaming without being thought of as crazy. I also did this in church when I sang and, although my loud singing annoyed a lot of people, that was my release that kept me sane.

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

I continued the ritual of singing even when I moved to live in Cedar Grove. Living in Cedar Grove was difficult for me. I was still in high school and so I continued to attend. To get to school I had to walk, the path took me through a community that was even more violent than the one I was living in Cedar Grove. It was heavily known for its violent nature, and gang violence attached to university students who lived in and around that community. At times I would be followed by men flirting with me and trying to convince me to talk with them. On every journey I made through the community I was overwhelmed with fear and anxiety of being molested. I bought myself a switchblade knife to protect myself and convinced myself I was strong enough to handle anyone that tried to attack me. But another part of me felt as though sexual abuse was just a normal part of my life and being sexually abused again was inevitable and would become unavoidable for the rest of my life.

As I had predicted, while heading home, I was cornered in a shop by a group of men who thought it was okay to sexually harass a high school girl. I entered a depressive state and began to self-harm. I told no one and suffered in silence and was only able to function on autopilot. Signs of something being wrong were there but who was there to see them? One of the most obvious signs was that I was still bedwetting at age sixteen. My sister, Kaydence, didn't like that I was still wetting the bed, especially since I slept in the living room.

I applied for NCU and was accepted. I was excited to start but I had no monies to register, so, I took advantage of the work-study program. I applied to work as a custodian because that was the highest paying student working position on the campus. I worked for a semester and earned enough money to start classes in January 2009. Knowing what I had to return to at home, I spent most of my time on the university campus I attended. I had a job as a custodian and I

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

took early shifts that demanded I be there at six in the morning, and I would volunteer for late shifts, which meant I would leave work as late as eleven at night. Leaving school that late meant being on the road alone in a community known for robberies against students from my university, shootings, stabbings and other violent acts. I still travelled with my knife, but by this time I was fearless because I had adopted a 'don't care' attitude: I had little regard for human life, let alone my own. I no longer cared what would happen to me.

The knife I travelled with came in handy at the times when men attempted to attack me on the roads with knives. I challenged them with all my anger I could conjure, and they backed down. I didn't do it out of bravery, I just didn't care what the outcome looked like. The only time and outcome that frightened me, was when Jackie and I were held at gunpoint while walking home together one night. I remained as calm as I could in that situation because I feared trying to retaliate or stand up to the robber would put my mother in harm's way. Luckily, we were not harmed but the robber took all the valuables we had on us. It was a wake-up call. I needed to take care of Jackie. I needed to ensure that she was protected and didn't have to walk on dangerous roads like this, because I, of all people, knew too well what could happen.

I knew I needed to do more in order to have a future that would afford my mother all the safety and security she needed, but I had no idea how.

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

### *Ball and Chain*

<https://youtu.be/nLsuDQqFEB4>

She woke up feeling heavy,

Heaviness that burdened her life of failure.

It is the kind of failure you feel like when everyone else around you is better and doing better

and being better and getting even better

as everything around you is just getting better.

While you stand still,

while you stand still, standing stagnated, not moving forward, not going backwards, not moving

upwards not moving, not moving, not going anywhere.

The kind of failure that time and time again she was told she was:

Not enough, not good enough

Not Smart, not smart enough,

Not pretty, not pretty enough,

Not clean, not clean enough,

Not wrong, not wrong enough,

Just always, not enough.

And feeling and believing

That all the inadequacies that plagued her existence were because of her and had no place else to

go because she was just that

... inadequate.

Shrugs of the shoulder,

shrug of her feet,

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

violently shaking her limbs,  
trying to rid herself of the cold, heavy ball and chain  
trying to rid herself of the cold claws of sad thoughts and emotions, plaguing her skin.  
Like a cloud of hollow darkness, it loomed over her day.  
Overshadowing her existence and latching on like a heavy ball and chain.  
Door to door,  
Bus to bus, street to street,  
Burdened weights, clamping down her feet.  
Burdened with feelings of being a failure, bombarded with words of despair.  
Every sad word, every broken memory, every statement of horror.  
Needing the right escape, but always choosing the wrong door.  
Sharp blades of self-medication.  
Blades of repression, blades of depression  
Twisting pains of emotional anxiety.  
Sad enough to feel but not sad enough to cry, not sad enough to die,  
Sad just enough to exist.  
She cannot even be sad right.  
Just sadness chipping away at her power through that heavy ball and chain.  
Heavy stress that just will not leave her alone.  
Is she invisible to the world, does no one see her pain?  
Or has she become invisible to the world around her.  
No one sees, or no one can see.  
She retreats into her shell, dragging her heavy ball and chain.



## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

No savior from this dungeon, not handsome prince charming.

Into the darkness she fades away,

She is lost to the world, but no one cares.

She is a girl in bed, laying down with her heavy, ball and chain.

### *Educational Journey*

#### *Church*

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*Learning about love, and the value of humility, traits necessary to be a good Christian. Learning to heal and let go of misery, are traits necessary for a piece of mind. God offers the love we need and gives freely the 'piece' that supersedes all understanding.*

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Church attendance was a weekly ritual that the entire family had to participate in. The family attended the Seventh-day Adventist church on Saturdays, which were called sabbaths. A sabbath lasted from Sundown on Friday evenings and ended at sundown on Saturdays. Between that time, we weren't allowed to do anything that wasn't spiritually based. So, there was no playing, no television or radio, unless it was gospel music, no cooking, no cleaning, and no spending of money to purchase anything. According to the faith, this was in keeping with the fourth or 'Sabbath' commandment" in Exodus 20:8-11 of the bible.

The church was being built and didn't have much security and, since it was neighbour to a community known for having robbers and violent men, nothing valuable was kept on the church site. One church sister who lived close by was tasked with housing keys to the church, other persons kept the PA systems and Frank, who was a deacon, was responsible for the church clock. Because he was the clock bearer, Frank would be the first one to leave home every Sabbath

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

morning. Jackie would be late getting to church because she had to ensure all the children were fed and ready to go as well.

At church, my siblings and I attended classes called Sabbath School. There we would be taught various Bible stories and would have to commit Bible verses to memory. We used lesson books as a guide called quarterlies that had enough lessons for thirteen weeks. The lessons from the quarterlies were fun and interactive. They had puzzles and colouring, and captivating images that made you want to learn. At the end of the thirteen weeks, there would be a special ceremony at church to commemorate the end of the quarter. Each study class, which was separated according to age group, had to commit Bible verses to memory and say it in front of the entire church congregation. On Sunday morning at seven o'clock, my siblings and I would attend Pathfinder Club meetings at church. This was mandatory for every child at church. Pathfinder is similar to Brownie or Girl Guide. They taught us how to survive in nature by teaching us camping, campfire lighting and meal preparation, cooking without pots, rope and knot tying and so on. We also learnt first aid, swimming, and, my favourite, marching. They even had a marching band. Pathfinder Club also had classes that started according to age; however, to matriculate or as they called it "invest" to be promoted to another class or rank, you had to earn badges and pass tests. I wasn't very good at any of those things in the Pathfinder's Club, so I only matriculated when I got too old for the class I was in. Pathfinder also promoted the memorization of Bible verses. There were seven specific verses we had to remember and those would change weekly. These verses were given at Adventist youth (AY) services on Sabbath afternoons. Sometimes at AY we would play games such as sword in hand, and treasure hunts and other fascinating games that were fun, but inadvertently tested and stimulated knowledge

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

retention of biblical principles. It also made me have a love for church and learning about the Bible.

### ***Primary School***

In the primary school environment, I recognized I didn't have the ability to retain information as well as my classmates, and I didn't read as well as they did. It made me feel like I was dumb and lacked the capacity to learn in school. Over time I began to fear being dumb the rest of my life, and wondered what a future with low intellect would look like. I was fidgety in class, but I tried to not make waves so as to not draw a lot of attention to myself. Each grade I matriculated into I did the best I could, but wasn't sure it was good enough. In one of my vocational subjects, I learnt to do crafts, sewing, and how to make things out of garbage. This was exciting for me, and I seemed to be pretty good at it. As I progressed through my grades, I was able to represent my school in various competitions through the 4H club and rank well, in most cases winning medals on the behalf of my school. Those situations kept a small fire kindled within me and, even though I went through moments of existential dilemma, moments of small victories followed me and kept hope alive.

Expression through art allowed for me to have an outlet. I could get lost in my work, without having to relate to anyone, or interpret my work to suit someone else. I could be as expressive as I needed to be and allow it to unfold naturally. Over time, building art from garbage would spiral into poetry, song writing, singing, video editing and design, and today, spoken word poetry. Each outlet served its purpose during the time it was needed.

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

### ***High School***

Attending the May Day High School I was in eleventh grade by this time and gearing up to do my final Caribbean Secondary (CSEC) exams. Although I had no plans, I knew that the automatic action after high school would be to attend Northern Caribbean University, just like my five siblings before me. I wondered how my parents would handle it when they realized I wasn't smart enough to get accepted into university, and often thought about what skill I would go to learn when I was rejected. I had a fifty percent average at school, and there was no way I could be accepted to university with grades like that let alone pass my CSEC exams. My friends were all smarter than I was, and they studied during lunch and break times, so I stuck close to them so I could grasp some of the knowledge they had. Sometimes I would even go by their house to study. I began to excel at English, so much so that I was asked to represent the school in an essay competition against other schools in the parish. I entered and won. I was asked to serve as a safety monitor, alongside my friends who were all prefects. Being given a leadership role boosted my confidence and I wore my badge with pride. I even started to act like a prefect, until everyone believed I was one. I joined the school choir and the music club. I became the most senior music student in the school and so was given the position of Music Club President and was asked to direct the school choir at one point, but I was uncomfortable being in front of everyone and having so many eyes on me, so I rejected the role.

Surprisingly after doing my exams, I passed six CSEC subjects. I also took some JSCE (Jamaica Secondary Exams) subjects and passed all of them. Frank, my dad proudly boasted about this at church and to others who would listen. I knew I only needed five subjects to get into university, but, as I compared myself to my friends who passed eight, nine and some even ten subjects, I felt ashamed and wanted to acquire more subjects just as much as they had. So, I

**Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

petitioned the school to repeat the eleventh grade and was accepted to stay in high school for an additional year to do an three more CSEC subjects. Although I had never taken those subjects before, I had eight months to soak up all the knowledge I could from each class. Since I wasn't carrying a full class load, when I didn't have classes, I could be found in the library studying, offering support to the librarian and other students who came to study.

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

### *The Christian Homosexual*

<https://youtu.be/omlYcedyl3o>

I woke up a homosexual  
I woke up a homosexual and I hate it.  
How does this happen to someone  
I go to church, I sing and I pray, I don't even swear.  
why me?  
God are you testing my faith?  
I can just hear what everyone is going to say  
"You're going to hell you nasty child"  
  
I woke up the devil's child and I knew it.  
I knew it when my best friend hugged me out of excitement,  
And all I wanted her to do was kiss me.  
I knew it when my friends spoke about boys,  
and it felt so unnatural to me  
  
Oh man, I woke up a sadomite,  
I know how it happened,  
I just know It was demon, as I slept,  
The demon paralyzed me in my dreams and crept in slowly  
Get an exorcist and I will be rid of you.

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

Oh my GOD, I woke up gay.

Nope it's still not gone

My 100<sup>th</sup> hail Mary today and no matter what I try it's still there.

I knew it as soon as the teacher entered the classroom, and the scent of her perfume perforated  
my nostrils triggering a chain reaction of erotic thoughts and bodily fluids.

I knew it when my eyes couldn't help but trace her as she glided to the chalk board and flipped  
her hair, as she turned around and licked her lips before she spoke just to tempt me.

Oh man in that moment all she had to do was say my name and I know I would just melt.

The things we did in my imagination, were so ungodly.

Now I knew I needed fervent prayer all day every day, read the bible 6 times a day, church three  
times a week.

I will be rid of you

Aw damn it, I woke up a lesbian

I knew it when I saw that girl on the choir, and I just knew she was meant to be mine.

My heart raced, and I got butterflies.

Wooooow, she doesn't even see me,

but how can I not go over and say hi?

But its wrong, its wrong, its wrong, its wrong,

No, no,no,no,no its wrong

And you're going to hell.

You are going to hell,

Stop it!

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

I woke up a cunt and I knew  
 I knew it the fist time he touched me and I cringed,  
 I knew it the fist time he held me and it felt wrong  
 I knew it the moment he kissed me and I puked all over his chest.  
 I knew it.  
 God is gonna strike you down and you're going to burn in hell  
 You're nasty, Sodom and Gomorrah was burnt and destroyed with everyone in it for this  
 Everyone hates you; no one wants to be your friend  
 Just don't get close to anyone they will be infected with your gayness.  
 Your such a disgrace on the your family and the church  
 How can you even step into church or say you are a Christian?  
 162 Arm cuts, 50 leg slashes and one attempted overdose and  
 Fuck, I woke up queer  
 I knew it when she looked at me, I got goosebumps and I got butterflies, right here, in my  
 stomach  
 I knew it when she Touched me, my heart skipped all kinds of beats  
 I knew it when she kissed me, oh my god wooh  
 it just felt so right,  
 It felt right  
 How can it feel so right?  
 I'm not supposed to feel this way,



**Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

Am I?

How does God feel when I'm like this?

Does he prefer when I'm sad and ashamed

Does he want me happy, like genuinely happy,

Does he want me to be me?

Am I betraying him when I'm happy?

I woke up human this morning

I knew it, when I rolled over and there she was

Smiling at me like I was the only woman in the world.

I knew it when she kissed me on the forehead and it felt like a hug

I knew it when she said I love you and I just knew, this was authentic love

Maybe not her love lasting forever

But self love.

I woke up myself this morning, and you know what

I love me!

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

### *They Called me Black*

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*They called me black to take away my power, they called me black to strip my existence of its worth. They called me black, to distract themselves from the esteem they held themselves accountable to, and rejected the fact that we are all one blood, one people, one hope, one destiny, one body of the African royal hive; birthed before the white man's act of enslavement*

---

The new school term started on what we called September morning. Moving to a new neighbourhood, meant we could no longer attend the same school. So after finishing out the school year, Jackie moved us into a new school, Old England Primary, closer to home. At the new school, I started in grade three and my sister Kellesha, went to grade five. We made new friends, and lead separate lives at school. We had the occasional sibling squabble but tried to maintain a united front at school. Kids were mean and they teased and called us names often using harsh creole words: “Yuh black Lakka tar,” said by children at school which translate to “you are as black as tar”.

These words would be recited by children at school almost like a song. It wasn't just me, but anyone whose complexion was darker than a light brown complexion was considered ugly and needed to be reminded of how ugly their skin colour was. Some would say, “you look like a monkey” and they were even creative enough to make up a song to go with it. It wasn't very easy to hear those words, and I ended up feeling rejected, isolated and alone. These racialized comments would continue from my peers until I graduated high school.

For a long time, I believed my skin was ugly. I remember once my mother looked at my face and asked, “How are you so black?” maybe I had gotten darker and she had failed to notice, or thought I caught “the black plague” and she knew there was no cure. I knew she wasn't trying

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

to hurt my feelings or make me feel ashamed of my being black, maybe I just had a tan from the sun and she wondered why, but that didn't stop me from wondering how I could change my skin, how I could turn it into a more desirable colour. I would come to realize that a lot of opportunities would be tied to the colour of my skin and how I was perceived. The lighter-coloured kids were the teacher's favourite, and they were the ones who were seen and respected and chosen for varying important and leadership roles. Not just at school, but I also observed this at church.

At home, my seven-year-old self tried several things to solve the problem of my skin colour by using skin-lightening agents. These I took from a supply of cosmetics my father was selling for an international cosmetics company. The product had the opposite effect because, while I used the product I would still play and walk in the sun for hours which I didn't know, would cause my skin to become darker. Over time I created a white version of myself and, even though she was a figment of my imagination, she became real in my mind. She was fashioned into a persona based on what I wanted to look and be like. Up to that point I had never seen myself in the mirror so my game of pretending was never diluted by what I looked like. It would be several years before I knew what my face looked like in real life.

My white persona I called 'Brithomia'; the whitest made-up name I could come up with at seven years old. She had an entire life absent from my disadvantaged situation. Brithomia was rich and had a wealthy mother whose life was filled with opportunity, and sophistication; scenarios I slightly adapted from television shows I watched and dreams I had when I went to bed. In my diaries, she came to life, and in my happy place where I would retreat to when I wanted to be alone. She was in love with a beautiful girl who was also wealthy and lived in a big

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

glass house full of white sheets, white furniture and white curtains and would hang out together all the time. As I grew Brithomia grew, and her story evolved. I wanted to be someone else because my real self and life were unacceptable and undesirable.

Having any kind of future was never something I envisioned as a child. Not just because of the colour of my skin but also because of the way I dress in second-hand worn our clothes, and I didn't think I was very smart either. Life for me just became a matter of surviving long enough to make it to bedtime and waking up to do it all over again. I never thought about the future, or even dared to think that I could have any kind of success.

My family was still living in Old England and my new school was now three miles away. In the mornings my sister and I would catch a ride to school with my father who had to pass that way on his way to work. The uniform we wore to school was a white blouse with yellow lining on the sleeves and a brown pleated tunic. Jackie made our uniforms, so it was made to fit. As I stepped through the door each morning I knew that if nothing else, I looked sharp and I enjoyed wearing this tunic that was tailor-made just for me.

Stepping into my classroom I knew I looked neat in my uniform, but this was short-lived because, at school, kids had little regard for how I looked in my uniform. They would grab and tug me; not maliciously but gesticulating or pulling me to go with them or in passing, and the dirt from their hands would smear, wrinkle, and deface my uniform, especially my white blouse. This wasn't a favour I was able to return because these kids had a lot more pride in themselves and their appearance than I did. So they didn't want to have any kind of spot on their uniforms. I remember I touched a student just to indicate that someone else was trying to get her attention,

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

and she got upset with me for touching her white blouse and emphasized that she would not want her white blouse to be messy. I couldn't complain, because I knew how she felt and I admired the confidence she portrayed and the courage she had to tell me that and I wished I was her so I could be like that.

Boundaries weren't something I thought I had a right to have. Moreover, I was scared to stand up for myself or confront anyone because I didn't want to upset them or have them lash out at me. My motto: "avoid confrontation at all costs". This was what I saw exhibited even at home. My family members were passive, we hardly even raised our voices at home (unless we were in a sibling squabble). It was almost seen as ungodly behaviour, and we were taught to leave our 'enemies' to God. So until God took revenge for us or moved negative people out of our lives, we should be humble and respond the way Christ would by turning the other cheek.

A pledge I recited in church every week and had to commit to memory and live by was:

"Be obedient, Be pure, Be true, Be kind, Be respectful, Be attentive, Be helpful, Be cheerful, Be thoughtful, Be reverent." (Club Ministries - North American Division, 2020).

