



storied lives

addressing intergenerational tension in black families
through creative reflection and storytelling

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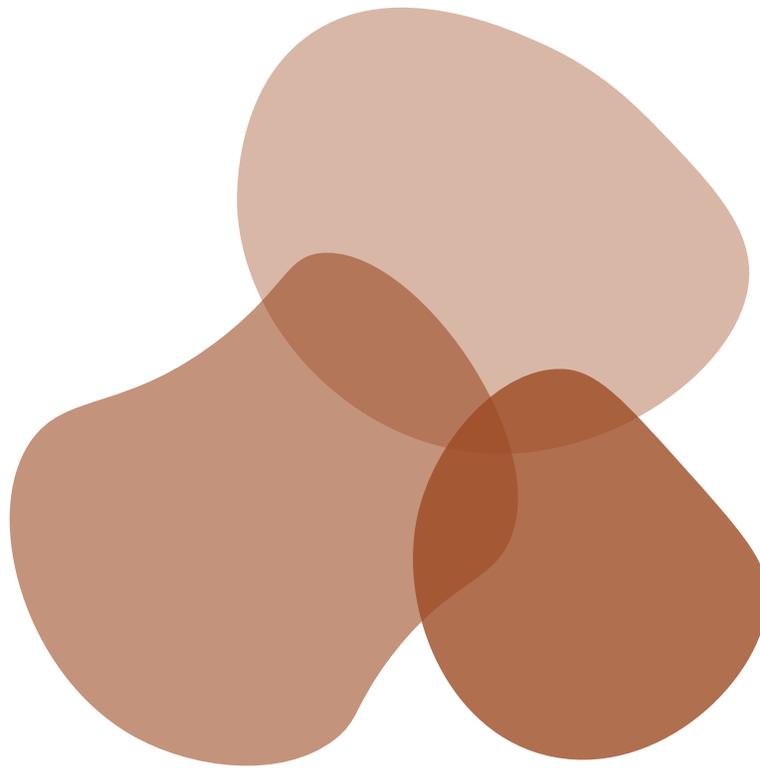
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context + framing

Sometimes, social design challenges don't scream loudly for attention - but rather exist just below the surface, influencing our interactions on a subtle yet powerful level. The complex systems we exist within create a tangled web of connection to our environments, and to ourselves.

Since, and well before, the founding of our nation, the black body has existed within a mode of duality. Simultaneously valued for its ability to produce, and devalued in its humanity; revered for its strength, and admonished for its vulnerability; its natural proclivity towards creativity simultaneously appropriated, and deemed "unacceptable". WEB DuBois talks about the "double consciousness"¹ we hold, and wondered about "the real question: how does it feel to be a problem?"²

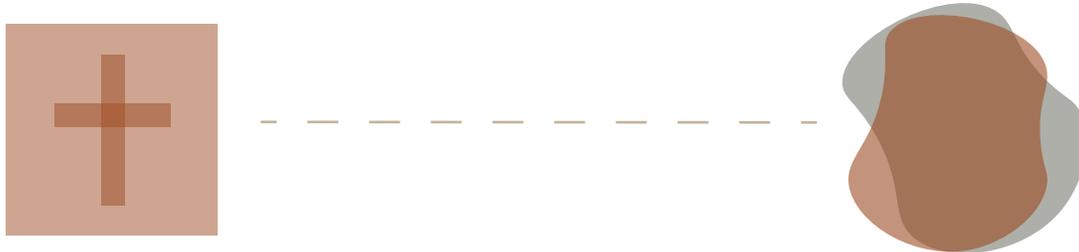
The black body as a collective has endured: in both forms of the word, as to "suffer (something painful or difficult) patiently" as well as to "remain in existence; last."



The collective black body has been forced to endure unspeakable trauma. Research is starting to uncover how trauma can be stored in a person's DNA³, and passed down to future generations. So that the societal effects of our nation's history are not only real, but present. Beyond the drastic ongoing economic impact and a historical lack of access to the "American dream" - black bodies are infused with the struggles of our ancestors. We must contend with the sins of the past on a genetic level, while still navigating a society that reinforces those traumas in real time.

