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## First Through the Black Glass Ceiling: Towards Understanding the Communication of Successful “First” Black Women of Martinsville

Dasha L. Dillard  
*Old Dominion University*, [ddill001@odu.edu](mailto:ddill001@odu.edu)

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**FIRST THROUGH THE BLACK GLASS CEILING: TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING  
THE COMMUNICATION OF SUCCESSFUL “FIRST” BLACK WOMEN OF  
MARTINSVILLE**

by

Dasha L. Dillard  
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Approved by:

Thomas J. Socha (Director)

Myles McNutt (Member)

Brendan O’Hallarn (Member)

## ABSTRACT

### FIRST THROUGH THE BLACK GLASS CEILING: TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE COMMUNICATION OF SUCCESSFUL “FIRST” BLACK WOMEN OF MARTINSVILLE

Dasha L. Dillard  
Old Dominion University, 2024  
Director: Dr. Thomas J. Socha

The present study investigated the communication Black women ‘firsts’ of Martinsville, Virginia received and how resilience is communicated throughout one’s lives. Seven Black women who once worked or lived in Martinsville, Virginia were interviewed to discover the resilience themes through their professional lives and how resilience was a factor in how these women became ‘firsts’ in their respective fields. The study's findings show that certain personality and communication traits define and equip Black women to succeed and overcome adversities in today’s society. Furthermore, women who exhibited personality qualities such as assertiveness, faith, rebellion, and self-preservation and communication qualities such as assimilation, confronting micro-aggression, countering, pacification, and educating were able to succeed.

Keywords: *Racism, Perseverance, Trailblazer, Success, Black Women, Martinsville, Virginia, Systemic, Structural*

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I want to dedicate my thesis to God, my grandparents, my mother, and my close friend Tracy Ann Harmer. Thank you, Mom, for always believing in me. Thank you, Granny, for introducing me to my greatest love which is literature. Thank you, Papa, for assisting me in my initial research stages and sharing your unique experiences with me, may your soul rest in peace. Finally, Tracy Ann, thank you for assisting me with every question and establishing confidence whenever doubt reared its ugly head. Thank you, God, for blessing me with the ability to express my thoughts eloquently and bring my work to life.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM

To be the “first” is to be a pioneer, a conqueror, and a potential victor. To carve one’s name in stone, into the history of a village, city, state, country, and the world is a transcendent honor. We revere and remember prominent firsts like the first African American President. But from a lifespan perspective, firsts happen in all areas of society and everyday life: like the first doctor in a small town, the first to open a business in a community, or even the first to attend college from a family. Whether known by many or few, firsts occupy special positions across the lifespan as they set in motion patterns and open opportunities for those who follow and are thus important to study for many reasons. Of course, being first is not easy. Firsts face many obstacles. Many first women, for example, have ascended the ladders of power only to reach clear glass ceilings, where they can see goals that are just out of their reach. Many more continue to reach glass ceilings and hopefully will continue to break through. For African American women, encountering “black” glass ceilings makes it additionally difficult to even see what might be on the other side, let alone breakthrough. However, to be the first African American to break through in any white-dominated context is to demonstrate special resiliency, perseverance, and tenacity to propel the purpose of every mission for people of color. For black women in particular to decimate black glass ceilings requires confronting historically racist as well as patriarchal fronts.

Understandably, the “firsts” to occupy any role in any context experience many difficulties. Uncharted territories and experiences are harder to anticipate and rocky to navigate. Firsts must be remarkable enough to surpass those who have not had the opportunity or create the opportunity to be first. "Firsts" represents awesome monuments to the human

experience. Each first holds a special place in the very foundation of human life. The birth of a firstborn, for example, encompasses the beginning of a family. The first school graduation inspires the excitement for the next level of accomplishment for a child. Just like a child's first steps, they later grow into a teenager's first love and experience a first kiss. Such sweetness and innocence can melt your heart and break it. There are many firsts because each day someone is achieving a great feat that no one else has accomplished yet.

Small or large, pivotal first moments inspire each generation to continue building onto the fabric of our communities and world. On a big stage, and although controversial, if it was not for Christopher Columbus being an early first to reach America in 1492, how long would it have taken for “America” to be established? The Wright Brothers were first into flight; to create the first airplane (“The Wright Brothers, n.d) that later allowed Amelia Earhart in 1932 (Hartman, 2023) to complete the first transatlantic flight by a woman. Before Amelia, no woman had ever accomplished this great feat. It is imperative to also recognize the first woman to become a member of President Roosevelt’s presidential cabinet, Frances Perkins (Tate, n.d), as well as the first Black Vice president of the United States of America, Kamala Harris, who was elected in 2020 (Mcnamee, 2023). As individuals grow into adults and begin to navigate careers, being the first in a field blazes new paths for others to follow and inspires others to achieve even more. It doesn't matter whether a person is the first in a family to attend university, the first to break the glass ceiling, or a city's first Black vice mayor, every one of these individuals has a story that represents resiliency, or the ability to bounce back from adversity (for a discussion of resilience in the field of communication, see Beck & Socha, 2015). The field of communication needs to understand the communication of firsts not only to better understand how they used

communication to succeed but also to gain insights into the communication legacies that shape all who follow.

### **Challenges of “Firsts”**

Being first comes with challenges and obstacles. An example of a triumphant first is Ketanji Brown Jackson, the first Black woman to serve on the Supreme Court (Houck, 2023). Ketanji Brown Jackson was appointed as a Supreme Court Justice by President Joseph Biden on April 7th, 2022 (Houck, 2023). The Supreme Court was established in 1789 (uscourts.gov) and the first Black woman was appointed to the Supreme Court in 2022 (Bustillo, 2022). It took over 233 years to witness such a momentous honor. As expected, this did not come easy for Ketanji Brown Jackson. In comparison, for example, to the first woman on the Supreme Court, Sandra Day O’Connor, a white woman, Ketanji Brown Jackson encountered criticism and was handled poorly by her peers (Bowles et al., 2022). She faced ridicule and belittlement from elected officials, backlash from citizens, was labeled a token choice by a less favored president, and even faced an attempt by a controversial U.S senator to mock her intelligence during her confirmation hearing for the Supreme Court (Bowles et al., 2022). In contrast, Sandra Day O’Connor was appointed by President Ronald Reagan (Bowles et al., 2022), a controversial yet beloved president of the Republican Party. At the time of her appointment, it was a foreign occurrence to even consider a woman for the Supreme Court, especially one who reigned for feminist rights at the height of conservative patriarchal propaganda. Even though many were against her appointment in the Senate, she was treated with respect. As mentioned by Bowles et al., (2022) several southern senators voiced displeasure with Regan “in private and their objections centered on O’Connor’s views on Roe v. Wade” but her hearings were “were respectful and cordial” and “No one twisted her record into something it was not; their questions were relevant and

reasonable” (p. 51). As for Ketanji Brown Jackson, during her appointment, senators “twisted her record – repeating debunked lies about her sentencing history” (Bowles et al., 2022). Ketanji had a rougher path than Sandra Day O’Connor.

Many Black women have traversed various aspects of their lives and careers to be crowned the first to conquer. This should be considered all the more remarkable due not only to misogyny working against them in every facet of life, but racism as well. For Ketanji, this may be the biggest position she’s ever held, very far from her initial humble beginnings. Ketanji Brown Jackson was born in Washington D.C. in September 1970 to her parents Johnny and Ellery Brown (Houck, 2023). Coincidentally enough, Ketanji was the firstborn of two children, as she was born with an almost imponderable symbolic crown on her head. She was born to two public school teachers, and she attended public schools herself, with one being in Miami, Florida. Based on her history and resume, Ketanji was a very smart student and even excelled in her debate team in high school and became class president. She later studied at Harvard Law and obtained her bachelor’s and juris doctor degrees just four years apart. After finishing at Harvard University, she held many prestigious positions that led up to her Supreme Court appointment (Houck, 2023).

Young Ketanji could have never guessed that she would be on the Supreme Court at the age of 52, and looking back on her career span becoming class president in high school may have been an early flame that lit the match of her future. We all have our beginnings, and it is up to us to create our middle and end, fighting each obstacle along the way. However, we must confront challenges to attain a much greater triumph. In 2012, one obstacle Ketanji faced in her professional career was being passed over for a nomination for the federal district court of Washington D.C. by the Senate (Houck, 2023). Due to the Senate failing to vote in her favor, she

was not chosen (Houck, 2023). As this is a highly esteemed position, it had to be a true source of frustration not to be nominated or at all acknowledged due to differences in the parties of the senate. Luckily, Ketanji Brown Jackson did not give up, and she was confirmed by the Senate later in 2013 (Houck, 2023).

### **Communication and The Concept of “Firsts”**

Like all firsts, Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson faced obstacles throughout her turbulent career, and her true resilience and bravery speak to her ability to overcome. In a wider scope, through the lens of her journey, for example, we can begin to ask questions about what it takes to succeed as a first. And, more to the main point of this MA thesis, what does the communication of firsts look like? What role does effective communication play in the success of firsts? And what do the communication legacies of firsts contain?

Undoubtedly, communication struggles and difficult communication are resonating themes among firsts. For example, in my own experience as a firstborn, Black woman who continues to traverse arduous and unfamiliar dominions like graduate studies, I struggle. Being a first seems to be defined by themes of perseverance and grit that trump continuous encounters with adversity. To further appreciate the sheer importance of the bigger picture of firsts, we must also appreciate smaller beginnings. Like Ketanji, I was the firstborn of my siblings. As the firstborn of three, it was not an easy ride. But as mentioned previously, being the first is never easy.

As for my story, I was raised by a young single Black mother who was also raised by a single Black mother who grew up in Martinsville, Virginia. In terms of obstacles, all African Americans encounter racism, and the first time doing so is often long-remembered and can shape future behaviors. My first recalled encounter with racism was at a state fair in Salem, Virginia. I

was lost in the crowd of the fair stalls and rides, trying to locate my family through the chaos. As I was frantically running to my family, I accidentally nudged an older white woman. Before I could apologize, the older woman called me a “nigger” for the very first time in my life. At the young age of six, I could not believe I was called that, but I also was confused as to what it meant and why I was called that. I was taught by my elders that it was a bad word and that my ancestors worked very hard to remove me from that negative side of American culture. Sadly, all African Americans have similar stories of their first encounters with racism that undoubtedly affected them. Do “firsts” recall and manage their first and undoubtedly many encounters with racism differently than others who come after them?

Although this was my first experience of overt racism, it was not my last. As I grew older, I became even more privy to covert racism and microaggressions as early as elementary and middle school. I attended a predominately Black elementary school zoned in the historically segregated Black area of Martinsville. The area and school have been viewed historically by Martinsville residents as inferior to the predominately white area and elementary school on the other side of town. While attending this school, my mother, a single mother, could not pick me up from the bus stop after her work shift. So, I had to join the Boy’s and Girl’s Club to care for me until she could pick me up. One day, my classmates and I were walking down the hall to the gym and were being a bit loud. As we were walking, a white teacher slammed her door open and yelled at us, “You don’t need to be this loud! Your parents did not pay that little bit of money for you all to do what you want if they paid for it at all!” Even at such a young age, I knew what she said was not appropriate to say to a child. This specific teacher had a reputation for being insensitive and prejudiced throughout her teaching career, as that was not my only instance of direct and indirect aggression from her.

These memorable messages resonate with me to this day decades later. “Memorable messages are stored in the brain’s long-term memory, can have a major impact on behavior, and tend to be selected when they hold emotional significance and/or practical relevance in a given situation” (Zenteno, 2020, p. 1). Back as a young child accosted by this educator and experiencing the feelings of the messages of hurt prompted me to remember it vividly. As written by Zenteno (2020), “Yet the biological, behavioral, and attitudinal reaction to memorable messages identifies their unique set of characteristics as consistently and coherently distinct” (pp. 2 – 3). Thus, although everyone stores memorable messages, I am wondering if “firsts” may store in them their autobiographic memories differently and use them differently than others.

One of my most memorable instances of overt racism was the time in high school when I was suspended. I was involved in a disagreement with another student on the same day my high school was being visited by State Superintendents and Superintendents of the Martinsville Public Schools. I was brought into the office of the Vice Principal, who was a Black woman. She consoled me and promptly asked if I had submitted all the required documentation to my intended universities before this conflict occurred. She asked this because a suspension on my record could harm my chances of being admitted to universities. As I began to answer her, the principal walked in, a White woman, and began to berate me. She did this when my mother was not present. She berated an injury I received on my face. She told me I was a terrible child and that I embarrassed her in front of the board. She then said, “I’m going to look at your record, and if you have any priors, I will make sure you will not graduate on time, and you will not make it to your graduation.” The vice principal did not like the principal’s tone, choice of words, or approach, but said nothing. It is now seven years later as I write this, and I still think about this moment often. Her choosing to speak the words “record” and “priors”—the language of

criminality—was intentional, methodical, and an egregious instance of racism and aggression. To assume that I had “priors” and to try to prevent me from participating in a pivotal and public teenage experience damaged my respect for the principal even further. Even before this instance, I was aware of stories about this principal antagonizing other Black students in the school, especially those with behavioral and academic struggles. According to Zenteno (2020), “The circumstances that typically elicit memorable messages are those that challenge the individual with new and demanding situations” (p. 5). I am of course not the first “first” to experience this kind of racist aggression, but this is commonplace among black sisterhood.

The firsts of anything are not spared any tribulation, as depending on how it is stored in memory and later used, it may help prepare us for much greater heights and challenges. I did indeed graduate from Martinsville High School in 2016 with an advanced High School Diploma. I went on to Old Dominion University and graduated with my undergraduate degree with a Cum Laude honors distinction in 2020. However, during my undergraduate days, I landed my first position at a predominately white organization in Norfolk, Virginia. I was the only Black woman on their staff, and the first Black woman in the position. After a while, I noticed that during our hosted meetings of the industries in the area, I was not acknowledged or recognized by more than half of the staff or regular visitors. One coworker attempted to introduce me to one of the industry leaders, and he quickly pushed the introduction to the side when he said, without looking up from his phone, “I’ve already seen her before.” As he stood there in a tattered work shirt and a long beard with a black muted American flag hat, he seemed annoyed that I was even there. When I later expressed my concerns to my immediate supervisor, she hushed me away and told me he didn’t talk much. At every meeting, I watched him shake everyone’s hand and build rapport but would never approach me in such a manner.

Over the months, I received the same treatment from my supervisor, when I was pulled into a meeting about my face appearing aggressive, my smile wasn't big enough, and my threatening appearance whenever a coworker approached my desk. I tried to express that by pointing these out to me I perceived them as microaggressions and this made me highly uncomfortable. But I was told, "tut tut, this is not the point of this meeting." Being ostracized due to racism is damaging to the psyche of those on the receiving end and caused me to resign from the position. Before I resigned, I met with my supervisor for a solution and to establish common ground, but when I shared my perspective, she blushed and started pacing backward, shouting, "We can wait for HR. I'm not doing this!" This response would have been expected if I were aggressive or abrasive, but I was neutral and completely shocked to see her act as if I was just another "angry black woman." She used her false fear and tears that resulted in the meeting before the day I quit because of course my tears were nothing compared to a white woman's tears. Of course, Black women "face racial limitations resulting from differences in skin, hair, and body type compared to White women" (Donahoo, 2023, p. 597). Sadly, almost every Black woman whether a first or not, "faces oppression on her own without always knowing if she is suffering as a result of her race, sex, a combination of two, or some other factor that is unique to her" (Donahoo, 2023, p. 597). Despite these obstacles, I have continued to move forward. I was the first in my immediate family to attend a four-year university, as well as the first in my family to leave my hometown of Martinsville to pursue graduate study; and of course, the first to write a thesis about the communication of "firsts."