I learnt it and did my best too I live by those words. I was helpful at school when the teacher needed help, I was helpful when some old lady on the street needed help with her bags, and I was nice and respectful to everyone. Lessons made me a nice girl but didn't do much to keep me safe. Everyone who could take advantage of my "niceness" because I never said "no", a word I desperately needed to learn to say, to keep myself safe

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

### *Nowhere Safe*

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*When I need it, the most is when it was not given. Maybe I asked for more than my fair share, but it feels like it was never there. Maybe I didn't ask, so am I being unfair? But still, just the fear made each day unbearable, digging the well of abandonment deeper, and the isolating rain filled the well with a tear.*

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Kaydence had taken on a leadership role in the house, being the eldest girl; she decided that I needed to be out of the living room: the common area where guests were entertained. So, in an attempt to rid that space of the fowl urine odour that invaded it, my sister suggested that my youngest brother who slept in the common area, move into the upstairs unfinished space. Jackie was opposed to it, but Jackie is not one for confrontation and my sister was skilled at getting her way. At the time I was sleeping on a futon, and I didn't own much else. My clothes were kept in a large garbage bag in a corner so, when I came home and all my things were in the new space, I knew it didn't take much time or effort to make that transfer. That would be my room for the next seven years. I had a makeshift window my sister installed, which had panes missing and an old office partition for a door. The blocks had spaces in between them which invited rats and cockroaches to crawl over me at random. I was filled with anxiety at night for fear of being molested during the night by a random stranger who could have easily entered because there was no door. At intervals, I would get ringworms all over my body. Eventually, my two younger brothers were evicted to the upstairs haven as well.

I had grown accustomed to the new normal of enduring cold nights, warding off cockroaches and rats, becoming friends with the occasional lizards that would visit and sleeping lightly to stay alert throughout the night, and, eventually, I made the space my own. When I was nineteen, I even got a real bed; my first real bed, I remember when I got it, I felt so happy and

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

looked forward to sleeping in luxurious comfort. This mattress was a family heirloom; it had been passed down from sibling to sibling for years now, and it was finally my time. My sister had purchased a new mattress and so now this one was all mine. Up to this point, I had only slept on old couches, sponges on the floor and a hard futon. I still however longed for the feeling of safety, security and comfort; things I saw other people enjoy and wondered if I would be so lucky (I mean I got a bed, so anything is possible, right?).

### *Mother Daughter Relationships*

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*I didn't know what I didn't know until I knew. And when I knew I felt I should have known. But who was to teach me, who was to let me in on the secrets of knowing what I didn't know so that I could have been among the empowered with this old knowledge?*

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My mom would say that we were always close when I was younger, which is true, for a time we were. For the first few years of my life, she was my safe haven. There are moments I remember holding on to her because the world was scary, and the tail of her long motherly gown offered me protection as I clung to it for safety. I got into an argument with an adult one day at the church we attended. I reported to my mom what had happened, and she was ready and willing to defend my honor. However, my recollection of the event was different from the version the adult recounted, and my mother said to me, "I will never trust you again". Of course, I now know that she didn't mean those words, but it played over and over in my mind like a broken record every time I had an experience that demanded her attention, or that I needed her to feel safe; my mind convinced me that she 'would never trust me again' and I would not be believed.

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The more I relied on myself, the less I relied on other people, including my mother. I learnt the value of trust, honesty and loyalty from experiencing betrayal, and observing how traitorous people could be, most importantly, I only trusted and opened up to people I felt trusted me. As I learnt, I made a mental list of the societal rules that governed human existence and, as young as I was, my observational skills became the greatest tool in my survival kit, and, as I learnt, how I interacted with and viewed the world around me was greatly impacted.

I don't think I blamed my mother at any point for the nature of our relationship, I withdrew myself from her. She, on the other hand, had seven other kids plus others to raise, and a household of fires to put out which left very little times to focus on the details of each child's well-being. However, since we grew apart, the open conversations I would have with my mother ceased, and the opportunities for one-on-one mother daughter time dwindled into nonexistence. Over time, the feelings of security I so desperately siphoned from my mother was no longer sufficient to shield me from the world and I had to ween myself off motherly protection and become my own safety net; teach myself to be self-reliant.

I feared speaking out and it created a ripple effect. I began to move away from environments that threatened my sense of self. This forced me into introversion and isolation from my family. I didn't go to the same church as they did, I dropped out of the same activities we shared together, and I played independent of them. Fear of speaking up and speaking out became more of an issue when my principal's nephew decided to continuously touch my private parts after school, or when several sexually violent experiences occurred after that. The first time it happened I told no one because I felt ashamed. I had no idea what was happening, but I knew I didn't like it. I feared telling my mom because I thought she would ask me if I was stupid or



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blame me, or even worse, say she didn't believe me. So, I stayed silent because that was the safest thing to do.

With the absence of my mother, learning basic elements of being a woman became trial and error, or from lessons of observing my sisters and female friends. I got some things right, other things I learnt later in life when I allowed myself to find the answers. So conversations about becoming a woman, and sanitary napkins and tampons, or the talk about boys and sex, and good touch and bad touch; conversations and life hacks and common-sense knowledge that would prepare a budding young lady for a world filled with judgement, and pedophiles didn't happen; instead, I felt as though I was flung into an apparent and automatic knowledge system that always seems too elude me. These conversations were not had in the environments that provided me with 'education', and so they became a part of 'life's lessons'; something you found out though experiencing it yourself.

My parents were taught to be workers and supporters of the family, and that's what they did. There is no manual on how to be parents, and so they did what they knew to do, and learnt to do by trial and error. The most important this is that they provided for their children as best they could, but the rest was up to us to learn.

### ***Father Daughter Relationship***

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*This could have been a beautiful song, a grand experience of learning and symbiotic growth. Instead, it seeped trails of disappointment to near stagnation, because of shallow minds, and the need for ready done. A part well played would have been a mind well nurtured, and a web of safety cast to protect the black widow's spawn.*

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As a child, I assumed I was dumb and had nothing to contribute to the world. I can recall when kids would talk about their futures and what they wanted to become, I would copy their responses and say I wanted to be a lawyer, doctor, or teacher.

The closest I got to having futuristic desires was wanting to be like my father. He was a wide reader and would take books home that was given to him by his friends. Soon enough we had a mini library at home. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't focus long enough to get through the first page of any book, so, instead, I soaked up the words Frank had to say. Dad would speak in clear English (that is important to note because in Jamaica we mainly speak creole, which is broken English); most Jamaicans spoke broken English as often as they could, and standard English was what was taught in school. My father used words I thought were big and complicated words and he would talk about 'psychology'. Psychology sounded like an awesome sophisticated thing to know, and I wanted to know it too. I wanted to speak as well as he did and know the big words as he did. Funnily enough, as I grew older, I realized that most of the words Frank used, were used out of context, or made up.

I wanted to be closer to Frank, and develop a relationship with him, and I tried, but it only made me feel like a nuisance. Frank would purchase sugar cane on Sundays for Jackie to sell at her place of work. These canes he got from various farmers across Manchester and Clarendon. There were times he would invite my brothers on these ventures, so he had helped to stack and pack the cane into the back of his truck. I asked several times to go with him, but he would never allow me to and I wondered why that was so. So I did what any logical child would do; I hid in the back of his truck, determined to go with him, knowing that he only needed to see that I could help, and be even more effective than my brothers. I knew I was just as strong, or even stronger

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than my younger brothers who he wanted to take with him and I could manage all the sugar cane he needed help lifting; he only needed to see me in action.

When we got to the place to purchase the cane, Frank saw that I had stowed away in the van and didn't know what to do with me, but since the job was there to get done, when the cane seller brought the cane up from his farm, I went to work, stacking and packing my father's truck with the sugar canes as fast and neatly as I could. On the way back we stopped and bought curry goat with white rice, and ate our bellies full. After that day, Frank made sure I never went with him on the sugar cane trips again, and I never really knew why. I made assumptions to help me make sense of what happened but assumptions led to feelings of rejection and further cemented the belief that I was undesirable and unwanted.

Another memory I have of Frank was asking him for lunch monies. For the most part, Jackie would give each child their lunch monies on the first day of the school week, and that was to last us for the entire week. That was her way of teaching us responsibility and money management. However, sometimes she only had enough to give us for one day or three days and would send us to our father to ask for lunch money. Nine out of ten times he would say he didn't have any. So going to my father to ask for money was never something I looked forward to.

I can recall one day, I needed shoes for church. My old one was worn out and I had started to wear my school shoe to church, and sometimes a slipper. Frank said he had no money, and Jackie I knew if she had the money she would not withhold it from me. My sense of self was dwindling, and wearing slippers to church didn't do much for my self-confidence. I decided to

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ask my friend to ask Frank for the money, and she did. She asked him for money to go to the movies, and he gave it to her, cash and in full.

After that, my interactions with my father didn't change, because we didn't interact much before that outside of family settings like family worship, while we watched television, or ate dinner together. The only thing that changed was my perception of him. I was no longer in awe of his words, and the pedestal on which I placed my father crumbled. I did not doubt that my father was proud of his children, he had thirteen of us and would share that wherever he went; if you could see the gleam in his eyes as he shared the accomplishments of his daughter with a nursing school or his son who played the piano, and all the accomplishments of his other children. Then it finally occurred to me, that I was rejected because he had no reason to be proud of me. I was no one and had accomplished nothing so he had no reason to be proud of me.

### ***Mentors***

Throughout my time as a university student, I met several women who impacted my life in a very big way. They took a special interest in me and helped me to stay on a positive path and taught me how to uplift my circumstances. Sharmen who is still in my life today, was like a big sister. Mrs. Barry was the head of the counselling center on campus and Ms. Gillings was an attorney at Law who hired me in my final year.

### ***Sharmen***

I first met Sharmen as I sat outside of where I worked, at custodial services one day. She was one of the instructors in the Humanities and Social Science Department at the time. She would allow me to goof around while she listened and laughed, other times we enjoyed

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intellectually stimulating conversations that helped me learn a lot. She showed me that I had a lot more potential and capacity for success than I thought, and she became my biggest cheer leader for all the ventures I innovated. As our friendship grew, so did my trust in her and I began to open up more about my life and experiences. Sharmen listened with a sympathetic ear; however, when she saw that I had not healed and had self-harming tendencies, she insisted on referring me to a counsellor on campus. By this time, I knew I could trust that Sharmen had my best interest at heart, so I agreed to counselling.

### ***Mrs. Barry***

Mrs. Barry and I met through a referral received from Sharmen. I was referred to receive counselling from her as she worked in the counselling centre on campus. While I was open to talking with Mrs. Barry, I realized that I was not ready to open myself to the counselling process. Since I was not opening up in my counselling sessions, Mrs. Barry presented me with two options; to quit, or make a conscious effort to allow counselling to work. I knew I enjoyed talking with Mrs. Barry, but I was not sure I wanted to stay in counselling, so I proposed a third option; for Mrs. Barry to become a mentor.

Mrs. Barry agreed to be my mentor after an extensive conversation about boundaries. As my mentor, she guided me to evaluate who I was and envision where I wanted my life to go. She taught me how to be a better student and offered options on the best ways to capitalize on my time at school. Up to this point, I was still wearing hand-me-downs from my siblings, so most of the clothes I owned were much bigger than I was. Even my posture was off, and I walked with a hunched back (from continuously looking at the ground when I walked). There was little that

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could be done about my clothing, but Mrs. Barry donated what she could to me and even gave me a sweater to help stave off the cold at night. As for my posture, I would have sessions in her office where I had to practice walking upright and ‘like a lady’. Over time I began walking without a hunch, but still trying to figure out ‘walking like a lady.’

Mrs. Barry eventually left to pursue her Ph.D. overseas. Leaving me with a referral to receive counselling: which I never used, because I didn’t think I needed it at the time.

### ***Ms. Gillings***

Stacy Gillings and I met on campus when she visited one of my classes to offer a presentation. Although our interaction was brief, she was so impressed that she offered me a job the very next day. She wanted me to digitize her client records. I had never had an official job outside of being a custodian, or sales and I had no idea how to digitize records, but there was no way I was going to allow the opportunity to pass me by. Before my start date, I consulted my brother, who was an IT technician he gave me pointers and to anchor what he told me I watched YouTube videos.

Over time being in the office, everyone started to treat me like family, especially Stacy. She would take me on errands, and over time I would spend time at her house. Stacy had no children of her own at the time, and so she treated me like the daughter she never had. She also developed a friendship with my parents. As our friendship grew, I began to spend more time at her house than I did on my own, until she eventually invited me to move in with her. It was just

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us for a while until the adoption proceedings she had started years before came through, and young Junior joined the family.

Living with Stacy, I had new experiences, some I never thought would be possible in my lifetime. I got custom-made outfits, new clothing, and shoes, and had food portions I felt were fit for a king. I had my room, and even the bed I slept in felt like stacks of clouds. Some things made me very uncomfortable though, such as; being included in a lot of decisions in the house, such as what groceries would be bought, places we visited and social events. As a lawyer, she would be invited to high society events, and I would be invited as well to tag along. This is how hard she tried to ensure I never felt excluded.

I remember having papaya she bought from the market. It wasn't my first papaya, but it was the first one I had ever had that was meant just for me without having to share with a house full of kids. After I had it, I told her how much enjoyed it. I'm not sure if it was because of the taste, or because it was my first time having papaya all to myself but these new experiences were exciting for me, and I was genuinely happy.

Since I would not say or ask for anything, Stacy had a hard time knowing what I liked, and she so desperately wanted to ensure that the house was filled with things I enjoyed. But I was content. I didn't need anything. After I told her that I liked papayas, however, she began to buy them every week for me to have. Sometimes on trips to the supermarket, Stacy would say "Pick from the shelves what you would like" but what was to her a simple question for me was a strange one. Here I am a budding adult floored at a question that offered me autonomy. Choice? What was that?

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It should have been empowering but it wasn't for me. I had feelings of embarrassment and felt overwhelmed with fear of getting the answer wrong. What did I want? Up to that point, my needs were basic and simple; enough food not to starve and a place to sleep. Anything outside of that was luxury and I never really needed luxury. When you grow up in a space where you don't have access to much, you accept what is given, when it is given, without complaint. So, this process of inclusion that I was being exposed to was overwhelming. I tried to do what I always did in those situations, 'avoid and retreat' so I humbly responded, "No I don't need anything, thank you."

As our relationship progressed that question, 'What would you like?' kept rearing its head and I knew I could not evade it forever. I was also curious to know what I liked. After some thought, I came up with a very sophisticated system of discovery 'fake it till you make it.' The next time I was asked, I chose something I had always seen other kids with and wanted but could never afford to have. So when asked I said "Grace Vienna sausage." She looked at me strangely, and I braced myself for the 'no' that was coming so I could not be hurt. She looked at me and said, "Okay, how many?"

I was surprised but, as I had always tried to do, I showed no emotion. I smiled and said, "Three, please." She picked them up and we moved on to the next aisle as if nothing happened. What was to her just another day of grocery shopping, for me was an empowering moment that filled me with emotions I couldn't identify with. We got to the car, and she kept looking at me and asking if I was okay. I replied, "Yes." She kept asking and I kept responding, "Yes I am fine", and I asked, "Are you okay?" She said, "If you're okay why are you crying?"



## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

My eyes had betrayed me. Tears streamed down my face, and I hadn't even realized what was happening. She leaned across the gearstick to offer me a hug and said, "You're okay." I'm not sure if she ever figured out what was happening with me that day, but that day started me on an adventure of discovery to figure out what I liked. Stacy continued to purchase things just so I could try them, and what a journey it was. I learnt more about myself and my likes and dislikes. I even stopped liking things for no rational reason and claimed what I thought was a more 'sophisticated' taste.

### ***Journey to Identity Discovery***

In high school CSEC subjects sometimes demanded an SBA (School Based Assessment), a research project surrounding a chosen topic, like a thesis. Since I didn't have access to the resources I needed at home, such as the Internet, a computer and books, I ventured to Northern Caribbean University (NCU) library every evening after school to work on my research projects. There Jackie and my siblings were well known, so a select few of their friends became my friends. One of which was a young lady named Desrine. She asked me one day "What do you want to study when you get to university?" I expressed to her that I had no idea and that I doubt I would be able to do anything worthwhile because I failed my math CSEC exams. Math was a subject that most colleges demanded a student have to enter university. Desrine set my thinking straight and provided me with the NCU website that would provide me with information and expose me to all the courses offered at the university. As I browsed it was overwhelming to see all the professions that existed that I didn't know about, and my imagination ran wild at the possibility of becoming anyone of them. The ones that spoke most to me were Social Work and Counselling. I'm not sure what exactly drew me to it, but I saw myself most in those roles. Up to that point, I had no idea what a social worker was. I mentioned to Desrine that Social Work was

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what I wanted to study. She replied by telling me, that she was a social work student and that it was an amazing profession.

When I started classes in January 2009, I began to learn about the world of social work, and what it means to be a social worker. Social workers were problem solvers, they were advocates, mediators, strategists, and researchers. As Jamaicans would say, “head cook and bottle washer” meaning we were the leaders to bring about change. We needed to know everything and were a part of everything so that we could represent our clients in the best way possible. We were taught to be proud of our profession and to ethically maintain the ethos and pride of being a social worker so that others would respect our profession and the role we played in society.

As I studied social work at school, I learned to engage in a profession that would teach me to fight for the underdog, and create a better standard of living for individuals; however, I was still broken. As I studied, I made sure to keep to myself and not make any waves. I went to class, to work on campus, and then home. That was my life. For the most part, I did my best not to draw any attention to myself.

As I sat outside of where I worked, at custodial services one day, one of the instructors, Sharmen, from the department I studied in walked past and saw me sitting. She stopped and stood looking at me but, as I had always assumed I was invisible, I ignored her. She asked, “Are you okay?” Being polite I responded “Yes, I’m well, and how are you?” She said “You look sad like something is wrong” and invited me to sit in her office. It took a while to open up to her and tell the truth about what was happening. We would spend many days joking around in her office

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until one day I finally opened up and shared small pieces of the true hurt I was experiencing. As she listened, she saw my pain and offered emotional support that was very foreign to me, but it felt comforting to have someone listening.

Sharmen afforded me a therapeutic space to vent a lot of things that plagued my mind, and she validated my feelings; however, she knew that I needed more support to work through a lot of the things I was experiencing. So, as soon as she thought I was receptive to it, she referred me to a counsellor at school. I was scared and reluctant to attend, but I went. I opened to the counsellor about the things that affected me, but I was resistant to the tools she was teaching me to use to heal. I never used any of the strategies she was trying to teach me, and I felt it was a waste of time. I began to hate the feeling of being counselled and the one-on-one attention made me uncomfortable. The counsellor would say sometimes that talking to me felt like “pulling teeth”. It was a funny expression but true. I just didn’t want to be counselled; especially because of the negative stigma surrounding counselling at the time; which was that counselling was for crazy people, and I wasn’t crazy.

To help me, my counsellor Mrs. Barry, opted to be a mentor, instead of my counsellor. She encouraged me to pay attention to my schoolwork, offered guidance in choosing classes that would capitalize on my time in university, and allowed me to visit her office to read my textbooks (which I could never focus enough to read, but I pretended that I was reading, so I could be around her). She would take lunch from home and invite me to the office to eat with her, and she brought me clothes that fit.

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

As I attended classes, I soaked up more and more information because I wanted Mrs. Barry to be proud of me, especially since she had another student that she mentored, who was getting all As in her classes and I was nowhere near that smart. I met a student in one of my classes, Angeline who started to flirt with me via text message. I shared this with Mrs. Barry who warned me to stay away from her. I didn't understand why, but she explained to me that the girl was a homosexual and was trying to make me a lesbian, which was wrong. I heard her, and I understood what she was saying, but I was also curious and flattered that someone saw me in that light, and I wanted to know and feel more. I continued to chat with Angeline, who eventually became my girlfriend. I knew I couldn't share this with Mrs. Barry who was a strict Christian and the wife of a pastor, and I knew, based on her forewarnings, that she would object to the nature of my relationship with Angeline.

