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I, Too, Am a Woman: an Emancipatory Text on the Intersections of Race, Gender, and Sexuality

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I, TOO, AM A WOMAN: AN EMANCIPATORY TEXT ON THE INTERSECTIONS
OF RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

by

MICHELLE ALLEN

(Under the Direction of Sabrina Ross)

ABSTRACT

This inquiry builds upon Black Feminism and Critical Race Feminist frameworks by exploring the juxtaposition between Black Women and Queer Black Women. It is also an exploration of the similarities between Queer Black Women and Black Women and how they interact with femininity and masculinity, patriarchy, and heteronormativity.

Claiming digital space through podcasting, it honors the power of counter narratives by employing autoethnographical story telling. It examines the multivalent ways in which critical geographies, safe spaces, and homeplaces nurture or alienate Black Women on the basis of sexual orientation, gender performance, race, and social class. Employing tenets of Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Feminism, Black Queer Studies, and Black Cultural Studies this work reveals that the gap between margins of Queer Black Womanhood and Black Womanhood is a critical geography ripe with the fertile soil necessary to nourish a reimagined Black Feminist Agenda that is complex, progressive, and inclusive.

INDEX WORDS: Black feminist thought, Critical race feminism, Critical geography, Black queer studies, Cultural studies, Podcasts, Autoethnography

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OF RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

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Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated primarily to my favorite little person, Jordyn Faith Allen. She is the embodiment of Black Girl joy, Black Girl magic, and Black Girl beauty. For me, she represents future of Black Womanhood. If this dissertation is half as magic is she is, then it will heal oppressive wounds, grant marginalized folks true and complete freedom, and amplify the voices of LGBTQIA communities, Black Communities, and racial and ethnic minority Women.

It is also dedicated to my late grandmother, Georgia Mae Allen. Her undying love and support is the driving force behind the woman I am today. “Hey granny, you stopped school at 4th grade to tend the fields with your daddy, but your grandbaby is a Doctor.”

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“Whenever I am asked to teach, speak, direct a movie...I bring everyone who has ever been kind to me with me. Black, white, Asian, Spanish speaking, Native American, Gay, straight, everybody. I say, ‘Come with me. I’m going on the stage. Come with me, I need you now.’ Long dead. You see? So, I don’t ever feel I have no help. I’ve had RAINBOWS in my clouds.”-Maya Angelou

Thank you to all of my rainbows: Family, Friends, Linesisters, Sorors, Soul Ties, Colleagues, and Mentors...I sincerely thank you.

To my committee: Thank you all for your time, patience, diligence, wisdom, and your vast and varied knowledges.

To every Black Woman Doctor in every field of endeavor, thank you. Your presence, scholarship, and resistance against hegemony expanded the realms of possibility for me and my place in this world.

“We are here because we are your daughters
as surely as if you had conceived us, nurtured us,
carried us in your wombs, and then sent us out into the world to make our mark
and see what we see, *and be what we be*, but *better, truer, deeper*
because of the shining example of your own incandescent lives.”-Pearl Cleage

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CHAPTER 1

THE PREAMBLE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Personal and Social Relevance

In some strange twist of luck, my identity was reared in a city that simultaneously subjugates and liberates Black Queer people and has situated itself at the confluence of three subjugated groups: African American, Woman, and Queer. It is important to note that these identities do not exist in a vacuum; they are interrelated. My identity as a woman cannot be separated from my sexuality and race; each identity collides, overlaps, and congeals to create my unique lived experience. This web of oppression can, at times, be a heavy cross to bear, but it is indeed mine to carry. In a society that has fashioned itself to cater to the desires, needs, and interests of white, Christian males, where do I fit in? Where do other queer black women, younger and older, fit into this society?

A reframed paradigm and politic that includes the narratives of Queer Black Women and Black Women would directly impact me personally and professionally. An inclusive discourse would remove implicit barriers that impede my true self from entering the Ivory Tower of academia. Barriers like unilateral and single identity praxis that do more to diminish Queer Black Voices than to provide opportunities for amplification and celebrations of new voices. Through my inquiry, I stand in the gap between then and now; between the premier works of Black Feminist Thought, Womanism, and Queer Studies and reimagined, multiplicitous forms of Black Feminism that move beyond a politic of silence to a politic of articulation.

As an educator and academic, my thoughts align with the author of *Courage to Teach*, Parker J. Palmer: “As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together” (Palmer, 2007). A revised and reimagined Black Feminist agenda would undoubtedly enrich my ability to live up to the true definition of education which is to pull forth my students’ highest potential.

Living in society today as a Queer Black Woman places me on the far margins of identity and majority culture; far from the centered construct that is cis-gendered white Christian manhood. Specifically, living as a Queer Black Women in Atlanta, Georgia leads to a unique blend of acceptance, comfort, and covert discrimination. 34% of the Atlanta’s metropolitan population is Black and it is known for its robust and active Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual/Aromantic (LGBTQIA) community (US Census, 2010). Atlanta’s gay population is, more often than not, relegated to a four mile area known as Midtown. Within the LGBTQIA community in Atlanta, even our PRIDE events are segregated amongst Blacks and Whites. The situation becomes more disparate as it pertains to spaces for and depictions of Queer Black Women.

In films like *Pariah* and *Set It Off*, there are depictions Black Women who are Masculine of Center (MoC), but Queer Black Women are rarely ever represented as traditionally feminine. Traditionally feminine women engaged in same sex relationships are depicted as curious, promiscuous, or only incidentally same sex oriented. This is symbolic annihilation. It substantiates the narrative of a unilateral image of Queer Black Women: Butch. For both Queer Black Women and Black Women alike, their authentic expression has been stifled, limited, and barred by hegemonic systems of religion,

sexism, and gender policing. For cultures guided by Christian belief, like Black culture, true gender expression may not be available for a child until they are an adult and have the agency to create their homeplace free of judgment, mores, and norms.

Writing Context

We live in a world where Black is other and Women are secondary. I venture to think that if you were to ask citizens of other countries to close their eyes and envision what an American looks like they would describe a white male. The image of Black people and Black Women of all hues, shapes, walks of life, and varying beauties may not always strike the mind. The lives of Sandra Bland, Rakia Boyd, Emmitt Till, Henrietta Lacks, the Tuskegee Airman, the Charleston 9, Trayvon Martin and countless other Black people who have been subjected to scientific abuse, medical mistreatment, or murdered are proof positive that Black Lives do not always matter.

The discrimination faced by LGBTQIA individuals on a personal and institutional level which is made evident through Religious Freedom Acts, murders of Trans people, and LGBTQIA homelessness, illustrates that Queer lives do not matter either. Religious Freedom and Religious Freedom Restoration Acts have been enacted since 1993, but following the Supreme Court Decision legalizing Gay marriage, there has been an onslaught of similar legislation. These bills are often labeled anti-gay because they allow businesses to deny entry and service on the basis of sexual orientation or gender expression (Griffin, 2017). In 2016, 23 trans people were killed; this was the most in recorded history. As of September 2017, 23 trans people have already been slain. We are on track to have more killings of Trans individuals than we have ever experienced (Human Rights Campaign, 2017). It should be noted that these are the *reported* murders

of trans-individuals. Many trans men and women are mis-gendered even in their death, which would lead to skewed data regarding the number of deaths. According to the Williams Institute, 40% of all homeless youth identify as LGBT (Durso and Gates, 2012). These multivalent examples of discrimination compel me to honor the lives, past and present, of those of us who exist on the margins of race and gender. This body of work is a testament of triumph and survival.

All of these factors lead to my decision to honor marginalized groups by capitalizing nouns that reference marginalized groups such as Queer, Black, Woman, Girl, and other nouns and pronouns that are used to signify Black or African heritage or feminine identities. It is my attempt at honoring our contributions to culture and honoring our experiences in a way that society has been unwilling to do historically. This text uses the term “Queer” to describe sexual orientations and gender identity/expressions that exist outside of heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and traditional gender norms. Queer Black Women and Black Women are acknowledged as two distinct groups based on the varying realities faced in common arenas. “Queer Black Women” is used to describe women who are lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, aromantic, trans, gender non-conforming, gender non-binary, or queer in gender expression and performance. “Black Women” is used to describe women of African heritage who identify as cisgender, heterosexual, and traditionally feminine. Additionally, “Black” and “African American” are used to reference the diaspora of generations of people who were stripped from their homeland as beautiful embodiments of the original people of this world but arrived to this nation as enslaved cattle. A glossary of intra-community terms, particularly related to

gender and sexual minorities (GSM), will be listed in the appendix to assist in understanding and framing of the concepts brought forth in this work. (Appendix A)

Research Context

In the movie “*The Dark Knight Rises*”, the antagonist, Bane, tells Batman that he was born and molded by the darkness and that Batman merely adopted the darkness (Batman: Dark Knight Rises, 2012). Like Bane, I was born into marginalization and oppression; I was molded by it. I have attempted to adopt freedom and privilege in the misguided hope of being accepted, welcomed, and centered in popular culture but it has been failed feat. I have been othered, doubted, and excluded for factors beyond my control. In a society that was founded on principles of white supremacy, there is a need to share stories that illuminate the negative influence of and ways to resist a “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 1997).

Recently, I had the opportunity to speak at a conference titled “Our Sisters Keeper”. The conference targeted middle school and high school age girls and was attended by approximately 600 girls. My workshop was called “The Mis-Education of the Black Girl”; it was both a nod to the iconic album by six-time Grammy award-winner Lauryn Hill, the album *The MisEducation of Lauryn Hill*, and the toxic narrative fed to Black Girls about their space, place, and realms of possibilities. In the presentation I made this statement: “If you are walking through life thinking that you have the same opportunities as a white girl living in a more affluent neighborhood and that you and her will face the same issues, you are sadly mistaken. I am here today to let you know that because you are Black and because you are a Girl, your life will be different! The sooner you recognize that the better off you will be.” As the words left my lips, I noticed their

young faces turn from intent listening to sadness, disappointment, and anger. I hated that those words were still necessary in 2017, but our existence at the margins of society cannot be ignored. To ignore the hegemonic borders that confine and define the lived experiences of Black Girls and Black People is to deny ourselves the opportunity to be armed in the fight against master narratives and hegemony. By acknowledging barriers and understanding their intended purpose, we can overcome them. It does not have to be an open wound that we allow to fester like a sore and run. Through an emancipatory education, we can move beyond fixed borders and relegated spaces.

My life and my story, characterized by resilience in the midst of struggle, provides a curricular text of an emancipatory education. The schooling and informal education I received implicitly taught me about my space and place in the world, but intrinsically I yearned for liberation from this toxic paradigm. For a short period of time, I was shielded from the toxic ways that race colludes with schooling and life. Growing up in the racialized south where I had no recollection of white people before the third grade meant that my life was unabridged to the reality of discrimination and implied inferiority. Decades prior to my birth, my neighborhood was once sprawling with middle class white people and brimming with opportunity, but *Brown vs. The Board of Education* forced upon the south something it did not want and Black bodies were allowed into white learning spaces and white flight ensued. By the 1980's, the West Side of Atlanta was practically all Black poor with high crime rates and rampant with the disease of drug addiction. With a Mother addicted to drugs and a father in prison, my grandmother was my salvation.

These factors were the bedrock to the curriculum of my life. I heard my grandmother tell stories of how nice a white woman named Nancy was to her. Nancy was the child of a white family my grandmother served as a mammy to for many years. Nancy would send my grandmother cards with money for Mother's Day, her birthday, and Christmas. In my introductory course to white people, a young Michelle learned that if you were nice and of service to white people, they will throw money at you from a distance. I never knew what "Ms. Nancy", as my grandmother called her, looked like; she never ventured to come visit my grandmother; the woman who loved and nurtured her until her teenage years. Nancy had no obligation to extend any kindness to the woman who was hired to raise her, but I often wonder if the \$50 or \$100 Nancy would send my grandmother was an act of altruistic kindness or payment on her debt to my beloved grandmother intended to assuage some sort of white guilt to the Negro Woman who played a key role in her privileged upbringing.

My next course on white people was taught by my father. After being released from prison, my father entered my life and reentered the workforce. I was seven years of age; my earliest memories of him are hearing his angry lamentations about the "crackas" at his job. He seemed to resent and hate everything about white people; I never fully understood why they infuriated him so. White people had no name in our household, they were "honkey", "cracka", or some contrived expletive that tickled his fancy. He hated having to follow direction, instruction, or assistance from white people even in times where it was necessary. To date, my father does not know how to operate a computer or smart phone because he refused to be instructed by white people. I did not understand what pain or wrong all white people could have caused him that he would let these biases

and discrimination stunt his personal and professional growth. By age nine his perceived superiority to white people tainted my attitude towards white people just in time for me to become acquainted with them through my formalized education.

I met white supremacy for myself in the third grade. I watched the white children speak without being addressed, roam the classroom freely, and be favored by my teacher while the Black students were either ignored or seen as disruptions. My eight-year-old mind could not understand why the white kids were granted reprieve while the Black children seemed to be cast aside and perceived as a pestilence. This trend continued throughout my primary and secondary education; my schooling was tainted by overt and covert racism and discrimination. The story of how a little Black girl deduced that perfect test scores and perfect grades were the only way to achieve parity to her white counterparts needs to exist in the canon.

As a little black girl who grew up on the Westside of Atlanta with a father in prison, a drug-addicted mother, and who would sneak behind the house to kiss her best girl friend, I have a story. My story of queerness, gender, race, and education challenges and may even tear asunder the master narrative of a Black girl coming of age. My story will elucidate themes of intersectionality, oppression, and freedom. The lotus flower that endured the murky and muddy darkness and grew strong roots to blossom peacefully and beautifully upon the placid waters surely has a testimony. The classic red rose that emerged fancifully and miraculously out of the worn concrete that was riddled with bullet shells and discarded crack cocaine pipes cries to be heard. I am the lotus flower and the rose that grew out of the concrete; this is my story. (Shakur, T. 2000.)

Throughout my childhood, adolescence, and now adulthood I have felt othered by my race, sexual orientation, and gender. It is my desire that sharing my story on the arena wall will create a workable past for young Queer Black Women who recognize that their lives and the lives of women around them are not reflected their schooling, politics, media, and professional lives. On a recent episode of ABC's *Scandal*, one of the characters said that Black people are hyper aware of how many Black people share a common space with them in majority geographies so that if White people were to snap, we know who has our back (Rhimes, 2017). As a Queer Black Woman I was keenly aware of my otherness and the whom I share critical geographies with.

Additionally, this liberatory prose could act as a collective sigh of relief for Queer Black Women who are suffocating, being stifled, and suffering under the tyranny of the grand discourse of Black Female sexuality. This endeavor should add context and explain the origins of tropes and stereotypes, both self-imposed and media perpetuated, of the LGBTQIA community. If there were complex and realistic images and narratives of Queer Black Women told in schools, shared trans generationally, and perpetuated in all forms of media then social change could begin. The majority would be able to see that Black Women and Queer people do not exist in a vacuum nor are we monolithic. Lastly, Queer Black Women could be recognized as fully human and offered the love, compassion, equity that they have long since been denied.

This historical and present-day denial of humanity is evident in the policies, laws, and mandates enacted that adversely effect Queer Black Women and Black Women. Consequently, while not a primary audience for my dissertation, policy makers and other hegemonic representatives, such as school administrators, police officers, and community

elders, could benefit from ingesting this body of work by rebuking covert and overt practices that deny the humanity of gender, sexual, and racial minorities. While the practices that denigrate Black Women are reflected in stereotypes like Welfare Queen, Sapphire, Angry Black Woman, and Mammy, there also appears to be a concerted effort by hegemonic structures and the Black Community to deny the Queering of the contributions of Black women and to ignore the contributions of Queer Black Women (Collins, 2004). When Queer Black Women, who are the embodiment of anti-hegemonic structures, are seen as levelly human, it opens the door to equity for Black Women because of shared identities and a shared longing for parity.

While the aims of this inquiry are deeply personal, there is no narcissism in sharing my life in my dissertation; only catharsis, hope for healing, and peace in a society that would rather ignore differences than celebrate them. I would like for my work to be decentered from hegemonic and oppressive structures that are fixed on the rugged individualism and domination that I call “whiteness” and for it to be written by a Black Queer Woman with all Black Women in heart and mind. However, since it will be etched in the walls of the Ivory Tower also known as academia, it is my expectation that it will be used to shift the collective consciousness and be the catalyst for more Queer Black Women to be heralded and their names to echo in corridors of the classroom and the collective consciousness of all Americans in perpetuity.

The aim of my inquiry, research, and personal pedagogy is to provide what Patricia Hill Collins coined as the “counter narrative” about Queer Black Women and subsequently Black people (Collins, 2000). It is a manifesto declaring what Black Women *are not* as much as it is a declaration of what Queer Black Women are. In an

episode of Oprah's Super Soul TV, Iyanla Vanzant said, "We get our meaning and our mattering from our story and if we tell our story in a way that disempowers us we won't know that we matter even in the midst of the story" (Vanzant, 2016). This notion is twofold: firstly, as Black Women, we are confronted with stories, tropes, stereotypes, and controlling images that tell a story about what we are capable of, how we feel, our purpose, and our place that are oft times untrue but serve the good of patriarchy, racism, and sexism (Harris-Perry, 2011). Secondly, Queer Black Women have to actively engage in reframing and rewriting the story about us, primarily for our well being and survival and secondarily to enact social change that leads to equity for Black Women politically, relationally, and culturally.

Theoretical Framework

My work draws upon an array of theoretical frameworks that combine to provide a thorough and unique presentation of ideas that will add value and texture to the field of curriculum studies. My inquiry juxtaposes the lived experiences of Queer Black Women and Black Women. It articulates both experiences and is told through my ethnographical account of my life before I began to identify as Queer and after. I will rely upon Critical Race Feminism, Black Feminist Thought, Black Queer Studies, Black Cultural Studies, and Critical Geography as the frames I deploy to build my dissertation. Critical race feminism puts power relations at the center of the discourse on gender, race, class, and all forms of social oppression (Delgado and Stefancic, 2000). Utilizing Critical Race Feminism is most helpful in exploring and critiquing the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor as it pertains to both race and gender. Critical geography reveals the important of space for marginalized groups and cultures towards the

continued existence of different ways of knowing and understanding. Black Feminist Thought will be used as a key to the door that reveals the vast pool of Black Woman scholars who have contributed to academia and the body of understand, but by virtue of their perceived inferiority have been overlooked by the Ivory tower.

In exploring the multiple layers of my identity as a means of highlight the experiences of all Black Women, it is imperative that I employ Black Queer studies and Black Cultural Studies. Black Queer studies and cultural studies will add depth and breadth to the research by allowing for further exploration of my life as a counterstory and anti-hegemonic text. By exploring media, scholarship, music, and film as curricular text through which we all learn about others and ourselves, the story would be incomplete with interrogating the Cis-hetero, white patriarchal grand narrative lens that re-presents and re-images societal minorities and subcultures.

Methodology

A mixed methodology approach will provide ample room for creativity and freedom in the execution of my research. I use autoethnography as the methodology for this endeavor because I can use myself as the subject and explore my life experiences as thematic phenomena within the context of the existing social, political, cultural zeitgeist. Through this ethnographical remembering and retelling, I can investigate how my life's experiences that have acted as curriculum towards my identity as a Black Woman and, later, a Queer Black Woman. Autoethnography allows the researcher to tell the story in such a way that allows creative freedom with the chronology, specificity details about how others may have felt, and how each phenomenon would later impact me or others. This weaves together a more colorful and rich tapestry of my story.

As a creative, I have long felt stifled by what I perceived as the confines of academic research. Throughout my academic career I have been given prompts and told what to produce. The most liberating thought occurred to me very recently: I am not benefitting my people, future scholars, or myself by contorting my thoughts to fit in the paradigm of scholarly work. Rather, I should liberate myself from the box and challenge others to reimagine what defines scholarship, curriculum, and creativity.

Consequently, a major component of my dissertation includes excerpts from two podcasts, a Youtube Vlog, and a tumblr blog. I will use digital narrative to incorporate and document the unique dynamic and energy that is manifested when Black Women enter a safe space and “talk back” to the master narrative that the world plays on repeat like a broken record. This rapport is a modern day form of Oral History storytelling. Through the use of podcasting and vlogging, I tell one story of a Queer Black Women that could complicate the Black Feminist Agenda, invigorate Critical Race Feminism, and claim digital space for other narratives of Black Womanhood. Often the names of Black Women scholars, pioneers, and historians fall from memory because we fail to speak their names and tell their stories; this body of work combats that collective failure.

Much of Critical Theory, Critical Race Theory, Critical Race Feminism, Black Queer Studies, and Black Feminist Thought is centered around the counterstory and its importance to better understanding each other and society at large. There exists an undercurrent of culture, knowledge, ways of knowing, and life that is untold, uncelebrated, and treated as if it does not exist; I will no longer subscribe to this forced invisibility. I unapologetically occupy digital space and contribute to the larger bodies of digital Black Feminisms.

In seeking understanding for ways to articulate my story in engaging, captivating, informative, theorized, and contextualized ways I encountered Janet Mock, Maya Angelou, and Roxane Gay. While these three authors and griots may not be heralded as Black Feminist Thinkers or Critical Race Feminists, their contributions to the field are indelible, remarkably intersectional, and paramount to a progressive Feminist agenda. Their memoirs and autobiographies have lifted veils of ignorance on topics such as sexual assault and molestation, body shaming, identity development, family dynamics, standards of beauty, and approaches to scholarship.

Roxane Gay is the author of *The Bad Feminist*, *Hunger*, and most recently, *Difficult Women*. Her ability and willingness to acknowledge the burden of feminism was freeing and comforting because it reflected the dissonance I feel when wanting to enjoy misogynist rap songs or patriarchy movies. She asserts how difficult it is to feel humorless, as a woman and a feminist, because once you are aware of the pervasive nature of misogyny, you recognize it everywhere, and it can make you feel insane (Gay, 2014). In an interview with The Elite Daily, Gay lamented about the burden of being a Black Woman author and the ways in which our identities dictate how our work will be received.

“Writing as a woman, you're faced with some really difficult choices. Often times the only thing women are allowed to be experts on is themselves. We're expected to write deeply personal essays, but then aren't equally expected to write a political essay or something historical and deeply researched” (Bronis, 2016).

This was striking because it echoed a latent concern I had about how my work would fit into academia and the larger discourse about modern Black Feminism. I wondered if my work would be perceived as less rigorous because I am using autoethnography as a lens through which to theorize my narrative and tell my story. These concerns are steeped in stigma consciousness and being overly concerned with the onlooker's gaze upon my work rather than necessity of retelling my story for my own liberation and the progression of Curriculum Studies, the Black Feminist Agenda, and Black Queer Studies.

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is assigned reading in nearly every high school or college around nation and possibly the world. However, I did not delve into this staple of literature until I completed my doctoral academic coursework. I wanted to understand how my favorite poet, scholar, and orator approached the task of iterating her life in such a way that shifted the world and its conversation on the way we view the molestation of children. More importantly, I wanted to voyeur into her life and selfishly discover commonalities in her joys, goals, pain, and suffering. In reading Maya Angelou's words, I was struck by her vulnerability, sensational picture painting, and her ability to develop a story. This was the catalyst for me transitioning from strict narrative inquiry to autoethnography; the determining factor being the freedom provided by autoethnography to paint a full picture with subjectivity with me as the sole authority in my remembrance of a given phenomenon.