### **Communication Contexts of "Firsts"**

This discussion raises additional questions about the communication contexts in which firsts develop. Although I have not lived in Martinsville since 2016, I still visit frequently as it

still holds a special place in my heart. To be from Martinsville, especially as a Black woman, is to emanate resilience and perseverance. Martinsville has a unique history that provides an opportunity to gain insights into the role that geographic and historical contexts play in the development of all the firsts who rose to prominence there. Later, I will tell Martinsville's story in Chapter 2.

Understanding systemic exclusions and their impacts are critical first steps in understanding African Americans' abilities to cope, survive, and thrive amidst racialized and gendered policies, practices, and behaviors. A part of this understanding includes understanding the role that communication plays among "first" African Americans' rise to equality. The topic of First African Americans is of course not new, for example, there are accounts of the first African American baseball player, Jackie Robinson ("Play Ball! Paving the way for Jackie Robinson"), the First Black president, Barack Obama (Josey & Dixon, 2023), and even a first African American grocery store owner, John Gassett (Bayeck, 2023). However, until now, there has yet to be a study examining the communication of everyday African American women who are "firsts" across a variety of contexts including government, education, infrastructure, and local history all within a single township, as well as over time. Now that the problem of the communication of firsts has been introduced, in the next chapter, I examine past research literature of use in understanding the lifespan communication development of "firsts," specifically African American female firsts, and the role of geographic and historical contexts play.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this chapter, I begin to further explicate the concept of “firsts” through the lens of communication by reviewing biographical information and media coverage of Black firsts to identify common qualities and characteristics of individuals who were first as well as how the media communicated about them. In seeking to understand the communication of “firsts” comprehensively it is important to understand how they are seen and understood not only by firsts themselves but also how they are perceived across various socio-ecological levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) from the public to the personal. Second, in addition to media coverage of firsts, I draw on the concept of memorable messages (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981) to connect a form of interpersonal communication to individuals’ experiences of being first. That is, are their common memorable messages among firsts that shaped their development? What does the autobiographical communication landscape of firsts look like? Third, I consider the contexts where the communication development of these various firsts took place. This includes a close examination of the history of Martinsville, Virginia: the context for the exploratory study of autobiographical memories of seven Black women I will outline in Chapter 3.

#### **Common Qualities of Black Firsts**

Although the concept of firsts applies widely to many kinds of firsts including first-borns, first in a family to attend college, and so on that I discuss below, this thesis is particularly interested in first Black women's professional and academic experiences, including challenges such as intersectionality, identity, patriarchy, and representation. To begin to explicate the concept of firsts, I have chosen to begin with a review of a variety of famous firsts from various societal systems. Because it is not feasible to write comprehensively about all possible “firsts” in

a single MA thesis, I will instead discuss a sample of prominent firsts that I argue capture at least some of the many prominent shared qualities of firsts. I understand that in doing so I may be leaving out some prominent firsts but must leave it to future research to refine and augment my examination.

I will begin by focusing on African Americans and in particular a highly prominent first in the public sector. Framed positively, a “first” person in any societal category is someone who represents *newness* and *novelty*. For example, the first Black US President, Barack Obama, was elected in 2008 (Josey & Dixon, 2023). According to Ledwidge et al. (2013), “Obama’s election was historic because it contravened the idea that people of African descent were not competent enough to occupy the lofty office of the presidency” (p. 5). According to Stoll (2021, n.p), “Barack Obama's second Inaugural Address, which took place on January 21, 2013, attracted 20.55 million viewers across the United States. His first Inaugural Address was watched by significantly more people - almost 38 million and was the second most watched, after Ronald Reagan's 1981 address” (n. p.). Novelty played an important role because if he were the 10<sup>th</sup> Black president elected, and assuming no controversies, there would be considerably diminished public interest due in part to the simple lack of novelty (“been there, done that”). Not only was he the first Black US President but earlier in his career he was also “the first African American to serve as president of the *Harvard Law Review*” (Mendall & Wallenfeldt, 2024, n.p).

In addition to the quality of novelty, “firsts” represent various kinds of *challenges* to various levels of societal systems. According to Bartunek and Mock (1987; and see Diggs & Socha, 2023, pp. 1 – 2), changes take place at three levels. Level 1 (first order) change includes routine changes within a system. For example, individuals adapt to day-to-day changing weather conditions. Level 2 (second order) includes fundamental changes to how a system conducts

itself. Put in computer terms, for example, this would be changes made to actual operating systems. Finally, level 3 change refers to the willingness of the entire system to be open and willing to change itself as conditions and circumstances dictate. A first Black President (arguably at least a second-order change) presents changes and challenges to many societal levels all at once (from proximal to societal). That is, with Obama's election, many Americans believed, for example, "that the United States had attained its vision of equality for persons of color" (Josey & Dixon, 2023, p. 529). However, according to Josey and Dixon (2023, p. 531), Barack Obama continued to encounter the status quo of obscene racist comments and citizenship conspiracy theories specifically to continue the status quo and create doubts in voting Americans. To further demonstrate the strain in America, Ledwidge et al. (2013) stated that the "election unleashed a wave of Obama-related hate crimes and domestic terrorist incidents and spurred the growth of radical right movements" and "interest in joining hate and antigovernment groups soared, beginning in 2008" (p.80). Although it can be surmised that Obama was aware of the racial and distasteful comments about his family and heritage, it did not hinder him from changing and pursuing the presidency. According to DeVinney (2021), "The election of the United States' first black president came with a degree of uncertainty" [second order change] but the prowess, resilience, and his ability to use "visual strategies to "bring before the eyes" of his audience a progressive journey that culminated in the victory of the first black president" was phenomenal. Only could such a highly talented "first" address so many levels of societal change not the least of which was seeking to change preconceived notions of about race of a nation.

Another Black man who is an example of perseverance and trampling adversity is Guion Bluford, the first Black astronaut in the United States (Barr, 2019, n.p). Before Guion, many Blacks believed they would never reach space. For example, NASA and the flight to the moon

featured Neil Armstrong, as he “became the first person to set foot on the moon on July 20, 1969” (“Neil A. Armstrong”, n.p). Back then, few could have imagined that a Black man would be in space only 14 years later. Luckily, Bluford “was raised to believe that he could do anything he wanted despite racist social restrictions” (Levasseur et al., 2023, np). This highlights another important insight shared among firsts, that is, firsts seem to believe that change is possible and that they themselves can be agents of change. When such messages are heard in early lifespan communicating confidence and perseverance, they can be especially impactful. Drawing on inspiring words and encouragement from his family and peers pushed Bluford to continue his quest in engineering all the way to NASA. Eventually, Guion Bluford made history in 1983, when he became “the first African American in space, launching into low Earth orbit aboard the Space Shuttle Challenger” (Levasseur et al., 2023).

Turning to Black women, an important contemporary example of a societal first is Stacey Abrams. Stacey Abrams is currently one of the most well-known Black politicians in the US. She competed for the job of governor against Georgia Governor Brian Kemp in 2018. Although she did not win the election, her campaign left a permanent mark in the election history of Georgia and the United States. When Stacey Abrams “won the Democratic primary in that race, she became the first African American woman to receive a major party’s nomination for governor” as well as “becoming the first woman and first African American woman to hold positions in state and national politics” (Rothberg, 2020-2022, n.p). Stacey Abrams suggests another quality of firsts: “resilience.” Specifically, she comes from a family with a legacy of activism. Both her parents participated in the Civil Rights Movement, and as unconventional as it sounds, they had “family outings to the polls and outreach trips to prisons were frequent” (Rothberg, 2020-2022). Although it may appear that firsts may care about more than themselves

and advancing their causes, I speculate that firsts believe they are called to respond to higher callings as they care and contribute to their communities as Abrams did from an early age. She was raised by two parents who stressed the importance of education and pushed her to achieve her dreams as they raised their kids with a “you-can-be-anything mantra” (Rothberg, 2020-2022). She graduated valedictorian from her high school and magna cum laude from Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. With an activist history, during her time at Spelman, Stacey “led a protest against the Rodney King verdict and co-founded a group called the Students for African American Empowerment” (Rothberg, 2020 – 2022), and she also attended protests to change Georgia’s State flag, which until 2003 hosted an embedded confederate flag. As an adult, in 2006, Stacey was elected to the Georgia House and “became the House Minority leader—the first African American woman to do so in Georgia” (Rothberg, 2020 – 2022).

In 2018, Abrams lost her Governor’s race to Brian Kemp, but her race shed lots of light on voter suppression in the state of Georgia. It is believed that “Abrams’ loss was “centered around anti-Blackness and sizeism [people who weigh more than others] — among other factors related to the former candidates’ appearance and personal life — as opposed to her experience and promise” (Hoskin, 2022, n.p). When put in terms of the language of change, too much 2<sup>nd</sup> order change in a system reduces openness to third-order change. To further explain why Abrams may have lost the gubernatorial race, Hoskin (2022) wrote “Abrams represented “everything they feared most— a proverbial boogeyman, with a loosey-goosey crime policy, who was determined to raise their taxes and forever destroy their way of life” (n.p). Further evidence of resisting change, Abrams needed to spend \$1.4 million on private security to protect herself, because “after she started Fair Fight in 2019, that’s when she said the threats skyrocketed, requiring her to hire private security” (Starr, 2022, n.p). After losing, her key

mission remained to end voter suppression and to get people out to the polls to bring about change. Stacey remained persistent, regardless of losing. She felt there was still work to be done. Today, Stacey Abrams continues to make waves in the US's political landscape and is an example of a trailblazer and a true testament to perseverance. "Firsts" hold a significant place in history and pop culture, and inspire future generations that Black women can break the dreaded glass ceiling. It is clear that another quality of being "first" is seeking (and succeeding) to create fundamentally new operating systems, which in the case of Abrams benefits future generations of black girls.

Another Black woman who was a considerable societal "first" is first lady, Michelle Obama. Michelle became the first Black first lady on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009. To most Americans, Michelle "stepped in front of the nation and changed the criteria for who can be a first lady" (Natalle & Simon, 2015, p. 3). Michelle Obama is "introduced first by profession, then as the wife of the president, then as a 'first' among first ladies" (Natalle & Simon, 2015, p. 5), completely upholding the importance of being a trailblazer of any kind. A common theme throughout this thesis is that "firsts" often face many kinds and extents of adversities throughout their journeys to bring about change. Like her husband, Michelle suffered from racist encounters. As mentioned by Natalle and Simon, (2015) Michelle would be subject to "conservative media messages that insult, vilify, and denigrate Michelle Obama because she is African American" (p. 6). But, like other firsts, she displayed resiliency, and "ignore[d] the racism in her public communication and to press her multiple agendas forward with enthusiasm and high energy" (Natalle & Simon, 2015, p. 6). Many consider Michelle "not the ordinary first lady we have come to expect as a supporter of the president" but so much more as her own identity (Natalle &

Simon, 2015, p. 8). Michelle Obama is a prominent example of the power and influence of first to bring about change in many contexts and at many levels.

My final example of a woman of color that I will reference as an illustrative societal first is, Vice President Kamala Harris. As mentioned by Miller (2021) “People celebrate firsts because they are momentous, and they signal progress and representation for people who have not had power before” (n.p). Vice President Kamala Harris was sworn into office on “January 20, 2021, on the steps of the U.S. Capitol” (Wilson, 2021, n.p). She is a woman of many firsts. “She is the first woman; the first black woman; the first Asian-American woman; and the first graduate of a historically Black university and member of the black Greek- letter organization, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, to serve as vice president” (Wilson, 2021, n.p). Also, Harris is also “the first Black woman to be elected district attorney in California and the state's first woman to serve as attorney general” (Wilson, 2021, n.p). As all the other black female firsts, Kamala faced racism while running for office. According to Filindra (2022), “racism, anti-immigrant attitudes, and/or sexism may have played a role” (p.893) in how Kamala was perceived and treated by the American masses during her previous election run with President Joe Biden. All the adversity she faced during her election run ultimately did not stop Kamala Harris from becoming the First woman of color Vice President in the United States. First, somehow find the courage to overcome negative memorable messages and the resilience to believe in the positive messages.

In summary, based on this admittedly selective review of a sample of prominent societal African Americans, I have identified five common qualities of “firsts”: (1) novelty, (2) self-determination, (3) realization of their role as a change agent, (4) resilience (in the face of adversity), and (5) building a legacy for future generations. Although these qualities were

derived from African American firsts, to varying extents they may apply to all firsts. However, it is important to emphasize that Black firsts face unique cultural and societal circumstance that requires separate study and examination. So, how did these Black firsts learn to become firsts? Where, from who, and how did they acquire the tools to be successful firsts? Part of an answer to these questions can be seen in an examination of memorable messages (Knapp et al., 1988).

### **Memorable Messages and Firsts**

As humans navigate everyday life, they create memories from day-to-day interactions and highlight specific events that they may remember years later. According to Knapp et al., (1988), “once a message is determined to be a memorable message, the person may believe it has been operative longer than it actually has” (p. 34). Memorable messages shape lives (for the better and the worse). Memories such as our first injury, first bad grade, or our first bike ride, have the potential to shape our lives in remarkable ways. For example, as a child, our first memory can be crawling to our parents with open arms, or as a teenager being asked to a first dance. According to Knapp et al., (1988), “hearing memory is apparently stronger in human beings than sight, touch, or smell memory” (p. 34). For communication to be memorable, it seems that “it is likely that the message has provided a unique way of resolving a crisis, integrating diffuse experiences, and/or creating hopeful guidelines for future satisfactions” (Knapp et al., 1988, p. 35). As discussed previously, “It is possible that at different times in one’s life different types of messages will take on an importance not found at other life stages” (Knapp et al., 1988, p. 35). For example, if a child (e.g., age 6) were to tell another child (also age 6) to not display an angry or frowning face when speaking with someone in authority like a teacher about a problem, the child may have wondered what the other child was talking about and may have forgotten the entire message. However, later, if an adult were to tell another adult (e.g., age

20) the same message at work about speaking with a boss about a problem, the message might have been noticed and potentially memorable. An important insight here is that messages throughout the lifespan can vary in importance as a function of the lifespan stages of senders and receivers.

Concerning firsts, memorable messages may have been instilled in them at a very young age and/or at a pivotal time in their lives. Firsts, like all of us, can recall memories from childhood to the present, and these memorable messages can either be influential or detrimental. Some memorable messages that firsts may have in common are “keep going no matter what”, “you will be the next president”, or something more general such as “you are going to be great.” Whether they are communicated by a supportive parent or an influential teacher, motivating and assuring messages are positive indicators of future success in a “first’s” life.

Throughout this chapter, among my many goals has been to highlight memorable messages "firsts" receive and to better understand how they contribute to resilience, perseverance, and the power of positive reinforcement. All firsts, especially Black women trailblazing new paths receive many different messages that may be unique to firsts. In the case of Black women, messages that are tailored to overcome racial and sexist assaults, such as: “You must work twice as hard as them [whites]” or even, “You have to be 10 times smarter to make it in this world.” Due to women facing both racism as well as sexism, it is appropriate to view Black women trailblazers as doubly resilient. Although memorable messages are important to consider when understanding firsts, it is also important to consider the role that communication contexts in which these messages are shared might also play in the development of firsts.

### **The Contexts of the Development of Firsts**

In addition to receiving memorable messages from significant communicators as well as media, the historical, geographical, and geo-political contexts where firsts develop undoubtedly play a role in their development. That is firsts blazing trails in the 1950s are not likely to face the same circumstances as firsts in 2024. To date, the idea of context has been an understudied aspect of the development of firsts. However, it is important to understand the various and evolving kinds of contexts of firsts to develop a comprehensive view of a trailblazing "first's" continuous development and resilience. To illustrate the importance of context, I will review the contexts of the five individuals covered in the previous section (i.e., Barack Obama, Guion Bluford, Stacey Abrams, Michelle Obama, and Kamala Harris) as well as Shirley Chisolm.