It felt wrong. I knew it was wrong because I was taught it was wrong, but it also felt right. The situation between Angeline and me didn't last long, but I experienced emotions and feelings of love, and I couldn't learn that from mentorship. Angeline held me in high esteem and was in awe of me, and I wondered how she saw those things in me because I didn't see the "smart, talented, cute" girl she said she saw. As time progressed, I struggled with being a Christian knowing how I felt about Angeline and women. Before Angeline, some people labelled me as a lesbian, based on how I dressed; because I presented as masculine (since my clothing was always too big for me and I walked like a gangster). It didn't bother me much because it wasn't true. Now it was, and it became another part of me that needed hiding, and I tried my best to hide it. I delved deeper into the church, to try to rid myself of the lesbian tendencies I had. I prayed earnestly for God to take it away so I would not be a sinner.

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While this wasn't a part of my life I could share with Mrs. Barry, I met other people on my college campus who wanted to be my girlfriend. As I had interactions with them, Mrs. Barry would delete their numbers from my phone, and make sure I didn't 'entertain the devil'. Thinking I had too much time on my hands, she refocused my mind on developing my resume, sharing the importance of being a part of campus activities and volunteer work. That led me to enroll in several clubs on campus: the drama club, female football, the concert band and colporteur. I wasn't very active in the drama club, because I kept forgetting to attend the meetings. I was very active on the female football team, and it felt like home; however, Jackie wasn't happy with that because her co-workers told her the team was packed with lesbians, and that wasn't an environment she thought I should be in, so she asked me to quit. The colporteurs club was a canvassing team, that sold Christian books locally and abroad in the United States and Canada from door to door. Since this was an income-earning opportunity, I stayed with the club and travelled to work in Canada during the summer for two years. Attending that program, showed me I was very good at sales, and I learned how to interact with people from diverse cultures and improve my sales and communication skills.

Mrs. Barry eventually left to pursue her Ph.D. overseas. I felt I was losing someone who was like a mother to me, but she promised to stay in touch to ensure I was doing well. Although she didn't stay in touch, she had already started me on a positive path and continued to follow it.

### ***The Entrepreneur***

My brother Jayron graduated high school by this time and followed the footsteps of all my siblings and myself by applying to attend school at NCU. He wasn't sure what he wanted to study, and so he worked for a semester to earn monies for tuition while he contemplated what he

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wanted to study. He started working with me at custodial services, although he didn't like the job much. He did his best and worked as hard as he could but, as he worked, he had a terrible itch on his scalp. You see, Jayron had terrible dandruff and nothing Jackie bought for him would work. On one of our trips to the Christiana to visit my grandmother, she told him about three herbs—sorrel, lemongrass and peppermint—that were guaranteed to get rid of his dandruff problem.

Since herbal medicines were the main form of the medical care we knew, there was no hesitation in using these herbs. Jackie had him try the regimen for two weeks and, miraculously, the itching and flakiness from dandruff went. For the first time in years, he had relief. What was more important to note is that Jayron's dandruff never returned. We never gave this "cure" a second thought until NCU was hosting a business plan competition. Jayron thought it would be an excellent idea to develop the dandruff herbal combination treatment as a product and enter this competition.

A business plan was drafted, and he entered the competition. What Jayron didn't realize though was that, while he could dedicate himself to learning how to develop a business plan, he wasn't very good at persuasive speech. This was important because he would need to pitch his business idea to a panel of judges as a part of the competition. He practiced daily along with some of his friends but, still, an element was missing. As they practiced one day, I attempted to offer pointers to delivering a better business pitch, grouping together the skills I was learning as a social worker and what I learnt from my colporteur training.

I offered advice to Jayron and his team but, when they saw that it was beyond them to grasp what I was saying in such a short time, Jayron asked if I would attend and do the

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

introduction of the pitch for them. This would set the stage for him and his team to deliver the technical content about the business and product. As requested, I offered the support that was needed; only after I offered support that day, did I never stop. I continued to be a part of Herboo, and Jaron and I grew the company together.

The following stage of the competition was to display the products at a symposium to the student population and offer products for sale if demanded. The only issue was that we didn't have a product or money to make products. Drawing on my social work and colporteur skills again, I knew what we had to do. We designed a large bottle and went office to office, class to class, to the over five thousand students and staff that populated the university: soliciting donations, with the promise of samples of our product for their donations.

Some people who donated offered words of support, others were filled with skepticism and laughed at us saying "We will support your little project", or "You will fail". Despite the negative comments, we knew we needed the money so we accepted the donations with a smile. With the money we collected, we went in search of the ingredients needed to make the first bottle of our product. Knowing we couldn't afford monies for transportation, we walked long miles to find all the locations we needed to purchase raw materials. When we had gathered everything we needed, the production process began. At the end of the process, we sanitized rubbing alcohol bottles and poured the products in. The money we had collected wasn't enough to purchase more attractive packaging, so we used what was available to us.

We now had a product that we named "Herboo"; a play-on word from 'herbal' and 'shampoo'. With that all set we needed labelling for the bottles, but the money we collected was

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already depleted so we decided to proceed without it. On the day of the symposium the Herboo team was determined that even if our product wasn't attractive, our display would be. We borrowed a water fountain Jackie used for her catering business and added droplets of sorrel to the fountain, which turned the water into a reddish pink. We decorated the table with pink flowers we found on the university campus, and that was it.

Our supervisor from custodial services came over to our booth as we were setting up and pride filled her eyes. She wanted to offer any support she could. We explained the label situation to her, and she offered to let us do printing in her office. We immediately grabbed the opportunity without hesitation and were able to print pamphlets and labels. The pamphlets had information about the product and its ingredients, and the labels weren't perfect but they had the name of the product and a logo that was created by our elder brother, Danny.

Jayron used transparent tape to attach the label to the bottles and, while doing that, one of the bottles fell and the cover broke. Not sure what to do, we had to get creative; we decided to use a yellow ribbon to tie the top of the bottle and make a bow to hide the broken bottle cover. As the event started the gymnasium, where the event was held, was flooding with students and staff exploring each booth with keen interest, and the judges examined everyone's brand with extreme detail and look of scrutiny. Students who passed by our booth were in awe of our product, and some even pre-ordered. Most people were in awe because up to that time, they had never heard about using the Jamaican sorrel flower being used for making shampoo.

In Jamaica, the sorrel plant is used to make a special drink at Christmas time, some even use it to bake; however, making a cosmetic with it was a new concept, and everyone was



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intrigued. Some-time before the symposium, one of our professors discovered in her lab at NCU that the Sorrel plant had cancer-fighting properties, which garnered her a lot of attention. So, our brand had a huge selling point.

After the event, Team Herboo placed in the top five. Although we didn't win the grand prize, the competition sparked an upward spiral for what would become 'Herboo Corporation Limited'. Herboo enlisted with the entrepreneurship department of the school for additional support in learning how to make Herboo shampoo not just a product, but a household brand. There they taught us how to improve the business plan and build a business. We were even introduced to several competitions that would help us to raise monies to grow the business and improve our packaging. We were even able to scientifically prove that the Herboo shampoo was great for treating not just dandruff but also had antimicrobial properties to treat itchiness, eczema, psoriasis, liver spots and several other ailments.

Entering and winning competitions Herboo and its members became very well known across the college campus and garnered traction from various media bodies in Jamaica. We even went to represent Jamaica in a business competition in Utah USA, competing against schools from top universities all over the world. Returning from that saw us being hosted on several programs on live television and newspaper write-ups. Other competitions were hosted by other entities outside of the school environment, such as the First Heritage Cooperative business plan competition, and Jamaica Observer Mogul in the Making competition, which we also won, not because we were naturally winners but because we worked late nights, had early mornings, sought out mentors, and did whatever we needed to in order to ensure we had the knowledge and

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skills to accomplish each goal. We didn't see competitions as competitions but, rather, as steppingstones to making our product the household brand we knew it could be.

Herboo continued to grow, and Stacy offered support by transporting Jayron and me to some of the events where we were invited to speak or display our brand. Up to this point the production of the Herboo products was being done in our mother's kitchen. That method worked for a while, but Jackie still needed her kitchen space to prepare family meals and cater for events. So, Jayron decided it was time to find a space that would belong to Herboo. He rented a two-bedroom apartment where he would live and conduct production. After even more growth, we enlisted the support of a manufacturing company that would help us make the volume needed to supply the growing demand for our Herboo now two in one shampoo plus conditioner and a hair and body oil.

While building the company we suffered a few setbacks. The most impacting was the time a car we had borrowed to do production was stolen with all our raw materials. For months we couldn't produce our product, and we lost a lot of customers. Customers were losing faith in our brand, and we needed to find an immediate solution. We approached several individuals, but not many persons were interested, and those who were interested wanted to invest at a cost we believed was too low. During this time, Jayron struggled to find rent and food. At times he would venture back home to our parents' house for meals or confiscate Jackie's groceries.

Persons were interested in investing in our company, but the amount of money they were offering for our shares, felt like low balling. Although on paper a share of the company was not worth much at the time, we needed a certain amount to make the investment viable and get the

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company out of the rut. Moreover, based on the vision we had for the company, we knew that the Herboo formulations were worth much more than was being offered. Soon enough we found a gentleman at church who believed in us and offered us a small loan with minimum interest to get the company back on its feet. We used this money to manufacture our products again and got our products back on the shelves.

Within three months, we were able to repay the loan with interest. Receiving the loan did help us get back on our feet; however, we knew we needed a more sustainable boost. We scouted for angel investment opportunities, which we got. Now the company supplies over a hundred stores across Jamaica and the Caribbean. Our product can even be found online, and we recently penetrated the United States market. As the company grew, we contracted out most of the services we would have needed to do in-house, such as marketing, and manufacturing. This meant that we had more time to spend on growing the business.

### ***Healing the Hurt: Mental Health Support***

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*Healing hurt is never easy, and throughout my journey, because I had accepted my hurt, and my place in the world I never really thought that healing was possible. As I sojourned, people who saw through a caring lens saw me and offered their support. I learn what care felt like, what hugs felt like, what genuine smiles and concerns felt like, and what validation was. I experience new feelings and emotions that felt warm, and I enjoyed the feeling of happiness and belonging.*

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I lived my life as though I was invisible, as I moved away from my family, I began to visit various churches on my own, to maintain that invisibility and escape the shadow of my family. This kind of anonymity felt good. I felt as though I was being freed from shadows that saw me as a little girl I was. By this time, I had started university and had already begun to question the

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warped view I had of myself. As I interacted in these environments and the people within them, I gained validation for the things I did and my point of view. Things I would never think were valid. I also noted that in my classes, my point of view was accepted, and even referenced by my instructors. This space allowed me to grow up, and feel like I had something to contribute to the world.

As I continued my degree in Social Work, and even added on an additional degree in Family Life Education and did courses in marketing and sales to offer adequate support to the company. I was making friends, and I felt like I had a purpose for the first time in my life. But, while I was making strides as a student and an entrepreneur, I was not healed. My confidence grew and I believed that I could make a positive impact on the world, but inside I was still dying and hurting because of past trauma. I had nightmares and found it difficult to be in the presence of males. I would even have panic attacks.

I knew one other person who had an experience like mine. Ashley was thrown away in a garbage bag by her biological mother shortly after being born. It was a horrifying story to hear. She was rescued by a lady who raised her as her own, but she didn't live an easy life and, just like me, she had been sexually abused. It was hard to listen to the hurtful situations she went through, and I admired her strength in being able to talk with me about it. I shared my story with her as well and developed a strong friendship over our shared pain.

After one of our Social Work classes, Ashley stood waiting to talk to me with the professor. There was a group being formed for sexually abused women and they wanted to know if I would be interested. I agreed to attend but I was scared. Several thoughts flashed through my

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mind that caused me to waiver in my decision. I wondered if my mother would find out I was attending such a group. I was even more scared to attend and see that women were there who would possibly know my family and decide to tell Jackie. But the thought that had me baffled was why there was a need for a support group for sexually abused women.

In the first session I attended, there were so many other women there; so many women who had experienced hurt and trauma like I went through. Just as I did, they each blamed themselves in some way, or held it a secret, or told their families and no one believed them. The stories piled up and the room was flooded with tears and hurt. As the stories were shared, support was given from other women in the room, and the facilitators. It was like being transcended to another dimension.

I was in shock that so many women had my story, had my thoughts, had my feelings. My friend Ashley and I shared wordless glances because we knew what the other was thinking, such as safe space, such powerful stories with some at differing stages of their hurt, and the healing process. Ashley and I felt, their pain but, more importantly, we felt less alone. I continued to attend the group because I found it very helpful. The facilitator lead us through activities and taught us to use therapeutic tools that would help to heal our hurt and to become the version of ourselves we were always meant to be. Hurt and pain from trauma are not meant to stagnate our growth and dwarf our greatness, but we can heal from our pain and claim the lives we are meant to have.

I soaked up every bit of what the group had to offer. I attended the group for months but I could never find the strength to share my story as the other women did and even though Ashley

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shared her story. In one session, the facilitator separated us into groups, and the activity demanded that each person share their experience with a certain issue and make a chart from it. As we separated into groups, and each person shared, it became my turn. I fumbled a bit and tried to be vague and general but the group was so supportive and responsive, that I began to open up. As I shared, I felt a swell of emotions overtake me and, without warning, my eyes were filled with tears and, in no time, I began to cry uncontrollably.

I couldn't tell why I was responding this way but my body did. My body knew I needed to release all the bottled-up anger and bitter emotions that kept me trapped. After that session, self-harming behaviours I had used to cope, such as cutting, slowly became unnecessary and I eventually stopped. Nightmares I would have which resulted in trauma responses such as bedwetting slowly diminished. It was a long road to healing but I was choosing that journey and I was becoming better as a result. For the first time in years, I felt lighter and my self-esteem was improving.

In the group, we were asked to do a dream board creation—a board made from newspaper cutouts of the time that represented the future life we wanted. I had no dreams. Before joining the group, I thought I had no future so I had no idea what to put on my dream board. I thought about Brithomia, the white version of myself I created and what her life was like. I placed that on my dream board as a space filler and, for the first time in my life, I was looking forward to my future.

The group was good for me, so I continued to attend. I was growing and healing and becoming even more outspoken in the group. The opportunity even presented itself for me to

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become a facilitator in the group and I grabbed a hold of it because I wanted to offer the support for healing that I had received. I found my voice and I intended to use it, not just in the group but with Herboo, in the classroom and on-campus activities, at church, and in other areas of my life. I was evolving and it became noticeable.

I realized, the view I grew up with of myself, was exaggerated by my own mind. I experienced heavy and horrifying events, which made me shut myself off from the world, harshly judging myself, and over time blaming a brunt of that judgement on others. Now I opened myself up to true healing. Allowing my subconscious to accept me as I was, and learning to become the person I wanted to be.

### ***Making A difference: Claiming Success***

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*For who best to share the deed than the one who has lived it. Learn oh dear reader, that my mistakes may not be yours. Chart the waters that have been chartered but cannot be conquered. Observe the observer and become the master of tomorrow.*

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I was capable of more than I thought, and receiving psychological support coupled with my social work training helped me to see that clearly. I was capable of being a part of the change I wanted to see in my environment. My success and failures were always up to me. A fact I had never realized before. I could change the world, and I didn't have to do it in a bug way, I just needed to have a positive impact one person at a time, one space at a time. Even when I was not trying to make an impact, people were in awe of me and were pleased to be in my presence. This became evident as I listened to my friends from high school recount stories about me. These were situations I remember differently, but they say positivity and enjoyed my friendship as a

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result. I was not the great failure I allowed myself to believe I was. Throughout my journey, I had taken part in several activities and events that positively impacted individuals, I just didn't see or hear the success stories. But as I began to see through a new lens, I could see the potential I had and the impact I was making on the world around me.

I was asked to coach other student entrepreneurs, offer advice to young business owners, and even share insight with others that would help people live their best lives. At times I was being asked to take on roles I had no idea how to execute or being asked advice on things I had no information on. I felt embarrassed, as though these were things I needed to know. Even with Herboo growing, I was becoming a leader with no idea how to be one. I needed to learn how to be the leader I was becoming.

Our university had a certificate course in leadership, and I enrolled. Shortly after gaining that certification, the president of the university gave a speech at a devotional session in the department where I worked on campus. He shared a story about Usain Bolt (a Jamaican who is also the fastest man in the world). He said, "When Usain Bolt was asked, "How do you run so fast?" he replied, "I tell myself I have to do at least one percent better every time and that's what I do." Although the president spoke for about twenty minutes, that story resonated most with me. If this was the strategy the fastest man in the world was using, I was going to use it too; and that's what I did.

I was seeing the world through a new lens and it was transcending. I continued to grow as a social worker, an entrepreneur, a facilitator, and an individual. In every aspect of my life, I



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tried to be at least one percent better every day. Up to this point, I was still living upstairs in my parents' house. It was still a source of trauma for me, but I was trying to push past it.

Seeing life with new lens and not being weighed down by my insecurities. I was more open to giving support and helping others in the way I needed it, and in the way, I was helped. I realized there was a deficit in my church community. I sat in at intervals as a teacher for one of the sabbath school classes, and while interacting with the, I realized that some students weren't intellectually at their grade level. I dismissed the issue and told myself that not all students will be on the same level. One sabbath as the names of the student who passed their grade six achievement exams were read out loud, I realized that a great majority of the children in the church were not matriculating to a traditional high school. This was an issue that I thought could be fixed, and I wondered why the church didn't take responsibility to offer to support the children needed.

This was troubling for me. My social work and entrepreneurial mindset kicked in and I knew I could empower these children to be better learners so I offered myself as a teacher to help the children who needed it the most. I didn't fully think it through because, if I had, I would have realized that I didn't possess the skills to teach. I didn't know how to teach someone to read and I didn't even know where to start. I defaulted to my social work training and asked myself "What would social workers do?" The planned change process was introduced to the social work profession in 1957 by Helen Harris Perlman. The Planned Change Model is the development and implementation of a plan or strategy to improve or alter a pattern of behaviours, a condition, or circumstance to improve a client's well-being or situation (Kirst-Ashman, 2012). The Planned

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Change Model consists of a seven-step process which includes: engagement, assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation, termination, and follow-up. So that's what I did.

The program started with four students; however, as these students, who were marked off as "lazy and will never learn," started to improve in their grades, I was flooded with applications from parents wanting to enlist their children in the program. Before long, I had more students than one person could handle. As the testimonials poured in so did the applications for new enrollment. My students didn't improve because I was a genius teacher; before this, I had no teaching experience. They improved because I took the time to understand where they were and tailored my intervention to each student's specific needs.

The students I worked with were from volatile communities where there was gang violence. Some of them witnessed their parents, family members, and friends being gunned down. Some had no parents and lived with extended family members, who ended up abusing them physically and emotionally, even sexually, which were all factors that contributed to the children acting out. They felt abandoned and unwanted which, in turn, caused some children to have little to no interest in learning because that was the least of their worries. Some children said they even faced discrimination from their teachers because of the communities they came from. These were factors I could not ignore because, from personal experience, I knew the barriers they could create for learning. So, I adopted each engaging learning model I found helpful as a child and designed a holistic education model, that was now proving to be effective.

Since the parents of my students were at or below the poverty line, I could not dare dream of charging for their children to attend the sessions. Realizing, however, that the resources I needed to offer support weren't free, I did as I was being taught to do as a social worker. I

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advocated by seeking donations from individuals and I wrote proposals to solicit support from government agencies and private organizations so that I would have the resources I needed to offer effective support, and I received the resources I needed. After mounting socioeconomic and emotional barriers, I began to suspect that some of my students had learning disabilities. I considered this while teaching them and I made referrals to their parents to have them tested for potential learning disabilities. Some parents were resistant, made excuses that their child was being lazy or just rude, and some even said, “a two lick dem wa” which is Creole for suggesting that it can be beaten out of the child.