In addition to the scientific, genetic realities of trauma, our family structures have formed in a way to both protect us from the challenges of navigating the world in black skin, and prepare us for them. Our familial relationships are often fraught with words unspoken. Stories that we are not allowed to hear, or to tell. We keep secrets to create the illusion of normalcy in a world that would have us believe our very existence makes us “other”. We recreate the structures of power and violence that we have endured generationally, in our own homes. We use the dominant culture of whiteness as a benchmark for our own beauty, and worth.

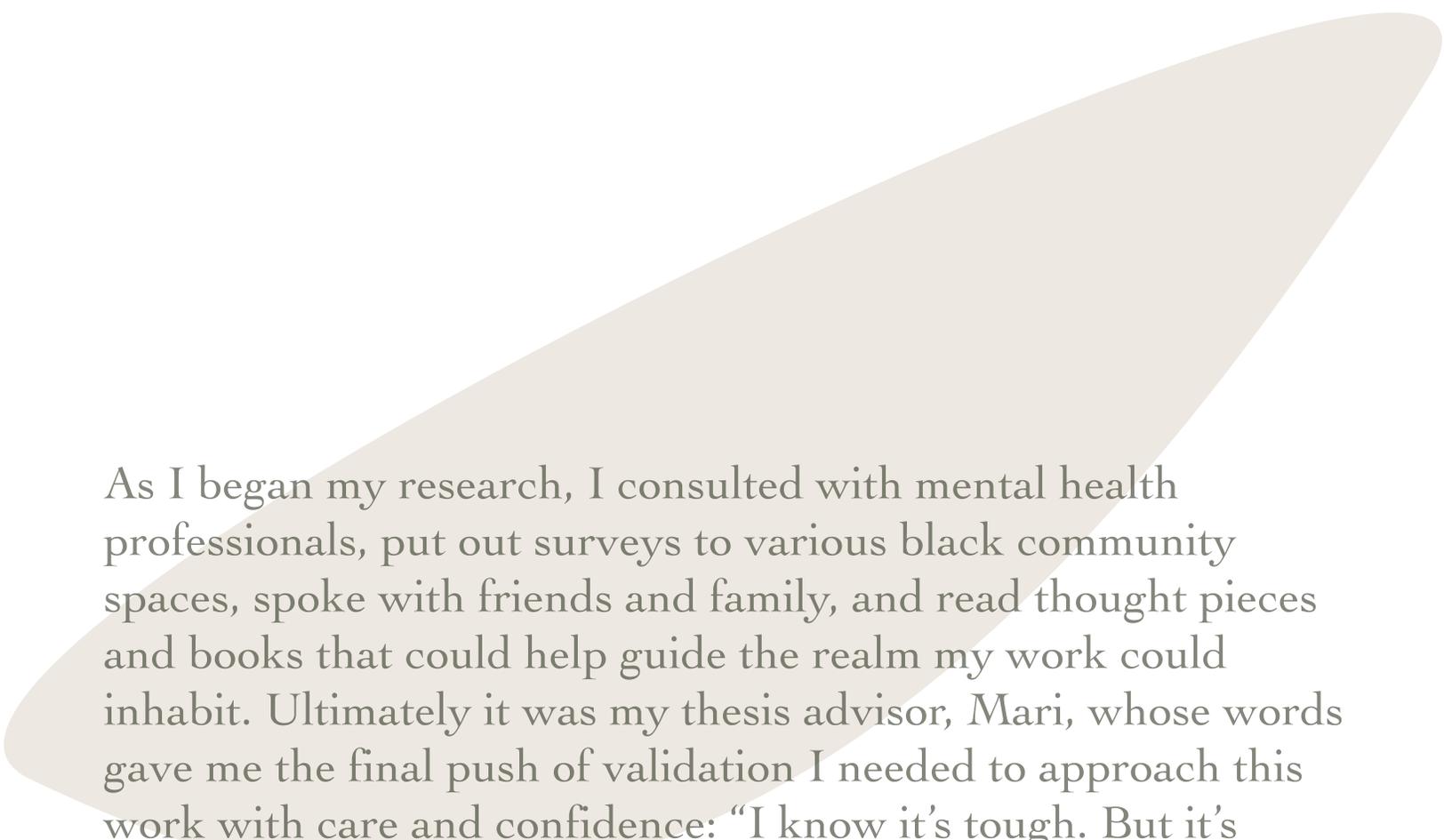
For some, we seek validation through academic and economic institutions where we can prove our value within the structures that society has deemed appropriate. But ultimately, those spaces weren't ever really built for us and are often inadequately prepared to care for us. In those spaces, our lived experiences become a footnote, a piece of the story that we are asked to switch on and off for the comfort of those around us. And again, we see this duality. The understanding that we must inhabit two ways of being at once. That tension can manifest in a multitude of ways, most often in our relationships within families.