The 44<sup>th</sup> President Barack Obama was born in Honolulu, Hawaii on August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1961, to his parents, S. Ann Dunham and Barack Obama, Sr. (Mendall & Wallenfeldt, 2024, n.p). Barack Obama's mother grew up in multiple U.S. states before her family settled in Hawaii, which is where she met Barack Obama, Sr. (Mendall & Wallenfeldt, 2024, n.p). Honolulu, Hawaii became a U.S. state on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1959, (Nakamura, 2023, n.p). As stated by Nakamura (2023), "colonizers confiscated lands and militarized parts of the island" as well as "suppressed traditional cultural and spiritual practices", and "banned the Hawaiian language in schools and government" (n.p). The political climate in Hawaii then and now is not welcoming to those not born in Hawaii or of original Islander descent. This is important because Barack and his family were not traditional islanders, and therefore were considered outsiders. They would, for example, not be welcomed in local politics or traditions due to their lack of island heritage.

As mentioned, Barack later moved to Indonesia as a child due to his mother remarrying an Indonesian foreign student (Mendall & Wallenfeldt, 2024, n.p). According to Nelson (2023),

“From age six through ten, Obama lived with his mother and stepfather in Indonesia, where he attended Catholic and Muslim schools” (n.p.). During his time in Indonesia, he was exposed to a religiously diverse society that faced economic struggles and large amounts of poverty (Sharma, 2011, p.5). Barack himself stated that growing up in Indonesia allowed him to see the huge divide between the wealthy and the poor (Obama, 2020, p.8). The issues Obama championed for during his presidential campaign may have been influenced by his time in Indonesia. Lifespan communication and memorable messages indicate that memorable messages from the developmental stage of a child’s life can greatly impact their future beliefs. With Obama being “raised as an Indonesian child and a Hawaiian child and as a black child and as a white child” he benefitted from being immersed in multiple cultures that shaped his worldview (Nelson, 2023, n.p). These experiences made Barack more knowledgeable of politics than the average American. Barack also mentions in his writings that he never knew his mother to “get involved in a political campaign" and like his grandparents, "she was suspicious of platforms, doctrines, absolutes, preferring to express her values on a smaller canvas" (Obama, 2020, p.7). Due to his mother not being interested in politics, Obama may have found interest simply out of curiosity.

Obama returned to Hawaii in 1971, to live with his grandparents and occasionally his mother as well. Eight years later, Obama “graduated from Punahou School, an elite college preparatory academy in Honolulu” (Mendall & Wallenfeldt, 2024, n.p). Moving to his early adult years, he attended school at Occidental for a short time, and through community building, he found his love for social movements. He stated, “the two years I spent at Occidental represented the start of my political awakening” and “what did capture my attention was something broader and less conventional not political campaigns, but social movements where ordinary people joined together to make change” (Obama, 2020, p.11). He transferred to

Columbia University and graduated in 1983. Shortly after he moved to Chicago in 1985 (Mendall & Wallenfeldt, 2024, n.p), to be a community organizer on the city's south side. As a community organizer, he saw the effects of the city's racially divided political system. Obama mentioned that the influential voices behind his evolving beliefs were "inspired by the young leaders of the civil rights movement— not just Dr. King but John Lewis and Bob Moses, Fannie Lou Hamer and Diane Nash" (Obama, 2020, p.11). Obama continued to law school at Harvard, graduating in 1991. In 1996, he was elected to the Illinois Senate, and assisted in passing laws that "tightened campaign finance regulations, expanded health care to poor families, and reformed criminal justice and welfare laws" (Mendall & Wallenfeldt, 2024, n.p). In 2004, he was elected to the U.S. Senate and later announced his run for the presidency in 2007 (Mendall & Wallenfeldt, 2024, n.p). Obama became the first Black president of America soon after. These historical, geographical, and geo-political contexts play a major role in a first development due to influencing their drive, dedication, and purpose for their works in the future.

The next "first" is Guion Bluford, America's first Black astronaut (Barr, 2019, n.p). Guion Bluford was born earlier on November 22, 1942, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was born to a mechanical engineer father and a mother who was a schoolteacher. At the time of his upbringing, Guion was right in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement. During Guion's upbringing, the Space Race was taking place. It was reported that the United States began to look at American schools and "decided that students should study more math and science so that America could catch up to Russia in the space race" (Haskins & Benson, 1984, p.16). As stated by Haskins and Benson (1984), "Guy was not quite 15 years old when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1 in 1957" (p.16). Americans were eager to reach space and Guion dreamt of the aerospace engineering that would take him there. As Guion prepared for college admissions,

he was repeatedly dissuaded by his high school guidance counselors. One counselor “told him that he was not college material” and urged him to go to a technical school to learn a trade (Haskins & Benson, 1984, p. 17). His teachers and guidance counselors did not believe that he would be successful in aerospace engineering. However, Guion was not phased, because nothing a counselor, teacher, or fellow student could say would overshadow the memorable words of encouragement his parents had communicated. He shared that he “grew up in a household where I felt that I could be anything I wanted to be” (“Guion S. Bluford”, n.d, n.p)

Guion was accepted to Penn State University in 1960. At the same time, the Civil Rights Movement also arose in Philadelphia and was prevalent during Guion’s enrollment in college (Haskins & Benson, 1984, p.19). Guion supported the civil rights movement and its mission but chose not to participate in the resistance due to putting his education first (Haskins & Benson, 1984, p.19). As he entered a predominately white space at Penn State, for the first time Guy became aware that he “was black” (Haskins & Benson, 1984, p.19). As a Black man from a diverse city, stepping foot into a historically predominately white space could cause culture shock to those less exposed. This historical and geographical context of the Civil Rights Movement and attending a white university guides us to the influences on Guion’s life. Guion joined the Air Force ROTC at Penn State and continued to rise in rank until he reached NASA. In 1983, Guion rode the Challenger into space, becoming the First African American astronaut to travel into space. Features of multiple contexts influenced him to pursue the unthinkable, a formal nod to his upbringing, to never give up. Perseverance and resiliency are prevailing themes that firsts commonly possess.

As Black ‘firsts’ share similar struggles, I must add that Black women face additional aversions due to misogyny as well as racism. For example, Stacey Abrams emerged as a pivotal

figure on the path seeking to break the Black glass ceiling. Stacey Abrams is the first woman and first African American woman to hold positions in both state and national politics (Rothberg, 2022). Stacey Abrams, a stark contrast from others, was born in a predominately white city and state. Born on December 9, 1973, in Madison, Wisconsin to Robert and Carolyn Abrams, Abrams only remembered “the cold and the cheese curds” before moving to the very southern Gulfport, Mississippi. (Rothberg, 2022). Before Mississippi, both of her parents attended “boycotts and marches of the civil rights movement” which might have heavily influenced Abrams and her belief system. The historical and even the contemporary culture of Madison, Wisconsin for some may lag behind the times, because as of 2023, “many Black residents in Dane County still face troubling disparities in health, education, and income, and suffer from negative stereotypes and different expectations than white residents” (Mosiman, 2023, n.p). As for Mississippi, it had strong Civil Rights Movement roots and could be considered the heart of the movement. According to Davis (2001), “In Mississippi, the Civil Rights Movement began slowly and developed unevenly across the state” and “the NAACP was the strongest civil rights organization in the state, and it invested resources to organize civil rights activity” (n.p). As her family moved to Mississippi when she was still a child, this climate could have also inadvertently influenced her prowess for political change for minorities. The family later moved to Atlanta so her parents could become ordained ministers. While in Atlanta, Abrams was voted valedictorian of her class and invited to the governor’s mansion, for a valedictorian reception. However, as she and her family approached the gate, their identities were mistaken and they were told to vacate the premises by the guard (Rothberg, 2022). It is as though the guard had a deep-seated prejudice that allowed him to believe that Abrams did not belong there. Abrams recounts this as a memorable moment, as she stated, “I don’t remember meeting the governor of

Georgia or my fellow valedictorians . . . All I remember that day was a man at a gate, telling me I don't belong" (Rothberg, 2022, n.p). Using her later empowered voice during her time at Spellman College, she held a protest for the beating of Rodney King and co-founded the Students for African American Empowerment (Rothberg, 2022). Abrams' constant fight for equality and justice for others, even at a young age, created a path that she would traverse into adulthood. She later was elected to the Georgia House. In 2010 she became the House Minority Leader and was the first Black person to do so in the state of Georgia (Rothberg, 2022). Her focus was on voting rights and combating voter suppression, causes her parents fought for during the Civil Rights Movement. When Stacey Abrams ran for Governor of Georgia in 2018, she was a product of the Black South, and her fighting for voting rights of those who resembled her could be attributed to the historical, geographical, and geo-political contexts that be.

The next contextualization of my exemplar Black "firsts" is First Lady, Michelle Obama (Born on January 17, 1964, in Chicago, Illinois). Chicago's political climate around the time of her birth was greatly affected by the civil rights movement. As for the local/neighborhood environment, Michelle's family was "living in an underprivileged area with very little money in South Side Chicago. The area was described as "a black island in a largely white city" and "a collection of smaller neighborhoods scattered over 60 percent of the city" (Bond, 2012, p. 9). Michelle's father was a "city-pump operator and a Democratic precinct captain" and her mother "a secretary at Spiegel's catalog store" (McEvoy, 2023, n.p). Like all children, her parents likely impacted Michelle's perception of politics as well as the city where she grew up. Because education was emphasized in her family, she and her brother learned to read by age four and both skipped the second grade (McEvoy, 2023, n.p).

Like Guion Bluford and Stacey Abrams, Michelle's education was a large part of her childhood that undoubtedly shaped her perceptions and approach to the various issues and paths later traversed as an adult. As Michelle grew older and applied for Princeton University, her teachers tried to dissuade her "from applying, telling her she would never get accepted." But instead, Michelle persevered. She was not only accepted but graduated Cum laude in 1985. Michelle Obama persevered despite the doubts from her high school teachers and counselors, graduating from Princeton University in 1985 with Cum laude honors. Her journey establishes the prevalence of resiliency and determination in historical Black firsts.

Similarly, Vice President Kamala Harris also represents the resilience of firsts because she became the first Black woman US vice president. Harris was born on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1964, in Oakland, California to her father, a Jamaican immigrant who was a Professor at Stanford University, and her mother, "the daughter of an Indian diplomat" who was a cancer researcher (McNamee, 2024). Kamala, like Obama, was raised in a multicultural environment, as both of her parents are immigrants from Jamaica and India. As a child, Kamala periodically visited India and Jamaica, which exposed her to various cultures and perspectives that could have contributed to her political, social, and personal worldviews and politics. (Bose, 2020, p.27).

Kamala was born and raised in Oakland, and at the time of her upbringing was known for "massive demonstrations and civil unrest" which resulted in the Civil Rights Acts, "Oakland was again at the center of change" ("Oakland's History of Resistance to Racism", n.d, n.p). It must be recognized that Oakland is the birthplace of many influential groups, such as "the Black Panther Party, Oakland Community Organizations (PICO/OCO), Unity Council, and Intertribal Friendship House" which focused on "equal access to jobs, housing, employment, transportation, and services" ("Oakland's History of Resistance to Racism", n.d, n.p). Kamala's parents, Donald

and Shyamala, both met one another while on Berkeley's campus contributing to the mission of the Civil Rights Movement. (Bose, 2020, p.27). Like Stacey Abrams, Kamala's parents were also involved in the Civil Rights Movement. To have parents who are involved in such an influential cause can undoubtedly have altering effects on a child's perception of the world. Kamala's exposure to the Civil Rights Movement at such a young age could have driven her to pursue public service and later politics in her career. Kamala would later attend Howard University, a prominent historically Black college, and graduated in 1986, and graduated from law school in 1989. She worked as a district attorney in Oakland for years, serving her community and prosecuting criminals. Completing her first 'first', in 2010, Kamala was elected attorney general of California, "becoming the first female and the first African American to hold the post" (McNamee, 2024). Vice President Kamala Harris's triumphs further substantiate the presence of resiliency, perseverance, and striving to serve others in higher positions.

I would like to add another often-cited example of a remarkable early trailblazer: Shirley Chisom. Shirley Chisom, born in 1924, was the first Black woman to be in Congress, as well as the first Black woman to run for president. Just like Ketanji Brown Jackson, Shirley was on her high school debate team and received many rewards for her debating skills. From a young age, both women discovered the power and value behind their voices and beliefs, as it helped propel them into their prospective careers. To assist her people in the great fight for equality, Shirley "joined local chapters of the League of Women Voters, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, as well as the Democratic Party club in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn" (Michals, 2015). After achieving such success in her community, after redistricting her area made it predominately democratic, she was able to run in 1964 for and became "the second African American in the New York State Legislature" which

then led to her winning a seat in Congress in 1968. (Michals, 2015). While in Congress, Shirley faced adversity from her white counterparts as being a woman and being Black: a double whammy. However, she persevered in her role in Congress by passing over 50 laws and helping end the Vietnam War. Another great feat she accomplished was becoming the first “Black woman and second woman ever to serve on the powerful House Rules Committee” in 1977. (Michals, 2015). She faced much discrimination in her run for president in 1972 as well. Shirley Chisolm was blocked from participating in televised primary debates, and after taking legal action, was permitted to make just one speech. She was treated as the pariah of the 1972 election circuit. Although Shirley did not win, she still accomplished more than any Black woman in a predominately male caucus. Without perseverance and resilience, who knows how long it would have taken the first Black woman to occupy Congress?

In summary, this biographical review of firsts and their early lifespan development supports the argument that to understand the development of “firsts,” the contexts in which “firsts’ develop seem to play an important role in shaping their development. This thesis seeks to provide a contextual, lifespan understanding of the development of the qualities of Black female firsts by focusing on their development in a unique context. Much can be learned from the biographies of firsts such as the ones previously abbreviated, but more is also needed about the role of context in their development. Towards this end, I next provide a selective historical overview of Martinsville, Virginia to identify shared contextual qualities and characteristics potentially affecting the development of the various first African American women from that locality that will become the primary focus of my study.

### **Abbreviated and Selective History of Martinsville**

I argue that understanding the communication of African American women firsts requires including an analysis of their communication contexts which in this thesis specifically refers to Martinsville, Virginia. Martinsville presents a unique context in which to examine the lifespan development of firsts in part because of its relatively rural location and in part because of its historic roots in slavery and ongoing struggles with race relations that continue today. The following abbreviated overview of the history of Martinsville begins with Martinsville's history in American chattel slavery and the dominance of the Hairston family.

Peter Hairston, immigrated to the United States from Scotland in 1729. He first situated his family in Pennsylvania, but later migrated to Southern Virginia. Settled in Virginia, his family "became tobacco planters and acquired slaves" (Wieneck, 1998, p. 7). According to Wieneck (1998) "the immigrant's children and grandchildren created a network of plantations along the southern border of Virginia stretching in a broad swath through the counties of Halifax, Pittsylvania, Henry, Franklin, and Patrick" (p. 7). They were even able to expand past the North Carolina border to five more counties by 1860.