I had heard the poem which was derived from the title and content of Dr. Angelou's award winning memoir, many times throughout childhood and adulthood, but it was not until I finished the text that I truly understood its refrain.

“The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom” (Angelou, 1969).

The caged bird sings as cry to be heard and have his voice matter in the many songs and melodies that exist. Unsure of who will hear him and what action they will be inspired to take after listening; he is assured that singing is better than remaining silent. This concept parallels Audre Lorde’s remark on the need to speak regardless of how it will be received as well as the need to transgress beyond a politic of silence to a politic of articulation (Lorde, 1984; Hammond,1997).

Lastly, I learned to appreciate the nuances of my feminine identity from author and TransWoman, Janet Mock. Her memoir *Redefining Realness: My Pathway to Womanhood, Identity, Love, and So Much More* encouraged me to truly examine femininity outside of my privileged relationship with Womanhood. Reading her words as she detailed her complex and contentious relationship with her body was eye opening and ground breaking in my academic career and personal life. She resented that her body was accelerating into manhood without her permission and ignoring her mind and spirit’s desire to show the world her feminine essence. It forced me to grapple with the ways in which I besmirched and resented my body for racing into femininity before I knew what

to do with it and before I knew how to handle the unwanted attention it would garner. I was forced to acknowledge the privilege of being Cisgendered and wanting to delay a process that Janet had to wait years and make many dangerous sacrifices to actualize.

The commonality I found in Janet's work was the yearning to define myself for myself without external confirmation or validation. I think that is a commonality experienced by many Queer people of color from all walks of life. Mock's articulation of the importance of self-definition as a tool towards liberation is a poignant reiteration of my assertion that true freedom begins with knowing thyself and utilizing that knowing to claim space and implicitly inviting others to do the same.

“Self-definition and self-determination is about the many varied decisions that we make to compose and journey toward ourselves, about the audacity and strength to proclaim, create, and evolve into who we know ourselves to be. It's okay if your personal definition is in a constant state of flux as you navigate the world.”

The ability to self-determine and present ourselves to the world on our own terms is crucial to understanding the spectrum that exists in both gender and sexual orientation. Janet quotes Audre Lorde in saying, “If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive” (Lorde, 1984, pg. 137). This articulation and rendering of my life is an outright refusal to be consumed by other people definitions of me or relegated spaces for me and brawl against hegemonic forces that would seek to diminish me to make me more palatable in a bland, flavorless grand narrative.

These works and their respective authors provide the foundation of all of my research and scholarship. A foundation built with the ideals of intersectionality, homeplace, representation, education, schooling, a politic of articulation, and feminism as its cornerstone. Without authors like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, I would not have the language needed to explain my ability to traverse boundaries of sexual orientation and gender expression. Without historians and academicians like Barbara Smith and Beverly Guy-Sheftall I would be ignorant to the innumerable Black Feminist thinkers that precede my existence in the Ivory Tower. Joan Morgan, Melissa Harris Perry, and Janet Mock substantiate my desire and legitimize the need to continue the work of Critical Race Feminism and Black Feminist Thought from a modern Black Cultural lens. E. Patrick Johnson, Essex Hemphill, and Audre Lorde complicate my academic understandings by drawing forth the realization that my Queer identity colludes with my other identities to create a nuanced and progressive pedagogy and epistemology. Their scholarship in tandem with my lived experiences has been personally revolutionary and it will progress the understanding of Black Women and Queer Black Women.

Blogs, Vlogs, and Podcasts

Blogs.

For centuries, people have been documenting their lives, their feelings, and their experiences with pen and paper. It is thanks to this form of autoethnography that we have religious documents like the Bible, Quran, and the Torah; autobiographies of the great philosophers Socrates, Aristophanes, and Galileo; and slave narratives written by Frederick Douglas, Harriet Ann Jacobs, and Hannah Crafts. I would argue that even the

cave drawings from the early hominids were our ancestors' attempt at making manifest the feelings and experiences of their world that words could not yet contain. Over time, this documentation of our opinions, feelings, and thoughts came to be known as journaling. People are encouraged to journal as a way to capture the zeitgeist of their experiences either as therapy or capturing the fullness of a moment that will never come again and could be lost in the corridors of the mind.

However, over time with the assistance of internet boom of the late 1990's, web logging emerged. People sought to express themselves and share their thoughts on politics, culture, life, music, and more in a public domain. This served as a way of shouting into the void and proclaiming space for their thoughts. In 1994, Justin Hall, a Swarthmore College student, created a homepage that would come to be generally recognized as the first web log: Links.Net. Hall's work on his personal homepage would inspire websites such as MySpace, Tumblr, WordPress, Blogger, and LiveJournal. After a rise in popularity, the phrase "web logging" was shortened to weblog; a term coined by Jorn Barger in 1997. Eventually, Weblog would be deduced further in the term we use today, "Blog" (Chapman, 2001). While the name for this methodology for journaling and creativity was shortened, the field blogging expanded rapidly. People use blogs to share their informed or casual opinions on a myriad of topics. Elementary students use blogs to post assignments, professors use blogs as communicative tool to reach their students, and journalists use blogs to post their unfiltered thoughts on popular culture.

My blogs, *Triple Consciousness* and *Two Toned Soul*, were both created out of a desire to share thoughts with the world that I felt were too rich for Twitter or Facebook. Tumblr was a tool I used to find home amongst strangers. In 2011, Tumblr was a new site

and its users formed a tight knit community of information exchange and freedom of expression. I shared poetry on my blogs that I would not have dreamed of sharing with some of my closest friends. Somehow, I felt more at home in the collective conscious amid anonymity of blogging. Young Black Women would “like”, “share”, and comment on my intimate thoughts and I found mattering. I used blogging as a personal diary. Initially, I did not even tell anyone I had blog, but after gaining confidence from the friends I had gained on Tumblr, I shared my blogs with people I interacted with daily. They praised me for my writing style and my ability to be so vulnerable. It was here that I honed my comfort with vulnerability for the sake of catharsis and self-liberation. Today, millions of people have blogs; the site has been flooded with folks seeking fame and notoriety. While my intentions for blogging were different, the sites are still a platform that champions freedom of expression and its ability to amplify the voices of all who wish to be heard.

Vlogs.

Today, some bloggers and blog sites are more recognizable than major media outlets. Due to informational lags and skepticism of mainstream media outlets, generations of people rely on blogs for insightful think pieces, up to date journalism, and a connection to the shrinking world. In February of 2005, blogging made another remarkable advancement in its short life: Youtube. This groundbreaking website birthed the Vlog. Youtube is the leader in the video sharing market. It is a space and place that allows creators to upload original content and videos documenting their lives. Use of this platform is free for both the users and the viewers. Furthermore, through the use of strategic advertising, content creators reserve the right to profit from traffic to their

Youtube page. Vlogging and Youtube has created globally recognized personalities who have become millionaires from high traffic to their account. According to the Business Insider, the world's most famous Youtube star, Pewdiepie, has 54 millions Youtube subscribers and made \$15M in 2016. Other stars such as Tyler Oakley, Jenna Marbles, and Lilly Singh made between \$5M and \$7M from Vlogs on Youtube (McAlone, 2017).

The real-life images and stories that can be told on a platform as large and widely used as Youtube has the power to articulate a new representations of all Black Women. These representations are either real life video accounts of their lived experiences or user created fictional narratives that paint more accurate depictions of who we are. Representation and storytelling has always been of striking importance to me and my circle of friends. In high school, we would watch television shows like *Moehsa*, *Sister Sister*, *Living Single*, and *Girlfriends* to see reflections of ourselves as we were and as examples of what we could aspire to be. As we transitioned to college in the early 2000's, these positive and complex images of Black Women in television began to dissipate. As we entered the work force and pursued graduate degrees we struggled to find women we identified with in the work place, our families, and in popular media. I decided that if we only had ourselves as positive reflections of Black Womanhood, we should create bodies of work that would eliminate that void for future generations of Black Girls. We created a Youtube channel and named it *Cut From the Same Cloth*. The channel featured confessional style vlogs from eight women ages 23-27 discussing our changing identities, relationships, triumphs, and struggles. The channel lasted for 18 months and in that time we received so much positive feedback from women who identified with our stories and

admired our courage to be vulnerable in a public sphere in hopes of reaching countless unknown Black Women.

Podcasts.

In a world where pop artists are being discovered on Youtube and everyone is one funny tweet or Instagram post away from going viral, podcasts are a new way to claim space, amplify voice, and colonize the airwaves for people from all walks of life. Informally, podcasts are defined as radio shows without the irrelevant advertisements and allow you to listen at your leisure. Formally, a podcast is a digital MP3 file that broadcasts through various mediums through use of a Really Simple Syndication (RSS) link or feed. They allow complete autonomy in when the listener tunes in, how they listen, and where they listen. Autonomy is the key competitive advantage of podcasts over traditional radio because streaming services and digital video recording (DVR) services have created a culture where users are not relegated to programming schedules.

There are few barriers to entry for the field of podcasting. Creating a podcast only requires a recording device, computer, and an internet service provider. Listening to podcasts is as simple as well; it requires an internet service provider or cellular data and a smart phone or computer. Steve Jobs once held a press conference illustrating how easily podcasts can be created using the GarageBand app found on all apple devices. Starting and uploading a podcast is free and there have no reports of censorship and unnecessary bureaucracy for sharing a podcast with the world. Podcast topics are vast and varied; they discuss politics, comedy, music, television shows, fan fiction, murder mysteries, etc. The content of podcasts are as varied as the people that create them. Tools for streaming podcasts include but are not limited to Itunes, Google Play, Soundcloud, Stitcher, Acast,

Spotify, and Podomatic. Originally known as “audioblogging”, this form of digital media emerged in the 1980’s, but due to advances in technology like the digital radio and broadband internet, podcasting emerged. In 2016 Apple reported that there are over 325,000 unique podcasts with over 13 million episodes (Herman, 2016).

There is most certainly a dearth of reliable knowledge and history about who the early pioneers of podcasting are. According to websites like InternationalPodcastsToday and Voices, podcasting began with Adam Curry, former MTV host, and founder of UserLand, David Winer in 2004. Journalist and radio talk show host, Christopher Lydon, created the earliest known podcast with the assistance of David Winer’s RSS feed expertise. At that time Lydon had a blog that discussed politics; he would post written articles and upload digital audio files of interviews onto his weblog about the 2004 Election cycle. This early combination of free, unbridled journalistic space solidified the bond between blogging and podcasting. The term “podcasting” may have been first used by Ben Hammersley in *The Guardian* in February of 2004, but was popularized by Dannie Gregoire through his strategic registration of multiple website domains associated with the word “podcasting” in September of 2004 (Ciccarelli, 2017).

Like much of academia, the content creators and early arrivers in the field of blogging and podcasting are white and male. Even in the shallow bank of knowledge pertaining to the creation, naming, and claiming of podcasts, there is a lack of minority representation. In alignment with this whitewashed history of podcasting, a 2017 Edison Research study on podcast listenership paints a clear and concise image of the average podcast listener; they are white, upper class, college educated men. While 112 million Americans report to have listened to a podcast and 67 million Americans listen monthly,

56% of those listeners are male and 63% are white. However, while African Americans constitute 12% of the nation, the percentage of African American listeners have increased has risen from 14% in 2011 to 16% in 2016. Edison speculates that the increase in listenership is due to the availability of more diverse content, but I posit that in the socio-cultural climate that Black African today, we are finding more liberal and innovative ways to resist and speak truth to power (Edison Research, 2017).

One of the first podcasts that featured two young Black co-hosts discussing popular culture is *The Read*. Prior to *The Read*, many podcasts emulated the NPR style of reporting and conversation. The hosts of these “news” podcasts were matter of fact, objective, and supposedly biased; *The Read* was their antithesis. It began in 2013 on the heels of the viral video “Shit Black Gays Say” which featured one of the shows co-hosts, Kid Fury. Kid Fury is an opinionated, hilarious, openly Gay Black male from Miami, Florida. His co-host, Crissle West is a queer cultural commentator from Oklahoma who was recently nominated for an Emmy for her appearance on Comedy Central’s *Drunk History*. The pair met on Twitter, formed a bond, and began the podcast. Their podcast has over 500,000 listeners each week and has made them leaders in podcasting for African American millennials. Since their inception, many other podcasts have emerged that attempt to mimic their show format and emulate their success. They are trailblazers and the inspiration for the creation of my two podcasts and vlog that I use as an autoethnographic methodology for this body of work.

My podcast, *The For the Culture Podcast* was created in resistance. Resistance from denigrating stereotypes of Black Womanhood, homophobia/heteronormativity, and what I perceived to be collective dementia regarding contributions of people of color in

music, film, fashion, and academia. I have two podcasts: *The Henn and Apple Juice Podcast* and *The For the Culture Podcast*. *Henn and Apple Juice* is a shared venture with a college friend and is decidedly more lighthearted than my own podcast, *For the Culture*. My surname for the podcasts is Fiya Angelou. I adopted the name as homage to the late Maya Angelou. The leading line of the biography created for my digital presence reads, “Fiya Angelou is the hypothetical love child of Carter G. Woodson and Nicki Minaj. She is the mashup of Negro Spirituals and Organized Noize. She is Nina Simone’s soul lyrics over crunk music bass lines” (Allen, 2017). I created *The For the Culture Podcast* in February 2017. I have addressed popular culture topics like the film *Get Out*, new music releases, and the murder of young black men at the hands of Police. Other, more general, topics have included being a young mother trying to balance home and a social life and the representation of Queer Black Women in Black Greek Lettered Organizations to name a few.

Both of these modes of expression, ethnography, and autobiography claim a critical geography in spaces that are still dominated by majority culture and do not always represent people who share my brown skin, my uniquely “woman” experience, or my cultural background. By using my voice to tell the stories of Black people, more specifically, Black Women and Queer Black Women, I aim to shift the social climate for Black Women that will succeed me, blaze trails with the women that walk alongside me, and honor the legacy of the women that preceded me. Audre Lorde’s *Litany for Survival* best denotes why I feel like a politic of articulation is far more important than silence for the sake of protecting the ego from judgment and persecution. “And when we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed, but when we are silent we are still

afraid. So it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive” (Lorde, 1996, pg. 31-32).

The Implementation and Analysis

Each chapter of the dissertation will open up with a segment, excerpt, or transcription of dialogue from my blog, vlog, or podcasts and brief contextualization of each clip. The snippets are a preview into my identity development in the idiom of my life. They date as far back as 2011 and are as recent as 2016. Throughout this period of time I experienced exponential growth peppered with moments of regression, frustration, suppression, and self-reflection. Re-entering these memories were, at times, comedic, painful, or heart breaking but they are undoubtedly a part of the curriculum that has molded me into who I am today.

These modes of expressions claim digital space and put forth the image and experiences a Queer Black Women in search of herself in a very public arena. Each transcription provides an authentic, real time example of the concepts, theories, experiences, and phenomenon discussed in the prose that follows and in the literature review. It should be noted that many of these conversations and self-reflections were created before I began this doctoral program or before I was even aware of the theories articulated in this body of work. These conversations have been salient and present for me throughout my life. Their applicability to scholarship and bodies of knowledge that are older than I am provide validation of my thoughts and demonstrate the timelessness of their research. The timelessness of the content and theories is heartbreaking because it means that we have not over hegemonies like sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. However, it means that there is room in the arena for my dissertation

to fight and advocate for Queer Black Women and all people marginalized by race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Literature Review

On my journey throughout the terrains of academia I have encountered many bodies of work on a multitude of topics. However, the authors of these scholarly productions were not as multitudinous and varied; they were created mostly by white men and purported a body of knowledge that was largely exclusionary to those who live on the outskirts of dominant cultures. I would read leaders in the field of psychoanalysis like D.W. Winnicott and his discussion of the bonds that infants either form with their parents of what he calls “transitional objects” in *Playing and Reality*. Specifically, he recounts the treatment of a young boy who was experiencing separation anxiety from his family that manifested into an unhealthy fixation with string. The boy even tied string around his infant sisters neck. Winnicott says, “I explained to the mother that this boy was dealing with a fear of separation, attempting to deny separation by his use of string, as one would deny separation from a friend by using a telephone” (Winnicott, 1971, pg. 17). I yearned for an exploration on the ways in which race, gender, and class would effect how this type of behavior would be perceived or how the separation anxiety experienced by Black People who were stripped from their families and native land could manifest in the ways we form bonds with one another. Without these types of explorations, the analysis felt incomplete.

Likewise, in the readings of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, I was befuddled as I searched for saliency and meaning in his words. Wittgenstein says, “The results of philosophy are the discovery of some piece of plain

nonsense and the bumps the understanding has got by running up against the limitations of language” (Wittgenstein, 2009, pg. 54) I wondered how does this relate to me? How does it relate to all or any of my identities? What limitations of language will I experience in trying to share the lived experience of Queer Black Women? I struggled to find meaning and home in my assigned readings until I discovered thought leaders and scholars like Derrick Bell, Kimberle Crenshaw, Emmanuel Levinas, Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Evelyn Hammond, Patricia Hill Collins, and Melissa Harris Perry. Once, I discovered authors, writers, and thinkers like these, the tension between traditional schooling and my warring identities eased.

Black Feminist Thought.

The first scholarly essay I completed for this doctoral program was on the critical importance and relevance of Anna Julia Cooper, one of the foremothers of intersectionality. It was through her words that I found language to articulate the compounded marginalization I had experienced as a Black Woman (not yet Queer) raised poor in the south. In 1892, Cooper published her seminal work, “A Voice From the South” detailing her experience as a Black Woman; sadly, in 2013, the words remained relevant and rang a bell of truth within me that could not be silenced.

“The Colored Woman of today occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both. (Cooper, 1892, pg. 572-573)

Through Cooper's work I could better understand the DuBoisian concept of double consciousness which details the dualism that Black People (men) experience in this country as a Negro and an American (Du Bois, 1903). It begged the question, how many layers of consciousness am I living with as a poor, Black, Woman, burgeoning on queerness, and raised in poverty? If Anna Julia Cooper posed an answer to this question in 1892, my mouth watered in anticipation of satiating my appetite for stories and curriculum that reflects my experiences. Patricia Hill Collins was my first meal.

Patricia Hill Collins is a sociologist and Black Feminist Thought leader. She is the author of several books including but not limited to *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, *Race, Class, and Gender: Anthology*, and *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*. "Through the process of rearticulating, Black feminist thought can offer African-American women a different view of ourselves and our worlds" (Collins, 1990, pg. 32). This process of rearticulating and combatting the master narrative of Black Feminisms is imperative on two fronts: fostering self love by transitioning Black Women from the object to the subject in society and offering normalcy to Black Women seeking belonging. Black Feminist Thought is the exploration of the intersection of Race and Gender within the context of academia. It explores how the intellectual endeavors and property of Black Women transgress boundaries of education created and institutionalized by White Men for the perpetuation of White knowledge. Collins, like me, understood that the works of Black Women were buried alongside the Black Women that created it. This attempted erasure is also demonstrated

in the historical exclusion of Black Women from the education process post antebellum and today in the intentional yet covert exclusion from the ivory tower of academia.

“How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?” (Stewart & Richardson, 1987) According to Collins, Maria W. Stewart was one of the earliest examples of the Black Women seeking alliances with other Black Women in an aim for self-determination and activism. Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* does a phenomenal job at highlighting the works of Black Women scholars whose names have not been carved in the walls of the Ivory Tower and have seemingly been forgotten by historians. *Black Feminist Thought* is aimed at speaking the names of the forgotten academicians and highlighting the vast and rich contributions they have made in every field of endeavor but by virtue of their race and gender have been buried deep in the hollows of history. This text is the symbolic exhumation of those scholars. For most of my formal education, I internalized the absence of Black Women in my schooling as the norm and perceived education as a white endeavor that if I could conform to and assimilate into would be a triumph over hegemonic systems and historic oppression.

Hegemonic forces like racism and sexism seek to oppress Black Women and delegitimize their contributions to the Ivory Tower. “This larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black Women intellectuals and to protect elite white male interests and worldviews” (Collins, 1991, pg. 7). What does this teach Black women about their intellect and academic efficacy? Who are the architects of this knowledge and following the analogy of architecture, what lies in the secrets corridors, basements, and attics concerning Black women in academia?

I did not see myself reflected in academia, but I did see failed attempts at reflecting Black Women in television, film, fiction novels, music, and music videos. These failed attempts were called Mammy, Sapphire, Angry Black Women, Jezebel, and the Strong Black Woman. These images are emotionally violent because they produce embarrassment, other, and alienate individuals that do not align with the vile images. They also create damaging imprints in the mind of dominant cultures about what Black Womanhood is. "These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life" (Collins, 1991, pg. 68). This othering leads to the denigration of and utter misinterpretation of Black Women. These controlling images create blanketed and generalized understandings of Black Women as the infinite other. Viewing each other as the stranger or the other is a blood clot in the arteries of a collective understanding of each other as Americans or global citizens. The concept of the other is essential for understanding one's place and identity in the midst of other cultures. For philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the "Other" is superior or prior to the self; the mere presence of the Other makes demands *before* one can respond by helping them or ignoring them. For Black Women, this means that before ever being acknowledged for who we are individually, we are presumed to be aligned with one of the many negative stereotypes that precede us. (Lévinas, 1969)

I did not find belonging in my K-12 education and outside of television shows like *Girlfriends*, *Moesha*, and *Living Single*, I could not find belonging in popular media. I was the other on many fronts. As a Black Women, still not yet actualized in my Queer identity, I only felt safe in my friend circles, family, my historically Black College, and other Black spaces. Safe spaces and self-definition are critical for the survival and peace

of Black Women. Collins provides three environments that act as safe spaces for finding voice and consequently liberation: family and friendship interactions, Black churches, and Black Women's organizations. Patricia Collins' concept of safe spaces and its importance to the well being of Black Women is an example of critical geography as is hooks' "homeplace"(Collins, 2000) (hooks, 1990). Critical Geography is the exploration of space and place as it relates to the way in which marginalized people locate themselves in an oppressive society. It can refer to a physical location or spiritual place of belonging. However, whether the geographical location is physical or metaphysical, critical geography asks the question of who belongs where, who sets the boundaries, and who is excluded from those boundaries.

"In the comfort of daily conversation, through serious conversation and humor, African American Women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and the right to exist" (Collins, 1990, pg. 97). I submit fully to the truth in this statement. We must create our own spaces and police our own boundaries. This is the catalyst for using my podcast, *The For the Culture Podcast*, and my video VLOG, *Cut from the Same Cloth*, as one of the methods employed in my inquiry of study. As a member of a Black Greek Lettered Organization, a Black Church, and as a Black Women with strong bonds to other Black Women, I know first hand the peace, ease, and normalcy felt when I gather with friends, family, Sorors, or like-minded women. There is much to learn about the power of these safe spaces to heal oppressive wounds, provide normalcy to our experiences, and be the fertile soil for planting seeds of developmental growth.

The realization that Black Women could not rely on scholars and academicians who represent dominant cultures did not have the same vested interest in uncovering bodies of work by Black Women was inspiring. They did not share the same sense of urgency to creating a program of study that was aimed at developing, maintaining, and perpetuating the Black Feminist agenda. This task required Black Women historians. *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, but Some of Us Are Brave* is the concerted effort to revive, document, and insure the legacy of Black women in academia Barbara Smith, Darlene Clark Hine, Debra Gray White, Stephanie Evans, and Beverly Guy Sheftall. The title of this anthology is so provocative and enticing that it challenged me to be as alluring and intentionally provocative in the title of this dissertation. This anthology recognized that there was vast void in representation of Black Women scholars in and outside of academia. Understanding that Black Women scholars, teachers, activists, and artists did not first appear in 1970's at the inception of the anthology, these women bravely sought to pull these scholars from obscurity. "Black Women in higher education are isolated, underutilized, and often demoralized" (Hull, Scott, Smith, 1982, pg. 115). They note that the efforts made to provide equal opportunities for Black men and white women in higher education during the 1970's still overlooked Black Women and the Black Feminist movements.