Historically, religious institutions have often been spaces for the collective black body to rest, heal, and express the frustrations that inhabit our minds and hearts. Black churches and mosques provide much needed respite from the exhausting, performative nature of our existence. However, that respite often existed within hierarchical, patriarchal and dominance-based structures and that created interactions which, for many, deepened existing traumas and created new ones. So, younger generations have begun to move away from these traditionally religious spaces.⁴ This break in tradition and away from those ideological foundations not only causes tension between relationships, but also creates a missing component to the systems that promote racial healing.

In reflecting on all of this over the course of my time as a first-year graduate student, I struggled, for a number of reasons, with the idea of addressing the topic for my thesis. As one of only two black students in my program, I grappled with the fear of tokenizing myself. Worse, I worried about creating a project that would only validate the assumption behind DuBois' question: "how does it feel to be a problem?", by potentially unintentionally centering blackness as a problem to be solved by a social design process. I was concerned about making it seem like blackness was a monolithic experience that was inherently net negative.





As I began my research, I consulted with mental health professionals, put out surveys to various black community spaces, spoke with friends and family, and read thought pieces and books that could help guide the realm my work could inhabit. Ultimately it was my thesis advisor, Mari, whose words gave me the final push of validation I needed to approach this work with care and confidence: “I know it’s tough. But it’s important. And if you don’t do this work here, who will?”

As I dug in, I made a realization that helped to propel the rest of my process: my hesitation to approach this work stemmed from my own internalized struggle with the legitimacy and validity of the personal, lived experiences of black folks as a necessary dataset in academic research. I had to decolonize my own understanding of the types of systems that social design and academic research should focus on, and how that focus should manifest.

how might we utilize
trauma-informed
practices to design a
space for black folks to
address intergenerational
tension and racial trauma
through creativity,
network building and
resource sharing?

research process

My research approach to this work was multifaceted. I used a combination of desk research, 1:1 conversations, books and articles, and my own lived experience to help shape the direction of my project. My goal with the research phase was to ensure that I had as much background information as possible to form a relevant, trauma-informed foundation for my proposed interventions.

20+

hours of primary research (interviews, surveys, 1:1 conversations)

100+

hours of secondary research (research studies, books, media)

3

mental health professionals consulting

72

participants in interviews, questionnaires, and probes

HIGHLIGHTS

DESK RESEARCH

Academic research and studies around mental health, racial trauma, family structures and community building

Readings on **trauma-informed healing practices**

First-person accounts in the form of **existing interviews and stories**

BOOKS

“Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory & Identity in Black America Since 1940” by Jonathan Scott Holloway

“Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity” by Ronn Eyerman

“African Americans in the Making of the Atlantic World” by John Thornton

The Art of Peace with John Paul Lederach

How to Love a Country with Richard Blanco

An Invitation to Brave Spaces with Jennifer Bailey and Lennon Flowers

PODCASTS

MENTAL HEALTH CONSULTING

Michael Dulchin, MD

Jeasha Ramsay, LMSW

Elisabeth J. LaMotte, LICSW

As part of my research, I wanted to see what other designers, practitioners, and community members were doing in the space. I attended a number of workshops around trauma, healing, storytelling and creative practice to gain a better understanding of the work that was already being done, and to begin to build a community of people to engage with my work.

HIGHLIGHTS

Spoken Black Girl: Healing Through Writing Workshop

Exploring personal stories through creative writing and fellowship with black women.

Black Power Synesthesia with Ari Melenciano

Explored the historical and cultural implications of musical practice in black communities. Investigated the cultural value that gets lost when we don't have a full context of the history.

Tethered: A Dialogue about Intergenerational Trauma

Understanding the mental health implications of intergenerational trauma with Ieasha Ramsay, LMSW.