The Hairston enterprise was vast. According to Wieneck (1998), "their plantation empire grew so large that it almost defies description" (p. 8). Wieneck continues, "In Virginia and North Carolina the Hairston's established 10 major plantations and each of these had numerous satellite plantations that might be worked by a dozen slaves or fewer" (1998, p. 8). In 1851, a Richmond newspaper reported that a member of the Hairston family-owned Oak Hill Plantation, he "was probably the richest man in Virginia and perhaps in the United States the possessor of land and slaves worth \$5 million" and was "reputably the largest slaveholder in the South" (Wieneck, 1998, p. 8). As stated on [hairstonfamilygenealogy.com](http://hairstonfamilygenealogy.com), "The Hairston's enslaved more than

10,000 people over a two-hundred-year history” and were “one of the largest slave-holding families in the history of America.” It was once said that “you could walk from Danville to Martinsville and never leave Hairston land and once you got to Henry County, the Hairston's owned virtually everything” (Wienczek, 1998, p. 44).

Misinterpreting and bending the Christian *Bible* to fit their narrative, the Hairston's “clung to their belief in the natural inferiority of the black race even as they grew more and more dependent on the skills of the black people, saw the growth of the generations in their Black family and felt the stirrings of emotion when one of them died” (Wienczek, 1998, p. 71). Owing over 45 plantations in four states, the Hairston family quickly expanded. It is not surprising to find the constant reoccurrence of the last name Hairston in the city of Martinsville among African Americans—the descendants of enslaved people with the last name Hairston endure to this day. For example, my family's last name is “Hairston,” and my ancestors all descended from the plantation of Martinsville, as my family lineage can be traced back to 1822. Martinsville may not be the wealthiest town per capita in the state or a bustling metropolis but it is the home of many African American Women's firsts: the focus of this thesis.

Two major features of studying African American women's firsts are necessarily the historical and contemporary understanding of both racism as well as sexism. One of the first texts available for the study of systemic racism in the American South is Ida B. Wells's *Southern Horrors*, a pamphlet published in 1892. As a result of Wells' report, the crime of lynching became a visible national problem, but for years politicians were reluctant to ban the act of lynching. In Virginia, it was not until “in 1928 the Virginia General Assembly passed an anti-lynching statute not at the urgency of humanitarian reformers but at the insistence of law-and-order conservatives who promoted modern law enforcement as the most effective method of

preserving racial stability” (Rise, 1998, p. 3). By 1922, more than 3,500 African Americans had been lynched by mobs in the United States. Wells (1862-1931) is a significant figure in this study of racialized violence in Virginia: Black men were often lynched, “five on the same old ricket—the new alarm about raping white women” (p.1). Wells analyzes this phenomenon: “Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women” (1892, p.1). Although it has been mentioned that cases of lynching were mostly attributed to rape, there are cases attributed to other crimes. An example is a lynching in Axton, VA, part of Henry County, just a few miles outside of Martinsville, VA. Kellis Moorman, a Black man, was reportedly lynched in April of 1886 by a mob. Reportedly, Kellis assaulted and robbed a white man of his money during a card game. After the assault, the white man fled and sought assistance from a nearby farmer, in which a mob was formed. They sought after Kellis, and once he was captured, was hung from a tree around 12 am Sunday night (“Racial Terror: Lynching in Virginia”, n.d, n.p). Regarding racial inequalities, we must recognize the innovation and firsts that blossomed from the adversity suffered. As Martinsville and its surrounding areas have been affected by racial violence and adversity, it is important to highlight the successes and resilience that Martinsville continues to possess. Where Martinsville has faced multiple levels of systemic injustice, the city once thrived as a culturally rich Black epicenter for all to see.

### **Qualities of Geographic Contexts**

In the 1900s, Fayette St. in Martinsville and the surrounding community had 75 Black-owned businesses. There were eleven churches, two hospitals, two drug stores, eight doctors, and an attorney. The block also had three textile industries, two pharmacists, three grocery stores, nine restaurants, three beauty shops, five barber shops, three cab stands, three skating rinks, a bowling alley, three theaters, a bakery, well as two auditoriums, three gas stations, two funeral

homes, a laundromat, two schools, an insurance company, three dry cleaners, two shoe shops, three convenience stores, a clothing store, a furniture store, a doctor who owned his own airplane, a bus service, and a hardware store. The “Baldwin Block” was the epicenter of the Black community in Martinsville, and the residents’ mecca. It not only was a visible testament to Black ingenuity and expertise but also was a pathway to investing in and amplifying Black businesses.

It is here that there was once a vibrant center of Black-owned businesses in Martinsville serving the large Black population of the city. The Baldwin Block was the epicenter of the Black community in Martinsville, and the heart of Black culture. Not only was *The Block* a visible demonstration of Black ingenuity and perseverance, but it also provided a pathway for residents to invest in and amplify the resources for Black businesses. In the early 1900s, Baldwin Block was created and named after Dana Olden Baldwin, Martinsville’s only African American physician (Kozelsky, 2020, n.p). When Baldwin returned home honorably discharged from the military, he acquired property surrounding his medical practice as part of his efforts to improve the economic standing of African Americans in Martinsville. In doing so, many businesses were offered the opportunity to operate their business in the Block. Baldwin also opened Saint Mary's Hospital, where he treated everyone in need of medical attention. Black people in the vicinity of Martinsville relied on Baldwin's Block for their commercial and social needs, including restaurants, hotels, barber shops, beauty parlors, dental practices, pharmacies, an attorney, and theaters. There were over 75 Black-owned businesses. The Block was home to three textile industries, two pharmacists, three grocery stores, nine restaurants, three beauty shops, five Barber shops, three cab stands, three skating rinks, a bowling alley, three theaters, a bakery, well as two auditoriums, three gas stations, two funeral homes, a laundromat, two schools, an

insurance company, three dry cleaners, two shoe shops, three convenience stores, a clothing store, a furniture store, a doctor who owned his own airplane, a bus service, and a hardware store. Baldwin Block was a thriving magnet for Black customers and investors. Baldwin Block in the 21<sup>st</sup> century looks completely different than before. As of 2023, the Baldwin Block area is no longer and has now seen a new addition in place of the previous Baldwin Pharmacy (Kozelsky, 2020, n.p).

### **Black Women Firsts in the Context of Sexism and Racism**

Just as remarkable as the Baldwin Block, which symbolized the resilience of the Black community in a radicalized area, Black women's pioneering attitudes along with their upholding resilience by being the first in their work fields, created a strong and admirable foundation of striking adversity and paving the way for those to come. To acknowledge this, I explore the importance of the challenges faced by Black women who were the first in their respective fields, and the multiple obstacles and aspects that contributed to the foundation of adversity such as systemic racism, misogyny, intersectionality, and classism. Professional Black woman experiences unique struggles that both Black men and White women don't. Black women must fight racial stereotypes from the world, even from their race, classism, colorism, and even featurism. This complex phenomenon which is systemic inequality, must be examined and revised to improve the experience of the Black woman in the professional world and to encourage others to break the Black glass ceiling.

For centuries in the Martinsville community, as shared through oral history, Black women have played crucial roles in movements and responsibilities. These responsibilities extended from raising children, managing the household and church tasks, and causes as transformative as the Civil Rights Movement. But before the Civil Rights Movement and Jim

Crow, there were centuries of slavery that extended unique experiences for Black women. Ever since the beginning, Black women seemed to be underestimated and infringed, even as early as the Revolutionary War. The Black female slaves were responsible for birthing children, producing labor, and keeping families fed. Besides the matriarchal duties, Black women also yearned for freedom and escaped slavery as well. In literature, it is usually attributed to Black males for successfully escaping. Harriet Tubman was a slave born in Maryland around 1822, who fought her entire life for freedom, and for others as well. (NWHM, 2016). The theme of being the first did not begin in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as Harriet Tubman worked as a spy on the country's behalf and was later "granted a military pension of \$20 per month, the first African American woman to receive one" (NWHM, 2016). According to Bell (2022), "while acknowledging the limitations that the female experience of slavery placed on women's resistance, one-third of fugitives who escaped during the Revolutionary era were women" (p.60). To further support this observation, it is mentioned that "the overall invisibility of fugitive women seems to be due in part to the fact that women in general are often overlooked in studies about the enslaved population" (Bell, 2020, p.60).

It is imperative to recall that Black women's drive, perseverance, and strength continuously span across decades. Their very existence helped shape the Civil Rights Movement that we know today. From organizing lesser-known events like lunch-ins, cooking meals for prisoners, creating flyers and signs, and attending demonstrations, Black women contributed to the movement while others attempted to diminish their contributions and police their actions every step of the way. This is displayed when children as students learn about the Civil Rights Movement and all who had their hand in the creation of something so crucial. However, when I was taught about the Civil Rights Movement, I was mainly taught about prominent men such as

Martin Luther King, Jr. Besides the infrequent mention of Rosa Parks, I cannot recall hearing about anyone else. It seems that I was not alone. None of the names of Black women activists such as “Ella Baker, Diane Nash, Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Lee Cooper, and Angela Davis still are mentioned when students learn about the civil rights movement” (Lott, 2017). It was not seen as a woman’s place to be involved in something other than household and church duties. As is stated, “the enemy is never a person, it is always an attitude such as racism or sexism, some kind of system of attitude that oppresses” (Lott, 2017, p. 335). Not as surprisingly, it is reported that women participated significantly more in the Civil Rights Movement than their male counterparts, as women organized as men utilized that work to lead (Lott, 2017). As women are usually stifled by their male counterparts, during the Civil Rights Movement, Black women specifically were not “allowed to be in formal leadership positions” as “sexism and authoritarianism were among factors that prevented women from assuming public leadership roles in the civil rights movement” (Lott, 2017, p. 336). Although there was an attempt to limit the Black women’s contributions, they still managed to achieve the overall mission for the African American race and be the remarkable trailblazers that they are.

To further explore the complexities of the first Black women and the adversity they faced in their careers, we must acknowledge intersectionality and its impact on the obstacles that each woman faces. Not only do Black women have to suffer due to being female in a male-dominated society, but they also suffer due to being Black. Let’s consider these dual adversities in a professional career context.

Intersectionality for Black women is race and gender, as it is defined by Smith et al. (2019) as “The intertwined and multiplicative effects of multiple identity groups (p. 1707). Black women professionals are faced with at least two unique goals, fitting in and feeling represented.

As stated by Smith et al. (2019), “this complicated experience of being an outsider within another’s world resembles the unique situation of one of the most underrepresented groups in executive and senior leadership roles in organizations: Black women” (p. 1705). The experience is unique, as they are seen “As strangers in the predominantly male- and White-dominated upper echelons of organizations, on the one hand, they may be ignored, devalued, and misinterpreted, while, on the other hand, they may be seen as an intriguing anomaly with “bonus standing” (Smith et al., 2019). Black women are underrepresented in the corporate world, as there are very few who are on the Fortune 500 Board of Directors compared to their white women counterparts. According to Smith et al. (2019), “White women, despite being underrepresented themselves, far surpass Black women in terms of corporate representation. Comparatively, while being roughly 38% of the U.S. population, White women hold 29% of senior management and executive roles” (p. 1706). Black women face more adversity in the professional world due to being Black and a woman, especially in the executive world, as their glass ceiling is much darker on the way up.

According to Smith et al. (2019), Executive Black Women (EBW) must be content with “living in two pervasive hierarchical societal structures: one gender-based hierarchy, where they are subordinate to men, and another race-based hierarchy, where they are subordinate to Whites” (Smith et al., 2019). EBW must work hard to be seen as valuable and not attribute to the negative stereotypes that already plague every Black woman in America. Stereotypes such as being lazy, ghetto, or dumb, an individual could feel the pressure of overachieving and making a name for themselves. Almost as to prove others wrong, and to prove their spot in their position. I know plenty of Black women who have worked extremely hard to be in the positions that they are in, but it is not viewed as enough by their white female and male peers. Although, if asked of their female Black peers, they would be equally recognized and praised. As most Black women at this

point have “surpassed the levels of educational, income, and occupational status commonly experienced by the vast majority of Black women in America, they defy stereotypical race- and gender-based expectations” (Smith et al., 2019). With these experiences, Black women may feel as though they are living in two different worlds but do not belong to either one of them.

When I worked in western Chesapeake, for example, I worked in a predominately white office with predominately white partners. I never felt that I could disclose my true self due to the chance of experiencing ridicule and judgment. So, I began to code-switch. Almost every Black professional is familiar with codeswitching as a tool to exist in the white corporate world. According to Dickens and Chavez (2018), this is also known as “identity shifting, also known as identity negotiation, which is the alteration of one’s actions, speech, and appearance to adjust to cultural norms within a given environment” (p. 760). I would avoid long protective styles, long nails, and dresses that happened to fit my figure, and even avoided using African American Vernacular English and trying my hardest not to be perceived as ghetto. Over the years, I mastered identity shifting as early as high school. I learned it gained me access to opportunities most could not grasp. Supposedly, “Identity shifting involves changing not only how one speaks, but also one’s behavioral patterns and other factors that compose an individual’s sense of self” (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). I would not discuss my family life because it was personal and because no one in the office could relate to a pro-black, country, rural Black girl from the South. I would adjust my tone with a higher pitch and would wear slick styles, as that is what is attributed to class and sophistication. Coincidentally, “Black women experience intersectional invisibility because dominant cultural ideologies of “androcentrism” (wherein men tend to be the hegemonic normative standard) and “ethnocentrism” (according to which Whites tend to be the hegemonic normative standard) in the United States renders Black women non-representative of

either of their respective identity groups (Black men represent the prototypical standard of Blacks and White women represent the prototypical standard of women;” (Smith et al., 2019). As previously mentioned by personal anecdote and ample research, I conclude that intersectionality is the idea that race and gender are not as separated as we believe, as they intertwine and drastically affect one another. These two factors cannot be separated and viewed individually regarding Black women in professional careers.

### **Educational Contexts for Black Women in STEM**

As I continue to explore the dual effects of race and gender as crucial obstacles for first Black women professionals in Martinsville, many fields find the underrepresentation of Black women. I will next highlight some of these because firsts are rising through the ranks across many societal spheres (e.g., business, education, sciences, and more). One major field that continuously has a low representation of Black women in Martinsville (and beyond) is STEM: an acronym for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math. According to Sendze (2023), “Although Black women comprise 14.1% of the female workforce and have historically maintained the highest level of female workforce participation since 1996, they account for only 2% of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) workforce” (p. 377). To further support this statement, “This inequality is more salient for Black women, who account for only 2% of the STEM workforce” (Sendze, 2023). The STEM field is long overdue for a great awakening for inclusivity and diversity in the year 2024, as initiatives regarding welcoming diverse minorities should be championed to help change the current environment. While there are Black women in the STEM field, those in the field express that they are the minority and feel isolated in their community compared to their white counterparts. (Sendze, 2023). Being isolated in the workplace can be very detrimental to one’s mental health and job performance, which can

cause one to quit. Being underrepresented in the job field, and academic literature for STEM, a Black woman (especially a first) can start to feel as though she does not belong in her career. It has been found that for Black female STEM workers, “while their visible identities involved being Black and female, their race was more salient than their gender in their experiences” (Sendze, 2023). One obstacle after another, Black female STEM workers exhibit sheer resilience and perseverance every time they step foot in a STEM course, gain a STEM degree, and begin a STEM career. Especially since the STEM field is heavily occupied by white males, who show little regard for women, especially the voices of Black women. It is reported that “Black women’s voices are often silenced in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) contexts, which are predominantly occupied by White men” (Morton, 2021, p. 306).