This anthology principally defined me as a Black Feminist Scholar by introducing me to the Combahee River Collective. The Combahee River Collective was a consortium of Black Women scholars and Black Lesbians thinker and artists actively engaged in the struggle for equity for all Black Women. Their collective statement, for me, acted as a manifesto that poignantly and passionately articulated what it means to be a Black

Feminist and the aims of the Black Feminist agenda. The statement features an excerpt from Michele Wallace's *Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood*.

“We exists as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle—because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world” (Wallace, 1975).

Black Women and Queer Black Women fight the world towards the liberation of the world. The Combahee River Collective and the contributors to *Brave* understood this challenge and still chose to traverse this wilderness. They chose to be radical in their approach to the struggle for equity, but they chose to struggle together despite their differences in sexual orientation and praxis. The statement asserts, “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Combahee River Collective, 1977). This inspires the refrain and chorus in this song of freedom that bellows throughout this dissertation: communion, not unity, for the cause of equity and liberation in full acknowledgment of our varied existences as Queer Black Women and Black Women.

Brave highlights the many ways in which racial and gender oppression has been used by both white people and Black men to attempt to relegate all Black Women to the margins of society; devaluing and ignoring any contributions made to the building of this nation that are not male centered or our contributions to the household (our own or others). It centered Black Women in a way that was so foreign to me that my colonized

mind nearly rejected. It felt as though I had lived my entire life in darkness and my eyes had adapted to that darkness and suddenly the glorious light of the sun beamed on me. There was an entire field of study and text that concerned itself my full humanity as a Black Woman; it felt vain and beautifully specific, but invigorating. *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, but Some of Us Are Brave* is a pivotal body of work for two key reasons: perspective and context. The anthology explores a diverse range of topics with a focus and keen attention to how these phenomena affect Black Women and how these women thrived and survived through it all. The most poignant example of this was their inquiry into Black Women and slavery. “Moreover, scholars treat the slavery experience as a Black male phenomena, regarding Black Women as biological functionaries whose destinies are rendered ephemeral-to lay eggs and die” (Hull, Scott, Smith, 1982, pg. 65). This critical examination of the Black Woman’s experience in the midst of pain and suffering was eye opening. It requires the decolonization of thoughts around specific phenomenon that are typically told through the male gaze and complicates the narrative in best way.

The anthology acknowledged that it was not intended to be exhaustive; rather it was a beginning that should have inspired future generations of Black Feminists, Womanists, and educators. “The transfer of knowledge, skill, and value from one generation to the next, the deliberate accumulation of a people’s collective memory, has particular significance in diaspora culture” (Hull, Scott, Smith, 1982, pg. 198) This is the point of education. Distinguishing schooling from education in that schooling is the passing down of basic knowledge and skills through formal curriculum established by politicians and school boards and education being the curriculum of life. Education is the

knowledge and skills gained from experiences, interactions, and relationships. Throughout my education I have learned that I could not rely on schooling, both collegiate and K-12, to speak to me as a Queer Black Woman; there was no space for me. I would have to create my own space. This anthology felt like I was being welcomed with open arms into a space filled with thousands that have come before me. As I entered this space, these are the words that were spoken, “Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work” (Hull, Scott, Smith, 1982, pg. 16).

Critical Race Feminism and Intersectionality.

Similar to Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Feminism addresses the junction of Black and Women identities. Both acknowledge that when combined these identities create a unique, yet untold narrative of struggle and oppression. However, where as Black Feminist Thought is focused on the scholarship, philosophy, and praxis of Black Women and Queer Black Women, Critical Race Feminism (CRF) uses the intersections of race and gender as a political site for Black Women. Critical Race Feminism is the exploration of the intersection of race and gender and the ways in which these two ideals results in the systemic and systematic oppression of Black Women. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an epistemology that examines the pervasiveness of racism as it pertains to the laws, politics, and governance that guides society. It is the convergence of CRT and Black Feminism.

Collins posits that Black Feminist praxis was a central site that catalyzed intersectionality as not only a term used to describe compounded marginalization but also as an analytical framework for understanding and critiquing (Collins, 2000). For Black

Women, intersectionality is an expansive concept that details the ways in which our work can be both artistic and serve as activism; can be scholarship as a means of liberation and activism, and can create a space that allows race, gender, sexual orientation, and social class to exist harmoniously. Intersectionality is an emerging field of critical inquiry and practice that examines how complex social inequalities are organized, endure, and change (Collins, 1991). Intersectionality is of crucial importance to the Critical Race Feminism theoretical framework.

Critical Race Feminist, Kimberle Crenshaw, coined the term *intersectionality*. In her 1991 *Stanford Law Review* essay titled “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color”, Crenshaw says, “Because of intersectional identity as both women *and* of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized by both” (Crenshaw, 1991, pg. 1244). Intersectionality is corner stone in all of my academic work; it is how I present myself to the world and the lens through which I seek to understand society. The works of Critical Race Feminists like Audre Lorde, Melissa Harris Perry, and bell hooks present concepts like the Crooked Room, Homeplace, the Erotic, Fictive Kinship, Shame, the Strong Black Women, and stereotypes as a political tool for our liberation or oppression.

Melissa Harris Perry is a scholar, educator, and political commentator and author of *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*. A few key concepts presented in *Sister Citizen* are the crooked room, fictive kinship, shame, and the strong Black Women stereotype; all of these themes are used as political tools that seek to control and confine Black Women both politically and socioculturally. It was fictive kinship that attracted me to Melissa Harris Perry; she is a scholar, political and cultural

commentator, and we are bonded through our shared membership in Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. She is the embodiment of my career goals. Her bodies of work expanded my conceptualizations about what it means to be politicized. She explains that the lives, space, and place of Black Women in this nation have long been contested and subsequently, political. Her use of Black culture references such as Sweet Honey in the Rock, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Color Purple*, and music artists like Kanye West and Alicia Keys helps add flavor and context typically bland topics. These references parallel the cultural references to artists like Nicki Minaj and Rihanna and television shows like *Scandal* and *Empire* that I employ to make more academic subjects relative and palatable.

The depictions of Black Women that are imagined and perpetuated in a cis-hetero racist patriarchy are always askew and steeped in generations of misogynoir; the specific and pointed hatred of Black Women (Bailey, 2014) The concept of the crooked room articulates this notion and is derived from a social psychology experiment on field dependence. "In one study, subjects were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room and then asked to align themselves vertically. Some perceived themselves are straight only in relation to their surroundings" (Harris-Perry, 2011, pg. 29). Harris Perry asserts that Black Women living in American society live their lives in a crooked room. A society where the images of Black Women perpetuated in film, social are askew and off center from who Black Women most often feel they are and how they perceive the women in their lives. The images of Black Women put forth in the media and public arenas are rooted in shameful stereotypes like Sapphire, Jezebel, and Mammy. This concept is crucial to my inquiry because I posit that in a crooked room society,

Queer/Black Women either align themselves with the detrimental stereotypes they ingest from media or they feel othered from Black Women because they do not align with these derogatory images nor do they want to.

Cultural practices like storytelling, Sankofa, and Black History Month are all effective because of Fictive Kinship. Fictive Kinship is the unique sense of connectedness experienced by members of a minority culture. It is the term that explains the phenomena of attending a predominantly white college or university as a Black person and seeing another Black Student; it is that twinge of excitement and connectedness that seems to say “It’s not just me here; I’m not alone.” It is the pride many Black people in America feel seeing the Obamas on television and in magazines. Early in my sexual identity development, I recall walking down a populated street in Atlanta with my girlfriend and a man passing by said to me “What’s up Fam?” I asked my girlfriend why he did that and she said that he was acknowledging my membership in the LBGTQIA community; instantly I felt welcomed, valued, and accepted; this is fictive kinship. It speaks to what we are able to accomplish by virtue of our shared minority status. Harris Perry says, “If one’s sense of self is connected to the positive accomplishments of other African Americans, then it is also linked to the negative portrayals and stereotypes of race. The flip side of pride is shame, and like racial pride, racial shame is important political emotion” (Harris-Perry, 2011, pg. 103).

The more I came into my sexual orientation and Queerness, I learned the extent to which fictive kinship can move beyond race and into other facets of identity. As a result of the imagined bonds that exist between oppressed sub-groups, I have experienced queer shame and gender shame. For example, any time a Queer Black Woman is depicted in

mainstream media perpetuating toxic and outdated stereotypes of masculinity, I feel shame. When a woman with a level of privilege attempts to police how another woman should behave or dictate what womanhood is, I also feel shame. However, if we seek to deny individuals the full range of their humanity to avoid collective shame we risk birthing stereotypes that are seemingly designed to compliment Black Women, but instead create an impossible standard for Black Womanhood. An example of this would be the myth of the Strong Black Woman. Black Women and Queer Black Women wear the title of Strong Black Women as a badge of honor, resilience, and fortitude, but beneath the façade there is exhaustion, weariness, and sadness. The myth of the Strong Black Woman has resonated deeply with me throughout my life. Most of my life I have heard it used as a compliment or statement of triumph; “I am a Strong Black Woman. I would like to have someone but I don’t NEED anyone.” In times of grief, defeat, sadness, and frustration I have been told, “You have to be strong. People are depending on you.” In 2011, I wrote the following on my Tumblr blog about what I started to perceive as the burden of being a Strong Black Women:

STRONG...BLACK...WOMAN. We wear the title proudly, often times without merit. “I don’t need you, I am a STRONG BLACK WOMAN!” or “It sure is hard out here; people just can’t handle a STRONG BLACK WOMAN like me!” What have you gone through to earn that title? Surviving day-to-day circumstances that you put yourself in does not a strong woman make; that is...simply put...SURVIVAL. But I digress...

I know, personally, that wearing the mask of the strong black woman can be exhausting. I have moments of frailty and vulnerability. Sometimes I do want

someone to listen to my problems and support me. Historically, black women have been the support system for this nation: we raised Massa's children, supported our husbands while he faced oppression, supported the church as mothers, first wives, nurses, and deaconesses, supported our own children, and presently we are, oft times, the glue that hold our offices together. But what about us? The weight of the world is heavy. We are disproportionately affected by heart disease, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, obesity, and breast cancer. Surely, you do not think this is a coincidence? They are side effects of generations of internalizing pain and stress. If you have a **STRONG BLACK WOMAN** in your life, realize that she needs you as much, if not more, than you need her. Be there (Allen, 2011).

Perry states, "The Strong Black Women is a powerful frame for Black Women; one that discourages attention to the structural sources of inequality" (Harris-Perry, 2011, pp. 190). If you can convince Black Women that they are powerful enough to endure circumstances that are the result of systemic racism and political disenfranchisement, we will not fight against these systems nor we will advocate on behalf of our fellow sister. I have come to realize that the true strength of Black Womanhood is in the liminal space between strength-resilience and brokenness and despair.

Melissa Harris Perry was quoted as once saying, "None of us come to Black Feminism but through bell hooks" (hooks & Harris Perry, 2011). This is undoubtedly true. Every Black Feminist and Critical Race Feminist scholar acknowledges the works of bell hooks. Upon hearing bell hooks call America an imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy I knew that she was a kindred spirit. In one phrase bell hooks manages to address every system that seeks to push Black people and Black women into

the margins of society and culture. Many people came to know bell hooks through her first book, *Ain't I A Woman*, but I was indoctrinated and decolonized by *Teaching to Transgress*.

The use of the word “transgress” in the title evokes senses and triggers thoughts of relegated space and ways to subversively exit those spaces. This is critical to my life’s curriculum because transgression has been reoccurring and omnipresent. I have made attempts to transgress poverty, gender norms, the white gaze, and the patriarchal gaze. A turning point in my professional came as a result of an early notion in *Teaching to Transgress*. This notion revealed that as an academic, it is important that I recognize that when I enter the classroom, I am embodied; I bring my identities as a woman, African American, and Queer. This acknowledgment is paramount because my identities may exist in direct opposition to the identities of my students; this opposition, if allowed to go unbridled, results in struggle for hierarchy. This dynamic denotes the power of education to empower and other any student or teacher that is not centered within the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. This othering provides a unique curricular phenomenon that teaches both parties a valuable and yet violent lesson on hegemonic identities. “...For there is a particular knowledge that comes from suffering. It is a way of knowing that is often expressed through the body, what it knows, what has been deeply inscribed on it through experience” (hooks, 1994, pg. 91). This suffering results in a trans-generational way of knowing that can be understood almost unilaterally by Queer Black Women and those of us far removed from centralized identities. At once, I felt included, embraced, and privileged by a text in a way that I had never experienced before.

It was through *Teaching to Transgress* that I discovered that the warm embrace I received from thinker-writers like bell hooks would not be available for future generations of young Black Girls in their schooling. Schooling is a mechanism of control and domination. Schooling teaches students to regurgitate information (banking deposits and withdrawals) and insures the existence of a class system. Critical Theory pioneer, Paulo Freire said, “The capability of banking education to minimize or annul the students’ creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed” (Freire, 1970, pg. 73). Using educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire, as a foundation, bell hooks argues that true education allows one the means to transgress beyond the covert aims of oppressive education tainted with white supremacist patriarchy that dominates Western civilization and move to a more loving schooling that creates inquisitive learners who challenge norms and obliterate boundaries (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1970).

hooks’ writing affirmed what I had been taught about the value of education and what I hoped my education would help me to achieve: a way out of the relegated confines for Black Women. I wanted escape generational poverty, escape the patriarchy that is perpetuated in Black family norms and religion, and transgress beyond racism. It was this text that was the catalyst for me bringing myself into the classroom; rather than the white washed version of myself. I was liberated; I recognized that I did not have to continue to shave off my edges and curves to position myself as an academic. I could bring my southern dialect seasoned with regional twangs from the Westside of Atlanta and my ways of knowing that are rooted in Southern Blackness and Hip Hop cultures, and that, lastly, it was my job to create a space for women like me to enter the cannon.

By bringing my full self into the classroom without fear of being ostracized, invalidated, or dismissed, I step outside of the white patriarchal gaze that looks upon the Black student and Black Woman with scorn, disapproval, and bias. However, wearing all of my identities is easier to do when I am amongst people who share those same identities and we foster kinship and ways of knowing that are specific and belong to kindred beings. “That ‘downhome’ way black folks had a speaking to one another, looking one another directly in the eye was not some quite country gesture. It was a practice of resistance undoing the years of racist teachings that had denied us the power of recognition, the power of the gaze” (hooks, 1990, pg. 39).

My dissertation also employs Black Cultural Studies as a theoretical framework and lens through which I seek images of Black Women and Queer Black Women. hooks’ *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* is a text that attempts to illustrate the desire for Black Women to move beyond tropes that are damaging intrapersonally, transgenerationally, and interpersonally. Balanced presentations of Black Women that attempt to combat the vile stereotypes seen popular media will not suffice in alleviating the deep suffering for Black Women. hooks’ posits that love is the only force powerful enough to overcome systems of oppression and the hate that infect the livelihood of Black people collectively like a malignant cancer. “I want to honor them, not because they suffer, but because they continue to struggle in the midst of suffering, because they continue to resist” (hooks, 1990, pg.43). I purport that love combined with more complex representations of Black Women and Queer Black Women is the remedy for our healing. It is this attitude of resistance, endurance, and survival that has carried Black women

through oppressive times but has caused scars, bruises, and psychological damage that yearns to be healed.

Additionally, hooks' explores the way in which Black Women's bodies have been colonized territory used as sexual toys or tools of political subjugation during slavery and now. "Then black women's bodies were the discursive terrain, the playing fields where racism and sexuality converged. Rape as both right and rite of the white male dominating group was a cultural norm" (hook, 1990, pg. 57). Crucial to my academic work is the understanding of the space that the Black Woman occupies with her body and how that occupation is often fetishized through hypersexuality and is hypervisible in hegemonic spaces like politics, academia, and capitalist arenas. The struggle to reclaim our bodies from the white patriarchal gaze is persistent and necessary. The fight for ownership of our bodies has been longstanding; from Saartje Baartman (Hottentot Venus) to TransWomen, we are embodied as oversexed, promiscuous, and complicit to any form of sexual activity.

In *Yearning*, hooks discusses a climatic moment in the book, *Soul on Ice*, whereby the main character, Eldridge Cleaver, describes raping Black Women in preparation for the eventual rape of white women (hooks, 1990, pg. 58). Even in a vile and evil act such as rape, the Black Woman's body is seen as a cheap cadaver used to simulate the raping of the most prized form of womanhood: white women. My dissertation is a cry for our bodies to be removed from public terrain and no longer viewed as disposable or objectified. Our bodies must be repossessed from the master narrative to avoid sexual violence, harassment, and objectification regardless of how we choose to present it to the world.

If the Black Woman's body is under threat and the images of Black Women and Queer Black Women exist in a crooked room, where can we go to be welcomed, loved, and accepted? Where are the places that we can go to shift from the roles of the object to the subject in our own lives? Where can we escape the onlooker's gaze? bell hooks presents "homeplace" as the remedy for that yearning. Homeplace is a place where Black people can escape the white supremacist gaze and be allowed to live in the full breadth of their humanity. Homeplace is crucial for Black Women because it provides a safe place that is loving, supportive, and has the power to heal oppressive wounds. It is imperative to our well-being, sanity, sense of safety, and joy. Homeplace is political and thus, is contested.

"It is no accident that this homeplace, as fragile and as transitional as it may be, a makeshift shed, a small bit of earth where one rests, is always subject to violation and destruction. For when a people no longer have the space to construct homeplace, we cannot build a meaningful community of resistance"(hooks, 1990, pg. 47).

Homeplaces like black colleges, black neighborhoods like Black Wallstreet in Oklahoma, and lesbian bars are all at risk of being delegitimized, under funded, or simply closed down because they are considered too niche to effective in their respective purposes. Walter Kimbrough, the president of Dillard University, says that Black colleges are closing and losing support as a result of the fear of Black intelligence. "Our colleges are repositories of Black knowledge, which some would like to ignore. We are plagued by low endowments but also by our nation's indifference to our service" (Malveaux, 2013). Neighborhoods like Greenwood, Oklahoma, most notably referenced as Black

Wall Street, were homeplace for many upper and middle-class families, but were burned, bombed, and destroyed because of the fear they incited in white people (Messer, 2011). Lastly, Rae Binstock of Slate.com, feels that lesbians around the world are losing our homeplaces and spaces to find companionship and camaraderie because of a lack of disposable income caused by the wage disparity and the inability to effectively market to women who love when in a sexist bar industry (Binstock, 2016).

Homeplace is the environment that allows everyone that enters the freedom and relief of removing the mask that grins and lies and reveals the face of a being that is fully human and deserving of love, care, and respect (Dunbar, 1896). It must be protected. In the home, Black women could move from the margins to the center of their lived experience; they could be the family matriarch, the friend, the sister, or just be themselves without the fear of judgment, expectation, and discrimination. Homeplace is our sanctuary; our incubator and our protection.

Yearning explores the ways in which patriarchy affects Black Women such that it even permeates the home. “Much of my work within feminist theory has stressed the importance of understanding difference, of the ways race and class status determine the degree to which one can assert male domination and privilege and most importantly the ways racism and sexism are interlocking systems of domination which uphold and sustain one another” (hooks, 1990, pg. 59). In society, Black Men and Women face racism, discrimination, and scornful indifference at every intersection; yet when these two enter their shared homeplace, the Woman is still expected submit under the reign of patriarchy. Patriarchy forcefully penetrates and impregnates mind and is not easy to abort. As a child, I was taught, implicitly and explicitly, that the man is the King of household and

the woman is his support. This practice is derived from the Bible and Christian practices. I have heard the same sermon in many churches across many denominations of Christianity that God spoke to Adam and Adam was to provide instruction to Eve. The point that God never spoke directly to Eve is usually emphasized to illustrate that a man is to lead the household whether he is equipped to do so or not.

Denigrating images and stereotypes seek to keep Queer Black Women and Black Women silent and suppressed. As a feature of her residency at the Eugene Lang College's The New School for Liberal Arts, bell hooks hosted a panel discussion titled, "Are You Still a Slave?: Liberating the Black Female Body. The topic for this discussion is derived from Shahrazad Ali's book *Are You Still A Slave?* (Ali, 1994). In this video, hooks and her counterparts take films like *12 Years A Slave* and *The Help* and other pop culture representations to task for the ways in which we image the Black Female body and silence them by stripping them of agency. When referencing *12 Years A Slave*, hooks said:

"He could create the sexualized black woman image and people didn't question that image because isn't that what we are Black Women?...I just want you to think critically about what we do with the Black Female Body; why we image some things and not others" (hooks, 2011).

This discussion is key to my line of inquiry because it elicits an active critique of popular culture and its imaging of Black women and our bodies as objects used for the pleasure, entertainment, and benefit of others.

hooks explores topic of the predatory gaze that Black girls and women exist within and the tragic consequences of toxic voyeurism. She posits that this gaze is used in

service of the imperialist white supremacist patriarchy. I would argue that this predatory gaze can only exist in the crooked room of re-presentations of Black people and in particular Black Women. She also reveals the way Black Women's bodies have been colonized territory used as sexual toys or tools of political subjugation. hooks and Trans-activist, Janet Mock, argue that it serves these compounded facets of oppression and collective complicit attitude to see a child actress, like Quevenzhane Wallace, play the role of a little black girl who is abused, neglected, and abandoned by her alcoholic father in the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. It serves these same systems to have Beyonce', arguably the most iconic pop star in the world, on the cover of Time Magazine as a "doe-eyed baby girl". These images strike the head of the nail securing and stabilizing stereotypes of Black Women as childlike, defenseless, and individuals that need to be bossed around. Lastly, after a rigorous discourse of this image and who was responsible for the creation of this image between bell hooks and Janet Mock; the panel deduced that sometimes Black Women collude with the others in perpetuating images that keep our individual selves and other Black Women enslaved (hoAll of our minds have been colonized with patriarchy and sexism because it is the pollutant we inhale to live and breathe in this society. Subsequently, in this prose I explore instances where I have used myself and allowed myself to be used by others as a tool of figurative enslavement in the chains of sexism and patriarchy all the while suffering in silence.

"We are Black Women born into a society of entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female. We are strong and enduring. We are also deeply scarred" (Lorde, 1984, pg.8). By far, the body of work that has been most influential personally and most closely related to the notion of fictive kinship is *Sister Outsider* by

Audre Lorde. She is a poet, activist, writer, and a Black Feminist. *Sister Outsider* is a collection of essential essays and speeches by Audre Lorde that discuss everything ranging from motherhood, the erotic, anger, and the intersections of age, race, gender, and class. Her work is seminal in the canons of CRF and intersectionality. She calls for Black Lesbians to speak up and out despite those that seek to silence us under the fake premise of solidarity and unified purpose.