Photoville NYC

This annual community gathering features public exhibitions, virtual online storytelling events, artist talks, workshops, demonstrations, educational programs, and community programming.

This work deeply personal, and spans across multiple aspects of our lives. I began gathering quotes, insights, thoughts, and concepts that helped me to see the big picture, and also start to narrow my focus on what part I could play in facilitating something new.

"We tend to think about care as an individual thing - but how do you take care of yourself in community?"

-Sloan Leo

Who owns our narratives? How can we reclaim them? Owning our own stories creates validation of our lived experience. Our stories are worthy of being told.

How might we work to decolonize our understanding of our place in the historical narrative?

"Every story begins inside a story that's already begun by others. Long before we take our first breath, there's a plot underway, with characters and a setting we did not choose, but which were chosen for us."

-Richard Blanco

"Most people of color play a balancing act when advocating for ourselves and our children. We straddle the line between finding a space to speak openly about injustice and trauma, and guarding ourselves so that our experiences and our grief aren't turned into racial tropes. We proceed with caution, lest our stories be stripped of empathy and subsequently used against us. There are consequences of vulnerability."

-Marvi Lacar

audience

Initially, my target audience was black millennials living in New York City. As I began to prototype interventions, I discovered that this work actually benefits from addressing a broader audience scope. The interplay between generations, and people in various types of relationships, are important components to building a full and relevant set of tools to address healing.

Ultimately, my work has engaged black folks across multiple generations, geographies, and life experiences.

prototypes

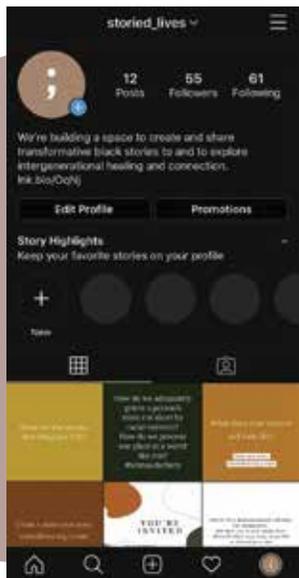


Conversation Toolkit

A set of curated activities to create space for conversation in multi-generational families

Safe Space // Brave Space Workshop

A 3-hour group session exploring and developing personal narratives through creative practice.



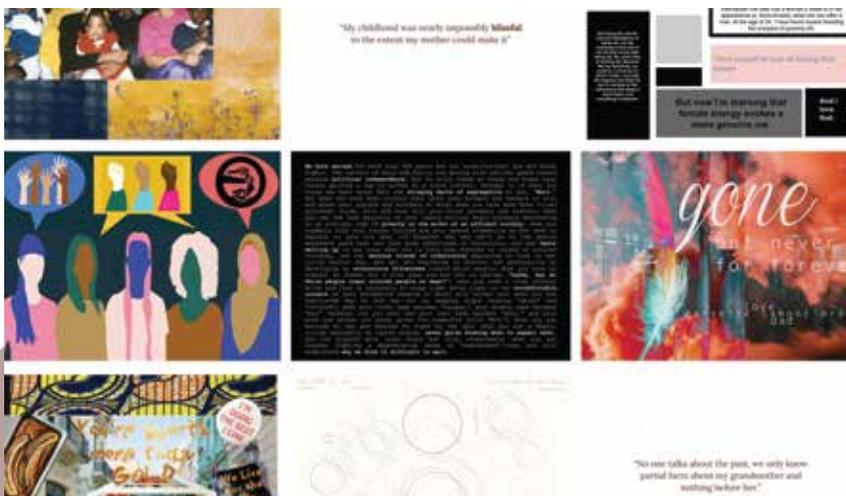
Storied Lives Instagram Community

A space to start conversations, share insights and resources, and engage with the community in real time. For black history month, I used the “stories” feature as a probe activity to gather stories and create connections.