I was passionately furious by some of the comments and reactions from the parents and guardians because I knew what it was like to have a learning disability ignored and to go through life with people just ignoring that part of you or making other excuses for behaviour. Instead of a child remaining in a state of arrested development, knowing the true cause of a learning problem could be so illuminating. I remember the possibility of me having a learning disability was not brought up until my final year in university when one of my instructors pointed out that my handwritten exam paper was complete gibberish and recommended that I speak to someone about potentially being tested for a learning disability and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) since I had also been exhibiting signs of hyperactivity in class as well.

Students came from diverse backgrounds and so during their assessment process, barriers to learning were identified and steps are taken to address them. Some children had parents who I could take with me to the assessment but others didn't have parents who cared as much and so I had to become creative. How could I influence positive change without parental buy-in?

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I pondered this for some time before I reflected on my situation then I remembered a quote I had to commit to memory “True education means more than pursuing a certain course of study. It has to do with the whole person, and with the whole period of existence possible to human beings. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers.” (White 1958, p.1). To educate them I needed to speak to their minds body and souls. It was a learning curve for everyone starting. I had to learn how to be an effective facilitator of learning, and the students hard to learn how to evolve their mindset and claim autonomy over their futures. I started with each student creating a dream board that was updated at the end of each month and I incorporated diverse ways of learning, having devotions, playing games, and talking about emotions and letting them know it was okay to feel their feelings. Slowly their minds were in it. They were learning without even realizing that learning was taking place. As the program gained momentum lives were being changed and futures were being illuminated.

The program came to an end organically and it was time to begin the next chapter of my life. I applied to work as a medical social worker in Portland; almost six hours away from my hometown. Social work had not always been recognized for its importance and so, as the government identified the value of social workers, more and more job opportunities became available. While still in the growing phase, however, the country had more social workers graduating from universities than there were jobs. As a result, the job market became very competitive. The position I applied for was for a social worker with a master’s degree, as is needed to work in the medical field in Jamaica. I was very nervous about the interview, but I prepared with the help of my friend who worked in a similar field and gave it my best shot. Still, when I got the call from the region (Northeast Regional Health Authority) offering me the job, I

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questioned if they had the right person. I was so elated yet nervous. It would mean being away from everyone I knew.

Moving to Portland, felt like moving to paradise. It was just a beautiful parish, driving along the beach to get to work, and overlooking the ocean from my balcony was the most therapeutic. It made being away from home easier to bear. As I delved into my job, I worked with families who were infected and affected with Human Immune Deficiency Virus, Acquired Immune Deficiency Virus and Tuberculosis and sexually transmitted infections (HIV/AIDS/TB/STI), helping them to attain a standard of social functioning while maintaining their physical and mental health. I had little knowledge about HIV/AIDS/TB/STI, and I was placed as the head of the Psychosocial Department. With this role came supervisory responsibilities of staff, who were older than I was and who had years of knowledge on HIV/AIDS/TB/STI, and caring for over seven hundred clients. I needed to learn and learn quickly. Again, drawing on my experience and knowledge, I learnt humbly and being true to my mantra of being one percent better, I elevated my department by setting personal goals to achieve preset targets and implemented programs to make meaningful changes in the lives of our clients. Clients were taught how to monetize their strengths using the entrepreneurship training I received. Support groups were initiated for the clients, and educational sessions to teach clients, who were willing to offer support, how to be peer supporters. Understanding learning styles, I designed and commissioned learning materials and props, to help persons living with HIV(PLHIVs) understand the virus and its role in becoming undetectable. I even hosted several seminars for PLHIVs and their families, helping clients to understand that they were not alone, and helping the families learn how to offer support to their family members living with HIV. All

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these programs and more allowed the department to move closer to achieving its virological suppression goals set for each year.

I decided to accept a position offered by the Ministry of Social Security, to teach groups of parents effective parenting skills, so they would better be able to support their children attending school. During Christmas, I organized a feeding program that fed the less fortunate, and in my free time, I worked on ensuring I maintained positive mental health, and updated my dream board. I would visit the beaches and do a lot of introspection and visualize what I wanted my future to look like and the kind of person I wanted to be.

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### Chapter 2: Literature Review

*As a Girl Thinketh*

<https://youtu.be/YDQB4yIRs8>

Anxiety

Depression

Low self-esteem

Anger

Suicide

Rage

Thoughts and feelings we have all experienced

Even more so our disadvantaged children and youth, robbed of their basic needs

Maslow says we need:

Safety and security

Esteem and physiology

Self-actualization and love

But at the heart of all this I believe is love

Love unearned and undeserved

Just love freely given because you exist.

Love is freely given, because you're human.

Yet a space filled with violence and heartbreak only exposes our children to trauma and  
heartache.

Crushing their hearts

Crushing their dreams

Crushing their souls

Crushing their very essence

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The very thing that makes them who they are.

“worthless”

“Fool”

“Lazy”

“Black”

“Stupid”

“You will never amount to anything”

“You’re ugly”

“Do better”

“Why can’t you be like your sister?”

Over and over society’s oppressors weaponize the oppressed to echo these words

Of trauma to our children.

Making sure the trend of mental slavery in continued for no one should be free.

Over and over we echo these words to our children, patting ourselves of the back lauding our

Own efforts while mirroring the pedagogy of hegemony.

All our children hear is “I am hopeless”

All they hear is “I will never be enough”

As a man thinketh so is he

I said

As a man thinketh so is he”

AS your child thinks, so they will be.

AS we teach them so they will learn

Are these the words you want imprinted on the hearts of your children?

Believing that this is who they are?



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Believing that this is who they are meant to be?

Because this is who you told them to be?

While the hegemonic structures indoctrinate, don't we want to empower our children

Or at least give them the tools needed to the heroes of their own story?

Metropolis has superman

Gotham has batman

The amazon has wonder woman

Who will be the hero for the city of children?

Oh children if you could see through my eyes

If you could claim a lens of enlightenment.

Claim empowerment through your won stories.

The narrative of your life can be written in words you dictate.

Take hold of every negative moment and experience.

Choose to forgive,

Choose to heal

Choose to claim a mindset fueled by love.

Take hold and fan the spark within you, so that it may burn with empowered passion.

Your happiness

Your joy

Your success

Can be a reality

But only if you want it to be

If "as a man thinketh so he is"

Then as you think and develop a mind of strength and greatness

Then you shall be great.

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Poverty

Trauma

Stress

Depression

Does not have to dictate your future

You are your own worst enemy

Only you can prevent our success

Challenge the bio powered glass ceilings and

And become your greatest asset

You can survive past your gravest circumstance

You can be your greatest asset

You can be your own super hero

You can take your challenges and failure and make them your super power.

We each have within us the power to be brave and achieve greatness

But,

Stop comparing yourself to your sister

She is not the standard of measure for your success.

Aim higher, and you will surpass her and everyone else around you.

No need to seek success for glory and recognition.

When you shine the darkness sees you.

You are a winner

You are amazing

You are love

You can do more

You can do better

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

But know, that you are enough  
And as long as you give it your best shot  
You will always be enough.

Love as much as you want to be loved.  
Work as hard as you want to achieve  
Become the author of your story  
And write the sequel worthy of who you are becoming

Since society failed to educate you, teach yourself how to learn  
Since society built road blocks, build yourself a new road.

You have one life  
And it is your born right, to live it by any means necessary.

Forgive those who have wronged you.  
Accept the things you cannot change  
But the things you can change,  
Transform it in a way that paves the way for other oppressed and disadvantaged youth who are  
yet to be enlightened.

Live your truth  
And be your own hero  
Become the advocate you wish you had.  
Create a community of truth and connection  
That will allow others as space to ventilate their own stories  
And gain healing.

If you hear nothing else, hear this  
“As a man thinketh in his heart, So is he”

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

### Literature Review

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*Several researchers have shared their opinion of disadvantages in relations to child and youth development. Some believe that it has immediate and lifelong consequences. It may show itself in varying ways, such as a child's performance in school, their mental health, and their physical health.*

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### **Exploring Disadvantage as a Barrier to Learning and Development for Children and Youth**

An article written by Suzanne M. Randolph, Sally A. Koblinsky, and Debra D. Roberts, Department of Family Studies, University of Maryland-College Park, explores the family and community and considers how these influence child development in violent communities. The problem being faced was that community violence had become a grave issue in the United States and the national public health bodies were targeting solutions for these areas. There was exposure to crime, such as robbery, assault, family violence, the death of children, indecent exposure, and children witnessed other violent acts daily. The authors note that children who are exposed to violence may develop dysfunctional coping responses and lose their sense of security, autonomy, competence, and self-esteem. As a result, children may mistrust their parents and teachers as they perceive them as unable to protect them, resulting in aggressive, impulsive, self-protective behaviour. These behaviours may interfere with the development of values such as cooperation, empathy, and sensitivity in young children (Randolph, Koblinsky, & Roberts, 1996).

Adversity in early childhood, whether it is related to a mental illness in parents, poverty, abuse, loss, neglect, or trauma, has a profound impact on children's physical and emotional health, as well as their ability to become competent, productive adults. The stories of heroic

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youth who have overcome disadvantageous backgrounds are rare, but for most, early adversity haunts them into adulthood. The link between early adversity and chronic physical and mental health disability was explored (Brent and Silverstein (2013)). The authors found that children who experience early adversity, such as maltreatment, domestic violence, or living with a family member with serious mental illness, are more likely to develop chronic diseases like smoking, substance abuse, obesity, cardiovascular disease, depression, and attempted suicide. It has been demonstrated many times that early adversity contributes to depression, cardiovascular disease, and metabolic syndrome through changes in stress responsiveness, via the hypothalamic-pituitary axis, and subsequently through an inflammatory process. There is evidence that epigenetic effects render the glucocorticoid receptor insensitive, which results in hypercortisolemia, incapacitation to mount a potent stress response, and deficits in attention, memory, and persistence. These animal models show that these effects are transmitted from parent to child through epigenetic mechanisms. Human adversity does not exert its effects in the same elegant manner as in animals, but epigenetic changes may contribute to immune dysfunction, insulin resistance, and cognitive difficulties, which can lead to risky behaviour and predispose to depression and emotional instability.

Early adversity not only contributes to the pathogenesis of disease but also negatively affects its treatment. Long-term exposure to early stress may have both cognitive and behavioural consequences, including a greater risk for chronic illness as well as an impaired capacity for self-management, collaboration with health care providers, and forming trusting relationships. In children with chronic illnesses like diabetes, parental depression and poverty adversely affect morbidity in patients with abuse histories. If family adversity is detected early enough, it may be possible to reverse, or at least mitigate, the negative effects on child health

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outcomes. The children are automatically and functionally benefited if maternal depression is treated to remission. Behavioural disorders in children are decreased with economic interventions that provide local employment and pull parents out of poverty. In infancy, extreme deprivation can have deleterious effects on the neurobiological and cognitive development of children. Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers should pay attention to these findings about early adversity and its consequences. Identifying effective approaches to remediating or preventing the deleterious effects of early adversity is crucial to improving our understanding of their plastic effects and defining critical periods when we can most remediate or prevent them. Additionally, the shared root causes of world disability (such as cardiometabolic disease and depression) suggest potential synergies, since interventions preventing the development of these conditions would have a huge impact on global health.

Our society bears the economic cost of excess health care use, non-response to treatment, incarceration, loss of employment, productivity, and human suffering. We cannot ignore the cost of adversity in our drive to improve healthcare quality and contain costs. The dark shadow of adversity can be exposed and diminished through research, clinical care, and advocacy. The impact of adversity on families can either be mitigated or paid for later by investing now in fighting it (Brent & Silverstein, 2013).

Steele, Sigle-Rushton, and Kravdal, (2009) share how, in the second half of the twentieth century, a growing number of children in virtually all industrialized nations suffered domestic disturbances, with separation due to the death of parents as the leading reason. These patterns have sparked alarm in several nations since observational evidence suggests that the shifts are connected to detrimental outcomes for the children involved. Proof from a number of countries demonstrates that children who have experienced a family disturbance perform poorly during

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early adolescence and adulthood, in such as academic achievement, financial stability, and cognitive and emotional well-being (Keith & Amato, 1991a, 1991b; Pryor & Rogers, 1998; Sandefur & McLanahan, 1994;). The family formation has been linked to a variety of outcomes. It is worth noting that there is a negative link between family conflict and educational attainment (Hobcraft, 2000). Poor academic performance may set in motion processes that lead to negative bodily and cognitive wellness (Dalgard et al., 2007; Krokstad, Kunst, Westin, & Krokstad 2002), interpersonal security (Lyngstad, 2004), and impact financial well-being later in life (Dalgard et al. 2007; Krokstad, Kunst, & Westin, 2002). (Statistics Norway, 2005).

It is worth noting, perhaps in keeping with this thinking, that numerous children who face parental separation in Norway have elicited minimal political concern. Although just a few empirical studies in Norway look at the relationship between family formation and children's results, there is some indication that children who have experienced divorce have more school problems and lower academic success (Lauglo, 2008; Strkersen et al., 2005). Furthermore, the impact sizes are equivalent to those observed in American studies (Olweus & Breivik, 2006; see also Dronkers, Hampden-Thompson & Pong, 2003).

When there is a disruption in the family unit, the non-resident or deceased parent's time and parenting contributions are immediately reduced. As a result, students who encounter the loss or divorce of a parent may have difficulties in educational institutions and the chances of these children pursuing further education become weaker (Emery and Kelly 2003; Keith & Amato, 1991b). Even if the disadvantage is only temporary, when parental divorce occurs near crucial turning points in a child's educational career, such as when required schooling finishes, the disruption to scholastic advancement can be significant (Gähler & Jonsson, 1997; Pakiz &

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Frost, 1990). As a result, the interruption experienced throughout adolescence may have a bigger impact than the identical disruption experienced at a younger age.

A study was conducted by Vázquez-Nava, Vázquez-Rodríguez, Vázquez-Rodríguez and Ortega Betancourt, (2019) in Mexico to determine if certain social factors were responsible for the dropout rate of high school students. Social factors looked at were high school students living in a non-intact family household, having an employed mother, active smoking, alcohol use, sexual activity at an early age and pregnancy in a broad population sample of female Mexican adolescents between 17 and 19 years old. The researchers utilized a cross-sectional study and questionnaires. The data were analyzed using the multivariate logistic regression model, with a sample size of 2034 out of which only 765 were studied. From this, the researchers found that among non-intact families the high school dropout rate was 34.8%. Among active smoking individuals, the prevalence rate was 18.3%, and among those drinking alcohol 52.0%. Sexual activity at an early age was reported by 59.8% of the female adolescents, and 33.5% of the participants had been pregnant during their adolescent years. The study concluded that the home of non-in-tact families, early sexual activities, and teen pregnancy was highly associated with high school dropout rate. Further in the analysis, it was determined that homes with an employed mother prevented high school drop-out, among adolescents.

In a pilot study, Horn, Leve, Levitt, and Fisher (2019) looked at childhood adversity, mental health, and oxidative stress. The authors tell us that adversity in childhood is a major risk factor for mental health conditions which happen as a result of disruptions in the child's stress response systems. After their study, the authors agreed that the result of childhood adversity is severe and will demand innovative strategies to understand the reasons adversity so negatively



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impacts health, and understanding this should help to identify and support children who need help the most (Horn et.al, 2019).

Morag Treanor from the Center for Research in Families and Relationships, at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, published a briefing which explores the impact of poverty on children and youth. This briefing pulls excerpts from Scottish policy and draws on evidence-based practice reflecting research conducted by the Scottish Child Care and Protection Network. Treanor (2015) reported that poverty negatively impacts children and youth. Some of the negative potential impacts highlighted were health-related issues, cognitive and psychological development and even educational limitations.

Treanor's perspective was supported by research cited in the briefing, which illuminated various issues that were found to arise for a child due to poverty. Families may face health issues like low birthweight due to poor food intake or poor health of the mother. Psychological issues may develop due to poor physical appearance, and this may spiral into other issues such as social friendships, self-esteem issues and even stigmatization. These are just a few of the issues highlighted that may have long-lasting effects on children and youth. The research also highlighted implications for a parent as well since, in families affected by poverty, the parent would sometimes offer their children a share of meals without having anything to eat or make other sacrifices of resources if there is not enough for everyone in the household. To disrupt the effect of poverty on children and youth, the Scottish government, 2008, developed three key policies to strategically intervene, which would offer the child the best chance at success. The policies targeted children living in at-risk and vulnerable families and focused on health inequalities. The greater aim was to ensure that children affected by poverty have an equal

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chance at keeping up with their peers. Through a governmental policy lens, it meant that local authorities would be expected to monitor their services for inequalities and address them.

Other disadvantaged environments may cause health problems as well. Colich, Rosen, Williams, and McLaughlin, (2020) in “Biological Aging in Childhood and Adolescence Following Experiences of Threat and Deprivation: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis” described how growing within a violent environment can lead to health problems such as accelerated aging and stimulated risk of disease. The researchers found that early exposure to violence can change a child’s brain chemistry, cause an early onset of puberty, and accelerate aging. However, if interventions are had especially at an early stage of development, these effects can be reversed or long-term damage can be avoided.

Although reversibility was a concept that was new to the researchers’ learning, they believed, based on their knowledge to date, that, for young people, psychosocial interventions like psychotherapy could be an explorable solution to reversing the effects. There are even studies now being conducted to understand how to remediate the long-term effects of childhood neglect, poverty, and racial discrimination. Research conducted on the use of strategies such as mindfulness programs, for example, shows that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy was effective in helping to inhibit relapses into depression (Loucks & Murphy, 2020).

It is important to empower child and youth professionals to be able to recognize these effects in children and youth from an early age to disrupt the disadvantage trajectory and stimulate healing, which will promote change.

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### **Growth Mindset and Disadvantage**

A growth mindset is a concept that intelligence can be moulded and improved with effort and the right techniques. According to previous research, students with growth mindsets are more likely to participate in arithmetic learning than students with fixed mindsets. Students with a fixed math mindset may ascribe their arithmetic difficulties to a lack of competence, whereas students with a development math mindset understand their difficulties as part of the learning process or the need to employ different solutions (Wang, Degol, Wang, Zhang, & Allerton 2018).

Growth mindsets are domain-specific, and children frequently regard math as requiring a high level of intrinsic talent as compared to other subjects. Many kids mistakenly believe that learning arithmetic comes naturally rather than via hard work, practice, and effort (Ahn et al., 2016). Students who have a fixed mental perspective may blame their difficulties in math on a lack of skill. Those who have a growth math perspective see their problems as a necessary part of the learning process. Growth mindsets are domain-specific, and children frequently believe that arithmetic requires a high level of intrinsic talent (Wang, Zepeda, Qin, Del Toro, & Binning, 2021).

Other researchers (Claro, Paunesku, & Dweck, 2016) looked at academic achievement and how it is influenced by structural factors, such as socioeconomic background, and psychological factors, such as students' beliefs about their abilities, according to two largely separate bodies of empirical research. In the study, the authors examined how these factors interact on a systemic level using a nationwide sample of Chilean high school students. It was found that family income is a strong predictor of achievement, which confirms previous research. Extending previous research, it was discovered that a growth mindset (the belief that

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intelligence is not fixed and can be developed) is a relatively strong predictor of achievement and has a positive relationship with achievement across all socioeconomic strata in the country. Furthermore, it was found that students from lower-income families are less likely to have a growth mindset than their wealthier peers, but those who do have a growth mindset are significantly buffered against the negative effects of poverty on achievement: students in the lowest 10% of family income who had a growth mindset outperformed fixed mindset students in the 80th income percentile. These findings imply that students' mindsets can either mitigate or exacerbate the effects of economic disadvantage on a systemic level .