“Those of us who stand out the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older--know that survival is not an academic skill” (Lorde, 1984, pg. 112). I grew up poor. I am Black. I am Queer. Immediately, I felt a fictive kinship with Audre Lorde. She described feelings and occurrences in this text, *Sister Outsider*, which was published two years before I was born that resonated so deeply that it left an indelible impression on my soul. I have always viewed my education as a way to overcome systems of oppression designed to subjugate me, allow me to enter uncharted terrain by entering the Ivory Tower, and using the knowledge obtained to educate my people, Black people. Then I was introduced to Lorde most popular quote, “The Master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 1984, pg.112). I had read William Watkins’ *White Architects of Black Education* and learned that schooling was used a tool to control the newly freed Negroes and not as a means of giving them an opportunity to be equal. Could it be that by attempting to use schooling and HBCU college education would only alienate me from my culture and subsequently lead to a failed attempt at dismantling historic disparities in education for poor Black people (the Master’s house)? Even worse, could my education

transform me into a tool for Master; only strengthening “his” house by enslaving me to the debt acquired to pay for school and othering me from the people closest to me?

“What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die, still in silence?” (Lorde, 1984) This question is the guiding force behind my inquiry of study and particularly, the usage of autoethnography (memoir) as my methodology. In keeping with storytelling as an African diasporic tradition, telling my story in my words is an attempt to achieve some form of catharsis for myself and offer normalcy to others who will read my story. I believe there is normalcy in knowing that their lived experience, while unique and specific, also has a place in society.

On the journey to remembering and retelling my story, I encountered pockets of anger that would seep up from oppressive wounds and spill onto my writings. Anger rooted in hurt that I normalized to the point of repression or presumed to be normal amongst other Queer Black Women. Audre Lorde articulated this dull, undulating anger that I carry with me masterfully. She said:

“I know the anger that lies inside of me like I know the beat of my heart and the taste of my spit. It is easier to be angry than to hurt. Anger is what I do best. It is easier to be furious than to be yearning. Easier to crucify myself in you than to take on the threatening universe of whiteness by admitting that we are worth wanting each other” (Lorde, 1984).

Lorde’s words liberated me from my silence. Her words encourage me, like hooks, to bring my full self into every space I occupy and it demands that my truth be

spoken and amplified in recognition that my voice is has a place academia and in this world.

Black Sexual Politics and Black Queer Studies.

Joan Morgan and E. Patrick Johnson are both emerging scholars within the field of Black Sexual Politics and Black Queer Studies. They both push the culture beyond a politic of silence to a politic of articulation. This move of the culture was met with opposition and combatted with critique. “Namely, there were scholars who explicitly critiqued homophobic colleagues, not only by "bashing" them, but also by critically engaging their work, pointing out the myopia of its narrow focus on race without considering how it intersects with sexuality” (Johnson, 2015). Joan Morgan is the author of the groundbreaking feminist perspective, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as A Hip Hop Feminist*. Morgan’s works speaks to the complicated relationship that has existed amongst Black Women and Black Feminists historically. We have never been a monolithic group and the struggle to identify one unifying cause has been stifling in our collective progress. We have split into Black Feminists, Critical Race Feminists, Womanists, Feminists, and Hip Hop Feminists. The types of feminism are as diverse as the denominations of Christianity. All serving the same God (equity for women) but worshipping (advocating) in different ways. Morgan articulates our rapport in saying:

“I know that ours has never been an easy relationship. Sistahood ain’t sainthood. That nonsense about if women had power there would be no wars is feminist delusion at best... That being said, know that when it comes to sistahood, I am deadly serious about my commitment to you...sistahood is critical to our mutual survival” (Morgan, 1999, pg.231-232).

Similar complications exist in Queer Studies as well. E. Patrick Johnson is credited with popularizing the term “Quare” to describe a uniquely Southern, Black or African American approach to Queer Studies. “When she [Johnson’s grandmother] says the word, she does so in a thick, black, southern dialect: ‘that sho’ll is a quare chile’” (Johnson, 2000). Johnson is the editor of *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* and the author of *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*. Like my work, the critical geography of the South acts as a silent partner in Quare Studies and the collusion of lived experiences, gender, and race. Johnson’s work is deeply rooted in the Southern experience. His bodies of work explore the intersections of religion, class, sex, and race. Johnson’s work is a master re-presenting of the beautiful and loving narratives that exist for Queer lives in the south and provide a rich example of the bodies of work that can exist for the lives of Queer Black Women in the South.

His anthology is a recent and relevant collection of essays in diverse areas of Black Queer Studies that pushes the agenda forward. Through its curated approach to highlighting representative pieces of prose that center Queer identity and critiques popular culture, it maps a critical geography for future Black Queer scholars to chart (Johnson, 2011). For too long Black Queer Studies existed as either niche market that queered cultural studies or provided a queer text under the umbrella African American History/Africana Studies, or Africana Woman Studies. “We have never been a monolithic culture or field of study. Quite the contrary. Difference abounds. And those differences--of opinion, gender, sexuality, class, ability, education, etc.-have been generative in that they forced us not to ignore them or necessarily accept them, but rather to work through them toward a greater goal” (Johnson, 2015). Johnson, alongside

pioneering scholars like Essex Hempill, Cathy Cohen, and Mae G. Henderson have claimed and named a critical geography that will open doors for reimagined ways of knowing and understanding. His work poignant articulates the experience of Gay Black men in a way that is both niche and universal for the entire LGBTQIA diaspora. *Sweet Tea* unearths stories of joy, love, pain, and fear for southern Black men in a way that debunks grim master narratives about this population both historically and presently.

Conversely, Morgan's body of work expresses the thoughts of a generation of women who are undeniably feminist and deeply immersed in Hip Hop culture. For traditional Black Feminists, hip hop, and its misogynistic lyrics sexist and denigrating imaging of Black Women, places itself in direct opposition to the Black Feminist agenda. Her work attempts to answer Evelyn Hammond's call for the politic of articulation solicited at the end of Hammond's *Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence*. For Morgan, today's feminism must acknowledge the shades of gray that exist for women who grew up at the dawning of the birth of Hip Hop and move beyond the politics of silence.

Hip Hop is the antithesis to a politic of silence; it is an art form that articulates the Black experience. She posits a politic of silence bars Black Feminist of the early 1980's from embracing music that elucidates the raw masculinity and chauvinism of male hip hop artists. Like most second wave feminists, she is critical of the systemic of oppression that has resulted in a Hip Hop culture that celebrates excess alcohol and drug abuse and greed to mask generational pain. Morgan speaks out against the rigid nature of the canonical works of Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Feminism and feels like

Black Feminists have used these works as a crutch that has essentially stunted our growth.

“We've become overly reliant on the field's most trenchant theories—specifically Kimberle Crenshaw's ‘intersectionality’, Patricia Collin's ‘control ling images’, Audre Lorde's deployment of the erotic, Higginbotham's ‘respectability politics’, Hine's ‘cultural dissemblance’. Bequeathing them the sanctity of dogma and rendering them impervious to the changes of time, we've often failed to re-interrogate these venerated interventions with the temporal, cultural specificity reflected in contemporary US black women's ethnic heterogeneity, queerness and the advent of digital technologies and social media” (Morgan, 2015, pg. 38)

I empathize with her desire to move beyond a religious like reverence for the historians and scholars that created a workable past upon which we construct our understanding of this modern world. The recognition that all of our bodies of work exist the idiom of our time and reflect the sociocultural, economic, and political climate of the worlds we live in is paramount. Consequently, some of the works and words of our historical scholars will not be applicable today and we only inhibit our agenda by not engaging in a healthy examination and critique of their scholarship.

CHAPTER 2

PRISONER IN MY OWN HOME: AN EXPLORATION OF HOMEPLACE AND BELONGING FOR BLACK WOMEN AND QUEER BLACK WOMEN

“When I think of Home I think of a place where there’s love overflowing. I wish I was home, I wish I was back there with the things I’ve been knowing” (Smalls, 1975).

The second episode of the For the Culture Podcast discusses the many facets of Queer identity. The episode is titled “[Don’t Yuck My Yum](#)” (Angelou, 2017). The title is an homage to a commonly used idiom as a declaration of sex positivity and a charge to not judge what may be a site of pleasure for others. It is an informative and insightful conversation around Polyamory, love, relationships, politics, and Black Culture through the lens of two cisgender Black Queer Women. The guest for this week’s podcast is Trinice McNally, affectionately referred to as T-Jay on the podcast. T-Jay works as an HBCU and LGBTQIA advocate. She is a Queer-Lesbian Black Woman and close friend of mine. T-Jay is also a member of two sororities: Gamma Sigma Sigma Sorority, Inc. and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. As the conversation progressed and intensified between T-Jay and myself, we began discussing safe spaces for Black Women and the ways in which Black Greek Lettered Organizations have failed to be inclusive, accepting, or minimally tolerant of Gender Non-Conforming Women, Trans Women, or Masculine Identified Women. The transcript below highlights a pertinent portion of this conversation.

MA: When I think about the representation and the advocacy that our Black Greek Lettered Organization has NOT done...

TJ: Ooooo!

MA: It really saddens me because I'm such an advocate for safe spaces and when you think about safe spaces for Black Women, of course, sororities come up. And you are a member of two sororities--a member of Delta Sigma Theta, along with me, and it's just problematic because, of course, our organizations haven't come out and said "we don't accept women that are Masculine of Center, Trans, or Gender Non-Conforming" we have not done that--but...

TJ: But we're doing it in subtle ways.

MA: Has there been something been done publicly? Like, I know we are accepting people but has it been done publicly?

TJ: Nooo. And honestly Delta probably doesn't want to take on that issue at this time. Umm [pause], I applaud but also frown. I mean if we're going to call ourselves the real daughters of the social justice movement--like our first act of service...

MA: Right!

TJ: Was two months after we were conceived in the Women Suffrage March. The only Black organization to participate. For me, that's why I wanted to be a Delta, that's why I am a Delta. To me, Delta meant force. To me Delta meant trailblazer. Delta meant social justice.

MA: Exactly! That's why my heart breaks and that's why I mostly frown because I'm thinking we should be doing more as trailblazers.

TJ: *Absolutely. We haven't. I talked about the issue publicly; we would prefer to keep it hush hush.*

MA: *Like I looked it up as a matter of research, like what is Zeta doing? What is Sigma Gamma Rho doing? Why Alpha Kappa Alpha doing?*

TJ: *None of them. But as a whole, ummm, what are we doing? I think even Zeta has taken a better stand than we have because they have had those incidents within...were a Zeta woman to transition to a man, female to male, and the whole conversation around will that person be automatically be made a member of Phi Beta Sigma because they are they are the only Black Greek Letter Organizations (BLGOs) that are constitutionally bound.*

MA: *What triggered the thought for me is that I was getting to know a young lady or a woman, and I'm going back on her Instagram and I see that she is -- using slang, she is soft stud. I see that in undergrad she was a part of a fraternity for Masculine of Center Women. So I was like 'okay cool'. They referred to each other a "bruh" and things like that and I'm not really trying to go THERE with this conversation, but talking to her umm I could tell, or I got the vibe, especially when I mentioned that I was a Delta, that she may have had some interest in being a Delta. You know how you just tell-- that's not me being cocky but YOU get it. YOU get what I'm saying, right?*

TJ: *Yeah. Like 'Oh You a Delta? Ooooh Man...'*

MA: *Right. They just get real quiet.*

TJ: *Yeah!*

MA: *So as I'm talking to you, I'm thinking why couldn't she have pledged in undergrad? Then I'm thinking well she is Masculine of Center. She probably was out. And I'm*

thinking, what if her chapter-- because I know we did to some extent-- there was a girl who was a stud and had amazing service and did a lot of stuff on campus, but in 2007, that wasn't something that was happening on the campus of Savannah State University. And so she was cool with us, but when it came down to coming to rush and, you know, image means a lot to these BGLOs; she didn't make it. She tried when I tried and she tried when I was over membership intake the following year and she didn't make it. I don't remember-- without going into the details of her case, I don't remember if she had the GPA but I just wonder even if she had made it in, would she have felt comfortable in our intake process when there are certain things you have to wear on certain days. You know, within the organization being around older Sorors who might look at her like she's crazy because of how she expresses herself. That's why when I see Jay, we both know her; she works at UDC, whenever I see her on Instagram--

TJ: *Yes. That's my sister!*

MA: *When I see hold her our sign and see her with her linesisters and her wife being AKA, it makes me so proud.*

TJ: *Absolutely.*

MA: *And it makes think of how BRAVE she is too because I know she isn't accepted every place she goes. We get that on some level, that's our life, but I just also think how unfortunate that is for people.*

TJ: *It really is. And it's disgusting. I mean we both know several Masculine Identifying Sorors with different stories, where they came out as just themselves, right? But when it's time for certain meetings and certain ceremonies, you gon' put on that dress!*

MA: *Exactly.*

TJ: *You gotta think about the time frame; in the early 1900's, 1920's-1930's. Most of these organizations solidified their ceremonies and rituals. There wasn't any language around Masculine of Center Women.*

MA: *That's true.*

TJ: *They've always existed but there wasn't any language around it. I think we are doing, especially the black community, a direct disservice since the Black Community looks up to Divine 9 organizations or at least they used to by not taking up the issue. By being silent, that is an answer to me. Because people have been seeking membership into Delta. Trans-identified Women have come up to me and asked me questions. Gender Non-Conforming folks. And the most thing I can say is go out for the organization. For me, I don't know how I feel. It doesn't matter. As long as you're a Woman; you're living in this world as a Woman, I don't have a problem. But if you're not sure and you're living through the world as a man...*

MA: *That's a different thing.*

TJ: *I don't know, honestly, how I feel about you joining MY organization. I'm a Delta and this is just how it was written and its purpose of college educated Women. That's in our mission statement but as Gamma Sig, our bylaws don't necessarily constitute that...but in Delta I'm definitely disappointed in all the D9 like you said because there are many [Queer Members]. I mean we have Barbara Jordan, Nikki Giovanni right? The AKA's have Wanda Sykes. Bayard Rustin was an Omega from Wilberforce and we don't talk about him.*

MA: *Who's that?*

TJ: *Bayard Rustin.*

MA: Oh yeah! Who planned the March on Washington?

TJ: Yeah. One of MLK's most trusted advisors, but all the Omegas don't bring him up.

They bring up Jesse Jackson.

MA: Right.

TJ: Ya know?

MA: You bring up all of these people, but you won't bring up Bayard simply because of his sexuality. We have to do better, but that's because, number one, sexuality is taboo in the Black community so of course gender and sexual orientation is definitely a challenge.

Analysis

For college age women, membership in a Sorority is a place of belonging, a source of sisterhood, site of social change. In most cases, membership in a Black Greek Lettered Organization is entered into as a young adult, but it extends for a lifetime. The implicit and explicit expectation is that members are active in the sorority throughout their life in terms of service, representation, and financial contributions. With this mutual understand acceptance, fellowship, sisterly love are all minimum expectations that these members can have for each other across the nation and internationally. This excerpt of "Don't Yuck My Yum" details the deep betrayal that is experienced within the sisterhood when these minimum expectations are not met and a critical layer of identity, one's sexual attraction, is either ignored or silenced.

The feedback from listeners of this episode illustrated that this topic elucidated the experiences of Queer Black Women to cisgender heterosexual women who, in their privilege, had never considered what it must be like to be Queer in a Black Greek Lettered Organization (BGLO). I imagine that it raised questions of their culpability in

perpetuating a sisterhood that requires a unilateral standard of womanhood and requires conformity and silence. Black Greek life is mired in secrecy like a Black Mother that tells her kids, “What happens in this house, stays in this house!” To discuss this intentional silencing on a public digital platform for members and non-members of BGLOs is a bold articulation and claiming of space. This space may have been received in contempt because it reveals a smudge in the legacy of an organization that has worked tirelessly in the areas of education, arts, health and wellness, economics, and politics for the Black Community. What about the Black LGBTQIA community? In what ways has Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. spoke up in protest for its Queer brothers and sisters. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said in his speech “Beyond Vietnam”, “There comes time when silence is betrayal” (King, 1967). How could an organization that I have dedicated myself to upholding the beliefs, efforts, and values of turn a blind eye to the suffering of Queer Black Women who undoubtedly are represented in the ranks of our sisterhood.

In the early 2000’s, under Past National President Cynthia Butler McIntyre, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. released a statement to its members calling for all of its members to contact their House representative to lobby for the Reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act. What has been done since then? What about TransWomen? What about required training for those conducting membership intake about LGBTQ discrimination? This othering in an organization that has acted as a homeplace for me since 2007 is the worst kind of betrayal. This is one example of the homeplaces that once nurtured me eventually alienating me and remaining silent on matters related to Queer Black Women and TransWomen.

Homeplace

“Black Women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty hardship, and deprivation...” (hooks, 1990, pg. 42). bell hooks puts forth the notion that homeplace is an environment created by Black Women. The home may not be the property of the woman, but she creates the essence of the home. It is the place where Black Women nurture and nourish themselves and their family with love, humanity, and acceptance. It honors the space within; it is an education of sustaining the spirit in a world that actively works towards your denigration. The song by Sweet Honey in the Rock, “No Mirrors in my NaNa’s house” articulates the experience of a little Black Girl who finds the beauty within not by staring at her reflection in the mirror, rather in the eyes of her Nana (Barnwell and Saint James, 1998). This is a triumphant example of the ways in which Black Women can create homeplace.

Expanding the conceptualization of homeplace, I challenge the notion of home place being a physical location where one rests, cooks, lives, and keeps all of their belongings. Traditional definition of home is a brick and mortar domicile that protects individuals or families from external elements and offers refuge from unsolicited others. My ontology likens the concepts of home place and Patricia Hill Collins’ safe space. They both describe a place and locale of critical importance for marginalized populations. These terms both describe a critical geography and are synonymous in my opinion.

In his collection of essays, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography*, David Harvey cites origins of critical geography as a derivative of an enriched understanding of Marxism. “This indicated a pressing need to define a critical geography

that could deconstruct how certain kinds of knowledge, seemingly neutral or natural or even obvious could be in fact be an instrumental means to preserve political power” (Harvey, 2001). Spaces and places that act as a home for oppressed, underrepresented, and marginalized populations offer the same protection, comfort, and refuge as a physical home. They also offer multiple bodies of knowledge that preserve, sustain, and elucidate hidden curriculum of othered lived experiences. Critical geographies have been of particular importance to Black people, the LGBTQIA community, feminists, and postmodern scholars because these groups understand the experience of being homeless in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Homeplace is not only a place of emotional well-being for Black people, it is a site of political resistance. Homeplace transcends the location of home; it is more than a physical space. For Black people homeplace could be the Black church, the barbershop or hair salon, or Historically Black Schools and Universities (HBCU’s). All of these places serve their traditional service or function but also provide a collective space and an informal classroom that teaches generations of Black Women a diverse and comprehensive curriculum of life.

Sororities

Historically, Black Colleges and Universities have thought of as havens for students to learn traditional pedagogy and the pedagogy of self-identity, space, and place. The late Dr. William Watkins, author of *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America, 1865-1954* posits that Black Colleges developed in Post Civil War America out of “accommodationism” and not out of a sincere striving for parity amongst Blacks and whites. “The politics and ideology of accommodationism shaped the

sponsored education of Blacks in the United States. Hampton Institute, Virginia, with its founder and leader General Samuel Armstrong, would become the testing ground and prototype for accommodationist education” (Watkins, 2001).

Six of the nine BGLOs were founded on the Historically Black College campuses. Black Women create home place in organizations like BGLOs and other social clubs. These organizations centralize the needs of Black Women, attempt to normalize phenomena thus strengthening bonds, and make strides to progress and uplift Black Women. Sororities and Black social groups do not explicitly deny membership to Black Queer Women; they are aimed at the uplift and progression of “all” Black Women. However, membership in these organizations is wildly subjective. Discrimination based on the basis of sexual orientation is undocumented but undoubtedly exists. Majority of members are inducted into these organization while attending college; young college adults are charged with the induction of other young adults into a lifelong membership. Unlike Pan-Hellenic Sororities and Fraternities, membership in BGLOs is an induction into a secret society that maintains itself in private rituals and practices that follow members throughout life and into death. Membership in these organizations is supposed to be largely based on grade point average, community involvement, and representation. One could only speculate about the challenges that a Black Queer college woman with a masculine affect, a woman in an openly Queer relationship, or a Transwoman could be subjected to. These women could be judged more harshly when considered for membership and their ability to be a valued asset to the organization regarding representation could be questioned. Their perceived difference is either ignored or not

welcomed into the organization; both are equally violent because they deny one's fully humanity.

From my experience as a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. for ten years, there are undoubtedly Queer Women in these organizations, but rarely are these members transparent about their attraction to women or relationships during membership intake for fear of being singled out or it being used a reason to ignore qualities that would make them an ideal candidate for membership and lead to denial of membership. These organizations rarely speak out for rights of their LGBTQIA members or Black Queer Women; their silence is effectively damaging. "Moreover, ignoring difference within groups contributes to the tension among groups, another problem of identity politics that it bears on efforts to politicize violence against women" (Crenshaw, 1991). If these organizations that have well over a million members, collectively, were to advocate for the rights, visibility, and centering of Black Queer Women change could be enacted and these women could be invited to make Black Sorority life a home with open arms.

Black Family

The politics of identity has been a struggle of Black people both individually and collectively. For the Black family, assimilationist conformity to American ideals meant prioritizing the rebuilding or formation of the family. Linguist and philosopher, George Lakoff, says, "The family has always been the cornerstone of American society. Our families nurture, pre-serve, and pass on to each succeeding generation the values we share and cherish, values that are the foundation of our freedoms"(Lakoff, 2011). In the generations following slavery, Black families have willingly and gleefully ingested the rhetoric of a heteronormative, God fearing family like glass of sweet homemade

lemonade. According to Darnell Moore, author of *Contest Alliances: The Black Church, the Right, and Queer Failure*, “The centralizing figure within this formulaic motif of normalcy (whether framed within the Black Church and/or the conservative political matrix) is the patriarch, the father, the husband, the head, God!” (Moore, 2012). The consumption of this sweet sugary narrative could have been an attempt to achieve normalcy after hundreds of years of chattel slavery and being treated as property rather than being acknowledged as a level human with agency.

Black families were dismantled, denigrated, invalidated some times for cruel whimsy and other times for profit. This is evidenced in Jacqueline Jones’ *Saving Savannah*. Jones recounts the story of slave owner, Charles C. Jones and his slave, Cassius. In an act of self-proclaimed “righteous Christianity”, Jones made a promise to Cassius’ family by agreeing to sell them collectively. However, this commitment was shallow and vapid; Jones separated Cassius daughters from their husbands, kept Cassius’s son as a manservant, and they kept his grandchildren. “The Charles Jones’ disapproved of their ‘ungodly’ neighbors who abused their slaves with impunity, separated black families on a whim, and favored a reopening of African slave trade” (Jones, 2008). The marriage of a Black man and a Black Woman was illegal, but slaves resisted by officiating and creating their own wedding ceremonies and traditions. They risked their lives to escape bondage to find their lost family members and, if granted the opportunity, they spent their days off traveling to visit dispersed kin on nearby plantations. As depicted in the gruesome image in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, sometimes, mothers would commit infanticide rather than have them endure of live on bondage and pain (Jones, 2008; Morrison, 1987). Following the Emancipation Proclamation, Black families

worked to reconstruct the family that was torn apart; it was a reclamation of their rights to love and belonging, and securing familial bonds that would endure for generations.

Understanding the importance of finding partner and building a family or home in the heteronormative sense, where does the Queer Black Woman find home? How does a Woman not interested in subscribing to heteronormative love find home? Where does a Black teenage Girl with Queer thoughts find home?