Microaggressions towards Black women are often experienced in this field, as the predominant race is white (Morton, 2021, p. 306). To survive their day to day, Black women (led by firsts) have adapted strategies to combat microaggressions in the workplace. As has been reported by Morton (2021), “Black women in STEM at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) may feel socially isolated and marginalized within departments” (p. 309). One strategy is resistance, as Morton (2021) mentioned, “Acts of resistance vary, what unites the strategies identified in the literature is Black women’s determination to change their experiences, and those of future underrepresented students, for the better” (p. 309). As well as reshaping the preconceived narratives of Black women, they also led collective movements that encouraged a more diverse and inclusive education outreach for STEM involving the next generation. As mentioned, Black women are “involved in STEM diversification efforts, including community outreach to encourage racially underrepresented students to consider STEM, and challenging authority figures (e.g., department heads, policymakers) to support these initiatives” (Morton,

2021, p. 309). There are other ways to combat microaggressions, which are building a strong community with other STEM women and seeking support from mentors and peers. Creating a strong community and participating in initiatives and events, “can expand Black women’s networks and perhaps remind them that there are other Students of Color in STEM thriving and surviving alongside them” (Morton, 2021, p. 309). To add to this sentiment, “By remembering personal motivations for pursuing STEM and striving to maintain work/life balance, Black women demonstrate self-reliance and accountability for practicing self-care” (Morton, 2021, p. 309). To help them remember the bigger picture, these women are constantly reminding themselves why they joined the field in the first place, which is their love of science. (Morton, 2021, p. 309). Black women in STEM also prioritized their well-being and mental health to help them remain resilient in their working positions.

As mentioned previously, Black women, especially firsts, face racial discrimination in the STEM field, but they also face discrimination due to being women. According to Eaton et al., (2019), “Despite significant cultural shifts in women’s roles and opportunities over the last several decades in the United States, stereotypic beliefs about women’s and men’s traits, roles, occupations” (p.128) are still believed by many. As you can assume, this is harmful to women in the STEM field, and especially daunting to firsts. The existing stereotypes make women appear inferior to men in many aspects, as “Words like intelligent and competent fall into the cluster of positive agentic traits considered typical of men” (Eaton et al., 2019, p. 128) and are rarely associated with women. In STEM fields, “gender-STEM stereotypes have tangible negative implications for women’s success and leadership in these fields by promoting prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination against women” (Eaton et al., 2019, p. 128), a hellscape that women cannot escape. Whether a woman, especially a first, appears competent to work in this

field and even has a degree to exhibit the completion of her studies, she is still seen as inferior. Surprisingly enough, “research has found that both men and women science faculty are less likely to hire a woman candidate compared to an identical man for a laboratory manager position and that this bias is explained by perceptions of the woman as less competent” (Eaton et al., 2019, p. 128). It is disheartening to know that women (including firsts) also play into these harmful stereotypes, as they should be familiar with the obstacles and adversity women face in the STEM field. Ultimately, for Blacks in STEM, “White university students have been found to stereotype their Black counterparts as unqualified for university study and these stereotypes about the limited academic ability of Black students can reduce their intention to major in STEM” (Eaton et al., 2019, p. 129), and they were also viewed as less intelligent than their White and Asian counterparts. (Eaton et al., 2019, p. 129). Being the Black first woman in the most underrepresented field is astonishing, as it takes true drive, dedication, and resilience to endure racism and sexism to practice in the field that you love.

To add to the adversities that Black women face, we must also address affirmative action, as it is still implemented in the United States, and was created to assist minorities in the workforce and academic world. According to Hall (2016), affirmative action “refers to a diverse set of programs designed to increase the representation of underrepresented groups in schools, businesses, and other institutions” (p. 8). Affirmative Action was created through Lyndon B. Johnson’s Executive Order 11246, which prohibited “employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, and national origin by those organizations receiving federal contracts and subcontracts” (Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity, n.d) as sex was later added in 1967. As the experience of the first Black women professionals of Martinsville, VA is being studied, it will become evident that the existence of Affirmative Action has not fully alleviated the stressors

and disadvantages that they face. As affirmative action was created to propel minorities to previously unattainable areas, its effectiveness has been largely questioned. As we discussed the implications and drawbacks of affirmative action towards Black women in the workplace, it is imperative to acknowledge the impressive tactics and strategies professional Black women use to assist them in conquering adversity and remaining levelheaded in their positions.

To effectively combat and display resilience, Black women firsts might find comfort in controlling and safeguarding their narrative “to avoid being misrepresented, misunderstood, and misidentified by socially imposed identities, such as being the “angry Black woman” (Sisco et al., 2020, p. 426). It is important that “shaping their own narratives, as opposed to allowing their colleagues’ curiosity and inexperience to configure false and irrelevant conceptions of their Black and professional identities” (Sisco et al., 2020, p. 426). Another strategy of resilience for Black women is “making efforts to draw connections with their colleagues, share their accomplishments, and maintain an elevator speech, so their colleagues have a clear understanding of their personal and work identity”, but to not expose too much personal information as to not reveal the true Black experience for entertainment. (Sisco et al., 2020, p. 426). This ties back to the previous mention of safeguarding, as Blacks must be “cautious of how much information they shared with their White colleagues, especially to those who did not present themselves as allies to the Black community” (Sisco et al., 2020, p. 427). The Black women professionals who will be interviewed in this thesis share experiences of workplace adversity and the strategies utilized to combat it. As these seven women traversed through their career fields, they adapted many ways to succeed in the workplace and remain mentally sound.

## Summary

Biographical and historical study of Black women who have surpassed various barriers and obstacles to later become firsts whether in Washington, DC or Martinsville, Virginia affirms the overall narrative of resilience, perseverance, and fortitude. These women possess powerful qualities such as recalling memorable messages from childhood as rallying cries for educational advancement, and determination that cannot be wavered by systemic oppression. Firsts originate from varied geo-political, geographical, and historical influences creating unique memorable messages collected over a lifespan that stay with them and may motivate them. By connecting these necessary aspects and more, we better understand how some Black women conquer barriers of sexism and racism. These remembered experiences can motivate individuals and when told to others might also motivate them to strive for better. The above firsts and many others exhibit shared themes of conquering adversity, doubt, sexism, and racism. To distinguish Martinsville's firsts from the rest, we must acknowledge how Martinsville is unique due to its history of racism and sexism that continues today.

These women became firsts by possessing qualities including personal strength, strong communication, a strong sense of community, and a history of successful education. Their stories and communication approach to adversity may possess some similarities with those who came before them but as firsts from varied contexts, they are not mere replications of the past. These women, specific to the area of Martinsville, VA although each unique are drawing on a shared context. Growing up and living in such a city directly influences how they communicate and respond to racism and sexism that they may face.

To begin to explain the communication of the successful Black women firsts, in this case of Martinsville, a conceptual model is initially needed. Such a conceptual model requires key

variables such as those identified in the biographical literature review of firsts such as resilience, determination, self-regulation, strong communication, and a strong sense of community. In addition, we must ask about unique elements of context that can begin to provide a more thorough understanding of the communication processes that specifically help Black women firsts succeed in Martinsville today. With this, researchers can begin to create a more solid conceptual foundation upon which to conduct further research into the communication of firsts. To build on past biographical studies of firsts, I next report a study of the communication autobiographies of successful first African American women from Martinsville, Virginia, focusing specifically on the communication used in their roles as firsts.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **QUESTIONS AND METHODS**

To gain a deeper understanding of the contextualized experiences, adversities, and triumphs experienced by Black women firsts in their development, I conducted a qualitative study by adapting a revised version of the *Life-Line Interview Method* (Assink & Schroots, 2010) to gather autobiographical memories including turning points that can provide insight into specific developmental processes and characteristics. A unique feature of this study is in addition to learning about the development of the first African American women because they all shared Martinsville, Virginia as a current and historical context of their development it is possible to gain additional insights into the phenomenon of firsts by studying how they managed common developmental contextual conditions and circumstances. As the literature review identified unique qualities of firsts as they each developed in their unique context, this study has the potential to explore common qualities and characteristics of firsts who all developed in the same context. Here are six research questions that shaped this study:

#### **Research Questions**

RQ1: What are the autobiographical memories of first Black women of Martinsville concerning racism and its communicative management?

RQ2: What are the autobiographical memories of first Black women of Martinsville concerning sexism and its communicative management?

RQ3a: What are the common or shared qualities in the autobiographical memories of first Black women from Martinsville concerning racism?

RQ3b: What are the qualities common with firsts identified in past studies?

RQ4a: What are the common or shared qualities in the autobiographical memories of first Black women from Martinsville concerning sexism?

RQ4b: What are the qualities common with firsts identified in past studies?

These questions are important for at least five reasons: (1) they help us to understand Martinsville's complex history and culture, specifically its professional culture and how it affects first Black women. (2) These questions help us discern potential contextualized patterns in the use of first Black women's communication to manage racism and sexism. (3) These questions can assist us in identifying patterns of ongoing systemic racial bias and misogyny. (4) Answers to these questions can assist the field of communication in developing and testing the efficacy of coping techniques for future use by Black women (whether firsts or not). And (5) answers to these questions will help us to better understand the role of communication contexts in managing the many issues that plague professional Black women. Generally, from a lifespan perspective, it is important to understand the stories of firsts and early generations so that subsequent generations can learn and benefit from their experiences.

### **Sample**

#### **Human Subjects Protections**

It is important to prioritize the safety and identity of the human subjects that are a part of a research study. This study protected each interviewee's likeness and identity, as well as their autonomy. The Old Dominion University Arts & Letters Human Subjects Review Committee has determined that this study is exempt from IRB review according to state and federal regulations as of February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024. The study, interview questions, and interview method were all found to be compliant with all rules and regulations for the protection of human research subjects (ODU File 2147477-1, see Appendix 2). If requested by the participant, the privacy of

the participants was further protected by not revealing any inadvertent identifying personal information. This process took place before any data were collected. Each of the seven Black women interviewed was introduced to me by one another or a mutual colleague. Each woman was mentioned directly by a previous interviewee or was contacted directly by an interviewee and then introduced to me. I met DeShanta at Martinsville's FAHI museum, Fayette Area Historical Initiative, which is an African American museum dedicated to the culture and history of the Martinsville area. After conducting research for a previous project, I received DeShanta's contact information which I utilized in this study. DeShanta then connected me to Jennifer, and Jennifer connected me to Sharon. I previously interned for Natalie in 2020 and kept her as a contact in which I contacted her during my interview process. As for the final three, my best friend's family is filled with successful local figures therefore I asked for their assistance in recruiting Black women first, which produced Ann, who is my best friend's aunt. After Ann's interview, she went through her address book and called different women who I could interview. Two of these women happened to be Ethel and Frances. My conversations with each woman made me fairly confident that they could offer great value and insight to this thesis. However, there was a reluctance in potential interviewees currently living and working in Martinsville, possibly due to being identified or ridiculed for sharing their personal experiences with racism and sexism.

### **Recruitment Procedures**

Participants were recruited according to purposive sampling criteria required for the study, that is, Black, female, resident of Martinsville, and a "first" in their occupation/profession. Snowball sampling ("Snowball Sampling," Oregon State University, 2010) was also used by asking each person to refer other colleagues or family members for participation. Every effort

was made to recruit participants of a variety of educational levels and professional roles. Ultimately, this procedure resulted in a purposive convenience sample of seven first women which are described in the next section. It is important to note that the purposive convenience sample is admittedly small due to the limited number of historic firsts available because many of the Black women firsts of Martinsville have passed away. As the sample shows most (not all) of the firsts who agreed to be available for this study are of advanced ages.

### **Participants**

The seven first participants are all Black women who had once worked in Martinsville, Virginia, and/or who have once lived in Martinsville, Virginia, and had accomplished being a “first” in the city of Martinsville in a current or previous occupational title/role. Each participant was asked about their age, occupational role, generation, and highest level of education. Table 1, *First Black Females of Martinsville, Virginia* displays demographic information collected from each participant.

**Table 1****First Black Females of Martinsville, Virginia.**

Participant's Name	Generation	Age	First Role	Highest Level of Education
Jennifer	Millennial	34	First Black Vice Mayor	Master's degree
Ann	Baby Boomer	65	First Black Female Chief Magistrate	Bachelor's Degree (B.S)
Ethel	Silent Generation	81	First Black Female (Sworn Office) Deputy Sheriff	High School Diploma
Sharon	Baby Boomer	64	First Black Female City Council Member	Bachelor's Degree (B.A)
Natalie	Gen X	45	First Black Female Producer	Master's Degree (M.A)
Frances	Baby Boomer	67	First Black Female Master Chief Clerk in Henry County	Associate Degree
DeShanta	Millennial	35	First Black Female Bookstore Owner	Bachelor's Degree (B.A)

**Method**

The data-gathering approach I chose used qualitative interviews conducted via the Zoom platform and transcribed and analyzed by the researcher. Interviews were chosen as the primary data-gathering approach due to the need to gather autobiographical memories that captured a wide range of topics as well as an approach that creates an open, comfortable environment to communicate this information. The approach allowed participants to not only answer questions

but to also explain their experiences fully. Each participant was asked 10 questions (see Figure 1) regarding their professional experience in Martinsville. As contacts were established, each participant was informed of the purpose of the study, informed of their rights as participants, and asked to be interviewed shortly. Each participant received a phone call, email, or text message to confirm their demographics and professional qualifications before the interviews.

As to the specifics that were asked, I chose to revise and modify the Life-Line Interview Method (Assink & Schroots, 2010) by verbally asking participants to recount and explore an individual's unique experiences and memories surrounding a topic or occurrence. I chose to not ask participants to draw a "lifeline" (as the method requires) as their advanced age made this step cumbersome. Yet I was still able to gather autobiographical memory data, which is a statement of "episodic memory for both retrospective (memories) and prospective information (expectations) related to self" (Assink & Schroots, 2010, p.1). Through these conversations, I was able to develop an intimate peek into these participants' lives and how they coped with various issues, conquered obstacles, and most importantly displayed resilience and perseverance, as first Black women.

### **Data Analysis Approach**

After the interviews were transcribed (manifest content), I utilized analytical induction (e.g., see Bulmer, 1977) to identify and analyze patterns that arose during interviews after each question was delivered. That is, repeated readings were used to identify themes with the reported autobiographical memories. Collectively, responses contain integral data that can help discover common as well as unique themes of the six Black female firsts of Martinsville, Virginia. Analytical Induction (Bulmer, 1977) was used to gain a better understanding of how Black women in established professional roles react to racism and sexism, and themes of how the

messages they received in their upbringing may have helped them combat adversity in the workplace. As stated by Bulmer (1977), analytic induction is “intended to maintain faithfulness to the empirical data while abstracting and generalising from a relatively small number of cases” (p.250), as for this study there are six individual cases. According to Bulmer (1977):

First (a) discover which characters in a given datum of a certain class are more, and which less, essential. Then (b) abstract these characters and assume that the more essential are the more general than the less essential and must be found in a wider variety of classes. Follow this by (c) testing this hypothesis by investigating classes in which both the former and the latter are found. Finally, (d) establish a classification, i.e. organise all these classes into a scientific system based on the functions the respective characters play in determining them. (p. 250).

As referenced in the Bulmer article, as this study focuses on perseverance and resilience in the wake of racism and misogyny, it can be viewed as contributing more broadly to social theory. In terms of understanding the potential impacts of systemic racism and misogyny on a Black woman’s career experience in Martinsville, VA, “The formation of categories in terms of content should be adapted to the material and the problem being studied” (Bulmer, 1977, p.254), and recognize that the “categories are an aid to understanding and generalization” (Bulmer, 1977, p.254) of the issues faced and themes identified during analyzing process. Furthermore, “analytic induction is a fruitful way of delimiting and defining a causally homogeneous category of phenomena” (Bulmer, 1977, p. 252), which we hope to achieve in this study. Next, I report the results of the study addressing the six research questions.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

To address the study's six research questions, I conducted a qualitative analysis of responses to 10 interview questions (see Figure 1). I transcribed each response for each interview question and identified the themes using thematic analysis, specifically analytical induction. I report the results according to each research question.