storiedlives.org

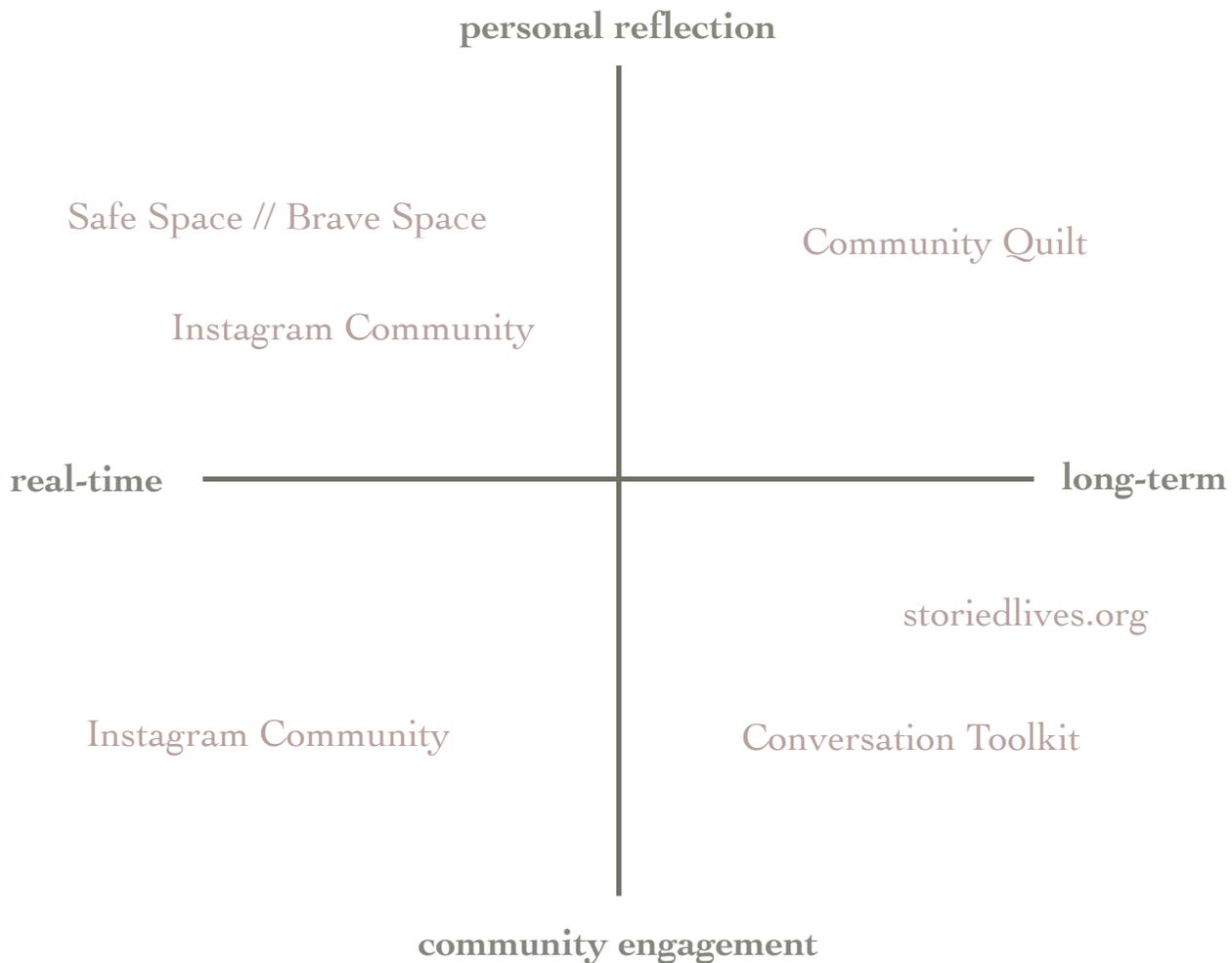
A digital space to create, share, and engage with personal and community narratives. This will also become a space to share and receive resources.



Community Quilt

A digital "quilt" made up of squares designed by community members to reflect a piece of their stories. This is an ongoing project that continues to collect stories (either using provided prompts or individual reflection) to grow the quilt.

Designing and deploying these prototypes served several purposes: they provided valuable insights that helped me refine future iterations, they presented opportunities for participants to engage with the work of healing through creative process and reflection, and they created a starting point for the development of a longer-term community.



intervention

The ultimate goal for this project was to design the foundation for a community of ongoing sharing and healing through creative processes.