Queer Scholar, Essex Hemphill wrote a personal essay on the forced silence of gay Black men, he says “This rendering describes home as a site of contestation-as opposed to the “welcome table” or “comforting” characterization of home associated with most dominant, public, and politically salient renderings of African American community” (Hemphill, 1992). Queer Black Women may also experience a mandate of silence and be forced to lean into their ability to pass as heterosexual in their home. For them, growing up in hooks’ homeplace is sometimes a far cry from reality; sometimes, it is not until adulthood that we can create our own place of acceptance, tranquility, and love. In a family that is steeped in heteronormativity, doused in patriarchy, and seasoned with religiosity, does the ideal of homeplace still endure Queer Black Women? How does a Black Girl who has been fed dreams of meeting her husband and sees only heterosexual relationships perpetuated in media and popular culture, but secretly yearns for a woman’s touch, find home?

The lack of a spiritual homeplace is evidenced in the statistics for the lack of literal home place for LGBTQIA youth: homelessness. The most frequently cited factor contributing to LGBTQIA homelessness was familial rejection based on sexual orientation and gender identity, with the second most common reason of being forced out

by their parents after coming out, according to the Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, et al. (Durso and Gates, 2012). How does a young adult, denied acceptance and humanity, find home when they do not subscribe to their familial ideals? If Southern Baptist Christianity, Black Liberation Theology, and patriarchy are embraced in Black families as an act of true assimilation and equal standing to white people, how do Queer Black Women situate themselves?

Black Church

The church has traditionally been a political site for Black culture and it is contaminated with heteronormativity, sexism, racism, and patriarchy. For Black Women, the Southern Black church has been a site and home of love, support, and encouragement and conversely, it has been fertile soil for patriarchy, subordination, and sexism. In *Uncle Tom or New Negro: African Americans Reflect on Booker T. Washington and Slavery One Hundred Years Later*, Dr. Rebecca Carroll recalled that in 2006, Black Women constituted 70% of Black church congregations, but only a miniscule proportion of church leadership (Carroll and Washington, 2006). “11% of those self-identifying as clergy in the 1990 census were women; however, in the Black church, only about 3% of clergy were women” (Ngunjiri, Gramby-Sobukwe, Williams-Gegner, 2012). Black Women hold many informal leadership positions in Southern Black churches; they are missionary, evangelists, deaconesses, and members of the motherboard. Black men are granted legitimate power in church while the Black church provides Black Women positions of reverence, authority, and high social standing. It should be noted that many Women gladly accepted these subordinate positions in the church because women

operating in submission to men is in alignment with many of the stories and respective interpretations in the bible.

In casual, intimate conversations amongst grandmothers, mothers, and aunts, Black Women are told that they can find a “good” husband in the church. This is evidenced in the cult classic starring Eddie Murphy, *Coming to America*. Prince Hakeem asks the barbers in a Brooklyn barbershop where he could find his Queen. They tell him “You gotta go to church! That’s where all the good women are!” Cisgender men and women can go to church to find a potential spouse and hear iterations of the Songs of Solomon and the love story of Ruth and Boaz to have their desires for companionship affirmed. Many churches even offer single’s bible study classes or singles social events. For Black Women, the Black church is both a classroom and homeplace fertile with the potentialities of love and family.

Queer Black Women are othered in communities and spaces that act as homeplace for Black Women. Growing up Christian, more particularly Southern Baptist, I found great comfort in church. The songs, sermons, honoring of tradition, the statesmanship of the deacons, pastors, first lady, and motherboard all resonated deeply. However, as I developed in my sexual orientation identity I began to feel alienated by the church. Sermons about the sin of homosexuality and the relationship of Adam and Even othered and even shamed me. Christian churches do not always allow the intersection between same sex relationships and Christianity. In the wake of the mass killing 49 LGBTQIA people and allies, Pastor Roger Jimenez in Sacramento was quoted saying, “As Christians, should we be mourning the death of these 50 vile, perverted predators? There is no tragedy...the tragedy is that more of them didn’t die” (Sieczkowski, 2016). Pastor

Jimenez does not exist in a vacuum; other pastors spoke out in a similar tone. As damaging as denigrating comments like that of Roger Jimenez are, it is the blaring silence of many Pastors and southern Baptist churches that speaks the loudest. Rhetoric like this and more passive, but no less aggressive behaviors such as glaring looks and whispers upon entering the church with one's partner or with a queer gender expression has led to the creation of churches for members of the LGBTQIA community; a religious homeplace. Churches like Saint Mark Methodist Church, Vision Church of Atlanta, and First Iconium Church are places that have either been created by Queer people or opened their doors to Queer and GSM members. Church leaders like Bishop Yvette Flunder in Oakland, California and Bishop Allyson Nelson Abrams in Silver Springs, Maryland are Black Lesbian ministers of Christian Gospel that preside over churches that act as a home place for people who live their lives at the confluence of sexual orientation, Christianity, and race.

Homeplace is a critical geography for all marginalized populations. They are transformative sites that affirm identities and combat outdated tropes, denigrating narratives, and systemic forces of oppression. Homeplace can be a physical locale or a metaphysical place that exists where two or more people with shared identities are gathered. These geographies are as politicized as much as the people that inhabit them. Historically, homeplaces like Historically Black Colleges and Universities, churches, and neighborhoods have been attacked through institutional underfunding, church burnings, gentrification, and physical violence. While homeplaces have shared positive benefits, they are not monolithic. Intercultural differences must be considered when attempting to construct safe spaces for intersectional identities. A place that could affirm Black

Women could simultaneously other Queer Black Women. We must create homeplace for ourselves in our relationships, religious practices, schools, and neighborhoods. These places must acknowledge that our identities exist at the confluence of race, gender, and sexuality and foster an environment that is safe, inviting, and comforting.

CHAPTER 3

BDSM: BI'S, DOM'S, STUDS, AND MARGINS: BLACK WOMEN'S SEXUALITIES

“I can’t change, even if I tried, even if I wanted to...love is patient, love is kind.

Not crying on Sundays” (Lambert, 2014).

In 2013, as a graduate student at Georgia Southern University, I audited a counseling course titled “Cross Cultural Issues in Counseling”. It was rumored by the Counseling Education students that the course was intense and helped them grow exponentially both professionally and personally. The course was aimed at challenging biases, belief structures, and cultural norms that could impede a counselor or administrator’s ability to properly connect with their patients. As a budding Higher Education administrator, I thought that a course this challenging would aid me in coming a more empathetic student affairs professional and better person. I had no idea that by the second day of class my life would be forever changed.

On the second day of class, we discussed gender identity and sexual orientation. My roommate was also enrolled in the course and unbeknownst to the class she and I had recently had a discussion about her perception of my style as androgynous; she felt that my style had strong elements of both feminine and masculine expression. This intimate conversation entered the classroom and resulted in the professor, “Dr. Washington”, agreeing that my style was androgynous, majority of the class revealing that they assumed I was lesbian upon first meeting me, and lead to my subsequent questioning of

my sexual identity. The following passages are journal entries documenting my thoughts and feelings immediately following my in class revelation.

February 3rd, 2013

1. The whole class thinks I am androgynous

A. I am completely shocked

a. "Dr. Washington" is shocked I am shocked, she thought it was intentional

B. Why would it be intentional?

C. What are the consequences of me being androgynous?

a. I attract men and women

1. Is that what I want? To attract women?

A. *No*

a. *Is that the truth?*

1. *I think so but it is flattering nonetheless when women are attracted to me. Who doesn't want to be deemed attractive?*

B. *Truth: I am attracted to men and, on occasions, women but only engage in heterosexual sex*

a. *I pursue my friendships like people pursue a partner*

1. *Is that a manifestation of attraction or just being selective?*

2. *I don't have any ugly friends*

b. I have only met one woman that I said if I were to be intimate with a woman, it would be her

1. Does that make me gay or just curious?

*C. But if I am truly attracted to both sexes why haven't I acted on any sexual attraction to a woman like I would a man?
Because I could if I wanted to.*

a. I can be quite impulsive with sex so what is the reasoning?

b. Religion doesn't keep from acting on my attraction bc I don't think anything is wrong with same sex attraction bc it is natural to me

c. Maybe I can be attracted but not desire sexual intercourse

D. *"We don't know about the impulse and you don't see results of the impulse"-Stella Oloyede*

I am have been actively conceptualizing this all week! I told my best friend of 11 years about my perceived androgyny and she was just as surprised as you ["Dr. Washington"] were with my being surprised. She mentioned how I rejected the gender roles that girls gladly accepted in grade school like getting your nails done, carrying a purse, make up, traditional girly dress like skirts, halter-tops, and whatnot. When I thought about it, she was right. Repeatedly, I want to associate this with how I dress, but I am trying to grapple with the fact that it is deeper than that. In high school, I never wanted to wear clingy clothing because I did not want a certain kind of attention from men; I wanted to be known for my personality and intellect, not for my body and didn't want them to talk to me or look at my unless it was on my terms. All of this is probably a manifestation of sexual violence that I experienced at an early age. That violation committed by such a close loved one probably spurred distrust and weariness of men that resonates today. Well...I think I built a bridge in my Johari's window, but now what?

In theory, now that I am aware of how that sexual violation, that I have been attempting to suppress, it is seeping and permeating into other aspects of my life, I could start healing and work through it right? But that would require a man to demonstrate that they are in fact worth trusting and not bad people who will eventually hurt me right. I do not think I have met such a man.

February 10th, 2013

During unfinished business, I revealed to the class the results, thus far, of my self-exploration by saying that maybe my perceived androgyny was the results of early childhood sexual violation and being attracted to both men and women. Those words came out of my mouth like word vomit, but were a result of my earnest desire to “do the work” and free myself from the confines of thoughts and opinions of me. However, after I said what I said, I FELT (see I’m using feeling words, not thinking words) embarrassed and exposed. No one said or did anything to cause those feelings, they came from within. The upside to that is that I think it tore down a barrier between me and others in the class, I have begun having friendly conversations and interactions with some of my classmates that had not taken place before. Silver lining.

February 17th, 2013

Now to the good stuff. I have been working on being more emotionally available and being present in the moment as opposed to closed and being fixated on what is happening next. A few weeks ago several graduate students went to out for drinks; at that gathering I found myself enthralled in conversation with one of my classmates, “Mya”. We were talking about my androgyny and attraction to both men and women. She informed me that she was bisexual and was intrigued by the fact that the class made that assumption about my sexuality, but would more than likely not make the same assumption about her. During that conversation, as corny as it sounds, I kind of forgot other people were there, she and I were laughing, there were light touches, and chemistry. About 20 minutes into the conversation, I realized that we were flirting with each other and I was attracted to her. I noticed myself looking at her lips as she spoke and making intense eye contact. I

kept thinking about her kissing her and that thought would break up the flow of thoughts and I would be shocked at how attracted to her I was and ask myself where those thoughts were coming from. After we left the bar, around 12am, she asked if she could come over to my house to continue the conversation over drinks and hookah. I agreed and was thrilled about having her alone in my house, away from everyone else. As we were exiting, one of my male friends invited himself to my house to join us and due to my anxiety about being alone with her, I allowed him to intrude. As we were all chilling at my house, "Mya" got up and wrote the following words on my dry erase board in the kitchen: "Take a chance. Life is too short, embrace the moment...Yolo! Muah!" I read that after she left and asked myself, "Is this real life? What does she mean by that?" Around 3am that night I texted her telling her I had saved her phone number and we entered coy, flirtatious conversation. I woke up the next morning thinking about her.

The following Tuesday she came over to my house to watch "Color of Fear" and just chill; we ended up talking and watching TV for about 3 hours. Thursday, Valentine's Day, I had a Singles event at my house; she came over and as I was trying to entertain my many guests, she and I kept locking eyes. At some point everybody was dancing and we began dancing with each other. She and I were having a private, yet very seductive conversation in bits and pieces throughout the party; at some point she said she liked how I said her name and I was instantly aroused. While my body was having a physical reaction to our interaction, my mind was saying, "No!" repeatedly. I was extremely conflicted; one side of me wanted to pull her into my room and get to it, but my mind was preventing me from doing it. I do not know where that "No" was coming from, but I

heard it loud and clear. Since then, we have been texting each other; I asked her if the chemistry between us was just in my mind or did she feel it too. She keeps saying what we do is completely up to me, but that does not tell me if she is interested in taking it there. My friend, who began dating women two years ago, said that I have not been explicit in letting "Mya" know that I am attracted to her and want to "take it there". She says once "Mya" knows that we are 100% on the same page, she will be more comfortable with moving forward because she wants to avoid assuming and consequently, rejection.

This is exciting and nerve wrecking at the same time. Thankfully, my closest friends are free thinkers and are supportive in this exploration. I told one of my friends that I cannot envision a woman performing oral sex on me or me reciprocating and she suggested that I watch lesbian porn and envision myself in either position. I thought that was a great idea so I tried it and it was helpful. This ought to be interesting.

February 23rd, 2013

*So now that I walking this fine line between heterosexuality and bisexuality and being more aware of my energy and emotional openness, I am noticing that a lot of women are flirting with me. For example, I was watching the band Nickel Bag of Funk and the leader singer; a woman was giving me "the eye". The lyric to the song was, "If I have one more drink, im gon' end up f***in' you" and she was choosing...hard! So was the drummer (male)! The two bisexual women I was with, "Mya" and Lex, noticed the same thing. I was playing into it, but still very coy and bashful at the same time; which is completely opposite of how I interact with men. I told my best friend that I wanted more of "Mya's" attention and that I would go about getting that attention by ignoring her in*

social settings, inciting the cat and mouse dynamic, but she informed me that that may not work because men are programmed to chase women and conditioned to the chase, but women are not. She suggested I just talk to “Mya” the way I would talk to her, if I want to hang with her, just say that. So I did and it worked. Learning how to interact with women is like learning a new language; very intriguing. Stella insists that when “Mya” and I are around each other there is a lot of sexual energy, but I think it may be a psychosomatic response to what she already knows. Of course there is chemistry between us and we are attracted to each other but I don’t think it is palpable yet.

I am excited about the changes I am experiencing at this point in my life; the things I am learning about myself and how I perceive others. As I become more comfortable with myself and learn how to interact with others, other things, particularly what I want to do next with my career and education, is becoming increasingly clear. This class is the most selfish and self-serving thing I have done for myself in a very long time.

March 11th, 2013

Over the past two weeks, I would describe myself as happy; which is something I have not always been able to say. I have been exhausted, overwhelmed, confused, but still happy. So much of my life is calculated and strategic but over the last couple months I have been just living and doing; operating with no true sense of what is next. More recently, I have been able to gain a sense of clarity in what I want to do and how to go about doing it.

Also, I have made great strides in my sexual orientation identity; I have cuddled with a woman, caressed and been caressed, and admitted to a genuine interest in a woman. It is funny that I consider those thing “great strides” but never move this slow with a man, but I want to take my time and make sure this is something that I seriously want to do, because the results could result in a lifestyle change for me. I keep checking in with myself to verify that I am still attracted to men and if I am actually attracted to women or if I am just attracted to one particular woman.

In the last class, we did the Kinsey scale assessment and I had the highest score in the class. I was really shocked. How is it possible that my score is higher than the two women in the class who have actually engaged in same sex sex?? I concluded that either people did not total their scores properly or they lied. My score was a 3.7. I deduced that my score was high because my closest friends are accepting of my identity development, considering same sex attraction, or bisexual themselves. According to the Kinsey assessment I am bisexual. As I was writing my cultural biography and reading D’Augelli’s development theory for LGB students, I was annoyed that I was textbook in my sexual identity development; I would like to think that I am so unique and beyond theory, but I am glad that there is theory to help me understand what I am experiencing and validate that I am not a phenomenon that is the first person to experience this dissonance.

April 6th, 2013

After that long, emotionally taxing night, I told “Mya” I needed to talk to her. I needed to clarify some things with her regarding my feelings and what we were doing, if anything. I

asked her what she wanted from me because sometimes I felt like she wasn't interested in me and just wanted to be friends and other days she would be extremely flirtatious and make every effort to spend time with me either over dinner, drinks, or just relaxing in the house. The mixed messages were a very confusing factor in me learning more about my bisexuality. We both expressed that we were mutually very attracted to each other, physically and mentally, but she expressed her concern for what would happen after we became intimate and me wanting more than she can offer right now. I told her I cannot promise her that I would not become more emotionally attached than I already am, but for her to make that judgment based on her past relationships is unfair to me. Like you ["Dr. Washington"] hypothesized, I am learning so much about myself from my experiences with her. I am becoming increasingly comfortable in asserting my attraction to her through initiating a kiss or touches or my desire to spend time with her.

Lastly, I let my best friend and "Mya" read my Cultural Autobiography and was surprised at the feedback. My best friend poured into me words of adoration and pride in my growth, bravery, courage, and self-awareness to be able to connect the dots in what has happened in my life, how it affects who I am today, and possibly who I will be moving forward. "Mya" and I exchanged biographies and had a planned discussion of what we found interesting and profound in each other's writing. Her thoughts about religion, gender identity, and her sexual orientation were all connected and intriguing what she deduced from that interconnectedness. She mentioned that maybe her comfort with her bisexuality stemmed from her seeing her mother operate in dual roles throughout her life. Her thoughts about maybe God punishing her with financial strife and life hardships

because of her sexuality saddened me deeply, because I have never thought of God being spiteful and so dogmatic in his dealings with his people that He created.

April 21st, 2013

Hurt-I am not sure if this hurt I am experiencing from being told that the person I was interested in was not into me is a good thing or a hindrance to my sexual identity development. I know I was not imagining that she was interested in me; I know she was. I guess somewhere along the way she changed her mind and that sucks. I am thankful what I experienced, but anxious for more.

Confused- I am so very confused right now. She told me she wasn't in a place to do anything outside of sex, but when I pull away she is passive aggressive towards me. I have been passive aggressive towards her, as well, because I like her and I am mad that she does not like me back, yet we are still trying to foster a friendship so we are always around each other.

April 28th, 2013

As I spend more time with women in an intimate setting, I am still struggling with deeming certain behaviors that are assertive and domineering as masculine. That label of masculinity makes me uncomfortable and stop whatever I am doing. However, I am learning that those are fluid concepts those labels do not apply in a situation with two feminine affected women. Also, I am discovering that I like being able to assert myself in a way that is typically deemed masculine and how to either tap into my femininity or masculinity when it is most advantageous for me.

I feel like I have been so open and upfront throughout this whole process and had hoped that it would be rewarded with open arms. Instead, I chose to have my first same sex affair with someone who is emotionally unavailable. She told me from the beginning that she could not handle an emotional connection, that she was very sexually attracted to me but couldn't give me more than that, and that she wasn't in a place to "like me like me", but I inferred things from our interactions with each other that were necessarily there. It hurts that she doesn't feel the same thing for me...yet. I still value our friendship and think she is an amazing woman.

July 2, 2013

This is confusing. I am most assuredly bi-sexual; I know this not because I have had sex with a women because I have yet to do that, but because of my continued confusing entanglements with women. I think the easiest way to explain my thoughts concerning my sexual identity would be to break it down per woman and situation. First things first: my coming out.

Coming Out

Since all of these newfound feelings, I have not felt the need to do some big public coming out event. I just feel like who I choose to love or fuck is my business. I have asked myself if I was ashamed of my lifestyle and was that the true reason for not wanting to come out, but the answer to that question was a resounding no. I was at home earlier in June and I had made plans to go to My Sister's Room (MSR) with several of my friends. I was toying with the idea of coming out to my mother, but I didn't know how to do it or when to do it. I was anxious about and several times throughout the day it almost slipped out like word

vomit. As I got dressed to go out and my mom enjoyed some chicken wings, I gently touched her on the shoulder (in typical dramatic fashion) and said “Ma, I need to tell you something...I am bisexual.” She paused with her head held down in silence for what seemed like 2 minutes, but in actuality it was only a few seconds. I followed with, “Do you know what that means??” She replied, “That means you like men and women.” I told her she was correct. I began to explain her my journey and she informed me that she had sensed something was different and expressed that she was glad I told her. What came next was very surprising for me...she said, “Not to take this moment away from you but I have had the same feelings all my life. I have always known that the way I look at women was how most women look at men. I have had dreams of being with a woman and being intimate with a woman, but I just haven’t met a woman to take it there.” We began to have a conversation about her fears of religious persecution being a PK (preacher’s kid) and her changing views and newfound freedom. She stood up and told me she was so proud of me and I told her I was proud of her and I went out to my first gay bar.

“Mya”

I think I am in love with “Mya”. It pains me to read that and I do not want to admit that to myself. I know that when she brought her ex girlfriend, who she has reconnected with, to my birthday gathering, I felt like I had been stabbed in my heart. So much so that I sat and talked to her about it and told her I never thought she would do something like that to me. She apologized and told me that there was no intentionality behind it. I hope that it is infatuation and that it passes swiftly. I think she is a beautiful person in and out. For me, love is demonstrative and self-sacrificing, and anything I can do within my reach or

range of power to make sure she is happy, safe, or has what she needs, I would do it. I think she could be one of my soul mates and that does not mean that we have to be together as girlfriend and girlfriend, it just means that she is a kindred spirit and we are connected to each other. I truly value that, but it hurts when I know she not answering my call or text because she is with her ex or if she speaks of her ex; I think we could be so happy together. It just hurts, but I would rather hurt from seeing her than not have her in my life at all.

Analysis

This deeply personal retelling of my journey into Queer identity reveals the dissonance that is experienced when coming out while Black. There are layers of conformity that sought to define femininity, love, relationships, and self-acceptance. The underlying curriculum here is fear, rejection, acceptance, unconditional love, and friendship. In 2013, just four years ago, I struggled to lean into my sexual attraction to women due to fear of being rejected by my family, friends, and society. I was worried that my choice to act on my latent attraction to women would push me out of my comfort zone of Black Womanhood and into uncharted territory. How would my friends receive me after I tell them? Would I be bold in my Queer identity or would I relish in my ability to pass as heterosexual? Many of my fears were about external perception and fears of being excluded from Black Women's homeplaces and rejected by my family. After a largely anti-climatic coming out tour, I soon realized that my concerns were largely projections of my own fears. They represented my own biases and prejudices for Queer people of color and of the people closest to me.

My story is curricular text of one Queer Black Woman's coming out experience that is a counter narrative to the sad and emotionally violent experiences that dominate popular culture and LGBTQ cultures. It is not an attempt to delegitimize and negate the hurt and rejection that is experienced by some young adults all around the world. It is, however, a story that can be a rainbow in someone's cloud; a story of hope, love, support, and acceptance (Angelou, 2014). It should be noted that my narrative is undoubtedly influenced by my age and status as an independent adult. For example, for many teenagers come out and are met with ultimatums to either conform or deny their attraction or risk being put out their home, shamed, or subjected to physical violence. Additionally, not being married, in a long term relationship, and not being a parent allowed me a freedom and privilege that those bound in the aforementioned ways are denied. All of these forms of commitment and responsibility mean that engaging in new forms of pleasure could adversely affect your home and relationships.

Articulating this ethnography of Black Queer sexuality is paramount in reimagining a more progressive Black Feminist and Critical Race Feminist agenda. My narrative highlights a complicated narrative of love, sexual attraction, friendship, and identity development over the span a rigorous academic semester. It is a raw and unfiltered dialogue paired with an academic discourse on the multivalent layers of Black identity in the context of acceptance, sexuality, love, and respect. In the stories of Black love, relationships, sexuality, and identity there lies a deepened understanding of who we are, what we are capable of, our passions, and our values. These understandings of Black Womanhood, consequently, offer context to our epistemologies, ontologies, and our pedagogies. Lastly, my story unearths some of the unspoken realities that exists between

Women who love other Women in the face of hegemonic structures like heteronormativity, patriarchy, sexism.