#### **RQ1: What Are The Autobiographical Memories Of Black Women Firsts Of Martinsville Concerning Racism And Its Management?**

*Interview Question 1: What is your earliest memory of racism in Martinsville, Virginia that has had a lasting impact on you? (see Appendix A)*

After repeated readings (and a second-reader check done by the thesis advisor) I identified a common theme in the participants' responses to this question that I labeled: *a lifetime of racism* starting in their early childhood years such as kindergarten and continuing later in their adult years within their respective professional fields. Although the extent, frequency, and kind of episodes may vary, racism is an ongoing, seemingly never-ending lifespan problem for all of these Martinsville firsts. I will use their first names to refer to these women (see Table 1).

Interviewee Jennifer (age 34) experienced racism in elementary school while playing on the playground when a white child told her she could not get on the swing because "white girls get to go on the swing first." Interviewee Natalie (age 45) was invited to a sleepover in kindergarten at a white child's house. The white children were encouraged to hug the homeowner's husband, but Natalie was instructed not to touch him and just to thank him verbally instead. Interviewee Ethel (age 81) stated that the lighter-skinned students were treated better than students with darker skin and later in her professional experience school superintendents

would come to the predominately Black schools to examine the teachers more closely than other schools. Black students also received old, tattered textbooks passed down from the all-white schools.

As for experiencing racism in their respective career fields, all six first women experienced racism and prejudice as they navigated their careers whether day-to-day or in specific moments that became memorable moments. For Ann (age 65), it was on a work call when a fellow officer used a racial slur in her presence (failing to consider she was Black). Frances Wade was told by a white man she was not qualified for the position she was running for in Circuit Court because it "was too much power for a Black woman." As for DeShanta (age 35), she stated that she has trouble identifying her early memories as racist as the others but remembers being accepted into UNC-Chapel Hill her senior year of college and was told by a white classmate's father it was due to affirmative action and not her merit. Interviewee Sharon (age 64) experienced racism during her career when she chose to hold those displaying racist behaviors accountable. She also had both her life and position threatened because of this. For example, Sharon shared an experience in her role on the city council that many Martinsville residents have yet to forget. A Governor school student presented a project in collaboration with the city manager's office, which consisted of a quilt created to portray the advancements and relations of Martinsville as well as a survey. In this survey, they were supposed to interview Martinsville residents and gather feedback on various topics related to the city's advancement. Everyone involved with this project was white; each student or teacher was white, and less than 10% were Black, as Sharon mentioned that Martinsville is 45% Black. As they presented the quilt, it showed a black stick figure crossing over the local dam, and then their complexion turned white. Sharon stated that she viewed the quilt as the Black figure "the

representation of before they had knowledge” and that “they became light because they were enlightened with knowledge.” Sharon recognized it as colorism stating, “the image being Black, being ignorant, crossing over, and then becoming light...their summation and characterization of ignorance and light.” Feeling that enough research wasn’t vetted nor were the council informed about the project beforehand, Sharon spoke up and began to ask questions regarding the creation of the quilt and their intentions. After Sharon questioned them all and communicated its perceived message, one of the students began to cry and from that point on Sharon was called racist and even received anonymous death threats.

For interviewees, the presence and experience of initial racism occurred in their early years. Thus, to be a Black woman and professional, in Martinsville, Virginia is to experience racism from various avenues and seemingly across all ages. For each woman, racism presented itself in various forms including subtle or covert. Both overt and covert are equally damaging mentally and emotionally. As we can infer, as Black firsts they ventured into uncharted territory in terms of racism and sexism. The presence of racism never faded and their challenges continued or worsened. As mentioned previously, their race and their gender, as well as being in a rural city that is known for its segregation and racism, created numerous obstacles that challenged their resilience and determination. Despite encountering racism, each interviewee presented unwavering perseverance. To better understand the specifics of their experiences concerning racism I continued to ask questions.

*Interview Question 2: How did your family communicate about racism to you growing up? (see Appendix A)*

After repeated readings of each interview, and using analytical induction, I identified three common themes that describe responses to this question: *assimilation, pacification, and*

*spirituality*. Exemplars of *assimilation* included Sharon (age 64) who stated, “In our family, we didn’t talk about racism. It was ignored, and assimilation was the way to get over racism or to deal with it.” She continued with “Either you assimilate, or you do whatever it is that you do better than anybody else. That way you won’t be perceived as being a bad Black person.”

DeShanta (age 35) stated that her grandparents lived through the Jim Crow era and were vocal about racism, but her grandmother “had an assimilation stance towards racism” and was not pro-black. To her, “There was an awareness there, but I feel there wasn’t a sense of pride in maintaining or being proud of your Blackness.” As for *pacification*, most all stated that their approach was to pacify whites and avoid conflict. In short, to stay to themselves. Ethel (age 81) shared that her parents “believed that the white folks were always in charge,” and “you had to bow down to them, the white folks and that’s what they called them, you couldn’t talk back to white folks.” Ann (age 65) also shared that she was told by her parents to “stay in her lane” due to her being vocal about her opinions and emotions.

When examining *spirituality* through the lens of racism, we must recognize its importance in African American culture, and how it is used to placate the real effects and trauma of racism in the United States. As shared by Frances (age 67), her parents taught her that she needed to rely on God’s word, as “God has no respective person” and you must be “nice to people, they’ll be nice to you.” Colonialists believed that “Africans were so far away from the European way of thinking and behaving that they could not have any relationship to their environment, to concepts, to religion, to philosophy, or to consciousness” (Asante, 2012, p. 55). Spirituality is rooted deeply in pan-African culture. “The first flourishing of religion occurred and even the naming of the Gods was said to be an African event” (Asante, 2001, p. 134). This further supports the claim that religion has always been an impactful occurrence in the culture of

Blacks and African Americans. Christianity was introduced to African Americans through the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Many believe it was used to pacify them. As mentioned by Baumann (2023), “One of the hallmarks of the social scientific study of religion is the recognition that religion, in its many forms, is a social force that both reinforces and mitigates social inequality” and all “contribute variously to reproducing and challenging the status quo” (p. 49). As a more nuanced approach, the Christian religion must be viewed differently race-wise as “recognizing this duality in the spiritual, material, and political chasms between the Christianities of white European settler colonialists and the Christianities of marginalized peoples of color among the colonized” (Baumann, 2023, p. 49). The Black Church is a pivotal staple in almost every African American’s life as it is usually introduced in infancy. Christianity is very prevalent among African Americans since the Black Church has been behind many political and social changes due to important Black figures thriving through their support. Baumann (2023), states:

The historical apex of the evolution of African American Christianity came following the Civil War, which he credits as the period of arrival of “the Negro church” as an institutional “nation within a nation”—a space for social advancement, political agency, and economic opportunity in a hostile, white-dominated world (p.53).

With these findings, it is not surprising that most all the interviewees mentioned spirituality, specifically Christianity, as a coping mechanism when met with adversity and racism. This theme supports the belief that religion and faith provide firsts with the resilience and perseverance needed in this world. As interviews continued I was interested in specifics about communication episodes of racism of firsts. For this particular question, there was only one spiritual response. Although, it was mentioned in other questions. It is also important to note that

spiritual differences can be attributed to generational differences. A silent generation Black woman would have a much different spiritual perspective than a Millennial Black woman in the Black church.

*Interview Question 3: Can you share an example of a situation where you displayed resilience in a racial encounter? (see Appendix A)*

The responses to this question can best be described in themes of *confronting* (microaggressions), *educating*, and *countering* (proving their opposers wrong), either by increased work ethic or pursuing higher roles. An example was Jennifer (age 34), who *confronted* a former mayor on a microaggression. Jennifer shared that the mayor “othered” African Americans in a statement by saying something along the lines of “the Blacks.” The mayor’s remarks involved “the Blacks should do this” and using the word “Blacks” rather than saying Black people, or African Americans. Jennifer stood up and let him know “Anytime you distinguish a race, [you call them by their appropriate terms]”, and said we used “Black American, Black people, Black whatever... but when you say the Blacks, you’re ostracizing them and making it seem like as if they can’t coexist with you.” Jennifer successfully confronted microaggression by *confronting* and *educating* others about the proper terms and language used when addressing an entire race. By *confronting* microaggressions and *educating*, one can hope to reduce further ignorance of the aggressor and expect a positive outcome as well as a sense of pride. Firsts are known for their resilience, in part because they must bounce back from managing racism for decades. They are good “rule breakers,” or champions of adversity by breaking the status quo established and maintained by Eurocentrism. As we reference good rulebreakers, we must recognize the late John Lewis, a civil rights legend, congressman, and, most importantly, a good rulebreaker. John Lewis was known for making “good trouble, ” as

punishment for a good cause is no punishment. John “risked his life countless times by organizing voter registration drives, and sit-ins at lunch counters and was beaten and arrested for challenging the injustice of Jim Crow segregation in the South” (Hayden, 2020). Through his sacrifice for the causes he believed in, he showed the world that to stand for something is to challenge all. If it were not for good “rule breakers” the status quo would have never been broken. Firsts must possess that same mindset. Frances (age 67) shared in her interview that when told by a white male that she was not skilled enough to run for election, she rebutted the statement by *confronting* the man and *countering*. She stated, “If you look at my duties now, you can see that there’s not much that I don’t do” and “I don’t understand why you don’t think I would be capable of running the office.” Frances said she “couldn’t just walk away and not say something”.

As for *countering* either by increased work ethic or pursuing higher roles, Sharon (age 64) did exactly that. As previously shared, Sharon suffered much scrutiny while on the city council, but she did not let that stop her from serving. She likes to think she displayed resilience by not only staying on the city council but also getting re-elected. Initially, she was looking forward to stepping down but decided to run for re-election “to prove that I could be me and that they weren’t going to run me off.” She took great pride that “even though you can find some negative things about the quilt lady, they didn’t run me off.” Ann (age 65) shared that her form of resilience is walking away but also proving them wrong. She stated, “If you cannot retaliate, you go forth and prove to that person that they’re wrong about your personality because you’re a person of color.”

It can be argued that these themes exemplify resilience as they both address and challenge racism and adversities that arise in the workplace. Resilience greatly relates to their

success, because without resilience, there is no will to fight or overcome. Resilience is why these Black women are the first of their kind. However, firsts, like all oppressed must also develop ways to cope and must continue to do so over long periods. A fundamental defining quality of “firsts” seems to be that they resiliently endure and are ever hopeful.

*Interview Question 4: How did you cope with instances of racism over the course of your career? (see Appendix A)*

For this question, I extrapolated two themes: *maintaining composure or professionalism* and *working twice as hard as others*. Frances (age 67) shared that she coped with racism by *remaining professional* and “treating everybody with kindness, even though it was hard.” Jennifer (age 34) shared that in the past she struggled with communicating issues without growing angry or *controlling her emotions*. She shared that she grew to learn to “call it out immediately” as she “learned different ways to do it without being as angry as I was.” She coped with racism in the workplace by maintaining professionalism and composure and when provoked, stating “If they say something wrong, ask them, what does it mean? What do you mean? Explain it to me like I’m five because I don’t understand” and following up with “push it back on them and also saying, are you saying this to be helpful or hurtful.”

Black women must *maintain composure and professionalism* because being too verbal or “difficult” will stereotype them as “Angry Black Women.” The “Angry Black Woman” stereotype “depicts black females as aggressive and hostile in their interactions with others,” and “expressions of anger by black women at work will activate the ‘angry black woman’ stereotype” (Motro et al., 2022, p. 142). By showing negative emotion or being viewed as “difficult” in the workplace as a Black woman, “the angry black woman stereotype has the potential to negatively impact black women’s employment status and career progress” (Motro et

al., 2022, p. 142). Being “angry” decreases the potential of further advancing Black women professionally because being seen as “too difficult” could have prevented them from becoming a first. As mentioned by Motro et al., (2022), “observers will attribute the anger of black women to internal factors, which are then expected to negatively influence perceptions of her performance and leadership capabilities” (p. 142). *Maintaining professionalism* in the face of racism is a true reflection of resilience, as repeated adversity can create feelings of defeat.

Regarding *working twice as hard as others*, most Black women have been told this throughout their entire lives. In my experience, to succeed, one must work harder than their oppressors, as the oppressors’ ethic is rarely questioned. As mentioned by DeSante (2013), “While many Americans may tell their children that they can grow up to be anything they would like, there is a different perspective illustrated in the following African American aphorism: “As a black person in white America, you’ve got to work twice as hard to get half as far” (p. 342). Ann (age 65) aligns herself with this aphorism by sharing “I’m an overcomer, obviously.” She stated she “always had a theory that I am better than you are” and “everything that I did, I did exceptionally. Because I had to.” Sharon (age 64) also shared this sentiment by sharing she took her parents’ approach which was “being twice as good” as she is “the quintessential type, an overachiever.” In addition to racism, black first women, like all women, also faced sexism. These two responses are unique but don’t particularly align with the previous themes mentioned for this question. Deshanta (age 35) shared that the way she copes is by “being very vocal and very pro-Black for equality, not with just racism but gender inequality.” DeShanta recognizes that her identity is not only her race but also her gender. Natalie (age 45), also shared that she remembers who she is, as she states “After I give myself that friendly reminder, I devise a plan to

address the situation that honors my spirit.” Although these responses vary, these women use their voices to inform and correct.

**RQ2: What Are The Autobiographical Memories Of Black Women Firsts Of Martinsville Concerning Sexism And Its Management?**

*Interview Question 5: When was a time you felt discriminated against as a woman in your work? (see Appendix A)*

For this question, most of the interviewees have experienced being discriminated against in their careers, as exemplified by two themes of their *role being minimized* or being *directly told women were not equal in the workplace*. As for being *told directly* that women were not equal, DeShanta (age 35) shared that her time as an employee in the Martinsville Parks and Recreation Department was chauvinistic. She stated, "Because it was Parks and Rec, these were men who were very outdoorsy, very health conscious, nutrition-conscious, and doing CrossFit on their lunch breaks." Consistent with the heavily male-centered culture, many remarks were made such as "about men's strengths and capabilities and women just kind of being the more emotional beings," and it was a department-wide attitude from upper management down. For Natalie, she experienced the latter, which is her role being *minimized* by others. Natalie (age 45), a female producer, is usually mistaken for an actor or makeup artist on set. She shares "There is not an abundance of Black women in the space, specifically in the leadership kind of positions, directors, producers, people who are making decisions, people who are cutting checks, people who are green-lighting projects." According to Natalie when she has been on set, "the assumption when I get into these spaces is that I'm a team member who's providing a service or I'm an actor, not that I'm a produce." She states that she often has to correct people in her role on set.

Jennifer (age 34), also has experienced being *minimized* in the workplace. One time when she served on the city council, she announced an item on the agenda and began introducing and discussing various solutions. While doing so, she was interrupted by the Mayor who said, “Stop talking” as he wanted someone else to present more information. The mayor completely disregarded her statements, as Jennifer stated, “He cut me out and stopped me in my tracks and when Bob was finished presenting, he repeated verbatim what I had just said.” Luckily, her coworker stepped in and vocalized that Jennifer already addressed the shared information initially. As mentioned by scholarly works in the review, this type of misogyny can be referred to as misogynoir. Misogynoir “was coined in 2008 by Moya Bailey to describe the specific forms of misogyny that Black women experience in visual and digital culture, which are coupled with racism” (Kwarteng et al., 2022, p.165). This term encompasses the “stereotypes that characterise Black women, particularly, as angry, unreasonable, or unintelligent are examples of misogynoir that impact the health, safety, and well-being of Black women” (Kwarteng et al., 2022, p.165). It can be safe to assume from experience that most women experience misogyny in the workplace, but it must be acknowledged that Black women are usually battling misogynoir and racism exclusively. Understandably, keeping an eye on the prize of being successful as a first requires resilience.