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### Chapter 3: Findings and Discussion

#### *Melanin Power*

<https://youtu.be/1BNKTojeLlg>

Deep beneath the dermis of my exterior lies a substance rare and pure  
 Melanin beauty, liquid gold splashed across my skin  
 illuminating each pigment of my African essence.  
 You may be familiar with the term tall, dark, and handsomely smart.  
 Curvy, caring, and clandestine supermodel sexy.  
 The embodiment of beauty and success.  
 I have learnt not to aim to be the best, but just better than myself  
 For whom can compare or compete with my vast ingenuity and earthy flow.  
 A powerful reflection of melanin glow,  
 Sun-kissed and accentuating my Afro.  
 Remaining true to who I am  
 For I am a woman  
 A formidable sister, girl.  
 Here to grace, disrupt and change the world.  
 Oh, I am just loving the skin I'm in  
 Strong and Untamed.

Hmmmm

To claim the courageous, ambitious, fierce, and obviously contagious Melanin aura,  
 No longer trapped in chain filled ships.  
*bruk wi back an side, pan massa land,*  
*Till all yuh machete tun ova.*  
 Skin Deep, Clanking chains  
 Pounding melodies with tunes and chants...  
 Drumming over and over  
 (sing)...Keep you hand on to that plow, hold on.

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The pedestal on which you placed me for auction to erase me, did not even phase me.

It only placed me closer to the sun,

Which eliminated the diversified hues in my melanin skin.

They say let's include the black, brown, and bronze budding colors  
that are bright and gleaming.

Yet you fear the strides we take, even when we're just dreaming.

But "I have a dream that one day, all this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its  
creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal",

But if Martin Luther King could see today, how crafty they have gotten in hiding their hatred for  
my melanin skin.

He would turn twice in his grave and return this quote to Thomas Jefferson

Because the pursuit of happiness is slowly becoming a disillusioned myth.

Let us shatter the bio-power's glass ceiling.

Can't you see the light in my child's eye may no longer be gleaming.

The attempts to break me and tame my unborn child is devastatingly unbecoming.

Stop trying to break me because I cannot be broken,

If you think I can, then I should probably tell you that I am the Phoenix that continues to rise.

As Bob Marley willed it,

The oppressed will become the masters of their own destinies.

Reshaping to no longer fit into the mould created

By you,

For us.

Reshaping to no longer fit into the mould filled with narratives I cannot identify with. A  
constitution that reflects the illusion of freedom.

oooooo

*They said:*

*"Walk upright, sit up straight, speak properly"*

But this is just the way I walk.

This is just the way I talk.

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This is the way I look.

This is who I am.

I am just a melanin Empress.

A product of great melanin people who came before me.

Great people who

though overshadowed by circumstance

and limited by discrimination,

broke barriers and defied odds

Great people

Great people like

**Jackie Robinson**, not just a baseball guru but his undeniable skill in tennis broke the racial barrier and paved the way for Venus and Serena Williams.

**Lewis Latimer**, a great inventor who possibly invented the telephone, reviewed Thomas Edison's light bulb invention and made it better.

**Elizabeth Bessie**, was the first black woman to become a pilot.

**Madam C.J. Walker** is a self-made millionaire.

**Henrietta Lacks**, whose cancer cells led to major discoveries in medical research.

**Daniel Hale Williams**, the first Dr. to successfully complete an open-heart surgery.

**Musa I**, King of the Mali Empire, The richest man in history.

**The Black Wall Street**, a thriving black community, progressing in it's own eco system until the 'Tulsa Race Massacre' destroyed businesses, homes and lives.

Great people,

Great people who made an indelible mark on our melanin nation.

Great people whose accomplishments were hushed

As others were placed in history books.

Great melanin people of the past

who sacrificed and made an undeniably bold stance

That causes me to stand today,

As they stood.

And now

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Here, I stand  
Here I stand Strong, just as they stood,  
We stand strong, as they stood.

For, this is who we are,  
This is who we will be.  
Living the truth,  
Living our truth,  
Living To the sound of drummed ancestral melodies, tunes and chants  
Strumming to their melanin beats  
and making a POWERFUL STANCE  
Because still, this is our song  
Keep your hand onto that plow, hold on.



## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

### Resilience

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*Growing up in rural Jamaica a typical child faces some degree of disadvantage. Some more than others. For me I experienced (1) Abuse—physically, sexually, and emotional, (2) Learning disabilities such as ADHD and dyslexia (3) Social and economic deprivation (4) Loss of basic human needs (5) Working with children/families infected or affected by HIV.*

---

One could ask the question, What is the source of my resilience? Where did it come from? What kept me motivated to continue going on despite everything that was happening to me? As I recounted my story for my research, I wondered the same thing; however, while growing up, at the heart of every circumstance was the tool taught to myself and my siblings to conquer all fears.

The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines resilience as being the process and outcome of successfully adapting to challenging life experiences, particularly through mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands which is referred to as resilience (APA, n. d). They site several factors that influence how well people adapt to adversity, the most important of which are:

- How people perceive and interact with the world
- The quantity and quality of available social resources
- Specific coping mechanisms.

According to psychological research, the resources and skills associated with more positive adaptation (i.e., greater resilience) can be developed and practised. It has been found in studies that children's emotional (internalizing) and behavioural (externalizing) problems are strongly related to socioeconomic disadvantage. A child's ability to regulate their emotions and

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behaviours in the face of socioeconomic disadvantage has been linked to their self-regulation and verbal cognitive abilities. Surprisingly, self-regulation and verbal cognitive ability have not been studied together to promote resilience in young children, despite their interdependence.

Children's emotional and behavioural resilience to family socioeconomic disadvantage was examined from early to middle childhood. (Flouri, Midouhas, & Joshi, 2014).

### ***Generational Resilience***

Michelle Obama once said “History has shown us that courage can be contagious, and hope can take on a life of its own.” (Obama, 2019). It is no secret the hardships that black people went through throughout history and the Caribbean was positioned at the heart of the slave trade; however, throughout the resilience of my ancestors, slavery was abolished, and we have the opportunity to be free. Each revolt or act of rebellion was sparked by one individual whose courage became contagious and the will to fight became embedded in the DNA of their descendants: me. As this courage spread, it planted seeds of hope that grew within each enslaved. As the free experienced post enslavement racism, they developed a ‘saying’, known to us in Jamaica as proverbs to motivate their children never to give up and to teach them coping skills in spite of the racism that our ancestors knew we would face. These sayings made us aware that life would be hard, but with resilience we can accomplish anything. Sayings such as:

(a) *“Rockstone a riva bottom nuh know sun hat.”*

Translated: *The rocks at the bottom of the river do not know that the sun is hot.*

Meaning: *If you are in a sheltered situation, you don’t know what hardship is.*

(b) *“If fish deh a river bottom an’ tell yu seh alligator have gum boil, believe him.”*

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Translated: *If the fish at the bottom of the river tells you that alligator has a gum boil, believe him. (Daniel, 2019)*

Meaning: *Listen to the voice of experience.*

(c) *Jackass seh di worl nu level*

Translated: *Life isn't fair.*

(d) *If yu cyaa get turkey, satisfy wid John Crow*

Translated: *Make the best of a bad situation and be content with what you have.*

(e) *Every lang lane ave a turning*

Translated: *Nothing lasts forever.*

### ***Nowhere But Up***

Seeing myself as resilient seems like such a strange phenomenon because all I've ever known is hardship and there was no other option but to keep moving after setbacks. My parents provided for my basic needs, and anything I or my siblings needed outside of what was provided, had to come from the ingenuity of our minds, or we did without it. This was true for most children in Jamaica who were living in low-income earning homes. When I met with roadblocks the options were to figure a way out or accept that it was beyond my capabilities. This inadvertently taught me to accept the things I could not change.

My sisters and I would try to be ready for school in time to be dropped off at school by Frank. If we missed him before he left home the onus would be on us to figure out our way to get to school. In a situation like this, we would explore the other options and try each until something worked. Usually, the first option would work which was to taking a taxi to school. The last option would be walking to school. Whatever we did, we knew that missing school was

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not an option, and if we didn't make it to school, we knew the consequences from our parents would not have been welcomed.

Being exposed to such forms of independence exposed us to situations that developed our problem-solving skills. As I grew, and my experiences grew, I learned the various way to gain the desired result. These life lessons played a vital role in building my resilience. I can hear my mother saying the Jamaican proverb, "If yuh waan gud, yuh nose haffi run". This means that if we want to be successful at anything, we had to work hard at it or it would never happen. So in most situations, I expected to face roadblocks, and I even assumed every situation would go wrong. This made me develop a mindset of planning possible solutions to fixing possible problems that might occur, and also begin to prepare my mind for accepting that that there was nothing I could do, in the event that I could not find a workable solution.

### ***A Higher Power***

When I would have a nightmare, or when I had an exam, or there was no food, the one thing that remain a part of finding the solution was God. My mother ensured we prayed for everything, and our Christian faith kept us strong and motivated. We were taught that, no matter what happened, God would have our backs, "God would take care of it, just have faith and pray" Jackie would say. So, at the base of my resilience, was hope and faith that everything was going to be okay. Even when I felt as though I had no future ahead of me, somewhere deep down I knew giving up and stopping trying was never an option. So, when I faced struggles, problems, and roadblocks that I had no idea how to solve, I just let the problem go and allowed it to work itself out.

In addition to my Christian faith, our culture was populated with stories from traditional folklore, like Brother Anancy (a character from Jamaican Folklore) who despite all his foolish

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plans to get his way never gave up trying to accomplish his end goal. We were also told stories of several people who were victims of disadvantage but were able to turn their lives around and claim success. I can recall times when we had no food going to bed, Jackie would say “Just drink some water and go to your bed”. Reminding us that even when there is no food, there is always something there to tide you over until a solution can be found in the daylight; and it always did. Although we went to bed without a meal, my mom would always find something for us to eat in the morning. That was just how it was, we figured things out when things got hard. In other situations, my teachers at school would always say “*cum fi drink milk, nuh cum fi count cow*” translated: ‘come to drink milk, don’t come to count cows’. This was to urge us as students to ignore the distractions that would prevent us from learning and focus on what is important.

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### *Goodbye Depression*

[https://youtu.be/a\\_Ct3bsdPDI](https://youtu.be/a_Ct3bsdPDI)

I ask myself

What would I do if you died?

Would I laugh

Would I cry?

I think I would laugh

But pretend to cry

I have even practiced the tears rolling down my cheeks, the sobs and that gradually grow into  
angry pants.

Maybe I'll fall to the ground and wake in pain.

Sob as I scan through photos of memories we never shared

What would I do?

Truth is I don't really care if you live or die

But in sure people will wonder what's wrong with me if I don't grieve you

So, I'll cry

onion juice induced tears

Pour unadulterated crocodile style

Rolling and wailing on the floor as they lead your cold corpse away

But do I want you to go yet?

don't go yet

Don't go just yet

Wait until I have mastered the art of crocodile tears and hurtful steers

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What if I'm the one who found you dying  
Would call the ambulance  
Or try to save you  
Would try CPR  
Or would I sit and watch as the life leaves your soulless body  
I know you deserve to die, but can't you even die  
Can you cease to exist?  
For as long as I've been here, I've your painful existence.  
Can you really die  
And dry rot flaking into dust and disappear into thin air  
I bet as you draw your last breath you would try claw yourself back to life  
Too bad I know you too well  
Too bad I have healed and known what it feels like to breathe air without you  
You filthy scum.  
So many things I should say to you.  
But no need to at this time. All I want now is for you depression, take your leave, you have done  
your time.

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### *Mindset*

Cultivating a mindset of ‘everything will work out, just leave it to God’ from an early age, taught me to be content, and to let go and make use of the opportunities that presented themselves. Although I was always content with the little I had or with each situation, letting go took a bit of learning and practice. After receiving psychological support for my experienced trauma, I was able to do this fully, not just in traumatic situations, but in every aspect of my life. As time went on, I built on these skills to maintain a healthy mindset and to keep growing personally and professionally. Some key things I learned during this journey:

- *Self-discovery*- I needed to know who I was and what I needed in any given moment to be happy.
- *Meditation*- Time talking to God, or time spent in my noetic space. This allowed me to be present, silence my mind and explore the solution to the problem I was stuck on or develop creative solutions.
- *Self Awareness*- I paid attention to myself and questioned why I do what I do, where I need to be and what traits I need to be more effective or even what traits I need to let go of that make me less effective as a human being.
- *Love*- I needed to learn to love wholeheartedly with healthy boundaries that would eliminate the need for baggage.
- *Seek Help*- Despite how self-sufficient I taught myself to be, it was important to know that when I needed help, I had an army of people who I knew loved and cared about me and were always there willing to help. No matter how strong we think we are, everyone needs someone at some point.



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- *Patience*: Being adept at working hard for success and knowing that success was not up to me but a higher power, allowed me to develop a calm demeanour. When things went wrong, I accepted what was happening, and was able to critically explore possible solutions without being flustered.
- *Integrity*- Honesty, transparency, strong principles and boundaries. These were important traits that influenced the quality of my journey. It promoted character building and reinforced my reputation as someone worth knowing and worthy of trust. The simple things mattered: sharing a smile, being on time, sharing a greeting, speaking the truth even when I would be seen as the enemy, and treating everyone equally, no matter their status in society or social background.

As I grew older, I was proud of the person I was, and the woman I was becoming. Every morning I recited my mantra, which reminded me to never compromise on my values because my life was greater than me, and my actions today don't just affect me but influenced the lives of those who will come after I have longed gone. It says:

*"I am a melanin woman; a force to be reckoned with. Great people fought to succeed so I could have the best chance at success. I strive to be one percent better today than I was yesterday. Not just for me, but for that little melanin girl who will be born tomorrow."*

There is a Jamaican proverb that says, "*God call fool im nuh khip dem*". The English translation says, "God calls fools, he doesn't keep them". It means we are called for a purpose no matter our disadvantaged situation, but when we claim the purpose, we must also subject ourselves to changes. To not define ourselves as poor, unworthy, or stupid, but we grow, we

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become better versions of ourselves. None of us can experience life and be changed as a result.

The difference is will we choose to be changed for the better?

### ***Psychological Effects and Coping Strategies***

I was no stone. All the things I went through did affect me psychologically but, because the expression of negative feelings and emotions were never seen or discussed at home, I just assumed it was one of those things I had to handle alone. Maybe they were not important, maybe there was no space for vulnerability, maybe it was a sign of weakness to cry or feel hurt.

When I experienced feelings of hurt and pain that I was not able to move past, I placed them in a far corner of my mind where they could not affect my daily functioning. So, when I was sexually abused, when I was attacked on the road, or when I lost a family member. It would take years before I learned to healthily feel and process my thoughts, feelings and emotions without pushing them away as if they did not matter.

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### (Song) Who Says

<https://youtu.be/mdsMbSQKMzU>

#### Vs. 1

Who says the world is dying?

Who says our hearts are crying?

Who chooses to break us and tear us apart?

Taking away our rights to restart

Who says to dream when night comes?

Who says a star should shine?

My dreams are faded, mistakes have replaced them

With nowhere for me to hide

#### Cho:

I've got so much in me to give

This is a place I have to live

If change is to come, it must come from me

When you can stand and give a hand

It matters not who or how or when,

Someone may choose to stay, cause of the stand you give today.

#### Vs. 2

Who makes the rules we live by?

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What future do you choose?

Step up, look around, what can you see?

The hopes, the goals, the dreams in me

But who says to dream when night comes?

Who says a star should shine?

My dreams are faded, mistakes have replaced them

With nowhere for me to hide

**Cho:**

I've got so much in me to give

This is a place I have to live

If change is to come, it must come from me

When you can stand and give a hand

It matters not who or how or when,

Someone may choose to stay, cause of the hand you give today.

**Bridge:**

Walk with me on this journey

I got you and you've got me

Don't lose focus and of your identity

Remember just who you are and then, you'll be free.

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**Cho:**

You've got so much in you to give

This is a place we all have to live

If change is to come, it must come from me

When we can stand and give a hand

It matters not who or how or when,

Someone may choose to stay, cause of the hand you give today

Some may choose to stay, cause of the hand we give today.

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### *Exploring Disadvantages as a State of Mind*

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*Vital to resilience, a key factor in disrupting disadvantage is a growth mindset.  
An intrinsic belief that one can accomplish whatever they want with the  
strength of willpower. Some believe that we are only as poor as we think we  
are, but is this true?*

---

A mindset is a collection of attitudes and beliefs about one's own abilities, such as intelligence. Carol Dweck, a psychologist and author, coined the terms fixed and growth mindsets to describe people's attitudes and beliefs about learning and intelligence (Dweck, 2006). The author highlights that students with a fixed mindset believe that their abilities are fixed and unchangeable. Students with a growth mindset, on the other hand, believe that their abilities can be developed and improved with practice.

Teachers can assist students in developing growth mindsets by explicitly teaching about the brain and how it changes while learning. The ability of the brain to form and reform new neural connections in response to experiences and changes in the environment is referred to as neuroplasticity (Robinson, 2017).

Growth mindsets and metacognition predicted higher math engagement among students who possessed the metacognitive skills to reflect on and be aware of their learning progress, according to researchers at the University of Bristol. According to the findings, growth mindsets may be required for pupils to actualize their growth mindset. The study attempts to explore the underlying individual and psychological characteristics that influence math engagement over time, given the importance of engagement in students' pursuits of learning arithmetic. According to Wang et al., engaged math learners are metacognitively and self-motivated (Wang et al., 2019;

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Winne & Hadwin, 2008; Zimmerman, 2000). The goal of this research was to uncover the underlying individual and psychological elements that influence math engagement.

If we can isolate and elevate the emotional consciousness of children and help them to develop a growth mindset, we can help our children and youth take control of their life's trajectory despite the disadvantages they have or will face. In further studies, researchers discovered that the relationship between socioeconomic disadvantage and internalizing problems was stronger for children with lower verbal cognitive ability. (Flouri, Midouhas, & Joshi, 2014).

One could argue that my performance in school throughout my learning years could have been linked to the socioeconomic status of my family and the trauma experienced. The feelings of hopelessness, the trauma, comparing myself to others around me; all these things and more contributed to my stagnated development and crippled my sense of self. Was I capable of more? Could I have been just as good or even better than the children and youth of my time? What part did my poor mental health play in the results?

I felt it was exercising futility trying to succeed at anything, since I felt that I didn't matter and that there was little to no opportunity for me to succeed. The psychological pain I was feeling, due to my trauma, crippled my potential and made it easy to succumb to misguided (unwritten) societal ideologies that the colour of my skin, the way I presented in how I dressed, and how I spoke would dictate the quality of my future. I never tried to be more than I was, I never tried to break the preconceived mould, or push past my insecurities. Believing the glass ceiling could be broken felt absurd and well outside of my potential and so I never tried. With a positively augmented mindset, came growth beyond measure. In return, my mental health improved, and my life took a turn for the better.

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I was more deliberate in each decision that would impact my life and even more intentional with the decisions I made that impacted my happiness. Soon enough all elements of my potential began to shine especially my sense of creativity that was once stifled. I permitted myself to succeed, not only in big ways, but I learnt to celebrate the small wins, the little moments of happiness as well as the big ones. I appreciated failures and used them to inform success.

Another study explored low-income African American and Latino families, found that impoverished children with high self-regulation levels had fewer emotional and behavioural problems than poor children with low levels of self-regulation. Children from poor economic and improved economic backgrounds benefited from self-regulation, but poor children appeared to be more vulnerable. For children raised in low-income households, self-regulation and verbal cognitive ability appear to be important protective factors (Lloyed, Weech, Gaubert, 2014). Although I experienced several traumatic events, I do not think they happened because I was from a low-income earning family. What it did do was cause mental health issues that dwarfed my potential. The disadvantages I experienced helped me to learn resilience and gain strength that I now use in my daily life. This in turn helped me to be an effective professional, student, partner, friend, and individual.