Bartering Sexuality for Respect

“Love is lak de sea. It’s uh movin’ thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it’s different with every shore” (Hurstun, 1937, pg. 191) Zora Neale Hurston uses her main character, Janie, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, to describe the ways in which we experience love based on who we are, where we are, and who is giving the love at any given time. Black Women live full lives; we are mothers, sisters, teachers, workers, lovers, but historically, we have been denied the love we deserve or had our love policed, limited, and scrutinized by people who assumed authority of us. Through hegemonic forces like sexism, racism, and homophobia we are denied the pleasure of true love, but still tasked being the rock of the family, a strong formidable tree in the forest of America, and rivers of love for future generations. Forced to give unrelenting love, but denied the opportunity to define it for ourselves in some instances.

Deborah Gray White is a Black feminist and historian and is the author of *Ar’n’t I a Woman and Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994*; she posits that myths about the sexual deviance, lusty availability, and the subjugation of Black Women underneath the Victorian standard of beauty all contributed greatly to the sexual abuse of Black Women during slavery and Jim Crow (Jones and White, 1988). The response to these denigrating tropes and heinous treatment was the consequent silencing of public sexual desire from Black Women and birthed “Mammy”. The mammy archetype is jovial, absolutely devoted to the white family that employs her, and devoid

of feminine gender expression, and subsequently asexual. Black Feminist Scholar, Deborah Gray White defines mammy as the following:

“Mammy” was a woman completely dedicated to the white family, especially to the children of that family. She was the house servant who was given complete charge of domestic management. She served also as a friend and advisor. She was, in short, surrogate mistress and mother. (White, 1985, pg .49)

Mammy is denigrating because it not only strips the Black Woman of the femininity and sexuality, but also implies that Black Women’s lives are consumed by her ability to be of service in a familial sense. Mammy is one of many controlling images that precede Black Women in our every encounter. These images occupy the mind and create a distorted and exaggerated mold for Black Women that many of us cannot and do not wish to fill. Patricia Devine, social psychologist at University of Wisconsin-Madison, says that controlling images take root in two phases: activation and application. According to Devine, activation is an unconscious process because the images have been adopted as a cultural norm and established as commonplace. Application is the conscious deployment of these stereotypes to judge or discriminate against a group of people (Devine, 1989). Mammy has been seen in films like *Gone with the Wind*, *Imitation of Life*, *The Help*, and *Sex in the City*. She is still depicted as Aunt Jemima on Pancake Mixes and bottle of syrup. In 1923, it was felt that Mammy was such an important staple in the American tapestry that Senator Charles Stedman submitted a bill to have a monument to Mammy built in our nation’s capital. The monument was to be “in memory of the faithful slave mammies of the South” (Cleage, 1989). This working class image of

the Black Woman was relegated to the home, but with time, contingent on our geographies, we resisted.

There are four waves of Feminism, but intersectionality in regards to class, race, and sexual orientation was not incorporated until the Third Wave. Working class Black Women were not privileged enough to participate in the first wave of feminism. First Wave Feminism took place in the early 20th Century beginning with the convention at Seneca Falls and focused on legal issues for women. Suffragettes like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott submitted amendments that demanded equal rights for women particularly as it pertained to voting and political involvement. They advocated for the acceptance of white Women in the workplace at their convenience and strived for to be removed from the pedestal of Victorian standards for Womanhood. However, like most white women of that time, Stanton prioritized her whiteness over equality for all people. “Elizabeth Cady Stanton abandoned the fight for black male suffrage after the Civil War and relied powerfully articulated racist and anti-immigrant reasoning to make a case for white women’s suffrage” (Rankka, 1988). This first wave of feminism oft times neglected to acknowledge that the plight of Black Women was entirely separate from their struggles. Work was a requirement of Black Women; not a striving. Black Women had worked as slaves, house maidens, mammies, cooks, field hands, and concubines. Black Women were never afforded the privilege of “the cult of true womanhood” and expressions of femininity (Welter, 1966). In her famous address to the women of Seneca Falls later titled “Ain’t I a Woman”, former slave and abolitionist, Sojourner Truth remarked, “Dat man ober dar say dat woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted

over ditches, and to have de best place eberywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gives me any best place; And ar'n't I a woman?" (Truth, 1851).

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., a Black Greek Lettered Sorority, was the only organization of its kind to participate in the Women's Suffrage March in Washington, D.C. in 1913. However, even in this march for equality, the founding members of Delta were relegated to the end of the march precession. This could be perceived as an indicator of their place in the movement: members of the latter waves of feminism. As early as the 1920's, Black Women grappled with the issues of the working class, liberation from patriarchy, and sexual identity. These were issues that would not be collectively and formally addressed by white Women for another 50 years.

In the 1920's, class played an important role in the lives of working class Black Women just as it does today. Working class Black Women viewed sexuality as a means of establishing autonomy and self-governance in ways that had previously been denied. During slavery and the years following, Black Women were viewed as the objects rather than the subjects of their own sexual agency. They wanted to be respected for their ability to contribute to society and the family outside of their ability to breed more slaves but did not want this respect to come at the expense of their sensuality and eroticism. I would infer and hope that during the first wave of feminism, in safe spaces and liberated cities, Black Women could reclaim their sensuality and sexuality. This hope could be actualized in progressive cities like Harlem, but what about the varying dynamics of sex, desire, gender expression, and sexual orientation in the south? Only inferences can be made because within the canon of Black Feminism, there is nil written about Black Women's sexuality during slavery and during the Reconstruction. However, we used

music and the arts to reclaim and proclaim our sexual narratives from the repressive self and the oppressive other. “The early blues singers—who were most decidedly not middle class have been called ‘pioneers who claimed their sexual subjectivity through their songs and produced a Black Women’s discourse on Black sexuality” (Hammond,1999, pg. 97). In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis says, “Women’s blues provided a cultural space for community-building among working class Black Women, and it was a space in which the coercions of bourgeois notions of sexual purity and true womanhood were absent” (Davis, 1998, pg.44).

The most recent re-presentation of lives of early Black Women blues singers was HBO’s *Bessie*. The 2015 biopic tells the story of Bessie and illustrates the complicated, but undoubtedly Queer love life of Bessie Smith, Ma’Rainey, Ethel Waters, and others (Foote and Rees, 2015). These women were androgynous in terms of gender expression, had long term relationships with other women as well as men. They sang lyrics that would even be considered provocative by today’s standards. Songs like Ma’ Rainey’s “*Prove it On Me*” and Bessie Smith’s “*Empty Bed Blues*” both evidence working class Black Women’s bold reclamation of sexuality on their own terms. In her song “Empty Bed Blues”, Bessie Smith says, “*He’s a deep sea diver with a stroke that can’t go wrong / He can stay at the bottom and his wind holds out so long*” (Smith, 1972). The topic of sex was taboo in public arenas; it was considered unbecoming and unheard of to hear women discuss sex in any space, domestic or otherwise. The idea of Black Women transgressing the de jure adherence to a unilateral politic (Black) was and in many cases still is, perceived as an affront to the strivings of the Black community and political agenda.

If sex was once difficult to discuss openly, *Black* sex was especially fraught. It touched on too many taboos: stereotypes and caricatures of "black Hottentots" with freakish feminine proportions; of asexual mammies or lascivious Jezebels; of hypersexual black men lusting after white women (Patton, 2012). "Western religion, science, and media took over 350 years to manufacture an ideology of Black sexuality that assigned (heterosexual) promiscuity to Black people and then used it to justify racial discrimination" (Collins, 2004, pg. 98). The desexualization of Black Women is damaging because it strips us of the right to be the author of our own sexual desire narrative and places it in the hands of sexist hegemonic forces; this is not empowerment, it is disenfranchisement. If we do not tell the story of our sexuality, it will be told for us in ways that are one dimensional, overly simplistic, and damaging interpersonally, politically, and socially. There have been many attempts by state legislatures to take ownership of Black Women's sexuality through eugenics, restrictions on welfare benefits for large families, and barring of same sex marriages. "It's not just a matter of distorted perceptions; these misrecognitions can be used to punish African American Women through policy" (Harris-Perry, 2011, pg. 68).

The Queering of Black Female Sexuality

The aim of Black Queer Studies (BQS) is to center the intersection Black Studies and Queer Studies. It is relatively new field of study that began to take root approximately twenty years ago which acknowledges that there is more power in the collective than an identitarian approach to social activism. The study of Queer lives has existed as a subsection of Cultural Studies, Queer Studies, Women Studies, and Black Studies; Black Queer Studies centers these peripheral identities. BQS is not only an

umbrella term for gender identities that exists outside of the woman-man binary and non-heterosexual orientations; it is a politic and a theory. “The politic and theory are closely tied, and both emphasize that Queer Studies, Queer Theory, and Queer Politics is an “‘in your face’ politics [and theory] of a younger generation” (Story, 2008, pg. 54).

Teresa de Lauretis is the creator of the term “Queer Theory”. “In a sense, the term “Queer Theory” was arrived at in the effort to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the given terms...but instead to transgress and transcend them” (Lauretis, 1991, pg. 84). E. Patrick Johnson, editor of *Black Queer Studies*, coined the term “quare”; quare is a term used to describe a person of color that is a member of the LGBTQIA community who appreciates black culture (Johnson, 2001). In characterizing lesbianism as the active sexual desire of a woman for another woman, De Lauretis questions the usefulness of any model which reduces or explains away women’s desire in male terms, or sees lesbianism as a mode of imitation or emulation of heterosexual role models (Grosz, 1994). Whether Queer or Quare, for Black Women, it is important that we define lesbian dynamics outside of the context of patriarchy and heterosexism. The reflections of Queer Black Women in popular media mimic the masculine and feminine binary that would be typified as femme/stud, or femme/AG, or femme/masculine of center (MoC). It is rare to find relationships that reflect two Queer Black Women with the same gender expression or affect in media and actual life. De Lauretis maintains that a critical examination of these dynamics can be of great value in understanding the personal passions and the psychical structuring that constitutes lesbianism (Grosz, 1994).

Though limited in scope, Black Women, unlike Queer Black Women, have the privilege of heterosexuality. They are protected under the normalcy of their sexual orientation. This privilege does not preclude them from sexual violence, abuse, discrimination, but it does mean that they can turn on the television and see their preference for love, sex, and dating reflected in media representations. By virtue of heterosexuality, Black Women can love openly and publicly without religious persecution or risk having their love made perverse or pornographic. In *Black Sexual Politics*, Patricia Hill Collins evokes the metaphor of “prisons” to describe the ways race seeks to subjugate Black Women and “closets” to illustrate the silence and erasure of LGBTQIA people of color. Following this analogy, let’s imagine life’s curriculum for Queer Black Women as imprisoned in the closets of Black heteronormativity unless some sort of Shawshank-ian escape to freedom is achieved (Whitmore, 1995).

“The invisibility of gays and lesbians helped normalize heterosexuality, fueled homophobia, and supported heterosexism as a system of power” (Collins, 2004, pg. 94). With core hegemonic structures like Christianity, masculinity, and heterosexuality firmly affixed in the United States, same sex attraction amongst Black Women is seen as a sexual deviance. For hundreds of years, it was believed that Black people were primal creatures that had sex, like animals, for the sole purpose of procreation. With this in mind, how do you explain the sexual intimacy between two women? How do we rationalize this derivation of pleasure and connection? How can we use this pleasure as a curriculum for understanding Queer Black Women and subsequently Black Women? Joan Morgan, Black Feminist Scholar and author of *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, purports that by exploring the ways in which all Black Women participate in pleasure we can

complicate existing Black Feminist subjectivities (Morgan, 1999). At present, however, these subjectivities are still adorned in multivalent layers of respectability and silence like the layers of stockings, skirts, corsets, camisoles, blouses, and shawls that aim to cover and diminish the feminine mystique.

The “politics of silence” is a term introduced by historian Evelyn Higginbotham; it describes repression of all sexuality and sensuality in hopes of denouncing the myth of the oversexed Black Woman (Higginbotham, 1992). However, this politic of silence is compounded for Queer Black Women because of the ways in which sexual orientation and practice collude with race to create niche, marginalized narratives. In the push for exploring Black Woman sex, Black Queer sex is smothered and covered under the heterosexual narrative that is assumed to be normal. This leads to the collective shaming of Queer Black Women and other young adults whose sexual orientation does not align with this myth of normalcy. Surprisingly, little work exists in the canon that explores Queer Black sexualities and its impact on the Black Feminist agenda and politic. Much of the existing discourse around Black Women and sex is framed within the context of the patriarchy: exploring what is defined as sexy or what is hypersexual, but not detailing what we claim as sex and pleasure for our own sake. There exists a gaping void. Black Feminist Scholar, Evelyn Hammond, says, “Black lesbian sexualities are not simply identities. Rather they represent discursive and material terrains where there exists the possibility for the active production of speech, desire, and agency” (Hammond, 2005).

By engaging in an intersectional discourse around Black sexuality for Queer Black Women, we can solicit the keys to the liberation for sexual discourse in academia for all Black People. *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* written by

Mireille Miller-Young, highlights the expression of one Black Woman involved in pornography work in which she remarked that Feminists and critics do not understand that porn stars and sex workers are trying open up possibilities for black people to see themselves sexually. She posits that we have fantasies about bondage, take pleasure in our painful pasts, and find pleasure in stereotypes (Miller-Young, 2014). Inquiries like these complicate the narrative of sexual desire and sensualities for Queer Black Women and Black Women. In what ways might Black Women find pleasure following the decolonization their minds with regard to sex and intimacy? Would they find themselves queering their intimate relationships? Additionally, Miller-Young explores the history of black pornography, looking at sex workers who add sex appeal to modern day replications of bondage, domination, and physical pain in a way that queers the reimagining of slavery. Audre Lorde posits that the master's tools can never be used to dismantle the master's house; this particular exploration of Black pornography challenges this very notion by using the "perverse" fantasies of the dominant culture for personal gain and transforms the politics of silence to a politic of articulation (Lorde, 1984).

Historically, through the perpetuation of myths and the use of scientific racism to substantiate stereotypes and false doctrines, Black people were seen as innately promiscuous and fertile. The sole purpose of their sexual activity, like animals, was reproduction. "If authentic black people are heterosexual, then LGBT Black people are less authentically Black because they engage in allegedly "white" sexual practices" (Collins, 2004, pg. 106). The vile ideals of what Queer Black Women represent to Black culture are also perpetuated in the subculture of Pan Africanism. Pan African leaders like Shaharazad Ali, author of books like *How to Tell If Your Man Is Gay or Bisexual* (2003)

and *The Black Woman's Guide to Understanding the Black Man* (1989) and Umar Johnson, author of *Psycho-Academic Holocaust: The Special Education and ADHD War on Black Boys*, speak on homosexuality as a white disease that threatens the preservation of the Black race because same sex couples cannot produce children. "This position supposes that if we do not eradicate lesbianism in the Black Community, all Black women will become lesbians. It also supposes that lesbians do not have children. Both suppositions are patently false" (Lorde, 1984, pg. 52).

This othering by Black people who only support a shallow representation of Blackness is deeply hurtful and acts as fertile soil for what Darline Clark Hine, a Black Feminist historian, calls a culture of dissemblance. Dissemblance is the compartmentalization and suppression of marginalized identities for the sake of achieving some form of social parity (Hine, 1989). This culture of dissemblance is the result of trauma, is inter- and intra-personally violent, and is never successful in the fight for equity or garnering respect.

Essex Hemphill says, "It is not enough to tell us that one was brilliant poet, scientist, educator, or rebel. Whom did he love? It makes a difference" (Hemphill, 1992, pg. 69). Understanding and knowing each other in way that is not compartmentalized acknowledges that who we are undoubtedly influences our philosophy, epistemology, and ontology. An inquiry that examines intersections of identity also challenges dominant structures and boundaries that seek to silence marginalized cultures and people. In a call for incorporating social justice into education, Ming Fang He and Joann Phillion express a yearning for a curriculum that is personal, passionate, and personal (He & Phillion, 2008). The inclusion of sexual desire in academic discourse is radical but necessary for

transgressing beyond sexism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. Whom I love and how I choose to replicate or denounce traditional expressions femininity undoubtedly flavors my palate dictates how I taste, ingest, and digests reality and subsequently how I learn where a Queer, Black Woman seeking a career in academia belongs. My Queer identity reminds me of the boundaries that exist for someone like me and challenges me to dismantle barriers and door that would attempt bar the fullness of who I am.

CHAPTER 4

“STRAIGHT” JACKETS AND WHITE ROOMS: QUEERING GENDER AND THE BLACK FEMALE FORM

“Well, I say you're my, beginnin my end

You're my sista lover and friend

God is, your light from within

It shines through your beautiful skin

What they, say bout you ain't true

There's no me if there is no you” (Love et al., 1998).

The Henn and Apple Juice Podcast features two dynamic hosts, Ace Boon and Fiya Angelou, discussing the lived experiences of two millennial graduates of Savannah State University, one married with children and the other a burgeoning lesbian dating in Atlanta, respectively. Our conversations were intentionally transparent and honest. The topics discussed range from issues at work, our sex lives, aging parents, and issues facing the Black community. This particular segment is from Episode 2 titled [“Slide in da DM’s”](#) and discusses Fiya Angelou’s coming out story (Angelou & Boon, 2015). This portion of the podcast perfectly encapsulates the dynamic between the between the two hosts and highlights a tongue and cheek repartee about Studs or masculine identified women. The conversation opens with Fiya Angelou explaining to Ace Boon the fear, trepidation, and anxiety that existed before her first sexual encounter with a woman.

Fiya: There’s Levels.

AB: What is it? Is it like tit sucking first?

Fiya: Bwahahaha! Not like, literally levels. But you know, if you have NEVER anything...I'm think what is that going to be like?

AB: Sure. It's kinda like starting all over again? Huh!

Fiya: Yeah, because, like...what if I don't like giving head? What if that's something that I don't want to do? Because there's terms; that's called a Pillow Princess.

AB: Which is?

Fiya: A girl who just like to get head from other girls, but she don't give head. She just literally lays back on a pillow...if you get what I am doing here?

AB: Hmm! Okay. I got what you saying.

Fiya: Then on the other end, there is a Touch Me Not.

AB: Okay...

Fiya: Which is—she don't want to be given head, she just wants to give head. Those are usually more masculine identified women.

AB: Sure. Hmm. Like Studs??

Fiya: Exactly.

AB: Hmm...do Studs have periods??

Fiya: Do...?? LOLOL! Alright, I'm leaving!

AB: Cuz I be looking at these tough ass—and I'm like "Wait a Minute. I know yall gotta slide them Tampex somewhere, B. LOLOL"

Fiya: LOL! It's crazy because I saw a stat somewhere that said that Studs or masculine identified women don't...they have, like, higher instances of feminine issues because—you know we are supposed to go to the doctor every year—

AB: Sure.

Fiya: They don't go because...

AB: Ooooh cuz they think they Real Niggas!!

Fiya: They don't go because they don't feel comfortable—

AB: So they not getting Pap Smears??

Fiya: They not doing that!

AB: Maaan, fuck that!

Analysis

This segment of episode 2 of the *Henn and Apple Juice Podcast*, like many other moments on the show, illustrates the plight of a member of a marginalized community being tasked with speaking on behalf of the entire Black Lesbian community to the cis-hetero-majority. It was a precarious situation to be in because, at that time, I was still learning intra-community labels, terminology, and stratifications, I do not identify as a Stud, and I would have still been considered new to the LGBTQIA community. However, within the context of this particular dynamic, I was far the more informed than my co-host and most of the listeners of the podcast. At times, I did not always want to be the Queer spokesperson on the podcast and rejected this role and allowed homophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic comments to be iterated while I sat in frustrated silence. Other times, I recognized the responsibility of occupying this digital space and the opportunity to combat the ignorance of our approximately 10,000 listeners.

While the question posed by Ace Boon regarding Studs and menstrual cycles was mostly in jest, it does represent the voyeuristic curiosity that many gender conforming cis-heterosexual people possess towards gender non-conforming people. They feel

entitled to information regarding the intimate details of their life and how those details operate in relationships. Women who are Studs and any other gender non-conforming person can freely adorn attributes of femininity or masculinity in a way that can be confusing, intriguing, or fetishized by on lookers. It is all a manifestation of gender performativity. However, in order to understand gender performativity, you must understand and recognize that gender is a social construct and does not exist in tandem with one's assigned sex at birth. Within the LGBTQIA communities, this knowledge is elementary, but for many "straight" people, this knowledge involves a difficult unlearning and decolonization of gender, sex, and sexual orientation. I have had innumerable conversations with men and women who struggle to understand that genitalia is indicative of birth sex, not gender, and that gender is a social construct that expresses itself in ways that are unique to each person. This excerpt illustrates the needs to discern and determine if someone is genuinely seeking knowledge or capitalizing on an opportunity to make a joke at the expense of marginalized people.

Gender Performativity

For the sake of this body of work and this particular content matter it is imperative that I distinguish commonly used terms that are often used as misnomers or incorrectly. Sex refers to the binary of male or female that is determined by the reproductive organs an individual has at birth. Gender is a less rigid classification that refers one's internal alignment on the spectrum between man/masculine or woman/feminine. Through the lens of social constructionist theory, it is important to note that gender is a social construct that is built between one and the other (Levinas, 1969). The ideals of womanhood and manhood are also socially constructed and the terms are

culturally bound. The concepts of what it means to be a woman or a man are discussed as an aesthetic or aspiration that must be attained through some ambiguous amalgamation of age, triumph over circumstances, and experience. Simone De Beauvoir was a scholar and philosopher whose work focused on the ideal of “femininity” and the contestation of object-subject tandem that exists between women and men, respectively. Though she did not initially identify with the term “feminist” herself, her treatise, *Second Sex*, was integral in the second wave feminist movement. Simone De Beauvoir states:

“One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (Beauvoir, 1952, pg. 249).

She describes woman as a male ideal that is consistently the object or other because it is also opposite male in a patriarchal society. The concept of what it means to be a feminine-woman is a framed, essentialized, and constructed in the shadow of the objective masculine-man.

Gender performance is a mandated construct from birth. “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 1999, 45). Before we are born, our parents decide what we will wear, what colors and markers will be used to denote our gender, and what name will be used an outward expression of our gender. As infants, the primary color used to signify the girl and boy gender are pink and blue, respectively. Few parents consider that gender is a fluid

construct that does not always align with sex. Few adults acknowledge that gender does not have an absolute correlation with sexual orientation. Gender performance and gender roles are like being cast into a role of a lifetime that you neither want nor auditioned for. The gender “Woman” does not imply heterosexual. In a culture that lives in a strict binary of girls/female and boys/male, it takes an active decolonization of the mind to engage in a critical dialogue of making space for gender neutrality or the liminal spaces between gender expression and performativity and sexual orientation.

Butler (1999) asserts that gender is performative rather than a performance. Gender performativity describes a more internalized impression of “man” or “woman” and elicits a series of effects. The performativity of gender allows one to vacillate between, to, and from either end of the spectrum of femininity or masculinity. It provides individuals the grace to be their full self in their mannerisms, style of dress, behaviors (dominant or submissive), and physical appearance. Gender performativity rejects the notion of mutually agreed upon gender norms. Conversely, gender performance is the adherence to the definitions of “women” and “men” that are constructed and mutually agreed upon by dominant culture. It presupposes how each sex/gender *should* act, rather than an individual representation of their own unique expression of the true self. As a society, we have dictated what girls are supposed to do and even enacted a term to describe such behaviors: “lady like”. We expect women to be demure, sexually modest, nurturing, occupy less physical space, accommodating, polite, and graceful. We must be critical of the origins of these definitions and standards of Womanhood. What is the intent? Who polices these behaviors? How do we, as a society, respond when these norms are not adhered to? Who are they intended to please?