*Interview Question 6: How has encountering these negative experiences affected your role in your professional life? And what strategies have you utilized to conquer these specific challenges? (see Appendix A)*

As for this question, the two themes identified were: *speaking up/being vocal* and *utilizing their faith*. Sharon (age 64), shared that encountering negative experiences has made her “a little more powerful than I thought.” She goes on to say since she made it past the “hanging”

(referring to a previous governor school's project controversy), she was proven to be resilient. The strategy Sharon utilized was "learning to use leverage." As she explains "the four years that Jennifer was on council, the same time I was, she and I worked with the mayor to become a threesome," which helped achieve progression in their work on city council. She also shared she adopted the attitude of "I don't care whether you get upset about it or not, I'm not going to be intimidated by you." As a Black woman, being vocal in the workplace can be seen as risky, but ultimately, and could create the change that is needed. As for the *speaking up or being vocal* theme, Natalie (age 45), shares "I think it's made me stronger." She adds "At certain points in my journey, I would say that I was just so happy to be in the mix that I didn't always say who I was" but "I started to, at a certain point, be able to say those things for myself." Her strategy was just "using my voice, not being shy about saying who I am not being so humble that when people say, Oh my gosh, I didn't know you did this."

As for *utilizing their faith* theme, Ethel (age 81) and Frances (age 67) both shared that they relied on God to give them the strength they needed. Ethel shared that while encountering these negative experiences, she shares "I always believed in the Lord, and I wanted to always do what was right" and "when I challenged those things, I said, I don't want nobody to be mistreated or hurt." Her continuous faith in her religion was her strategy of conquering the challenges and influenced how she faced her adversities. For Frances, she shares "It's made me better" and "It's made me want to try harder." The adversities made her mindful that God has so much more in store for her. Leaning into her faith, and utilizing her perseverance and self-control were her successful strategies that helped her conquer. Continuing to probe deeper I asked more questions about managing sexism.

*Interview Question 7: Have you ever had to make strategic career decisions to overcome gender-based challenges? (see Appendix A)*

This question elicited varying responses, but what themes could be identified were *moving to other positions/places* and *attempting to fit in to be seen as equal*. Natalie (age 45) shared that moving back to Martinsville from LA, was “a huge challenge for women in Hollywood is a culture has been established that to get something you have to give something.” Natalie is referring to the quid pro quo nature of Hollywood, which can be likened to the “casting couch” cliché of a powerful man obtaining sexual acts from subordinate actors in exchange for employment” (McIntosh & Davis, 2022, p. 6677). It is reported that “the entertainments industry may be unique in the use of the casting couch trope” (McIntosh & Davis, 2022, p. 6677), as women can be eager to receive an acting role that could catapult their career in Hollywood. Natalie moved back to Martinsville, stating “But being here is a protected space because I’m not giving anybody anything.” For Natalie, moving back to Martinsville was a strategic career decision to overcome gender-based challenges. As for Sharon (age 64), moving to Atlanta, Georgia was her strategic career decision that helped mitigate these challenges as well. She stated, “I may still have to face a ceiling, but I feel like I have more opportunities and I can have more control over the choices and the outcome.” Sharon further explained her breaking point which caused her to leave Martinsville:

When I finally made my decision to go, there was a job that I had interviewed for [in Martinsville] and they would tell me how close it was and how qualified I was, and I made marketing materials as well as a pitch. I was extra in my pitch for this job. Don't you know the other candidate didn't even have the creativity to do what I did? And you know what they said? We need to be fair and give this person an

opportunity to do what you did. I'm like, wait a second. They didn't have the idea to create materials to do any of this. This was my idea to go the extra mile because I'm extra. And now you're going to offer them the opportunity to create something for you based on the fact that I did it. Okay. And then after all this, you're going to offer them the job because we just think that this person is a better "fit." And so now, I'm like, you know what, I'm never going to be able to get a job in Martinsville. I'm just never going to be able to get a job that's not going to make me feel like I'm always going to be beating my head up against the wall. And continuing to consult, I'm having to get my clients elsewhere, and if I'm going to have to get my clients elsewhere, I might as well just go ahead and be elsewhere.

For DeShanta (age 35), she attempted the approach of attempting to fit in as she decided to join her local CrossFit to "fit into the culture" of her job. While working in Parks and Recreation, she initially viewed it as being a positive experience, but soon realized "it was very misogynistic." She also shared that instead of a bonding experience for everyone, it "was constant competition and [was a lot of] toxic masculinity." This approach seemed to create more stress and apprehension compared to the previous interviewee's responses above.

*Interview Question 8: Have you ever had to witness workplace biases or stereotypes based on your gender? What strategies have you used to combat these issues? (see Appendix A)*

For this question, multiple themes were presented and examined individually. The themes discovered were: *self-preservation, rebellion, being vocal/HBIC, and being overly prepared*. The *self-preservation* theme was prevalent with DeShanta (age 35), who shared that she has faced workplace bias based on her gender, sharing "Yes, I feel like I experience those often, especially

as a mother,” as “I think that even in the workplace, people kind of judge you as a woman in your personal life.” The strategy she uses to combat bias is by withholding personal information from her work colleagues. She stated “I don't talk about my personal life at all at work,” as a lot of times “I will pick up some extra work and hold things in, even if I'm feeling some type of way about it because I don't want to seem like I'm overly emotional or the angry black woman.” From my personal experience, this strategy can either be beneficial or it could badly damage your work reputation, as you can be viewed as standoffish or unapproachable. This relates to the Angry Black Woman trope, as previously mentioned that not appearing cheerful or making yourself accessible to others creates a negative connotation in the workplace.

The *rebellion* theme was prevalent with Sharon (age 64), who shared an experience at a previous employer where she challenged the status quo of the office with other female coworkers. She shared that while at Wachovia, “I was part of a group of women that fought to be able to wear pants,” as there was an established dress code for men and women. The men had to wear suits, but the women had to wear skirts with stockings or dresses. Sharon shares that their strategy to combat this office issue was coming together as there is “strength in numbers.” All of the female executives came into the meeting wearing pantsuits, while one of the well-respected female executives came into the meeting with a short skirt with boots. This strategy helped change the dress code in her workplace. This is a vivid illustration of what being “first” means in terms of changing the status quo. Firsts by definition, are the at the cutting edge of change.

The *being vocal* or *HBIC* theme was prevalent with Natalie (age 45), who shared a memorable moment that inspired her to use her voice after dealing with a gender-based assault on set. Natalie shared this memorable story where she experienced gender-based violence:

We were filming a TV test pilot in New York. This was 2016 or 2017 and we were in a convenience store that was still open. So, we would shoot the scene, cut, reset, and people would come into the store, buy their cigarettes, their beers, whatever they're purchasing, and leave. We would shoot again. And so, there was this flow of people in and out of the set. So, there was a guy who came in, he's someone who lived in the community, and he remained in the space while we were filming. And so because we had to be quiet and, you know, allow the scene to happen he took advantage of that moment and kept sidling up to me and putting his arm around me. I was so disturbed but I'm in my role as the producer of the show. And so I was trying not to be disruptive. And so, whenever we cut, I would say like, you need to back up. But then he knew once the camera started rolling again, that he had this opportunity to maneuver. Well, at a certain point, this director, producer that I had mentioned before, Frank Callow I just appreciate him so much. He just yelled cut. And he was like, hey, get out of here. And he just shut the whole thing down.

This experience however taught her how to “access her voice,” and to become a great communicator. She claims that “being able to say and not allowing any project, any person, any situation to be bigger than you as a human being with a right to, you know, not be harassed.” As for the final theme, *being overly prepared*, Jennifer (age 34) shared how she witnessed workplace bias in the workplace was being called sweetheart and other minimizing names that are usually attributed to patronizing women. Jennifer also shared that these names are usually accompanied by her being “mansplained” or her work or word being discounted. Her strategy to combat this was to be overly prepared. She shared “Most of the time I try to be over-prepared,”

and that she'd "never come without backup information." Therefore, no one can discount her value to the workplace as a woman. To substantiate this strategy, it is mentioned by Rubin et al. (2019), that in addition to many other strategies, women "may attempt to work harder in order to demonstrate their value in the workplace" (p. 269). Women have to utilize various strategies in the workplace to successfully maintain their positions.

*Interview Question 9: Did you feel you ever reached the glass ceiling effect on your career? How did you break through it? (see Appendix A)*

This question elicited mixed responses. Each interviewee either felt they had reached the glass ceiling and moved onward but some also felt that in other ways they had not reached the glass ceiling as of yet. DeShanta (age 35) feels when she reaches the glass ceiling in a position, she will depart that position. She shared "I've reached the glass ceiling in every job because I'm a high achiever and I usually find that I think I'm good at seeing the missing pieces to things" in which "I find often that my voice is not valued and can be overlooked or people are just not adept to change things from the way that they've always been." So to circumvent this, she finds another position. DeShanta stated, "I love to pack it up and go," further sharing "I've seen too many sides of the coin at this point to know when I can make a positive change or impact or when I'm being heard and when I'm not." Another interviewee who shares almost the same sentiment, Jennifer (age 34), shared that she also leaves once she feels she has hit the glass ceiling. She further elaborates by sharing "I used to work in a place in which I had a lot of ideas that couldn't be implemented because of the owner" not being receptive to new information. The job mentioned later assembled a board that would review ideas brought forth, which allowed her to be heard, but ultimately she felt that she needed to be "accepted for what I contribute when I

know it's good information." Thus, when facing something impossible, sometimes firsts must choose to not be the first and move on.

However, three interviewees felt that they had not reached the glass ceiling yet. Ann (age 65), answered with "No, I never have reached the glass ceiling" as "I still think God is not through with me." Also, Natalie (age 45), shared "I'm continuing to break through", as she feels in the film industry, there is a continuous list of things that can be accomplished. She believes that "once you get through one ceiling, you start to celebrate and there's something else that's there." She views her career as an ever-evolving lane, where "over and over just breaking through and then looking around like, okay I'm here but I'm still not there." And Ethel (age 81), also felt that she never reached the glass ceiling because "I was always the only one", inferring she was able to access advancement easier in her position due to being the only woman at the time. As mentioned previously successful firsts keep going no matter what.

*Interview Question 10: Is there anything you would like to add that would be helpful to this project? (see Appendix A)*

For the final interview question, each interviewee was asked what they would like to contribute to this project, and inadvertently, to the Black female professionals traversing the workforce. In their responses, it seemed to be an overall theme of *encouragement* for today's young Black women. DeShanta (age 35), shared that she wanted women to always be *mindful* of underlying racism and gender bias in the workplace. Sharon (age 64), shared that "I think that some of the principles that we've talked about and how to deal with them are timeless" and "sometimes you have to balance between do you deal with it or do you confront it?" She believes "we must think about who we are and those stereotypes, and controlling your voice," stating that "If you're a woman, lower the octave. Speak with command as if you are in control and that what

you have to say is valuable and important and make declarative statements as you must stay rational instead of emotional.” Further adding, “My grandfather used to say cream always rises to the top. You can't dispute what's the cream or what's the skim milk, cream is always there. So be the best.” Her final words of advice were for Black women to take pride in themselves “If we must be Black women, we're going to be some boss-ass Black women.”

Frances (age 67) shared, “You have to have faith that God will bless you to endeavor the things that you want to endeavor” as “you just got to look past the naysayers and have confidence in yourself.” Along with Frances, Ethel (age 81), encouraged those to stay close to God, by sharing “treat people as if they are human beings and not because they made a mistake” as well as “Be the people that God would want them to be.” Ann (age 65) expressed her hope to see the City of Martinsville’s governmental system evolve, by sharing that “I would like to see more women of color in the politics of Martinsville.” Natalie (age 45), wanted to encourage young Black women to continuously achieve, by stating “I hope that future generations of Black women have a higher level of freedom and a sense of there being no limitations. I hope there are fewer rule followers.” She also shared, “I want other young women like you to feel like whatever it is, there are no restrictions.” Finally, the last interviewee, Jennifer (age 34), shared that she wants us Black women to be mindful of messaging:

Messaging has always been like one thing since I was younger, I would always play naive, even if I wasn't naive. So, what does that mean? Can you explain that further? I don't understand what you're saying. So, things like that, instead of just saying you sound like a really bad person, it's just that we, unfortunately, have to present ourselves as soft and, you know, we can't be assertive, but we're a B word, but everybody else is assertive.

In summary, these interview questions were tailored for Black female firsts in the workplace. These seven Black women were able to address a complex phenomenon while creating a collection of unique and relatable experiences. The discovery of various themes throughout the analysis, such as; rebellion, using your voice, religion, and working twice as hard, provide a nuanced insight into the workplace that Black women experience on a daily. By giving these Black women avenues to voice their experiences, we are not only recognizing the adversity they face, but their pure perseverance, resilience, and strong will to beat all odds as firsts. To build a conceptual, descriptive model of the communication of First African American women using what was learned from the firsts in Martinsville, it is important to relate the Martinville stories to the qualities of first found in the review of literature.

**RQ3: (a) Are There Any Common Or Shared Qualities In The Autobiographical Memories Of Black Women “Firsts” From Martinsville Concerning Racism? (b) Are These Qualities Common With “Firsts” Identified In Past Studies?**

There are numerous shared qualities between Martinsville’s first Black women and the historically Black women firsts mentioned in the literature review. One instance is the shared experience of facing racism throughout their careers. As mentioned, Stacey Abrams faced racism as she ran for her Georgia governor race in 2018 and 2022. As well as Michelle Obama, who faced racism in the media during her time as the First Lady of the United States of America. These qualities are common with firsts and to become the first and create a lane that has not been forged, is to withstand all adversities and obstacles that come your way.

As identified in the literature review, five themes described “firsts”: (1) novelty, (2) self-determination, (3) realization of their role as a change agent, (4) resilience (in the face of adversity), and (5) building a legacy for the future generation. The first women of Martinsville

shared all four of these themes. That is, novelty, self-determination, realization of their role as a change agent, and resilience (in the face of adversity). To this, I add nine more psychological and communicative qualities identified from the first Black women of Martinsville: (1) *a lifetime of racism*, (2) *assimilation*, (3) *pacification*, (4) *spirituality*, (5) *confronting microaggressions*, (6) *educating*, and (7) *countering* (proving their opposers wrong), either by increased work ethic or pursuing higher roles, (8) *maintaining composure or professionalism* and (9) *working twice as hard as others*.

**RQ4: (a) Are There Any Common Or Shared Qualities In The Autobiographical Memories Of Black Women “Firsts” From Martinsville Concerning Sexism? (b) Are These Qualities Common With “Firsts” Identified In Past Studies?**

Continuing to add to the previous list of the qualities of first Black women, common or shared gender-based qualities found among the autobiographical memories of Black women firsts from Martinsville are (10) *gender-minimized* and (11) *directly told that women were not equal in the workplace* (12) *assertive women (speaking up/being vocal)* and (13) *faith-based women*. As well as (14) *women’s self-preservation*, (15) *Women’s rebellion*, (16) *HBIC persona*, and (17) *women’s overpreparedness*. The very existence of Black women threatens sexism in a patriarchal society. These women were told that they were not able to succeed in their roles due to their gender. Examples that feature Stacey Abrams and Kamala Harris. Kamala Harris’s media coverage was researched and it found that “61 percent of the media coverage of Harris mentioned race or gender,” compared to the former male vice president (Gupta, 2025). It was found that “A quarter of this reporting employed sexist and racist stereotypes, such as the “Angry Black Women” trope” (Gupta, 2025).