I have developed a community system within which I will continue to utilize storytelling as a collective care intervention. This community is interactive, self-reflective, and committed to an ongoing process of healing. We use trauma-informed practices to engage with our personal narratives, and those of our families and communities in order to cultivate a space of care, where folks are able to interrogate and solidify the stories that shape their experiences.

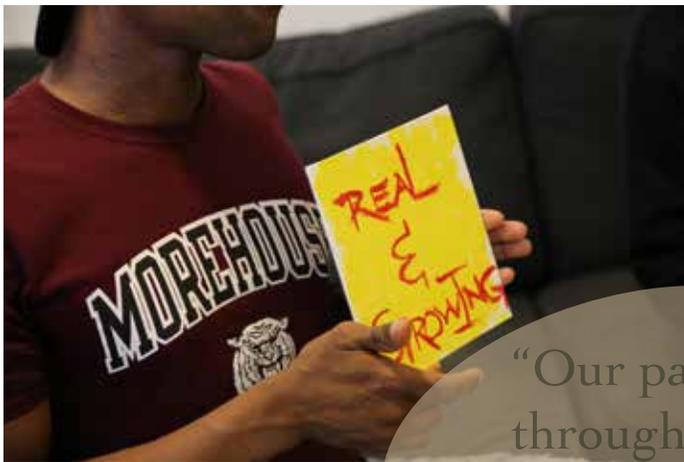
While I am the facilitator of the community, the continuation of this work is a collective experience. I have used research processes to develop the framework for the community, but its continued success will be centered on co-creation.

This work has developed into a practice which I hope will add to the broader landscape of the burgeoning equity design space.



“I love that we are creating our own mental and emotional wellness which we can hopefully pass back to older generations and pass forward to the next ones.”

-Storyed Lives Community Member



“Our parents and their parents got through it by being tough, so we feel like we’re not allowed to be weak. Talking about this stuff with other people who are living it too is like a breath of fresh air and helps me think about how to express my feelings to my family”

-Safe Space // Brave Space workshop participant

conclusions + next steps

This process has highlighted how little research exists on the effects of generational trauma on future generations. I hope that this work can grow into a model for a more widespread conversation on lived experience and story as important pieces of data that can inform the way we think about research initiatives related to mental and physical health.

I have been so inspired by the work of art therapy, crafting and creative healing groups that have formed as a way to facilitate healing. Creative practice is the foundation of my work because it is both deeply connected to our history, and vastly underutilized as an approach to healing in our community. I see creative processes and storytelling as a way to bridge the gap between older generations who often discount the positive effects of therapy, and younger generations who are seeking ways to focus on their mental health.

The next steps for this community are vast. I have been in touch with several community partners who are interested in developing more workshops, toolkits and resources to continue to facilitate this work. Storiedlives.org will serve as the community hub, and will continue to grow as the community does.

notable mentions + thanks

These are a few of the fantastic organizations and individuals whose work has impacted the development of this project.

Ethel's Club (www.ethelsclub.com)

A community designed for intention, healing, and creation

Spoken Black Girl Publishing (www.spokenblackgirl.com)

Champions mental health awareness and holistic wellness in communities of color, breaking stigmas and giving a voice to women of color who wish to share their journeys as a force for empowerment and inspiration.

Denise Shante Brown (www.denishantebrown.com)

Holistic design strategist, mental health advocate, and creative healer whose lifework centers the wellbeing and brilliance of Black womxn and folx who hold marginalized identities. Wholeheartedly and with no apologies.

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Denise Shante Brown

Alyson Fraser-Diaz

Mari Nakano

Miya Osaki

Ieasha Ramsay

Sloan Leo

citations + further reading

¹<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-consciousness/>

²<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1897/08/strivings-of-the-negro-people/305446/>

³<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psyched/201909/the-epigenetics-childhood-trauma>

⁴<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/11/03/454063182/poll-finds-americans-especially-millennials-moving-away-from-religion>

Photo essay on the power of storytelling for black Americans

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_telling_our_own_story_is_so_powerful_for_black_americans

Black Citizenship Project

<https://ds4si-test.squarespace.com/interventions/2016/7/25/black-citizenship-project>

Black History Library

<https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/0Bz011IF2Pu9TUWIXVWxybGJ1Ync>

Black Storytelling - Victoria Taylor

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/diana-williams-mwm-universe-answers-your-storytelling-victoria-taylor/>