Any expression of being not aligned with these attributes is deemed unlady like. This is coded language that essentially means an unlady like woman is less desirable to men. The performance of Woman is always acted out with the female as other and the male as subject. A woman should not dress in revealing clothing to “protect” her from the male that will be powerless against his innate sexual attraction to her. This narrative leads to victim blaming and slut shaming meaning that it frames the sexual assault of a woman around her behaviors rather than the man. In a sexist, misogynistic society a woman should not be assertive, too loud, too confident, or domineering lest she be labeled a bitch. This denigrating epithet is used when a woman is not easily dominated or subjugated by men. In minority cultures, the walls and boundaries regarding the performance of “woman” is more rigid; this sometimes results in shame, punitive action, physical violence, or exile. Conversely, these rigid boundaries regarding gender performance for women births hyper masculinity and toxic expressions of manhood enacted to either distance one’s manhood from the inferior gender of woman or to assert dominance over women. The expectations and standards of “woman” are out dated and usually framed in sexist ideologies.

The choice of how to perform Womanhood implies the control of the flow of what Audre Lorde calls the “erotic”. The erotic is defined as the flow of authentic power that is uniquely feminine (Lorde, 1984). The experience of being woman and allowance of the flow of the erotic is at once a beautiful expression of the feminine and a painful revelation of our vulnerability; in this society, Women, without regard to sexual orientation, are the perpetual object to male subject. This objectification leads to sexual harassment, assault, and abuse and subjugation. Women have to become skilled at

harnessing the erotic and using it selectively for both our benefit and protection. It is a skill that Queer Black Women and heterosexual Black Women become versed in at an early age; the art of being friendly, but not too friendly as to be perceived as sexually lascivious. Judith Butler once said regarding the repetition of gender performance, “This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in” (Butler, 1999).

However, once the woman moves beyond the societal construct and the expression of Womanhood as performative rather than role playing, true liberation can be achieved. There is an authentic expression of “Woman” that can make the active choice to adopt or reject commonly held standards of Womanhood without fear or being othered. There exists an expression of Womanhood that adorns facets of masculinity when they find it useful or befitting. Moreover, there exists the experience of a human exercising behaviors, traits, mannerisms, styles of dress, and other external markers that align with their internal gender identity without regard for their sexual orientation or sex. After a critical examination of the ways in which gender is constructed and inflicted upon all of us, the destruction of presumptive gender norms manifests an identity that is not reduced to binaries. These binaries seek more to confine than refine who we are.

Unwanted Roles and Stale Scripts

Growing up, my family was matriarchal. This is in alignment with many Black families. My late grandmother and aunts made the important family decisions and, individually, they managed their households even if there was a man present. This is paradoxical to the strong Christian principles that dictate and influence many of my family’s core beliefs. In most societies, as prescribed by the religious teachings of

Protestant denominations, practices of the Islamic faith, and other religious teachings, Women are to submit to their husbands, are perceived as inferior, and asked to pride themselves in their ability to raise a family.

"Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them." (Qu'ran 4:34)

This viewpoint has supported the subjugation, control, and abuse against Women of the ages. Growing up in a Southern Baptist church, I was taught that a woman is created to help a man; her role is to support her husband and the family through her "innate" nurturing spirit and undying loyalty. The women in my family were living models of this expression of Womanhood and it provided an emotionally and sometimes physically unhealthy text of what it means to be a Black Woman. As a young girl, I always admired their strength, resilience, and diligence. Collectively, the women in my family taught me that to be a Woman means you work tirelessly for others, you provide, and you love unconditionally. You love a man that is addicted to drugs and steals your money to support his habit. You work two jobs to support your family while your husband uses his money to buy beer and drugs. You continue to do for the men in your life and children until your body figuratively begs for mercy through health issues like diabetes, heart attacks, or stroke.

The first tenured Black professor of law and one of the creators of Critical Race Theory, Derrick Bell, authored the canonical body of work titled, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. The chapter “The Last Black Hero” discusses the relationship between Black Women and Black men. I perceived a great deal of sexism in this chapter, particularly in the description of Geneva who was in love with a man labeled “last black hero”. She was committed to both him and her leadership role in a Black militant organization that was similar in mission and structure to the Black Panthers. Bell tells of a conversation between Geneva and her mother whereby she was informed that the primary task of Black Women was to be a source of strength and comfort to Black men in a racist society (Bell, 1992). I can remember being taught this as well, but it begs the question, who is the strength and support of Black Women? As I began to critically examine Black Womanhood and find my place in Black Culture, I realized that for us to survive and thrive in a sexist patriarchy, it is imperative that Black Women become our own source of strength and support.

The choice to perform the “Woman” gender in the traditional sense is simultaneously advantageous and disadvantageous, varying greatly based on context. Contrary to the confines of manhood and the hypermasculinity found in many minority cultures, a Woman is allowed to experience a full range of emotions. She can feel free to cry, be angry, jealous, affectionate, and loving at her liberty unless she is a member of traditionally male terrain such as sports, business, and politics. In these male dominated geographies, the display of any emotion is used to denigrate and delegitimize a Woman. This is made evident in the sexist narrative that undercut Hilary Clinton. In an opinion piece written by CNN reporter, Mel Robbins, the sexist and misogynistic comments from

then candidate, Donald Trump and those who opposed Clinton factored largely into her presidential campaign loss.

Of course, using sexism is also the laziest way to demean a woman. If you can't debate her ideas, just slam her appearance, her personality, her relationships and her likeability. Trump crossed the line all the time. Flustered during the debate because he couldn't out debate Clinton on policy, he just leaned into the mic and dismissed her entirely: "nasty woman" (Robbins, 2017).

Rhetoric like this influences the perception of Women in politics on a macro level, but there are also microaggressions against women that seek to regulate women's behavior and subjugate them into their designated spaces. Asking a woman how she will manage a family and her career implies that one should be prioritized over the other; rarely are men asked this question. Labeling a Woman a "hoe" for seeking and engaging in sexual acts, practices, and behaviors that derive pleasure implies that "Woman" should not be active in their sexual praxis, rather they should submit to being a pleasure vessel for men. The policing of gender performance or performativity seeks to designate a space and place for Black Women, Queer Black Women, and all Women; we must resist.

The pre-determined performativity and scripts expected of Women are desirous for a counter narrative. Scripts and gender roles dictate what Women should be and how we should behave. It manifests through perceptions of lower intelligence, sexual abuse or molestation, and overall disregard. "Whatever African-American women choose to name a Black women's standpoint, womanism and Black feminism encounter the issues confronted by any knowledge that aims to 'talk back' to knowledges with more power" (Collins, 1998). Talking back is an act of rebellion, resistance, and survival.

Queering Womanhood

I support Butler's claim that gender is merely a performance; a performance of the images of gender that we have seen performed throughout or lived experiences (Butler, 1999). Heteronormativity and presupposed gender roles are systemic and so deeply engrained in culture that they even permeate the minds and ideologies of Women who love and are intimate with other Women. There are many stereotypes and labels within the Black Queer People of Color community such as Butch, Lipstick Lesbian, Hard and Soft Stud, Tomboy and Tomgirl, Pillow Princess, and High Femme. Queer Black Woman more liberally transgress the boundaries and confines of what it means to be a Woman and other. Individually, the expressions of "Woman" are more performative and can freely form our gender expression outside of the rigid constructs because we already exist on the margins of acceptable Womanhood.

Expressions of Womanhood for Queer Black Women manifest in the ways that extend beyond style of dress and behavior. In a study conducted by Lippa and Reiger, the link between expressions of femininity, masculinity, and sexual orientation is directly correlated. "There is a possible core to masculinity-femininity that contains sexual orientation in addition to gender-typed self-concepts, interests, appearances, vocal patterns, and nonverbal displays" (Lippa, 2005b; Rieger et al., 2010). Black Lesbians with a masculine gender presentations not only adopt the clothing style of men, they also are adept at lowering the tone and pitch of their voices to be perceived as more masculine and be more attractive to the more feminine women they desire. Similarly, Cis-Heterosexual Black Women both anthropologically and socially are accustomed to emphasizing or exaggerating the qualities and traits that deem them feminine in the hopes

of attracting a man. This is evidenced in anthropological studies of makeup, clothing, perfume, and shoes; it is revealed that historically items like lipstick were intended to draw attention to plump lips as a show of fertility. Conversely, however, anecdotal research would suggest that feminine lesbians (Femmes) do not feel the need exaggerate or emphasize their femininity because the mutual attraction between them and other Queer women fosters a common erotic (uniquely feminine) bond and mutual understanding that supersedes the male gaze and patriarchy (Power, 2010).

Regulatory Queerness

Filmmaker, Marlon Rigg's final project *Black Is, Black Ain't* discusses the notion of the performance of Blackness (Riggs, 1995). The film emphasizes the importance of defining what it means to be Black and the necessity of embracing the many nuances within Blackness. Not acknowledging the multitude of identities within Black communities results in the ideal "regulatory blackness". Regulatory Blackness defines what Black is and what Black isn't. On the surface, Regulatory Blackness forms a unifying identity for all Black people, but the substratum to this collective identity are confining barriers that dictate how Black people should be. Similarly, I posit that within the Black Lesbian communities there exists Regulatory Queerness. Many of the tropes of Black Lesbian Womanhood are relegated to either side of the masculine or feminine binary. These permanent paradigms force expressions of Black Lesbian Womanhood that are often caricatures of toxic manhood and/or stale womanhood rather than authentic expressions of the true self.

Within the Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transwomen communities one would think that we accept all expressions Womanhood; quite the contrary. We have constructed

boundaries and norms within the classifications of Black Lesbianhood. Studs are expected to behave and aestheticize themselves in a way that is so narrow that it can be as stifling and suffocating as toxic masculinity. Women labeled as Femmes are expected to perform womanhood in traditional ways. Any expression of Womanhood outside of that rattles the Black Lesbian communities in such a way that a myriad of terms have been created to label these fluid expressions. Even within marginalized communities the ideal of a monolith is obliterated so much so that it manifests into hyperbolic stratifications that do more to divide than affirm.

As I developed in my sexual orientation identity it seemed as if there were only a few fixed roles for Queer Black Women that had been given shape, form, and definition in a crooked room. The crooked room for Queer Black Women is society, popular culture, film, music, Christianity, and the family. These controlling images of Queer Black Woman identity are as sick as the society that created them; sick with the diseases of patriarchy, misogyny, racism, classism, and sexism. The primary relegated roles are Femme (submissive) and Stud (dominant); the intersections of these binaries create minor stereotypes such as Femme aggressive, Soft Stud, Tomboy, Tomgirl, or Stemme. These controlling images describe gender affects and behavior. They are used as markers that claim critical space in the Black Queer geography. Upon meeting other Lesbians, we ask, “How would you label yourself?”; this is undoubtedly an attempt to understand the other and identify kin. If you do not identify with any of these labels and resolve that you will not conform to any of the pre-fixed roles, you risk of being the outsider within and perceived as less authentically Queer. This intercommunity stratification is troubling, but

more worrisome is the practical invisibility of any images of Queer Black Women in mainstream culture and academia.

Relationships

Many Black Lesbian relationships in, particularly those in less progressive geographies, mimic a heterosexual relationship; there is a Woman who assumes the roles typically associated with a male gender performance and a Woman performing Womanhood. In romantic pairings, Queer Black Women can slide up and down the spectrum of the man and woman gender construct scale based on the two people in relationship. When Queer Black Women form relationships that follow traditional gender roles it is called heteronormative mimicry.

“While gay and lesbian identities can themselves operate according to those gay men and lesbians who play out certain social roles through a prism of heteronormative mimicry and without irony, are shaken up by the radical and dissident nature of a queer cultural praxis” (Bailey, Georgiou & Harindranath, 2007).

It is rare to see Stud for Stud (S-f-S) or Femme for Femme (F-f-F) relationships. Socioculturally, we are accustomed to pairings and binaries i.e. male/female, up/down, left or right, good/evil. Acknowledging the liminal spaces is not something we are accustomed to, Black Lesbians that exist in the “in between” of Femme and Stud are deemed inauthentically Queer because they do not fit in the standards of Regulatory Queerness. Similarly to other cultural boundaries, we must be critical of who patrols these boundaries, who permits entry and exit, and why the boundaries were ever established.

Of all of the Queer gender and sex minorities, Bisexuality is often labeled as the most contestable because of their attraction to both men and women. This liminal existence is unacceptable amongst a marginalized group of women who ironically adorn masculinity at will. Bisexual Black Women are allowed to be attracted to a woman who mimics the toxic facets of American manhood, but somehow being intimate with an actual man is seen as a betrayal. These performances of Queer Womanhood are problematic because these identities are assimilationist acts that take form in the crooked room with the hopes of not being othered in an already marginalized sub group. However, in the idiom of this time, it is difficult to imagine that any of us construct our identity and manifest it outwardly without external, hegemonic forces.

Hetero-Femininity

Femininity is a set of stylized behaviors typically assigned to Women. There exists a pervasive notion of what femininity is called hegemonic femininity. “Hegemonic femininity acts as a complement to hegemonic masculinity, the dominant Western version of masculinity, and maintains the hierarchy of gender in which males are dominant and females are subordinate” (Velding, 2017, pg. 507). It guides the roles and behaviors assigned to the female gender, but it should be noted that men also exhibit feminine traits. Each expression of femininity is as unique and multivalent as the individuals demonstrating the traits. A few commonly held qualifications of femininity are empathy, nurturing, and sensitivity. The Victorian standard of beauty held that women should be fair (pale) in complexion, thin, large, doe like eyes, and an extremely cinched waist. White skin represented purity and wealth because it denoted that a woman

did not have to work outside like the peasants. “Victorian sensibilities held that women were uniquely endowed with morality and ethics” (Sklar and Gilmore, 1997).

This standard of beauty did not include Black Women. Without regard to social status, Black Women were not privy to the social privileges granted to white Women; subsequently, Black Women were desexualized and represented in unattractive and exaggerated caricatures of themselves. In the years following slavery, most Black Women did not seek to reclaim the culture of their African ancestors; adorning themselves in tribal headdresses, patterned clothing, and other signifiers of their difference. They sought to assimilate into the culture of their oppressors as a means of survival, striving for equality, and normalcy. Black Women with affluence wore the dresses, shoes, and hats that had been denied them. They wore gloves on their hands and on sunny days, they carried fans and umbrellas to protect their skins from the harsh heat and sun. They voluntarily leaned into the crooked room of femininity, they wanted to take every measure within their scope of control to reclaim their place in society as a woman deserving of the same social standing as their white counterparts. Black Women who were still relegated to the fields as a sharecropper or to the house as mammy would adorn the accouterments befitting of a newly freed woman on Sundays to church. It was on these occasions that Black Women could audaciously pronounce their femininity through their clothes, hair, and poise; they could transgress beyond their job and subordinate status if only for a fleeting moment.

Black Women and Queer Black Women must use gender expression either as a means of reclaiming their sociopolitical standing or as a means of personal liberation from stagnant representations of gender. However, historically, much like today, their

style of dress and their feminine expression did not actually garner respect or equality. Black Women are still viewed as hypersexual, promiscuous, and subordinate to other women in society regardless of our expressions of femininity.

Many of today's Black Women still cling to a gender expression that feels foreign; from the practice of sewing Malaysian, Brazilian, and Indian hair into our hair, from paying Asian manicurists to attach artificial nails to our fingers, extending our natural eyelashes with synthetic hair fibers, and adhering to standards of beauty and gender expression that were never our own. These are all tools that aid in the attraction of a male partner, incite admiration or jealousy from other women, or contribute to one's self concept of beauty. Femininity imbues notions of physical space, voice, passive sexuality, appearance, and behavior. "Some ideologies portray a voiceless, docile, and sexually submissive woman as the quintessential feminine woman" (Bordo, 1993). This characterization of traditional femininity is in direct opposition to the master narrative about Black Women that exists in mainstream media. The indoctrination of these toxic stereotypes of Women have been masterfully crafted and taught; it is the prevailing undercurrent that pacifies the need to understand why Black Women are the least desirable when compared to other racial and ethnic minorities.

In a 2013 study of an online dating app, it was revealed that Black Women have the lowest response of White, Latina, and Asian women. Black Women most often responded to Black Men while Black Men most often responded to Asian Women. Despite their best efforts, Black Women's version of femininity is deemed unattractive and undesirable to men of all races; even Black men. Black Women have stylized a nuanced style of femininity that mergers identity traits appear to be germane to only us,

but is deemed attractive to men possibly as a fetish or as a proclamation of Black Love. Black Hetero-Femininity is rooted in independence, struggle for social, political, and relational equity, fervent loyalty, sass, and protective nurturing. These qualities evade every aspect of their interactions with potential suitors and how their Hetero-Femininity manifests outwardly in any social setting. Examples of Black Hetero-Femininity can be found in the character Olivia Pope on ABC's *Scandal*, Claire Huxtable of *The Cosby Show*, and Molly on HBO's *Insecure*. All of these are depictions of Black Women are high powered, successful, and they garner the attention of men because of their prowess, intellect, and fierce persona. These women are not hyper sexual, rather they are the objects of attraction for their stylization of modern day Black Femininity in the context of a heteronormative cisgendered body.

Homo-Femininity

“Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining ‘straightness’ is our last resort. Being out is the final renunciation of any claim to the crumbs of ‘tolerance’ that nonthreatening ‘ladylike’ Black women are sometimes fed” (Smith, 1980, pg. 143).

The only doors Black Women have to enter into dominant culture or assimilate into American culture is through heterosexuality and Christianity. If America values whiteness, capitalism, Christianity, and heteronormativity, then Black Women have the doors of acceptance slammed in their face at every turn with the exclusion or normative sex practices and religion. What, then, of Queer Black Women who do not subscribe to

traditional expressions of femininity? If Black Women are othered by the impossible standards of beauty, where do Queer Black Women locate themselves and their sense of beauty? It should be understood that not all Queer Black Women are masculine of center or butch; there are many Queer Black Women that do adhere to widely accepted standards of beauty. Most often femininity is defined by dominant cultures; in the United States, femininity is framed within the context of white Women. This image of femininity is expressed and has endured through styles of dress, makeup, and hairstyles. “Thus, just like during slavery where emulating White hairstyles, particularly straight hair, signified many things in the Black community . . . free vs. slave; employed vs. unemployed; educated vs. uneducated; upper class vs. poor” (Patton, 2006).

As a pre-teen I was annoyed by the constructs of femininity placed upon me. I was told I needed to carry a purse. I did not understand why; when I asked, I was told “because it’s what little girls do.” I was given a purse and I carried it, but then I was tasked with what to put in it. I did not have a need for it so I put the thing I loved most inside: candy. When my aunts would ask me what I had in my purse and I would pull out laffy taffies and jolly ranchers, they would laugh. I was told that I should always have compact mirror, lipstick (chapstick for girls my age), hand lotion, and Kleenex. I wore this accessory on my body, but I felt disconnected from it. It wasn’t big enough to fit my Walkman and Goosebumps books, so what was the point? I must have lost that purse and all of the pointless things inside at least six times between the ages of 12 to 15. My mother birthed me when she was 36, so growing up my mom was always older than my friend’s mothers. This meant that my expression of femininity and young womanhood was sprinkled with vestiges of the 1960’s. My mom taught me how to roll my hair with

sponge rollers, how to oil my scalp three times a week with Blue Magic hair grease, and to always wear a nude or black slip with skirts and dresses. I was educated in classical school of Womanhood that dictated that a lady must always have a pair of nude stocking in her arsenal, know how to hem clothing, have a pair of hoop, pearl, or stud earrings in ear at all times, and she must know how to cook. Some of these lessons linger in my adult Black Lesbian mind and guide how well I perform femininity day to day.

There were many “arguments” (Black kids knew better than to really argue with their parents for fear of a whooping) about why I chose not to wear the floral prints, dresses, and pink blouses my mother bought for me to wear. In eighth grade, I was given the money to buy my own back to school clothes because my mom had grown tired of bickering with me about my style. I chose t-shirts, denim jeans, and sneakers. She submitted to my style and would tell my aunts, “Michelle is a Tomboy, she doesn’t like the things I pick out for her.” There was an indifference in her voice that let me know I was not what she wanted me to be, but also said she just wanted me to be comfortable. As an adult, my expression of femininity is too Queer to be heteronormative and too heteronormative to fit into Regulatory Queerness. I am hyper aware of when, where, and to what degree I sway the span of my hips. At times I assume a masculine posture by planting my feet firmly on the ground, with my knees at a 90-degree angle, shoulders straight and square to assert dominance in social and professional settings. I make unrelenting eye contact when I perceive admiration, attraction, or attempts at domination. Other times, I soften my gaze to appear welcoming and submissive. I occupy less space by crossing my feet at the ankle and tucking them back and relaxing my broad shoulders. I slow my pace and hesitate at doors to allow someone with a most dominant energy to

open the door for me. Whether in heels or sneakers, when exiting a stage or descending less than three steps, I extend my hand like a southern debutante to be assisted down even if there is a rail. It is all a performance that is fluid and subjective, but it is all my own.

Judith Butler declares, “women who fail to . . . understand their sexuality as partially constructed within the terms of the phallic economy are potentially written off within the terms of that theory as ‘male-identified’ or ‘unenlightened’” (Butler, 1999, pg. 39-40). By perpetuating a different image that disrupts the narrative about femininity, Queer Black Women can occupy critical geographies and initiate safe spaces within mainstream cultures. Presumably heterosexual participants in a focus group about feminine expression and hair conducted by Cheryl Thompson of McGill University remarked that their hair was a major proponent of their performance of beauty and heterosexual dating. One participant, Jackie, remarked, “When you feel like you can attract a man that gives you some power...I think it’s just sexuality that you’re seeing...if you see a couple of short haired women, you automatically assume that they’re lesbian” (Thompson, 2009). This is a widely accepted ideology presumes that women with short hair are not heterosexual and if they are Queer, that they are not interested in attracting sexual partners. Further it makes the major claim that hair is the primary form of sexual expression in all women. Queer Black Women know the nuances of expressing femininity all too well and have employed a multitude tools to either amplify or suppress their gender that is as unique and varied as their individual fingerprints.

For Black Queer Woman, however, there is freedom of choice regarding gender expression. Black Queer Women exist at the far margins of society by virtue of their race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Women who are Queer in *sexual orientation* have

the choice to deny or comply with traditional forms of gender expression associated being a woman. However, for Black Women who are queer in *gender identity*, choosing to not align their gender identity with their gender expression can be damaging and violent to their emotional wellness. Because sexual orientation does not have to be expressed to the external world, some Queer Black Women choose to not signify their alignment LGBTQIA community through any form of gender expression.