In this sample, multiple interviewees expressed facing sexism throughout their careers. Deshanta was undermined and underestimated in her Parks and Recreation position, due to her being a woman in a male-dominated office and branch. Frances, when running for a position in Circuit Court, was told by a White man that a Black woman had no right to occupy that position and that it would be too much for a woman to handle. While this remark was inherently racist, we must recognize the misogyny that accompanied the remark. Natalie, a producer and jack of all trades was constantly mistaken for stage help or a makeup artist on the set of her own media productions. In the entertainment industry, it is not uncommon for stage roles to be occupied by women, but to continuously be mistaken for help is a problem within itself.

Like the influential and historical Black women mentioned, these women are traversing mostly male-dominated fields. The sexism referenced in this study can be defined as “Sexism, or ‘individuals’ attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, and organizational, institutional, and cultural practices that either reflect negative assessments of individuals based upon their gender or support unequal status of women and men” (Dray & Sabat, 2022, p.317). These women, experienced organizational and institutional sexism as they were in various state, local, and government positions that were rarely ever filled with women, nonetheless Black women.

In the next chapter, I will synthesize these various results in order to begin to build a conceptual model of “firsts” intended to be used in future lifespan communication studies.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND LIMITATIONS

This study identified the qualities of Black women ‘Firsts’ in Martinsville, VA, as they traversed through a professional world of racism and sexism while attempting to break through the “Black” glass ceiling. Unique to the communication research literature, this study explored the types of communication ‘firsts’ experienced. The findings of this study highlight the variety of adversities that ‘First’ Black women encountered and describe their strategies of resilience. These women were able to succeed against various obstacles due to a combination of qualities including inner strength, belief systems, adapted strategies, and messages they received over their lives. The Black women interviewed in this study shared qualities and themes with famous trailblazers, proving that ‘firsts’ can adapt to obstacles they face and conquer any encumbrance. The research conducted contributes to the understanding of the complexities ‘First’ Black women in Martinsville, VA face, as well as the systemic aspects that are continuously a harmful factor in today’s society.

Here is a summary of the qualities of firsts identified in past literature and in this study that can be used to build a preliminary conceptual model to inform future research. That is, when studying the communication of firsts, the following combinations of qualities should be considered because firsts are different from the average person, as reflected by the accomplishments they acquire. They choose to accept difficulty, adversity, stress, and possible failure. To consciously embark into territory feared by others, is to adapt a mindset that not many may possess. With Martinsville, these women as Black children were informed from an early age about what they could and could not do, and what limitations would be placed on them by being Black in Martinsville. Black children in this landscape were and are taught what their enslaved

ancestors endured and what should be their warning. Black parents believe in their children and guide their paths like any other parent, but Black parents have to instill a specific drive and confidence that others may not have. ‘Firsts’ are actively choosing to experience pain, discomfort, and possible deadly repercussions, but due to the messaging they received from their parents, the fear is an afterthought in comparison to failure. A ‘first’ may be viewed as just another person to some, but psychologically, emotionally, and communicatively, they are different from the norm. As shown in this thesis, they are more skilled, courageous, resilient, confident, and assured than average. Most children are raised to accomplish typical goals: a high school graduation, a marriage, a baby, and a job that can afford a small home. But ‘firsts’ are pushed to achieve past the norms and carve their names into history. Firsts rely strongly on communication, as they may have to negotiate through their professional life, code-switching and establishing relationships that could ease their journeys.

I will use the results of the study to begin to compose a conceptual model of the qualities of firsts. In my estimation there seem to be two primary dimensions of qualities of Black women “firsts”: psychological (personality) and communicative. Some of these personality qualities of Black female firsts (from past literature and this study) are *assertiveness*, *faith*, *rebellion*, and *self-preservation*. These qualities distinguish these women as groundbreakers, as well as highlight the importance of an individual’s ability to interact in today’s society and succeed. *Assertiveness* as a trait solidifies a first permanently by reinforcing their behavior and actions as a force to be reckoned with, instilling their confidence and reassurance in spaces that Black women were not recognized before. *Faith* is crucial because it gives a first something to believe in, that all the pain and suffering endured did not go unnoticed. While believing in a greater power or themselves, they are reminded that they are not alone in their journey and they can see

things through. *Rebellion* is an important trait, due to supplementing their ability to go against the status quo and challenging the problematic norms that Eurocentric and patriarchic influences have had in America's society.

*Self-preservation* is a fundamental trait, possibly the most important of them all, as it allows for the ability to constantly endure oppression and obstacles created by racism. Without self-preservation, one would succumb to their environment and would not be able to navigate through hostile and oppressive environments, as well as lack the mental capacity to succeed. These traits together exhibit strength, leadership, and resilience in today's society, and prove worthy of being remembered as a 'first'.

The second dimension of a conceptual model is new and identifies six key communication skills of Black women firsts: *assimilation, confronting micro-aggression, countering, pacification, and educating*. Communication skills are very important to succeed in our society. Communication can and will look different, especially in each race. As for these Black women, these communication skills helped them adapt and co-exist in areas that were not created, nor historically intended for them. Based on the findings of this study and being a Black woman myself, I believe key communication skills of Black women firsts are defining and critically important to succeed, yet have been ignored in past research studies of firsts. *Assimilation* highlights their ability to be seen as equal, and to not be treated negatively by the predominant race or gender but to "fit in." The more someone is different from what is deemed normal, the more challenges they may face. However, confronting inevitable micro-aggression gives them the ability to confront and challenge those who place harmful stereotypes or outwardly disrespect them due to their gender or race. *Countering* grants the opportunity to either debate, inform, or reframe an ignorant comment or situation that could be distorted and

harm them down the line. Although some may view pacification as weak or ineffective, it gives them the ability to remain calm, reassess, and give themselves the grace and patience they need in such a high-stress environment. Lastly, *educating* is just that, educating. Possessing the ability to educate an individual who is either ignorant or ill-informed is a strong trait that will help alleviate the stress of being unheard for Black women in professional fields.

Going forward, utilizing a more comprehensive model that combines personality traits along with communication traits, we can more fully understand not only Black women firsts' remarkable individual qualities, but also their communication abilities, strengths, and traits that function to increase their resilience and success firsts. Further, we can begin to create the content of communication education programs that can begin to build on what has been learned from the Martinsville firsts to benefit future firsts. That is, we can teach skills of *assimilation, confronting, countering, pacification, and educating*.

To this I would like to add my personal experience and what makes me different as a Black 'first' in my family. No one in my family has ever attended a four-year university, obtained a Bachelor's Degree, or moved out of Martinsville. Ever since I was a small child, my mother constantly told me that I would leave this city and attend a university and that she would never let me stay here. From first grade until my senior year of high school, my mother instilled these messages into my spirit and placed me in areas that would help me achieve these goals. Throughout my 12 years of schooling in Martinsville, I achieved multiple accolades, and trophies, and was even inducted into organizations that only a high GPA could access. During my senior year of high school, I received acceptance to over 11 universities across multiple states, with three of them extending scholarships. I have encountered extremely overt and covert racism in almost every grade of elementary, middle, and high school. I have been told that I

would never make it far by white teachers and parents, I have had many counselors and administration tell me to lower my expectations in life, and even discouraged by Black elders making remarks such as “I’m aiming too high” or blatantly stating “Oh, you can’t do all that.”

If it were not for my mother and my proven ability to succeed, I could have easily adopted a defeatist attitude due to the negative communication I received, but I did not. I have endured an abusive romantic relationship, an absent father who abused drugs, and a mental health crisis, but it could not deter me. As a Black female ‘first’ from Martinsville, like the other women profiled in this thesis, I am different. Growing up in a city known for executing seven innocent Black men due to a false claim of rape, possessing an open Klan chapter, and being adorned with confederate flags with a stark racial divide, I have displayed numerous qualities of ‘firsts.’ I have fought abuse, racism, and economic struggle to be the first in my family to receive a bachelor’s and soon a Master’s from an accredited university. As I once recall hearing, we all may have the ability but we all do not take the challenge.

To further future research and emphasize the importance of resilience in lifespan communication, it is important to understand the day-to-day adversities that different races and cultures could face. This study focused on exploring the types and qualities of communication ‘firsts’ received in participants’ lifespans that instilled resilience. It is also a first-of-its-kind study that adds communication traits of first to the previous literature on personality qualities. This study highlights the need to generate interest in this topic area, and I hope to encourage academia to explore more into this topic.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The first limitation of this research study was the small number of participants for the data analysis. As stated, only seven participants were able to be interviewed for this study, as a

larger number of participants would warrant a much more expansive set of data that could encapture larger themes and more generations that have experienced racism and sexism and received varying communication throughout their lifespans.

A second limitation of this research study was the lack of varying industries regarding the professional fields that were included. In this study, most of the professions were based in government and law enforcement, whereas only two participants had non-government-related professions. Further research into this study could benefit from a larger, more diverse sample of professions and industries. With a diverse sample, we would be able to explore a much wider range of experiences, phenomena, and coping strategies.

A third limitation of this research study was the reliance on personal recollections and self-reported experiences and memories. That is, responses from each participant can be intentionally altered, and/or memories fade, and feelings omitted or withheld by the interviewee from the interviewer due to bias, fear, or discomfort of relieving harmful experiences. By utilizing a more diverse sample in the future, we could mitigate bias by having a wide range of experiences and stories, which could lessen the ‘hive mind’ effect that can appear in qualitative research in small studies that share strong similarities such as race. For future directions of this study, the role socioeconomic class and status play in differing Black firsts experiences should be studied. The role of class could be examined as characteristic of a first as communicative styles and resilience will present themselves differently through various classes.

### **Conclusion**

Research and education on resilience across the lifespan emerging in communication (e.g., see Beck & Socha, 2015). Future research on Black women and resilience should seek to provide more in-depth findings if researchers track resilience and fortitude for longer periods

across different life stages and milestones. Exploring various stages throughout participants' lifespans will exhibit how resilience develops and alters with continuous growth or trauma over time. With these life stages, milestones, and experiences, we could examine smaller key aspects that influence resilience in a lifespan such as extracurricular commitments, familial relationships, socioeconomic status, and education level. By furthering research using these suggestions, we can learn from various Black women who were not represented in this completed study. Many Black women were not covered in the study, due to area and time limitations, these suggestions will rectify said issue.

The experiences of the 'first' Black women of Martinsville, VA highlighted in this thesis emphasize the importance of instilled resilience and powerful communication that can help overcome racism and sexism. Their unique stories and experiences can help those unfamiliar with the adversities that Black women face understand the systemic disadvantages at play. By possessing strong qualities that prepare anyone for the trouble ahead, these Black women were able to accomplish remarkable feats. Resilience is acquired through repeated responses to adversity, as a 'first' is not created overnight. This study also wishes to recognize the importance of communication, as this is a communication MA thesis. Communication for Black women 'firsts' consisted of stories, warnings, advice, affirmations, and strategies to conquer all that arose, which prepared them with the knowledge and determination needed to confront racism, sexism, and all of the above. The information shared through various communication processes whether by parents, strangers, or cultural members, has been proven invaluable in providing the strength needed to become a Martinsville 'first'. This study contributes to the field of communication as the communication field needs to research 'firsts' across all aspects including organizations, societies, and cultures.

Further research into these aspects will provide the communication field with rich findings that can fill the gap in ‘firsts’ research, helping to further expand on the conditions and communication, and how it can vary in different areas around the world or different cultures. As this study focused on Black women from Martinsville, there is much more to find in other cities, states, countries, races, and socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Firsts are everywhere and the communication field could benefit from learning the very influences and circumstances that create those who break the rules for the better. For example, Black women are not the same. They are not a monolith, just as any other race. The experience of a Black woman from a rural southern city with limited resources would not compare to a middle-class Black woman raised in a larger city. Resilience would look different for each of these women, as they would encounter different challenges than one another. The following can be said about a Black woman raised Christian in the South, and a Black woman being raised as an Athiest in the South. This is why encompassing different aspects such as location, socioeconomic status, and family dynamics is crucial to discovering a wider range of resilience and communication styles for success and endurance. As well as what resilience looks like through the lens of other cultures and societies, as there is no single monolith in communicating strength and perseverance.

Martinsville to the rest of the world is viewed as a small rural city. As of 2024, Martinsville is still referred to mainly as the place of the Martinsville Seven. It does not hold positive connotations to the rest of the country, or even its state. As the findings from this study have shown, each Black woman ‘first’ has confronted the persistent issues that are racism and sexism, and sadly these issues have not subsided. It seems that Martinsville cannot grow past the Hairston legacy, oppression, and systemic racism, as these factors are proving hard to dismantle. As of 2024, the political landscape and the upcoming November 2024 elections have contributed

to a prominent divide between Martinsville citizens and lawmakers and have strengthened racist and prejudiced beliefs. Contemporary occurrences seem to have reversed the hard work that Black people and other races have put in to help dismantle the racist history of Martinsville. As the women interviewed were from across multiple generations, it is disheartening that someone as young as I may not be able to outlive racism and sexism, especially in Martinsville.

In conclusion, the experiences of the 'first' Black women of Martinsville, VA highlight the importance of personal resilience and powerful communication that can help overcome racism and sexism. Their unique stories and experiences can help those unfamiliar with the adversities that Black women face understand the systemic disadvantages at play. Future studies should examine closer the individual ages and developmental achievements of each participant fully in depth to retrieve more detailed findings. By possessing strong qualities that prepare anyone for the trouble ahead, these Black women were able to accomplish remarkable feats. Resilience is acquired through repeated adversity, as a 'first' is not created overnight.

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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your earliest memory of racism in Martinsville, VA that has had a lasting impact on you?
2. How did your family communicate racism to you growing up?
3. Can you share an example of a situation where you displayed resilience in a racial encounter?
4. How did you cope with instances of racism over the course of your career?
5. When was a time you felt discriminated against as a woman in your work?
6. How has encountering these negative experiences affected your role in your professional life, and what strategies have you utilized to conquer these specific challenges?
7. Have you ever had to make strategic career decisions to overcome gender-based challenges?
8. Have you ever had to witness workplace biases or stereotypes based on your gender? What strategies have you used to combat these issues?
9. Do you feel you ever reached the glass ceiling effect in your career? How did you break through it?
10. Is there anything you would like to add that would be helpful to this project?

## APPENDIX B

### HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW APPROVAL LETTER



#### OFFICE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH

**Physical Address**

4111 Monarch Way, Suite 203  
Norfolk, Virginia 23508

**Mailing Address**

Office of Research  
1 Old Dominion University  
Norfolk, Virginia 23529  
Phone(757) 683-3460  
Fax(757) 683-5902

DATE: February 2, 2024

TO: Thomas Socha, PhD  
FROM: Old Dominion University Arts & Letters Human Subjects Review Committee

PROJECT TITLE: [2147477-1] The Black Glass Ceiling: A Study of the Narratives of First Black Women of Martinsville

REFERENCE #:  
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS  
DECISION DATE: February 2, 2024

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Old Dominion University Arts & Letters Human Subjects Review Committee has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact Randy Gainey at 757-683-4794 or rgainey@odu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Old Dominion University Arts & Letters Human Subjects Review Committee's records.

**VITA**

DASHA L. DILLARD

Old Dominion University

Department of Communication & Theatre Arts

Graduate Program Office—BAL 3054

Norfolk, VA 23529

757-683-3833

**EDUCATION**

MA., Lifespan and Digital Communication, Old Dominion University, Virginia

2024

Thesis: *First Through the Black Glass Ceiling: Towards Understanding the Communication of Successful “first” Black Women of Martinsville*

Advisor: Thomas J. Socha

BS., Professional Communication, Old Dominion University

2020