Other authors such as Binning, Wang, and Amemiya share the benefits of a mindset intervention were only seen among African Americans with high educational expectations (Binning, Wang, & Amemiya, 2019). In another study, academic engagement and performance increased only for African Americans who experienced heightened levels of stereotype threat in academic domains (Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003) as quoted by Zepeda, Hlutkowsky,



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Partika, & Nokes-Malach, 2019). Echoing this relation, metacognitive interventions have been particularly helpful for lower achieving students (Carr, 2010; Schneider & Artelt, 2010).

Students may be more motivated to interact with arithmetic if they believe they can improve their skills.

*Mindset theory* integration in classrooms can assist children in maximizing athletic achievement and increasing their age of learning. The development of a growth mindset allows children to take control of their learning, assisting them in developing positive lifelong learning habits for the twenty-first century. When individuals must overcome significant obstacles to succeed, a fixed mindset is more debilitating than a growth mindset. Although existing data cannot explain why low-income students were more likely to endorse a fixed mindset, this finding does suggest that economic disadvantage may lead to poorer academic outcomes, in part by leading low-income students to believe that their intellectual abilities cannot be developed (Boylan, Barblett, & Knaus, 2018).

Farrington, 2013 in research expressed the following four mindsets in the first person from the learner's perspective:

1. Sense of belonging; As members of an academic community, students feel part of not only a social community, but also an intellectual community. Students who do not feel like they belong at school tend to withdraw from interaction with their peers, and because they associate academic work with their alienation from the school community, they are less likely to put forth the effort to learn. According to Mazlow, one of our basic human needs is “belonging” and “a place in a group” (Mazlow, 1943; pg.370-396).

2. Belief to succeed; Academic perseverance is strongly related to students' belief that they are “good” at a particular task or field of study. According to research, self-efficacy, and

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belief in one's ability to succeed are more predictive of academic performance than actually measured ability. When people anticipate success, they are more willing to engage in any task. Students must believe their efforts will be successful to put forth the sustained effort required for learning. We acquire this mindset because of our fundamental desire for a stable, firmly based, (usually) high evaluation of ourselves, self-respect, and self-esteem, as well as the acceptance of others. Students who expect failure or believe they cannot do something well will likely avoid putting forth effort or undervalue the importance of the task to maintain their sense of competence.

3. Personal ability and competence grow from self-directed effort: According to Carol Dweck, students with a growth mindset believe that “the brain is like a muscle” that gets stronger with use. A fixed mindset is a belief that intelligence is predetermined and beyond a student's control, according to the author. “Growth mindset” is also associated with “mastery goal orientation,” which means students are motivated to learn as much as possible to master the material; they are always challenging themselves to learn new things (Blackwell, L. S., Trzesniewski, K. H., & Dweck, C. S. 2007, pg 246-263; Dweck, C. S., & Leggett, 1988 pg. 256-273).

4. The work has personal value: Academic work must have meaning for students to penetrate their consciousness and become a focus of attention. When students value their coursework, they are much more likely to put forth the effort required to complete it. The importance a student places on a particular academic task is strongly related to persistence and performance on that task. When a task is not valued, students must expend significantly more energy to focus on it (Eccles, Adler, Futterman, Goff, Kaczala, Meece, & Midgley, 1983 pp.75-146; Freeman, Wigfield, 1994, pg. 49-78).

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In conclusion, the author states that a school must provide students with opportunities for deeper learning so that they can pursue their interests, strengthen bonds with peers, collaborate with diverse groups of individuals, and learn that success is the result of consistent hard work. Positive academic mindsets can also be viewed as important outcomes for deeper learning. Schooling outcomes include not only content knowledge and academic competencies, but also the people that students become as a result of their educational experiences (Farrington, 2013).

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

*As Girl Thinketh*

<https://youtu.be/YDQB4yIRs8>

Anxiety

Depression

Low self esteem

Anger

Suicide

Rage

Thoughts and feelings we have all experienced

Even more so our disadvantaged children and youth, robbed of their basic needs

Maslow say we need:

Safety and security

Esteem and physiology

Self actualization and love

But at the heart of all this I believe is love

Love unearned and undeserved

Just love freely given because you exist.

Love freely given, because you're human.

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

Yet a space filled with violence and heart break, only exposes our children to trauma and  
heartache.

Crushing their hearts  
Crushing their dreams  
Crushing their souls  
Crushing their very essence  
The very thing that makes them who they are.

“worthless”  
“Fool”  
“Lazy”  
“Black”  
“Stupid”  
“You will never amount to anything”  
“You’re ugly”  
“Do better”  
“Why cant you be like your sister?”

Over and over society’s oppressors weaponizing the oppressed to echo these words  
Of trauma to our children.  
Making sure the trend of mental slavery in continued for no one should be free.

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

Over and over we echo these words to our children , patting ourselves of the back lauding our  
Own efforts while mirroring the pedagogy of hegemony.

All our children hear is “I am hopeless”

All they hear is “I will never be enough”

As a man thinketh so is he

I said

As a man thinketh so is he”

AS your child thinks, so they will be.

AS we teach them so they will learn

Are these the words you want imprinted on the hearts of your children?

Believing that this is who they are?

Believing that this is who they are meant to be?

Because this is who you told them to be?

While the hegemonic structures indoctrinate, don't we want to empower our children

Or at least give them the tools needed to the heroes of their own story?

Metropolis has superman

Gotham has batman

The amazon has wonder woman

Who will be the hero for the city of children?

**Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

Oh children if you could see through my eyes

If you could claim a lens of enlightenment.

Claim empowerment through your won stories.

The narrative of your life can be written in words you dictate.

Take hold of every negative moment and experience.

Choose to forgive,

Choose to heal

Choose to claim a mindset fueled by love.

Take hold and fan the spark within you, so that it may burn with empowered passion.

Your happiness

Your joy

Your success

Can be a reality

But only if you want it to be

If “as a man thinketh so he is”

Then as you think and develop a mind of strength and greatness

Then you shall be great.

Poverty

Trauma

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

Stress

Depression

Does not have to dictate your future

You are your own worst enemy

Only you can prevent our success

Challenge the bio powered glass ceilings and

And become your greatest asset

You can survive past your gravest circumstance

You can be your greatest asset

You can be your own super hero

You can take your challenges and failure and make them your super power.

We each have within us the power to be brave and achieve greatness

But,

Stop comparing yourself to your sister

She is not the standard of measure for your success.

Aim higher, and you will surpass her and everyone else around you.

No need to seek success for glory and recognition.

When you shine the darkness sees you.

You are a winner



**Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

You are amazing

You are love

You can do more

You can do better

But know, that you are enough

And as long as you give it your best shot

You will always be enough.

Love as much as you want to be loved.

Work as hard as you want to achieve

Become the author of your story

And write the sequel worthy of who you are becoming

Since society failed to educate you, teach yourself how to learn

Since society built road blocks, build yourself a new road.

You have one life

And it is your born right, to live it by any means necessary.

Forgive those who have wronged you.

Accept the things you cannot change

But the things you can change,

**Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

Transform it in a way that paves the way for other oppressed and disadvantaged youth who are  
yet to be enlightened.

Life your truth

And be your own hero

Become the advocate you wish you had.

Create a community of truth and connection

That will allow others as space to ventilate their own stories

And gain healing.

If you hear nothing else, hear this

“As a man thinketh in his heart, So is he”

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

### **Theoretical Exploration and Relevance of Work**

Throughout my autobiography of disadvantage, we can see several themes of a disadvantage being echoed. I also explore how these experiences affected me as a child and how they influenced my adult persona. As I address the themes echoed, I consider several theoretical perspectives that validate these experiences or speak to the childhood growth process and environment. As I explore, I consider the questions: Were the circumstances under which I grew up ideal for a child? Was my response to each situation “normal” under the circumstances? Some of these theories also highlight the most common results for a child in these situations or those that have certain needs unmet. Through this exploration, it is clear that safety was a concern, along with role confusion, sibling rivalry, self-esteem, and depression.

Let us explore some of these perspectives that speak to these.

#### ***Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs***

The Maslow Hierarchy of Needs (HON) is a developmental psychology theory proposed by Maslow (1954). According to this theory, individuals move through a hierarchy of hierarchical motivations based on both physiological and psychological needs. These needs by order of importance, are physiological, safety, belongingness, love, self-esteem, self-actualization and self-transcendence (Meer, 2015).

According to Maslow’s (1954) influential theory, children’s ability to be motivated by “growth needs” (e.g., academic achievement) requires first satisfying “deficiency needs” (e.g., safety needs, love/belonging needs). Given the large number of children who have deficiency needs, a better understanding of these relationships may be required before creating conditions that maximize learning outcomes. Maslow also suggested that, while one level of need may take precedence at any given time, an individual can be motivated by multiple needs at the same time.

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

For example, if a child's belongingness needs are not fully met, he or she may still be able to attend to esteem needs, although not as effectively (Noltemeyer, Bush, Patton, & Bergen, 2012).

Furthermore, Maslow suggested that, even after deficiency needs are met, they can become motivating again if threatened later. In the case of a parent who loses their job unexpectedly, they may be forced to temporarily sacrifice growth needs (such as achievement or self-esteem) to ensure their family's deficiency needs are met. When a person's deficiencies and growth needs have been met, Maslow suggests that their optimal level of functioning has been reached (Noltemeyer, Bush, Patton, & Bergen, 2012).

### ***Family Systems Theory***

Looking at the family systems theory as applied to the family as a whole also helps us understand role confusion. In an ideal world, parents support each other, and both parents support the child (Cox & Paley, 1997). Roles are thought to be defined by a vertical relationship between the parent and child subsystems, as well as a horizontal relationship between parents and similarly aged siblings (Howes & Cicchetti, 1993). In this hierarchical system, parents nurture and lead their children. There are clear generational boundaries between the parent and child subsystems, so parental needs for instrumental and emotional support are met primarily by the parental subsystem, while children's needs for structure and nurturing care are met primarily by the parental subsystem and, to a lesser extent, by the sibling subsystem. Shifts may occur in certain contexts such that parents are unable to fulfil their nurturing and structuring roles as parents, and they either actively turn to their children, or their children step in by default, to fulfill those functions (Hartup, 1986; Howes & Cicchetti, 1993; Sroufe, 1989).

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

### **Discussion**

If Maslow's logic is followed, then one might argue that, in many ways, my early years lacked these very basic needs. If the basic needs are not met, or are not perceived to be met by the affected individual, do the consequences of the lack of these needs manifest themselves? If so, how? In some ways I believe I had some of these needs being met. In my childlike mind, however, I was unable to see it or receive it. This is because it was not present in a way that I could experience or utilize adequately. I do not believe I was without love; however, I didn't believe I was loved. Although, in many ways, my parents tried their best to the extent of their knowledge and ability to keep my siblings and me protected, I felt unsafe. I was not safe in some instances, which left me in vulnerable situations. As a result of not feeling safe, I never truly felt as though I belonged anywhere. Which also invites inquiry about whether parents really protect their children from everything? Can parents really keep their children safe?

Lacking the feelings of love and belonging invited self doubt and esteem challenges. I felt worthless and less than everyone else around me. It took conscious effort and reaching into spaces independent of my family to dig deep and find my power of resilience, self worth and the desire to take steps to self actualize. I took the time I needed to learn about myself, my likes, my dislikes. Learn what I needed to feel safe and place myself in space where I did feel safe and eventually discover how to provide safety and security for myself. As I learnt, I grew both personally and professionally.

With the absence of my parents, there was an unintended invitation to a hierarchical struggle. My eldest sister tried to assume the role of "leadership" in the absence of my mother; however, it fueled negative feelings, and may have even compromised the "big sister" relationship we would have had growing up. Instead, she saw me as an annoyance, and I saw her as a sibling trying to control me. Although Hartup, 1986; Howes & Cicchetti, 1993; Sroufe,

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(1989) sees this sibling leadership role adaptation as a child filling a role they believe is missing, for me it invited parental support from a sibling who didn't know how to be apparent but who possibly relished control. As a result, it affected my behaviour. For example, Caydence would say, "sweep and wipe the floors or you won't get any dinner". Although I knew I would be hungry, at times I rebelled by making up my mind that I would have to go hungry. This happened enough times to culture my mind into not eating as often as I should have. I began to view not eating as a passive way of punishing myself. So, when I was hurting from mental and emotional pain, I would refuse to feed myself, which led to stomach issues and eventually an ulcer.

Not eating along with the other trauma I experienced, affected not only my physical health, but also my performance at school. It also didn't help that I had undiagnosed ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). The teachers didn't notice, and I was unaware, and just assumed I was lazy and dumb. This isn't uncommon for girls with ADHD to go unnoticed and undiagnosed. Studies conducted by Jacobs (2014) has shown that ADHD symptoms appear to manifest differently in girls than in boys. Girls exhibit hyperactivity, emotional reactivity, forgetfulness, disorganisation, low self-esteem, and anxiety. Failure to recognise these symptoms in girls results in many of them advancing through primary and secondary school without ever being diagnosed. They are frequently misunderstood and, as a result, rarely receive the necessary support. Adolescents with ADHD struggle to manage the pressures of academics and interpersonal relationships (Jacobs, 2014).

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### Chapter 4: Methodology and Process

#### *Autoethnographer's Tale*

<https://youtu.be/N9ASyt7SJ-M>

As scholars have recognized that many of the phenomena in which we are interested are complex and require deep inner reflection as well as equally penetrating examination, qualitative approaches have become accepted and even embraced as empirical methods within the social sciences. Because quantitative approaches like self-report measures often fails to capture

The colorful essence of such phenomena

Qualitative designs based on interviews and other in-depth data-gathering procedures provide exciting, nimble, and useful research approaches.

For many of us, the question has been how to choose between approaches and how to learn the various methods. Many previous descriptions of the various qualitative methods were not clear enough, making it difficult for novice researchers to learn how to use them.

If it piques your interest you should learn with me

Learn about how to conduct qualitative research that requires such delicate, concise and thorough descriptions of its approach,

As the canvas is painted before your eyes learn how by example how to use these methods.

Autoethnography differs from other types of qualitative research.

Autoethnography is an academic genre that draws on and analyses or interprets the author's lived experience and connects researcher insights to self-identity, to cultural rules and resources, to communication practices, and traditions, to premises and symbols, to rules and shared meanings, to emotions and values, to larger social, cultural, and political issues.

Most autoethnographers use a multipronged, layered, hybrid approach to research social phenomena and craft compelling narratives about human social or cultural phenomena, drawing on various methodological tools common in qualitative inquiry.

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

As anthropologists set out into the world in the middle of the nineteenth century to study and write about “exotic” or “primitive” cultures.

They pioneered the practice of ethnography,  
They observed, documented, and systematically analyzed people and their cultural practices  
Then illustrated in their findings a systematic interpretation of culture that deepened  
understanding of the subject's lifeworld.

Early ethnographers provided naturalistic “realist tales” that emphasized objectivity. These trailblazers recognized and wrestled with the issue of how to render textual accounts that provide clear, accurate, and rich descriptions of others' cultural practices. Observing events from the perspective of an outsider looking in on the scene was a common approach among early ethnographers.

It was clear that the locals were aware of  
and adjusting to  
the presence of these “outsiders.” As serious questions arose about the possibility and legitimacy of offering purely objective accounts of cultural practices, traditions, symbols, meanings, premises, rituals, rules, and other social engagements, the idea developed of writing about the researcher's experience as though they were actors on stage, playing out their scene.

After all, aren't all qualitative researchers human actors playing out a story  
Interpreting responses to unfolded events.

Playing their role as challengers of neutrality and objectivity notions “.

Yet still, being human autoethnographers can we listen, view and experience cultural and  
historical premises, rules, and backgrounds

These firsthand tales not be inextricably impacted or influenced?



## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

### **Methodology**

**Qualitative Research.** Qualitative research is concerned with the universe of thoughts, ideas, goals, aims, attitudes, experiences, and feelings as elicited from study participants in their individuality and living settings. Qualitative research is a catch-all phrase for a number of research methods based on differing ontology and epistemology. The research design is a plan or method that researchers use to answer the research question, and it is based on methodology, philosophy, and methods.

The core premise of qualitative research is that interactions between persons and their environment form and influence truth and reality (Freebody, 2003; Silverman, 2000). According to Lincoln and Denzin (2000), “Qualitative researchers investigate objects in their natural environments, aiming to make sense of, or interpret, events in terms of the meaning humans bring to them” (p. 3). Qualitative research opposes the positivist belief that truth is impartial to the researcher. This is important to autoethnography in which the researcher is at the centre of the research.

I have come to appreciate the unique way in which this qualitative approach allows the researcher to capture diversity through stories. With each story comes a perspective that serves to add colour and diversity to the world of research. For example, there can be a hundred people present at the same historic event and still each person will have a different perspective in their account of that event. Does it change history? Does it make the experience less valid? Or does it offer the opportunity to tell a more holistic story? Considering the Indian folklore “the elephant and the blind men” (Saxe & Galdone, 1936). Each man had a piece of the puzzle, but only needed to put each piece together to have the complete picture. So too in research, all perspectives contribute to the bigger picture.

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

**Autoethnography.** Autoethnography is an approach that combines autobiography with ethnography. When writing an autobiography, the author speaks proactively and deliberately about past occurrences. In most cases, the writer does not go through these events to include them in a published book; rather, these experiences are pieced together in retrospect (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989, Freeman, 2004). The author may utilize writing to enhance memory in addition to interviewing people and consulting literature such as photos, journals, and recordings (Delany, 2004; Didion, 2005; Goodall, 2006; Herrmann, 2005).

Autoethnography is a method that attempts to recentre the researcher's experience as vital in and to the research process. It is based on active self-reflexivity, which "refers to the careful consideration of how researchers' past experiences, points of view, and roles impact these same researchers' interactions with, and interpretations of, the research scene" (Tracy, 2020, p. 2). Simply put, autoethnography is an observational, participatory, and reflexive research method that employs writing about the self in interaction with others to illuminate the many layers of human social, emotional, theoretical, political, and cultural praxis (i.e., action, performance, accomplishment (Poulos, 2021).

Using whatever tools necessary, autoethnographers create compelling narratives that attempt to evoke and capture the researcher's (and coparticipants', as applicable) lived experiences in relation to the phenomenon under study. Most autoethnographers use a multipronged, layered, hybrid approach to research social phenomena and craft compelling narratives about human social or cultural phenomena, drawing on various methodological tools common in qualitative inquiry.

**Narrative Perspective.** From a narrative perspective, Fisher (1984) writes that people are storytellers and explores the distinctive aspects of narratives and how powerful these stories

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

can be. As a researcher, I resonate with narrative theory from growing up in an environment where storytelling was a key way of passing on traditions and imparting key life lessons. I, therefore, believe that it is my responsibility to offer the story of what I went through as a disadvantaged child. I was unaware that I had a learning disability, I did not even consider myself disadvantaged; even as I ate rice in several different ways, for days, or when I placed pieces of cardboard in my shoe to replace the sole that had worn through. Each account of my past is a piece of the puzzle, contributing to future knowledge, which is why I chose to take an autoethnographic approach to tell my story.

Autoethnographers write reflectively and judiciously about eureka moments that come from or are made feasible by becoming a part of a community and/or holding a specific cultural heritage. Autoethnographers examine their experiences in addition to speaking about them. As a researcher, I invite deeper thought into the subject matter of disadvantage and examine how, as a child born to disadvantage, I was able to disrupt that trajectory where people from low economic status have no future or become gang members or are a product of teenage pregnancy. I went on to share how I used the tools I was taught from personal experiences as a learner in different spaces and my educational journey, to offer support to children and youth I had the pleasure of influencing. I offered them the opportunity to disrupt disadvantage in their spaces by acknowledging their pain and circumstance, and consciously deciding to rise to more than just a standard of social functioning, to dream and self-actualize (even though their most radical views of the world were through the screen of television shows) and take bold strides to self-actualizing; making what seemed to be elusive dreams a tangible part of their reality.

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

### Storytelling as a Means of Social Change

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*The stories we tell are important and there are countless stories to be told. Storytelling has been used to oppress and control people, but it can also be used to empower and humanize them. The stories we tell have the power to both break and mend a people's dignity.*

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Our ability to tell stories is both natural and learned. Oral history and storytelling are integral parts of all human societies, and we use stories to better understand one another. In our stories, our individual and collective memories collide and reconcile to form what Kansteiner, as cited by Hancox (2011), refers to as our “collectively shared representations of the past.” Hancox also explores the thoughts of Harter, Japp, and Beck in an article they wrote entitled ‘Narratives, Health, and Healing’. They argue that narrative is a fundamental way for humans to give meaning to their experiences. Additionally, Goodall asserts the use of narrative as a mode of knowing and a research method for revealing meaning and transferring it to readers (Hancox, 2011).

Narrative and storytelling can be reimagined and repurposed in a way that has the potential to significantly change the way cultural and social research is conducted. Through policy and community-based solutions, this new approach could impact our understanding of marginalized groups’ experiences. Using personal stories and narratives can help researchers better understand broad issues. This capability can also be used to portray seemingly intractable social problems in a human light. Our public narratives are energized by personal narratives in this way, influencing our ways of thinking and collective understandings (Harter et al. date? ).

Storytelling, in all its forms, must be nurtured and developed as a dynamic practice if it is to contribute to the lives of individuals and communities. Throughout the early 2000s,

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storytelling initiatives and projects in Australia have increased rapidly, and they are used by a wide range of organizations for varying reasons. The ability of “ordinary” people to tell their stories has been profoundly impacted by digital technology, and research has identified the potential of digital storytelling in these contexts to aid in the representation of multiple voices and viewpoints in society through inclusive processes of co-creation (Burgess, Hartley, Klæbe and Burgess as cited by Hancox, 2011).

In both popular education and feminist legal activism, oppressed populations tell their daily stories as a strategy for social change. As a result, storytelling represents various perceptions of reality that contradict established knowledge. Razack (2006) focusing primarily on popular education, describes how uncritical reliance on stories has failed in the classroom to recognize the risks taken by various oppressed groups when attempting to critically reflect and build coalitions. Additionally, stories are not always empowering; mixed-race and mixed-sex communities have been unable to develop effective political strategies and determine how to implement them without mechanisms for critique.

There are many professionals in the fields of health, education, and community service caught in a double bind of credibility and authority while enduring or having experienced the same discrimination, violence, or trauma they are dedicated to overcoming. It has become commonplace for some to share their marginalization stories for advocacy, telling a bigger truth; for others, self-disclosure serves as a means of connecting isolated people. As a lifelong social worker and activist, Linde Zingaro interviewed several colleagues who have spoken out in this manner, discussing their ethics, and intentions, and identifying some of the risks and also professional implications for the practitioner. Through their voices, the author illustrates how these people have learned to transform storytelling into significant social action safely and

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effectively. In promoting a more just society, the author's analysis of speaking out as a meaningful social practice may serve as a guide to other workers, activists, and community researchers (Zingaro 2016).

### **Data Collection**

Chang (2016) in his book *Autoethnography and Method* suggests a model followed when collecting autoethnographic data. For my study I used key components of this to get ready to write:

1. Collecting personal memory data. Channel information from the current memory bank, enhancing memory with the use of artifacts.
2. Collecting self-observational and reflective data.
3. Collecting external data. Collecting data from artifacts (videos, photographs, written work), or individuals who may be able to offer insight or validate memory.

To convert the data into autoethnography I:

4. Managed and categorized the data, filtering through data collected and categorized data, understanding its relationship to the topic being explored.
5. Evaluated and interpreted the data, filtering according to relevance, exploring cultural themes, analyzing inclusion and omission, identifying exceptional occurrences, and exploring frameworks and theoretical perspectives.

(Chang, 2016, p. 61-139)

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### Power

<https://youtu.be/UGbafYkarO8>

What is power I ask myself.

Is it who holds authority? Or who dictates authority

Am I in control of my own self, my own thoughts, my own feeling, my own learning, my own  
self?

Or am I just a puppet, a short green Muppet

Made to follow a leader I can no longer see,

To Become just the reflection of copied behavior

Behaviour learnt from the hegemonic powers that be.

Power disguised as autonomy when the choice has already been made.

Power

Power

Power

When I think of power

Is it just the teacher I see in front of me?

Or am I the power

is the power inside of me,

Can I take and taste and feel and be,

Power,

The power that takes and takes and takes and takes,

how can I know that I am truly being me?

They call me disruptive.

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Me a student that is just hyperactive,  
 Moving away from the mold preset to detect abnormality.  
 Not realizing that the abnormal is the beginning of eye opening anti oppression.  
 How is it that I see  
 yet you do not,  
 everyone else around me conforming, and learning and knowing and being,  
 but me, not me,  
 I see, I know, dream, I think, and I grow.  
 Is it just me?  
 Should I just follow the majority, who is afraid to face reality?  
 The system is a joke  
 set out to teach conformity, to a system for the dead.  
 Lauren Hill Correct in her words echoing thoughts Paulo Freire would never dread.  
 Breathless, lifeless, mindless, thoughtlessness  
 From one who holds the true power?  
 What does that look even like?  
 Me alone sitting in a classroom, everyone conforming but me.  
 Why wont anyone listen to me?  
 All I need is someone to hear me  
 Let us have a conversation, isn't discourse what we are supposed to be promoting,  
 Mother hear me, teacher hear me  
 My point of view does not have to be in your rear view.  
 Foucault says it constitutes knowledge when discourse appears regularly and persistently.



**Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

Hear me I say!

Learn from me as I take to thought what you have imparted.

Let us usher in a new dialogical culture that seeks to edify truth

rather than mirror thought

Aren't children meant to express themselves

Freely and especially at the risk of being wrong.

For only through seeing my words can you see my mind

And only through seeing my mind can you know me

I don't reject your values, practices and beliefs,

I only seek to question every jot and tittle

Done judge me based on your preconceived notions of who I am,

see me as empowered and teach me to be an empowered being

As I grow stage to stage

Childhood into adulthood,

Help me to change

or should I just stay the same.

Power,

What you fail to see,

Is the rebel inside of me

Not fitting that mold of hegemonic structures

But nurturing spaces for authentic heuristic thinking

Will you continue to insist I follow as you lead?

Or will you share the power with me,

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So, we may grow strong together,  
Learning from each of our imperfections  
Even if it is a bother.

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this work, I have drawn on researchers who have agreed that when children are exposed to violence, they may develop dysfunctional coping strategies and lose their sense of security, autonomy, competence, and self-esteem. As a result, children may mistrust their parents and teachers, believing that they lack the authority to protect them. These actions may interfere with the development of values such as collaboration, empathy, and sensitivity in young children. Children who experience adversity at a young age, such as mistreatment, are more likely to develop chronic disorders like smoking, substance abuse, and obesity. Early adversity contributes to depression, cardiovascular disease, and metabolic syndrome. As a result, my story becomes more important to document.

Research evidence suggests that developing academic mindsets is one of the best levers for increasing students' perseverance and improving their academic behaviour. Students with positive academic mindsets work harder, engage in more productive academic behaviours, and persevere to overcome obstacles to success. In contrast, students who hold negative attitudes about school or themselves as learners are likely to withdraw from the behaviours essential to their success. They are also likely to give up easily when they encounter setbacks or difficulties. According to intervention research, academic mindsets are malleable factors that can be influenced by contextual or instructional factors. This suggests that developing positive academic mindsets is the most effective way to improve academic perseverance and assist students in building the other competencies associated with deeper learning (Boylan, Barblett, & Knaus, 2018).

With the use of poetry and storytelling, I explored disadvantages in my life and answered the questions: What protective factors promote resilience in the face of challenging

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circumstances? How do these factors mediate the interplay between learning and self-actualization? And how might negative experiences promote resilience? Showing first-hand how, despite a life of hardship and roadblocks, success can be claimed. I also considered a growth mindset, resilience, and integrity, and explored and found that these were key characteristics that were useful in my journey of disrupting my disadvantage to claim a future filled with continued progress.

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### Noetic Space

<https://youtu.be/OjCPsr-TjKA>

As I cuddle into my noetic space, I envision my future institutions.

I view pedagogies and the revolution of the classroom.

The revolution of knowledge delivery that seeks to inspire students and evoke original thought.

Can we as educators nurture young minds that will make an indelible mark on society?

Can we really be inclusive and wholistic in our approach?

We would need an inclusive curriculum, developed by each expert within their field.

Teachers

The Community

Counsellors

Students

Parents

Include all those that can ensure the classroom becomes a space that is culturally inclusive, emotionally supportive and learning inspired.

What is next?

A meeting? Yes, a meeting to ensure cohesive thought and an effective plan to move forward.

Establish goals and objectives geared towards partnering with our children to ensure all voices are raised and all minds will be identified

Silencing the minority is not an option.

Ooh, this is going to be great!

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I can just envision it now; red, orange and purple cloaked students, in all their diverse glory  
strutting into the schoolyard,

Eager to learn in an environment that is retrofitted help them to grow.

Sharing the power and interchanging the role of teacher and student.

Inspiring transformatory learning.

Cementing each lesson with impacting stories that will illuminate  
and inspire students eager learn more.

Engaging their creativity and cultural diversity.

Moving away from mechanical learning processes.

And collaborating nature with the classroom.

Dream with me,

Dream out loud!

Share my vision with the world

Share my vision if you believe what I see

Or develop your own thought based on what is best for your own students

Help them see they are the authors of true change

Of true education

Say to your students:

*“Think out of the box, think freely, use your experiences and speak that I may see you.*

*Express your creativity, and share with your teacher, for you are the expert on how you will learn.*

*Teach that you may be taught.” For you are the reason we are here.*

Help your fellow teachers to share this vision, tell them to:

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*“Be open to learning from your students, learn from their perspective. Be actively looking for new knowledge every day. Live by your philosophies and teach your students to do the same.*

*As early childhood educators, we should view ourselves as humble agents of empowerment.*

*“The Hand that rock the cradle rules the world”, we are impacting future minds, we are responsible for molding these minds with care. Positively impact the growth and development of these individuals regardless of race, gender, culture or language.*

*Respect the voice of your students, and cultivate the diversity of perspectives.*

*“Care is an invaluable commodity”.*

Allow your enthusiasm to grow with each thought.

Consider the social, economic and cultural capital I would need to male this dream a reality.

And make it happen.

If it can be dreamt

It can be a reality

Dare to dream grand dreams

Dare to move away for normalcy and into spaces of innovation

If you do, you give your students permission to do the same.

Thus giving your students permission to excess despite race, culture, or accessibility.

Each can succeed, we just need to teach them its okay.

If you don’t, they will learn in other spaces

Because learning no longer only takes place in the classroom.

Today, knowledge is everywhere, in every way.

Your job is to give your students the tools they need to learn how to learn,

So they can chase knowledge and siphon what they need to know

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To get to where they want to be.

And since “things only have the value you place on them”.

This paradigm shift will place true power into the hands of our children

Where they can transform not just their future, but ours

For the better.

The traditional ways of teaching served its purpose,

It's time to adjust accordingly.

Innovation starts with having a problem with the problem.

It all becomes possible in a noetic space.



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### Appendices

#### 1.0 Poetic Expressions

##### *1.1 Through the eyes of a child*

<https://youtu.be/ta-FIQYRnq0>

I take this moment

To take you on a journey that began in the past.

Filled with tragedy, but also illuminated with lessons and laughter

Made real through the eyes of a child.

A child known only to you as a girl

So let me tell you this story

A story about a girl.

Staged in a space filled with poverty, violence, and desolation.

Her story though poor in origin, and a tainted soul, became rich in substance,  
and culture and power

A story written but will never have words

Until they are given.

Until they are taken

Until they are claimed

This story is one of disadvantage, but it is also one of a girl whose

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Elusive dreams of happiness were stifled and suffocated.

Was it lack of opportunity?

Was it lack of freedom?

Was it lack of validation?

Was it lack of power?

This is a story of a girl headed down a path that led nowhere

Because a girl without a purpose is a girl no more.

She believed she was worthless because society said

She believed she was ugly because society said.

She believed she was broken and could never be mended because society said.

A girl defined by structures of hegemony she had never met but played such an important role in her self-perception.

This,

this is who I am she said because this is who they told her she should be.

Never have I seen such false ideology imprinted on a heart so pure.

She accepted her story because it had been placed with her.

Leaving her vulnerable

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Never to love

Never to love herself

Never to desire

Never to desire anything

Never to be better

Never to be more

Never to think big

Never to grow

Her self-worth was like currency she could never spend

She cashed in capital paid out by societal norms and skewed values

Becoming a reflection of perverted thoughts

Symptoms of mental slavery

Trickling down from generation to generation.

It is said, “as a man thinketh so is he”.

But what if it also meant ‘as a girl thinketh’?

If so....Then...

This girl could think

This girl could think and be

This girl could think and become whomever she wanted to be

“The story being written would [only] holds the legitimacy given to it.”

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The girl saw that if we can dictate who holds true power

Then determining what comes next can be up to her.

Can be her choice.

A destiny no longer predetermined by biased trajectories.

Oppressors maintain control by disempowering and withholding what is not rightfully theirs.

But

If she could only take claim of what is rightfully hers.

Give spark to the autonomy and power buried deep with her.

The she could claim power

She could claim legitimate power.

This is a story about a girl who has a voice

only needing to use it.

A girl who thought her future was stagnated by her disadvantaged experiences

But refused to allow circumstance to define her outcomes.

Drawing the power, she needed from a story still being written

Penning each line that could only be told by her, with her words, in her own way.

For as she thinks, she is becoming, as she dreams, she is claiming.

Claiming ownership, over all that is and can be hers.

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This is the story of a girl, told by her.

For I am the girl, and this is my story.

And I take it and I claim it.

and edit the narrative and trajectories

and the flaws and hiccups and the messy truths,

empowering failures and climatic successes

I claim it all

And it is all mine, because I say so.

And I urge you to do the same.

Reject what you've been told,

Question everything

Experience free thought

Challenge norms and ideologies,

and dare to transform your spaces with authenticity and innovation.

Do not allow your life to fall prey to circumstance.

Marcus Garvey a great for black human rights

urged people to free themselves from mental slavery.

If he could have freed us, he would have but instead he gave us the secret to freedom.

“free yourself”

Free yourself.

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But, what do I know?

I'm just speaking through the eyes of a child.

### *1.2 Ball and Chain*

<https://youtu.be/nLsuDQqFEB4>

She woke up feeling heavy,

Heaviness that burdened her life of failure.

It is the kind of failure you feel like when everyone else around you is better and doing better  
and being better and getting even better  
as everything around you is just getting better.

While you stand still,

while you stand still, standing stagnated, not moving forward, not going backwards, not moving  
upwards not moving, not moving, not going anywhere.

The kind of failure that time and time again she was told she was:

Not enough, not good enough

Not Smart, not smart enough,

Not pretty, not pretty enough,

Not clean, not clean enough,

Not wrong, not wrong enough,

Just always, not enough.

And feeling and believing

That all the inadequacies that plagued her existence were because of her and had no place else to  
go because she was just that

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... inadequate.

Shrugs of the shoulder,

shrug of her feet,

violently shaking her limbs,

trying to rid herself of the cold, heavy ball and chain

trying to rid herself of the cold claws of sad thoughts and emotions, plaguing her skin.

Like a cloud of hollow darkness, it loomed over her day.

Overshadowing her existence and latching on like a heavy ball and chain.

Door to door,

Bus to bus, street to street,

Burdened weights, clamping down her feet.

Burdened with feelings of being a failure, bombarded with words of despair.

Every sad word, every broken memory, every statement of horror.

Needing the right escape, but always choosing the wrong door.

Sharp blades of self-medication.

Blades of repression, blades of depression

Twisting pains of emotional anxiety.

Sad enough to feel but not sad enough to cry, not sad enough to die,

Sad just enough to exist.

She cannot even be sad right.

Just sadness chipping away at her power through that heavy ball and chain.

Heavy stress that just will not leave her alone.

Is she invisible to the world, does no one see her pain?

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Or has she become invisible to the world around her.

No one sees, or no one can see.

She retreats into her shell, dragging her heavy ball and chain.

No savior from this dungeon, not handsome prince charming.

Into the darkness she fades away,

She is lost to the world, but no one cares.

She is a girl in bed, laying down with her heavy, ball and chain.

### ***1.3 Goodbye Depression***

[https://youtu.be/a\\_Ct3bsdplDI](https://youtu.be/a_Ct3bsdplDI)

I ask myself

What would I do if you died?

Would I laugh

Would I cry?

I think I would laugh

But pretend to cry

I have even practiced the tears rolling down my cheeks, the sobs and that gradually grow into angry pants.

Maybe I'll fall to the ground and wake in pain.

Sob as I scan through photos of memories we never shared

What would I do?

Truth is I don't really care if you live or die

But in sure people will wonder what's wrong with me if I don't grieve you



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So, I'll cry

onion juice induced tears

Pour unadulterated crocodile style

Rolling and wailing on the floor as they lead your cold corpse away

But do I want you to go yet?

don't go yet

Don't go just yet

Wait until I have mastered the art of crocodile tears and hurtful steers

What if I'm the one who found you dying

Would call the ambulance

Or try to save you

Would try CPR

Or would I sit and watch as the life leaves your soulless body

I know you deserve to die, but can't you even die

Can you cease to exist?

For as long as I've been here, I've your painful existence.

Can you really die

And dry rot flaking into dust and disappear into thin air

I bet as you draw your last breath you would try claw yourself back to life

Too bad I know you too well

Too bad I have healed and known what it feels like to breathe air without you

You filthy scum.

So many things I should say to you.

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But no need to at this time. All I want now is for you depression, take your leave, you have done your time.

### *1.4 The Christian Homosexual*

<https://youtu.be/omlYcedyl3o>

I woke up a homosexual

I woke up a homosexual and I hate it.

How does this happen to someone

I go to church, I sing and I pray, I don't even swear.

why me?

God are you testing my faith?

I can just hear what everyone is going to say

"You're going to hell you nasty child"

I woke up the devil's child and I knew it.

I knew it when my best friend hugged me out of excitement,

And all I wanted her to do was kiss me.

I knew it when my friends spoke about boys,

and it felt so unnatural to me

Oh man, I woke up a sadomite,

I know how it happened,

I just know It was demon, as I slept,

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

The demon paralyzed me in my dreams and crept in slowly

Get an exorcist and I will be rid of you.

Oh my GOD, I woke up gay.

Nope it's still not gone

My 100<sup>th</sup> hail Mary today and no matter what I try it's still there.

I knew it as soon as the teacher entered the classroom, and the scent of her perfume perforated my nostrils triggering a chain reaction of erotic thoughts and bodily fluids.

I knew it when my eyes couldn't help but trace her as she glided to the chalk board and flipped her hair, as she turned around and licked her lips before she spoke just to tempt me.

Oh man in that moment all she had to do was say my name and I know I would just melt.

The things we did in my imagination, were so ungodly.

Now I knew I needed fervent prayer all day every day, read the bible 6 times a day, church three times a week.

I will be rid of you

Aw damn it, I woke up a lesbian

I knew it when I saw that girl on the choir, and I just knew she was meant to be mine.

My heart raced, and I got butterflies.

Wooooow, she doesn't even see me,

but how can I not go over and say hi?

But its wrong, its wrong, its wrong, its wrong,

No, no,no,no,no its wrong

**Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

And you're going to hell.

You are going to hell,

Stop it!

I woke up a cunt and I knew

I knew it the first time he touched me and I cringed,

I knew it the first time he held me and it felt wrong

I knew it the moment he kissed me and I puked all over his chest.

I knew it.

God is gonna strike you down and you're going to burn in hell

You're nasty, Sodom and Gomorrah was burnt and destroyed with everyone in it for this

Everyone hates you; no one wants to be your friend

Just don't get close to anyone they will be infected with your gayness.

You're such a disgrace on the your family and the church

How can you even step into church or say you are a Christian?

162 Arm cuts, 50 leg slashes and one attempted overdose and

Fuck, I woke up queer

I knew it when she looked at me, I got goosebumps and I got butterflies, right here, in my stomach

I knew it when she Touched me, my heart skipped all kinds of beats

I knew it when she kissed me, oh my god wooh

it just felt so right,

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

It felt right

How can it feel so right?

I'm not supposed to feel this way,

Am I?

How does God feel when I'm like this?

Does he prefer when I'm sad and ashamed

Does he want me happy, like genuinely happy,

Does he want me to be me?

Am I betraying him when I'm happy?

I woke up human this morning

I knew it, when I rolled over and there she was

Smiling at me like I was the only woman in the world.

I knew it when she kissed me on the forehead and it felt like a hug

I knew it when she said I love you and I just knew, this was authentic love

Maybe not her love lasting forever

But self love.

I woke up myself this morning, and you know what

I love me!

### ***1.5 Melanin Strong***

<https://youtu.be/1BNKTojeL1g>

Deep beneath the dermis of my exterior lies a substance rare and pure

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

Melanin beauty, liquid gold splashed across my skin  
 illuminating each pigment of my African essence.  
 You may be familiar with the term tall, dark, and handsomely smart.  
 Curvy, caring, and clandestine supermodel sexy.  
 The embodiment of beauty and success.  
 I have learnt not to aim to be the best, but better than myself  
 For whom can compare or compete with my vast ingenuity and earthy flow.  
 A powerful reflection of melanin glow,  
 Sun-kissed and accentuating my Afro.  
 Remaining true to who I am  
 For I am a woman  
 A formidable sister, girl.  
 Here to grace, disrupt and change the world.  
 Oh, I am just loving the skin I'm in  
 Strong and Untamed.

Hmmmm

To claim the courageous, ambitious, fierce, and obviously contagious Melanin aura,  
 No longer trapped in chain filled ships.  
*bruk wi back an side, pan massa land,*  
*Till all yuh machete tun ova.*  
 Skin Deep, Clanking chains  
 Pounding melodies with tunes and chants...

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

Drumming over and over

(sing)...Keep you hand on to that plow, hold on.

The pedestal on which you placed me for auction to erase me, did not even phase me.

It only placed me closer to the sun,

Which eliminated the diversified hues in my melanin skin.

They say let's include the black, brown, and bronze budding colors  
that are bright and gleaming.

Yet you fear the strides we take, even when we're just dreaming.

But "I have a dream that one day, all this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its  
creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal",

But if Martin Luther King could see today, how crafty they have gotten in hiding their hatred for  
my melanin skin.

He would turn twice in his grave and return this quote to Thomas Jefferson

Because the pursuit of happiness is slowly becoming a disillusioned myth.

Let us shatter the bio-power's glass ceiling.

Can't you see the light in my child's eye may no longer be gleaming.

The attempts to break me and tame my unborn child is devastatingly unbecoming.

Stop trying to break me because I cannot be broken,

If you think I can, then I should probably tell you that I am the Phoenix that continues to rise.

As Bob Marley willed it,

The oppressed will become the masters of their own destinies.

Reshaping to no longer fit into the mold created

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

By you,

For us.

Reshaping to no longer fit into the mold filled with narratives I cannot identify with. A constitution that reflects the illusion of freedom.

*oooooooo*

*They said:*

*“Walk upright, sit up straight, speak properly”*

But this is just the way I walk.

This is just the way I talk.

This is the way I look.

This, is who I am.

I am just a melanin Empress.

A product of great melanin people who came before me.

Great people who

though overshadowed by circumstance

and limited by discrimination,

broke barriers and defied odds

Great people

Great people like

**Jackie Robinson**, not just a baseball guru but his undeniable skill in tennis broke the racial barrier and paved the way for Venus and Serena Williams.

**Lewis Latimer**, a great inventor who possibly invented the telephone, reviewed Thomas Edison’s light bulb invention, and made it better.



## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

**Elizabeth Bessie**, the first black woman to become a pilot.

**Madam C.J. Walker** a self-made millionaire.

**Henrietta Lacks**, whose cancer cells led to major discoveries in medical research.

**Daniel Hale Williams**, the first Dr. to successfully complete an open-heart surgery.

**Musa I**, King of the Mali Empire, The richest man in history.

**The Black Wall Street**, a thriving black community, progressing in it's own eco system until the 'Tulsa Race Massacre' destroyed businesses, homes and lives.

Great people,

Great people who made an indelible mark on our melanin nation.

Great people whose accomplishments were hushed

As others were placed in history books.

Great melanin people of the past

who sacrificed and made an undeniably bold stance

That causes me to stand today,

As they stood.

And now

Here, I stand

Here I stand Strong, just as they stood,

We stand strong, as they stood.

For, this is who we are,

This is who we will be.

Living the truth,

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

Living our truth,

Living To the sound of drummed ancestral melodies, tunes and chants

Strumming to their melanin beats

and making a POWERFUL STANCE

Because still this is our song

Keep your hand onto that plow, hold on.

### ***1.6 As Girl Thinketh***

<https://youtu.be/YDQB4yIRrS8>

Anxiety

Depression

Low self esteem

Anger

Suicide

Rage

Thoughts and feelings we have all experienced

Even more so our disadvantaged children and youth, robbed of their basic needs

Maslow say we need:

Safety and security

Esteem and physiology

Self actualization and love

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

But at the heart of all this I believe is love

Love unearned and undeserved

Just love freely given because you exist.

Love freely given, because you're human.

Yet a space filled with violence and heart break, only exposes our children to trauma and heartache.

Crushing their hearts

Crushing their dreams

Crushing their souls

Crushing their very essence

The very thing that makes them who they are.

“worthless”

“Fool”

“Lazy”

“Black”

“Stupid”

“You will never amount to anything”

“You're ugly”

“Do better”

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

“Why cant you be like your sister?”

Over and over society’s oppressors weaponizing the oppressed to echo these words

Of trauma to our children.

Making sure the trend of mental slavery in continued for no one should be free.

Over and over we echo these words to our children , patting ourselves of the back lauding our

Own efforts while mirroring the pedagogy of hegemony.

All our children hear is “I am hopeless”

All they hear is “I will never be enough”

As a man thinketh so is he

I said

Asa man thinketh so is he”

AS your child thinks, so they will be.

AS we teach them so they will learn

Are these the words you want imprinted on the hearts of your children?

Believing that this is who they are?

Believing that this is who they are meant to be?

Because this is who you told them to be?

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

While the hegemonic structures indoctrinate, don't we want to empower our children

Or at least give them the tools needed to the heroes of their own story?

Metropolis has superman

Gotham has batman

The amazon has wonder woman

Who will be the hero for the city of children?

Oh children if you could see through my eyes

If you could claim a lens of enlightenment.

Claim empowerment through your won stories.

The narrative of your life can be written in words you dictate.

Take hold of every negative moment and experience.

Choose to forgive,

Choose to heal

Choose to claim a mindset fueled by love.

Take hold and fan the spark within you, so that it may burn with empowered passion.

Your happiness

Your joy

Your success

Can be a reality

But only if you want it to be

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

If “as a man thinketh so he is”

Then as you think and develop a mind of strength and greatness

Then you shall be great.

Poverty

Trauma

Stress

Depression

Does not have to dictate your future

You are your own worst enemy

Only you can prevent our success

Challenge the bio powered glass ceilings and

And become your greatest asset

You can survive past your gravest circumstance

You can be your greatest asset

You can be your own super hero

You can take your challenges and failure and make them your super power.

We each have within us the power to be brave and achieve greatness

But,

Stop comparing yourself to your sister

She is not the standard of measure for your success.

**Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

Aim higher, and you will surpass her and everyone else around you.

No need to seek success for glory and recognition.

When you shine the darkness sees you.

You are a winner

You are amazing

You are love

You can do more

You can do better

But know, that you are enough

And as long as you give it your best shot

You will always be enough.

Love as much as you want to be loved.

Work as hard as you want to achieve

Become the author of your story

And write the sequel worthy of who you are becoming

Since society failed to educate you, teach yourself how to learn

Since society built road blocks, build yourself a new road.

**Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

You have one life

And it is your born right, to live it by any means necessary.

Forgive those who have wronged you.

Accept the things you cannot change

But the things you can change,

Transform it in a way that paves the way for other oppressed and disadvantaged youth who are yet to be enlightened.

Live your truth

And be your own hero

Become the advocate you wish you had.

Create a community of truth and connection

That will allow others as space to ventilate their own stories

And gain healing.

If you hear nothing else, hear this

“As a man thinketh in his heart, So is he”



## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

### 1.7 Autoethnographer's Tale

<https://youtu.be/N9ASyt7SJ-M>

As scholars have recognised that many of the phenomena in which we are interested are complex and require deep inner reflection as well as equally penetrating examination, qualitative approaches have become accepted and even embraced as empirical methods within the social sciences. Because quantitative approaches like self-report measures often fails to capture

The colorful essence of such phenomena

Qualitative designs based on interviews and other in-depth data-gathering procedures provide exciting, nimble, and useful research approaches.

For many of us, the question has been how to choose between approaches and how to learn the various methods. Many previous descriptions of the various qualitative methods were not clear enough, making it difficult for novice researchers to learn how to use them.

If it piques your interest, you should learn with me

Learn about how to conduct qualitative research that requires such delicate, concise and thorough descriptions of its approach,

As the canvas is painted before your eyes learn how by example how to use these methods.

Autoethnography differs from other types of qualitative research.

Autoethnography is an academic genre that draws on and analyses or interprets the author's lived experience and connects researcher insights to self-identity, to cultural rules and resources, to

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

communication practices, and traditions, to premises and symbols, to rules and shared meanings, to emotions and values, to larger social, cultural, and political issues.

Find the auto ethnography data collecting tools and use them well

Participant observation, interviews, conversational engagement, focus groups, narrative analysis, artefact analysis, archival research, journaling, field notes, thematic analysis, description, context, interpretation, and storytelling

Then create a masterfully painted narrative that will evoke and capture lived experiences of your subjects.

Most autoethnographers use a multipronged, layered, hybrid approach to research social phenomena and craft compelling narratives about human social or cultural phenomena, drawing on various methodological tools common in qualitative inquiry.

As Anthropologists set out into the world in the middle of the nineteenth century to study and write about “exotic” or “primitive” cultures.

They pioneered the practice of ethnography,

They observed, documented, and systematically analyzed people and their cultural practices

Then illustrated in their findings a systematic interpretation of culture that deepened understanding of the subject's lifeworld.

Early ethnographers provided naturalistic “realist tales” that emphasized objectivity (Van Maanen, 1988). These trailblazers recognized and wrestled with the issue of how to render

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

textual accounts that provide clear, accurate, and rich descriptions of others' cultural practices.

Observing events from the perspective of an outsider looking in on the scene was a common approach among early ethnographers.

It was clear that the locals were aware of — and adjusting to — the presence of these “outsiders.” As serious questions arose about the possibility and legitimacy of offering purely objective accounts of cultural practices, traditions, symbols, meanings, premises, rituals, rules, and other social engagements, the idea of writing about the researcher's experience as though they were actors on stage, playing out their scene.

After all aren't all qualitative researchers human actors playing out a story

Interpreting responses to unfolded events.

Playing their role as expected being neutral or objective “scientific” observers.

Yet still, being human autoethnographers can we listen, view and experience cultural and historical premises, rules, and backgrounds

These firsthand tales and not be inextricably impacted or influenced?

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

### 1.8 My Noetic Space

<https://youtu.be/OjCPsr-TjKA>

As I cuddle into my noetic space, I envision my future institutions.

I view pedagogies and the revolution of the classroom.

The revolution of knowledge delivery that seeks to inspire students  
and evoke original thought.

Can we as educators nurture young minds that will make an indelible mark on society?

Can we really be inclusive and wholistic in our approach?

We would need an inclusive curriculum, developed by each expert within their field.

Teachers

The Community

Counsellors

Students

Parents

Include all those that can ensure the classroom becomes a space that is culturally inclusive,  
emotionally supportive and learning inspired.

What is next?

A meeting? Yes, a meeting to ensure cohesive thought and an effective  
plan to move forward.

Establish goals and objectives geared towards partnering with our children to  
ensure all voices are raised and all minds will be identified

Silencing the minority is not an option.

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

Ooh, this is going to be great!

I can just envision it now; red, orange and purple cloaked students, in all their diverse glory  
strutting into the schoolyard,

Eager to learn in an environment that is retrofitted help them to grow.

Sharing the power and interchanging the role of teacher and student.

Inspiring transformatory learning.

Cementing each lesson with impacting stories that will illuminate  
and inspire students eager learn more.

Engaging their creativity and cultural diversity.

Moving away from mechanical learning processes.

And collaborating nature with the classroom.

Dream with me,

Dream out loud!

Share my vision with the world

Share my vision if you believe what I see

Or develop your own thought based on what is best for your own students

Help them see they are the authors of true change

Of true education

Say to your students:

*“Think out of the box, think freely, use your experiences and speak that I may see you.*

*Express your creativity, and share with your teacher, for you are the expert on how you will learn.*

*Teach that you may be taught.” For you are the reason we are here.*

Help your fellow teachers to share this vision, tell them to:

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

*“Be open to learning from your students, learn from their perspective. Be actively looking for new knowledge every day. Live by your philosophies and teach your students to do the same.*

*As early childhood educators, we should view ourselves as humble agents of empowerment.*

*“The Hand that rock the cradle rules the world”, we are impacting future minds, we are responsible for molding these minds with care. Positively impact the growth and development of these individuals regardless of race, gender, culture or language.*

*Respect the voice of your students, and cultivate the diversity of perspectives.*

*“Care is an invaluable commodity”.*

Allow your enthusiasm to grow with each thought.

Consider the social, economic and cultural capital I would need to male this dream a reality.

And make it happen.

If it can be dreamt

It can be a reality

Dare to dream grand dreams

Dare to move away for normalcy and into spaces of innovation

If you do, you give your students permission to do the same.

Thus giving your students permission to excess despite race, culture, or accessibility.

Each can succeed, we just need to teach them its okay.

If you don’t, they will learn in other spaces

Because learning no longer only takes place in the classroom.

Today, knowledge is everywhere, in every way.

Your job is to give your students the tools they need to learn how to learn,

So they can chase knowledge and siphon what they need to know

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

To get to where they want to be.

And since “things only have the value, you place on them”.

This paradigm shift will place true power into the hands of our children

Where they can transform not just their future, but ours

For the better.

The traditional ways of teaching served its purpose,

It's time to adjust accordingly.

Innovation starts with having a problem with the problem.

It all becomes possible in a noetic space.

### 1.9 Power

<https://youtu.be/UGbafYkarO8>

What is power I ask myself.

Is it who holds authority? Or who dictates authority

Am I in control of my own self, my own thoughts, my own feeling, my own learning, my own self?

Or am I just a puppet, a short green Muppet

Made to follow a leader I can no longer see,

To Become just the reflection of copied behavior

Behaviour learnt from the hegemonic powers that be.

Power disguised as autonomy when the choice has already been made.

Power

Power

## **Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

Power

When I think of power

Is it just the teacher I see in front of me?

Or am I the power

is the power inside of me,

Can I take and taste and feel and be,

Power,

The power that takes and takes and takes and takes,

how can I know that I am truly being me?

They call me disruptive.

Me a student that is just hyperactive,

Moving away from the mold preset to detect abnormality.

Not realizing that the abnormal is the beginning of eye opening anti oppression.

How is it that I see

yet you do not,

everyone else around me conforming, and learning and knowing and being,

but me, not me,

I see, I know, dream, I think, and I grow.

Is it just me?

Should I just follow the majority, who is afraid to face reality?

The system is a joke

set out to teach conformity, to a system for the dead.

Lauren Hill Correct in her words echoing thoughts Paulo Freire would never dread.



**Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

Breathless, lifeless, mindless, thoughtlessness

From one who holds the true power?

What does that look even like?

Me alone sitting in a classroom, everyone conforming but me.

Why won't anyone listen to me?

All I need is someone to hear me

Let us have a conversation, isn't discourse what we are supposed to be promoting,

Mother hear me, teacher hear me

My point of view does not have to be in your rear view.

Foucault says it constitutes knowledge when discourse appears regularly and persistently.

Hear me I say!

Learn from me as I take to thought what you have imparted.

Let us usher in a new dialogical culture that seeks to edify truth

rather than mirror thought

Aren't children meant to express themselves

Freely and especially at the risk of being wrong.

For only through seeing my words can you see my mind

And only through seeing my mind can you know me

I don't reject your values, practices and beliefs,

I only seek to question every jot and tittle

Don't judge me based on your preconceived notions of who I am,

see me as empowered and teach me to be an empowered being

As I grow stage to stage

## Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account

Childhood into adulthood,  
 Help me to change  
 or should I just stay the same.  
 Power,  
 What you fail to see,  
 Is the rebel inside of me  
 Not fitting that mold of hegemonic structures  
 But nurturing spaces for authentic heuristic thinking  
 Will you continue to insist I follow as you lead?  
 Or will you share the power with me,  
 So, we may grow strong together,  
 Learning from each of our imperfections  
 Even if it is a bother.

### 1.10 (Song) Who Says

<https://youtu.be/mdsMbSQKMzU>

#### Vs. 1

Who says the world is dying?  
 Who says our hearts are crying?  
 Who chooses to break us and tear us apart?  
 Taking away our rights to restart  
  
 Who says to dream when night comes?  
 Who says a star should shine?

**Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

My dreams are faded, mistakes have replaced them

With nowhere for me to hide

**Cho:**

I've got so much in me to give

This is a place I have to live

If change is to come, it must come from me

When you can stand and give a hand

It matters not who or how or when,

Someone may choose to stay, cause of the stand you give today.

**Vs. 2**

Who makes the rules we live by?

What future do you choose?

Step up, look around, what can you see?

The hopes, the goals, the dreams in me

But who says to dream when night comes?

Who says a star should shine?

My dreams are faded, mistakes have replaced them

With nowhere for me to hide

**Cho:**

**Disrupting Disadvantage: An Autoethnographic Account**

I've got so much in me to give

This is a place I have to live

If change is to come, it must come from me

When you can stand and give a hand

It matters not who or how or when,

Someone may choose to stay, cause of the hand you give today.

**Bridge:**

Walk with me on this journey

I got you and you've got me

Don't lose focus and of your identity

Remember just who you are and then, you'll be free.

**Cho:**

You've got so much in you to give

This is a place we all have to live

If change is to come, it must come from me

When we can stand and give a hand

It matters not who or how or when,

Someone may choose to stay, cause of the hand you give today

Some may choose to stay, cause of the hand we give today.