Get Em' Bodied: The Body

To be a Black Women in this world is to be politically invisible but physically hypervisible. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* provides a powerful analogy for the ways in which Black Women have the ability to be seen without the ability to see reflections of each other (Foucault, 1977). The Panopticon describes an architectural design of a prison created by Jeremy Bentham whereby prisoners cannot see each other but are keenly visible to guards and prison wards (Bentham, 1791). Not only can those imprisoned within the Panopticon not see each other, because of their distance from the observation tower, they also cannot see those who gaze upon them. Panopticism refers the practice of constant and invasive surveillance that acts as a control mechanism. Over time, the persistent surveillance becomes internalized and prisoners begin to modify their behavior and police themselves by behaving as if they are being surveilled even when they are not (Foucault, 1979). Black women are hyper visible for our skin tone, physique, and gender. We are seen by everyone when we occupy physical space; it is the reason Black Women experience high instances of sexual assault, street harassment, racial profiling while shopping, and presumptions of anger and attitude. Similar to the Panopticon, Black Women are seen by everyone but we do not see ourselves reflected in

popular culture, media, film, and music. The white male gaze is ever upon the Black Women; as it was historically during slavery so it is now. The Black Woman's presence is amplified; pronounced by the hues in our skin and amplified in the exaggerations of our curves, and othered by our prowess.

By virtue of the impossibility of their skin tone, physical stature, and facial features they were denied the ability to be seen as beautiful. Saartje Baartman was painful example of the Black Woman body being regarded as alien, grotesque, and peculiar. "Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa who became a canonized exhibit of London's Piccadilly Circus as a result of her supposedly abnormal sexual organs" (Harris-Perry, 2011, pg. 57). Through her life and even after her death, her buttocks and elongated labia majora acted as an exhibition for casual circus attendees and scientist, substantiating the Black Woman as sexually deviant and the other. There are numerous examples of scientists and physicians using the Black Female body as a live cadaver that could be used to experiment upon and consequently torture to better understand this savage female body. The Black Female body was distant enough from humanity to cut, prod, and explore without anesthesia or medicine, but human enough to build the field of gynecology and add a better understanding to the female anatomy.

By age 14, my body was blossoming and spreading in ways that no one in family anticipated and the boys at school seemed entranced by. I wanted to hide; I did not want the attention that the other girls seemed to relish in and desire so deeply. I resented the comments boys made about my booty, hips, and titties. I hated that they could see my body under the t-shirts that I wore one size too big and the jerseys I wore that were just long enough to cover my booty. I was careful not to wear my pants too big so as to not be

seen as gay by either my family or the kids at school. I had not even realized my attraction to other girls yet, but I knew being identified gay was a label I did not want. With an awareness that can only be taught through the wicked lens of early sexual assault, I knew that my developing curvy body could garner attention from boys and men that was not in the least bit flattering or complimentary, it was dangerous and scary. My Tomboy was still an attempt at self-protection. I desired to be heralded and praised for my mental acuity rather than the rotundity of my booty. Physical attraction seemed then and still seems shallow, temporal, and vapid. Mind first, body later. However, today, women pay my worth in student loan debt to have my body. My hips effortlessly claim physical space and place while I am working diligently to claim the same space in academia through my education. I yearn for the day when the beauty of my mind garners more provocative attention than that of my temporal body.

The physical standards of beauty have progressed very little over the last three centuries and despite the infamous appropriation of a Black Woman's silhouette and darkened skin by Kim Kardashian and her sisters; waif body shape, long straight hair, and pale skin remains heralded as the American standard of beauty. Within Black Culture, standards of beauty differ very little from the dominant culture. Long straight hair, wide hips, large breasts, and plump bottoms are considered the norm for Black Women. Colorism, the hierarchical stratification of skin complexion in people of color, remains ever present in the Black Community and is particularly damaging to Black Women. This is undoubtedly a consequence of standards of beauty forced upon Black Women during slavery and Jim Crow. Noliwe Rooks conducted an investigation into the early 20th century of advertisements for altering the skin color and hair texture of Black Women.

She concluded “These advertisements” argue for the desirability of changing physical manifestations of ‘classic’ African features by juxtaposing the characteristics of Caucasians and Africans to highlight the advantages of disavowing the physical manifestations of an African ancestry” (Ebron, 1999).

At present women with dark skin like Leslie Jones and Gabourey Sidibe face harsh criticism for their skin tone and body shape; their appearance and presence in popular culture make them targets to hateful and vile social media attacks from both Black people and white people. The images of Black Women that put forth in popular media perpetuate one-dimensional view of beauty; the images of Black Women are usually altered to fit the tropes of acceptable attractiveness. As hooks (1992) reminds us, “popular culture provides countless examples of Black female appropriation and exploitation of ‘negative stereotypes’ to either assert control over the representation or at least reap the benefits of it”. These images are typically dichotomous: either hypersexualized or asexual. They are complicit in perpetuating Sapphire, Mammy, or the Strong Black Woman and according to Dr. Melissa Harris Perry, are used as tools of collective shaming (Harris-Perry, 2011). Music videos feature Black Women as accessories to men in ways that are misogynistic, predatory, and sexist. Older Black Women are viewed as non-sexual beings used to display motherhood, wisdom, or struggle.

Images that do not fit this binary are highly contested as evidenced in the backlash to Gabourey Sidebe’s recent love scene on Fox’s popular television drama *Empire*. Gabourey Sidibe is plus sized with dark brown skin complexion. Season two of the popular sitcom featured an episode where by Sidibe’s character, Becky, was seen

straddling her boyfriend poolside while they kissed affectionately. This scene was followed with hurtful and vile social media commentary about her weight and skin color. Sidibe said, “I was really happy to be part of something that’s never been seen on primetime television before. And you don’t notice it because you don’t have to notice it, but there’s never been someone of my skin color, my size, with somebody else of the same skin color in a love scene on primetime television.” Regardless, of our size, shape, or notoriety, the Black Woman’s body is other, gazed upon, and the subject in venerated narratives of misogyny, racism, and patriarchy.

CHAPTER 5

LA CARA OCULTA: THE SEARCH FOR COMPLEX REPRESENTATIONS OF QUEER BLACK WOMEN AND COMBATTING THE OTHER'S GAZE

“There were no mirrors in my NaNa’s House. The beauty in everything was in her eyes, yeah, was in her eyes” (Barnwell and Saint James, 1998).

*The excerpt below is a transcription of a vlog submitted by me on the Youtube channel, Cut From the Same Cloth, titled “[John Doe](#)” (Allen, 2013). It was uploaded in August of 2013 and details my frustrations with my burgeoning sexual orientation identity and gender expression. It highlights fears of not being accepted in a white supremacist heteronormative patriarchy (hooks, **) because of my identity as a Queer Black Woman and elucidates sentiments that may be universal to other marginalized people. An implicit theme that is evidenced in this excerpt is the deeply personal and vulnerable dialogue that is fostered in safe spaces for Black Woman friend circles. It is in these spaces that Queer/Black Woman can challenge and support fellow Queer/Black Women outside of the gaze of the other.*

AUGUST 29TH, 2013

“So I just had a good conversation with ”Mya” and we were talking about a haircut that I wanted to do, but my concern is that it’s going to look really masculine. I feel it already, and I don’t even have the hair cut yet, but I feel the need to umm, wear, like, big earrings, the big accessories, and more makeup. She asked me why did I have a problem with the haircut being more masculine and I was like “Because I just do!” And I know it’s tied into the fact that I am uncomfortable around studs; I don’t know why I do.

And I also know that its tied into the fact that when my professor told me last semester for a counseling class and a counseling exercise to go out, now that I have embraced myself as being bisexual, to go out and let my gender expression be masculine. For lack of a better word, dress like a stud. So she told me to do that and I was like “Why?? What do you think I’m going to get from that?” And it was just so much push back that I gave my professor and it was because I feel uncomfortable.

I don’t know. I don’t want to do that and I just had a long conversation with Drea and essentially what we talked about is that I told her ‘If I dress like a stud, then people see me and they instantly know that I’m gay.’ And what’s the problem with that, right? But it’s the fact that I don’t want people to make up their minds about who I am before they can even have a chance to meet me. Before they have a chance to see my personality. I don’t want people to do that because I feel if they do that then they won’t like me. They’ve made up in their mind that they won’t like me instantly because of my sexual orientation. As weird as that sounds—that doesn’t even make sense because I know that people do that everyday based on my race and also based on my gender. People have assumptions about who I am based on my gender, body shape...all these things that I can’t control. But I feel like as an androgynous classified [Woman] or STEMME or whatever you want to call it— as someone who can dress either way and look normal either way, then that gives me the choice. It gives ME the choice to tell you what I want you to know about me.

So then she [Drea] said, “Well you don’t think people look at you now how you are dressed and know that you’re gay? Or think that you’re gay?” And I was like “Well I—I don’t think so.” She said “well let’s go back to in class when the professor asked the

whole class if they thought you were a lesbian and the whole class raised their hand and said yes. What do you think they were seeing then?" I said, "I don't know! But every day since that that moment I have had to...rather I felt the need to question everything I do! Everything is negotiable for me right now! When I'm walking on the pedestrian I'm constantly wondering 'Am I walking in a masculine way? Is it how I walk? So now I gotta put an extra switch in my hips. I wonder am I frowning too much? Is it a scowl? Even as I look at this video, I'm thinking maybe I should open my eyes more. I don't know what it is, is it that I don't paint my nails? Maybe I should paint my nails more. Should I wear bigger earrings? Should I wear more make up? I DON'T KNOW. **Exasperated sigh.**

I don't know. I just want to be able to be myself without people feeling some kinda way about it. That's all I want. And that's not going to happen because people have their own judgments and people have biases and I understand. As a diversity educator, I get that people have biases and that are how we deal with people different than us. I get that. I get it; I really do. But when it comes to me, I want it to be different. Because I'm a great person and people don't get to know that if they've made up their mind about me before they talk to me. And I just don't know—I feel like if I tell the whole world—my brother doesn't know, my sister in law doesn't know, my cousins don't know, people don't know and if I tell the whole world then that's just another thing that I have to...compensate for. And it sounds self-degradating—his is internalized racism, internalized sexism that I'm expressing right now and I don't like it. I don't like that I'm doing this and I know better.

But it's just one of those things where I feel like now when I meet you and of course this is me trying to conform to the dominant culture which is white male Christian. Right, so when I meet John Doe who is a white male Christian I feel I instantly have to

overcome and prove to him that as a woman I'm intelligent, I'm not submissive, I'm not subservient...I'm intelligent and I'm powerful in my gender expression and in being a woman. Great, so I have overcome being a woman. And now I need to tell you that as a Black Woman, I'm not like every sassy black woman you've seen. I'm intelligent. I watch the same shows you watch John Doe. I watch the Office. I watch Parks and Recreation. Dane Cook is my favorite comedian not Kevin Hart. I do those things and its really who I am. But I feel the need to tell you that, John Doe, so that you know that I am different. I'm not like the stereotypes that you see of Black people.

And now if I add my sexuality on there, I have to show you that whatever concept you have of what it is...of what a Lesbian is or what someone who is Bisexual is...I feel like now I have to overcome that. So now that's Black, Woman, Lesbian/Bisexual that I have to overcome and it's exhausting. And be happy you don't have to do this John Doe with your privilege; that you don't have to feel the need—internalized thoughts of what YOU think of me and now I think them of myself. UGH! It's the looking glass theory "I'm not who I think I am. I'm not who you think I am. I'm a combination of who I think you think I am". Ahhh! Why can't I just go back to being unintelligent; I just want to be ignorant to these things, but that's not the world we live in."

Analysis

To exist in a world and be keenly aware of your marginalization can create a stigma consciousness and some sort of body dysmorphia. It can alter the way you perceive yourself and the way you feel others perceive you. This is what I experienced as I slowly and cautiously stepped further away from white cis-hetero patriarchal center of American society and into Queerness. I was plagued with concerns about what people

will think about me and my new found Queer identity. I resented the hyper consciousness that had manifested in my life because of my intersectional marginalized identities. The privilege to simply exist in the world and occupy spaces without having to consider the limits that could be imposed upon me simply for living freely was infuriating. This particular vlog from *Cut From the Same Cloth* features me ranting at all dominant cultures and hegemonic systems. My words shout out into the void about my bemoaned identity and existence as a burgeoning Black Lesbian. My ultimate fear was being mistaken for the false and denigrating images and tropes heralded on television, in music, and literature that define what it means to be a Black Woman that do not align with who I am personally.

In hindsight, I am frustrated with my inability to recognize how my desire to be perceived as equal to whiteness through shared music and comedic interests is a manifestation of white supremacy and its colonization of my mind. In an effort to find commonality, I am stepping into the white patriarchal gaze begging to be seen, welcomed, and embraced rather than acknowledging that who I am is worthy of love and companionship simply because I exist. I felt othered from Blackness because of my personal interests and there were no representations of Black Womanhood that reflected who I was or who I wanted to be other than my close friends. This dearth of representations is what prompted the creation of the Vlog. It was created as a result of our desire to be the images we yearned to see for future generations of Black Women.

In 2013, a search for reflections of Black Women in television and media resulted in angry, feisty, sneaky, and conniving Black Women who roll their necks, throw beverages in their perceived opponents faces, and are physically violent instantly. These

images and representations are intended for entertainment, but are damaging when there are no positive images to counter the negativity. They develop an askew image of what it means to Black and Woman; images that seem strangely familiar yet remarkably inaccurate. They are familiar because they are seen in popular culture frequently, but they are inaccurate because they are created as a repressive tool to limit the imaginations of dominant cultures regarding Black Women.

Crooked Room/Symbolic Annihilation

How do Queer Black Women and Black Women situate themselves comfortably in the seat of themselves when neither group is allowed what the Combahee River Collective called “level humanity” (Hull, Scott, Smith, 1982). Polarizing visualizations of Black Womanhood are unwavering and petulant like swarms of mosquitos at a picnic. Like mosquitos, these images are parasitic, they wound, and they are seemingly inescapable. During World War II, Herman Wilkin developed a cognitive psychology experiment to gauge Field Dependence/Independence (Witkin, 1950). The study was intended to gauge how susceptible individuals are to the persuasive the images and advertisements they shown. “Witkin suggested that individuals can be categorized in terms of the degree to which their perception is dependent on the prevalent structure of a visual field (Matthes, et al., 2011, pg. 86). This experiment is also called The Crooked Room. Melissa Harris Perry, professor and author of *Sister Citizen*, asserts that Black Women living in American society live their lives in a crooked room. This produces a society where the images of Black Women perpetuated in film, social media, and popular culture are askew and off center from who Black Women most often feel they are. Additionally, it negatively affects how people perceive the women in their lives. In the

study, subjects were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room and then asked to align themselves vertically. Some research participants were noticeably field dependent perceived themselves as upright, when in reality there would be leaning at an angle in correspondence to the askew images surrounding them (Harris-Perry, 2011).

The images of Black Women put forth in the media and public arenas are rooted in shameful stereotypes like Mammy, Jezebel, and Strong Black Woman. Mammy is one of the oldest stereotypes of Black Women. She is a vestige of the role enslaved black women played in the antebellum south. “Slaveholding men and women manipulated enslaved women’s mothering through their physical labor, their reproductive abilities, and the appropriation of their breast milk” (Knight & West, 2017, pg. 37). Our place as Black Women in this country has been riddled with hypocrisy; we were animalistic, sexual deviants built for hard labor and nurturing mother figures all at once. According to W.E.B. Dubois, “Whatever she had of slovenliness or neatness, of degradation or of education she surrendered it to those who lived to lynch her sons and ravish her daughters” (McElya, 2007). This involuntary servitude to the white familial institution evolved to a role for Black women that would be enduring in American culture. In 1939, American popular media formally documented its love affair with Mammy by awarding actress Hattie McDaniel with the first Academy Award ever granted to a Black Woman for her depiction of Mammy in the film *Gone With the Wind* (Lincoln and Chatters, 2003).

Mammy was the Black Woman’s entrance into the workforce; while white women were fighting for equity in society and the family through the ability to exit the home and enter the workplace, Black Women seemed to be permanently relegated to domestic

labor. “The central charge against the Mammy is that she sacrifices her own interests and those of her kindred to serve another who oppresses her (Schroer, 2013, pg. 102). Using the film *The Other Woman* as a curricular text for the modern Mammy we can explore rapper Nicki Minaj’s role as Mammy that subverts her actual role as the main character’s assistant and work confidant (Cassavetes and Stacks, 2014). In the film, the main character played by actress Cameron Diaz is experiencing trouble adulterous boyfriend. Nicki Minaj’s character, Lydia, is of service to her boss both professionally, by virtue of her occupation and personally, by virtue of her role as Mammy. She provides her with witty hard-hitting truths, comedic quips, and reassurance when needed. Minaj’s role is shallow and one dimensional; we know very little about her character’s wants and desires and the personal issues of Diaz’s character often supersede her role as an assistant. Lydia is the only person woman of color in the film; the character’s opinions and aesthetic fulfills another familiar tilted image for Black Woman: Jezebel.

Biblically, Jezebel is the embodiment of a wicked woman with no moral compass or regard for anything other than her desires. She was named a heathen princess and biblical retellings charge her with the fall of Israel and Judah (1 King 16:31, New International Version). Stories about Jezebel indicate that she was manipulative, controlling, and sexually lewd. It is no wonder, then, that this moniker was applied to Black Women. As Europeans scoured the earth in search of lands to colonize and dominate, they encountered the African Woman, observed her through the crooked lens and likened her to an animal. Saartije Baartman (Hottentot Venus) is a notable example of the African Woman’s body being stripped of its agency, critiqued, and deduced to something so different that it could not have been fully human; rather this discovery was

something wild, ravenous, and crude (Henderson, C.E., 2014). This trope was crucial to the justification of the rape, sexual assault, and medical experimentation Black Women were forced to endure in the during that time. Viewing Black Women slaves as animalistic and primitive means that they were not human beings that could be humiliated, debased, and traumatized for the acts that their bodies were force to survive.

Today, Jezebel exists as a tool not only used by oppressors to sustain systems of sexism, racism, and patriarchy, but it is also employed by Black Women and men to sell music, films, books, pornography, and other media. In recent reality TV news, a television show called *The Real Side Chicks of Charlotte* has emerged. The show will feature women who prefer to date married men and men in relationships (The Jasmine Brand, 2017). The show documents the eight women's lives as they lie to themselves and others about the nature of their relationships, respond violently when confronted by the wives of their boyfriends, and do whatever is necessary to fulfill their desires with no regard for public ridicule and scorn. Television is saturated with programming that highlights Black Women leaning into the Jezebel stereotype. Shows like *Basketball Wives*, *Bad Girls Club*, *Love and Hip Hop*, and *Real Housewives* depict images of women who fight, connive against, and demean other Black Women. Some people argue that these women are performing Jezebel for fame and money. I would argue that even if these images are performances, they are equally denigrating to the Black Women collectively. The price of individual financial security and notoriety does not supersede the heavy tax that we all pay as these images echo throughout majority discourse around Black Womanhood.

The images of Black Women as Jezebel are accompanied by music as well. Songs like *Freak Like Me*, *The Zoo*, *Animal*, and *Wild Thoughts* all evoke an image of animalist Black sex and love. The recent hit, *Wild Thoughts* was produced by DJ Khaled and performed by Rihanna, a singer who is known for her carefree display of sensuality, sex appeal, and the erotic. The lyrics to this popular tune coincide with the unbridled desire of sex historically associated with Black Women.

“I hope you know I'm for the takin'
 You know this cookie's for the baking (ugh)
 Kitty, kitty, baby give that thing some rest
 Like the '68 Jets
 Diamonds ain't nothing when I'm rockin' with ya
 Diamonds ain't nothing when I'm shinin' with ya
 Just keep it white and black as if I'm ya sista
 I'm too hip to hop around town out here with ya” (Brathwaite, 2017)

“Terms such as ‘primitive’, ‘backward’, ‘jungle’, ‘wild’, and ‘freak’ uncritically cycle through contemporary global culture, leaving undisturbed the pejorative historical meanings associated with this vocabulary (Collins, 2005, pg. 42). This is seen in the colloquial use of the word “bitch” and it becoming synonymous with “friend”, “girlfriend”, “woman”, or “rude, crass woman”. The term’s literal meaning is a female dog; while the literal reference of the dog has faded, the animalistic reference to Black Women has persisted and found new home in the lexicon of many Hip Hop songs and popular culture.

Sapphire and Angry Black Woman are the final stereotypes that I will explore in this body of the work. The terms are synonymous and will be used interchangeably. Sapphire is quite the opposite of her cohort, Mammy; she is angry, cynical, sassy, and demanding. Her legacy was immortalized as Foxy Cleopatra in the Blaxploitation films such as the self-titled *Foxy Brown*, *Willie Dynamite*, and *SuperFly*. The zeitgeist of these films was the Black Protest, Black is Beautiful, and Black Pride movements of the 1970's. The Black Woman was militant, aggressive, and sassy but all for the purpose of resisting racial and gender oppression. As a political strategy, Angry Black Woman was used to advocate for equal voting rights, parity in the school system, and equality in all forms of social reform. Politically, she is seen as Fannie Lou Hamer being "sick and tired of being sick and tired", Shirley Chisolm being "Unbossed and Unbought, and most recently as Congresswoman Maxine Waters speaking out vehemently against Donald Trump. Audre Lorde used her eloquence to posit that anger is fertile soil for progress when she remarked, "Anger is loaded with information and energy" (Lorde, 1984, pg. 127). These Black Women's anger was rooted in a desire to eradicate systems of oppression that are disproportionately afflicting Black Women and Black culture.

In recent appearances of Sapphire, the information and energy behind the anger has been lost, convoluted, and ignored. The Black Woman just appears to be angry for no reason, ready to roll her eyes and neck at the slightest perceived wrong. Black Women's anger has become the boy that cried wolf; our anger is so ever present that our real life outcry at the death of our sons, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and Kalief Browder, seems to parallel the anger exhibited when a fictional television husband forgets the eggs at the grocery store. Though drastically different expressions of frustration and anger,

both are shrugged off as harmless, weightless, and pointless. This trope has muted our anger and consequently our pain. Our anger falls on deaf ears; our anger becomes a performance that people watch like a spectator sport and then change the channel. Black Women's anger has been silenced for generations. In 1851, Sojourner Truth lamented on her silent rage: "I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?" (Truth, 1851). After hundreds of years being dismissed and muted, it is a triumph that we still muster up the energy to find voice to articulate our pain masked as anger.

Who hears the Queer Black Woman's rage and despair as she suffocates under the weight of racism and sexism and chokes on the thick rhetoric of heteronormativity? This concept is crucial to my inquiry because I posit that in a crooked room society, Black Women and Queer Black Women alike either align themselves with the detrimental stereotypes they ingest from media or they feel othered because they do not align with these derogatory images, nor do they want to.

Expanding upon the work of Melissa Harris Perry, I posit that Queer Black Women exist in a crooked room and as seen in the cognitive psychology experiments, have leaned into the crooked images of heteronormativity. Imagine you are an 11 year old girl living in a world where everyone is gay. You grow up as a young girl and your parents ask you, "Are there any cute little girls at school that you have a crush on?" As your mom's eyes beam with joy and anticipation of the feminine name that she is assured you are about to confess, you cringe because you don't like girls. You like boys. You wake up and turn on the TV and see families with two moms or two dads. Your favorite songs on the radio are about loving same sex. You go to church and the pastor

preaches about the sin of opposite sex attraction and yells “God, in all Her infinite wisdom, did not make Adam and Eve, She made Eve and Evelyn!” You finally reveal to your closest friends that you are heterosexual and while they accept you, they just do not understand how you could love a man when there are so many beautiful women in the world to love. You find a man to love and who loves you back and when out in public, people stare and make jeers at the two of you. Close friends pry about what sex is like between a man and a woman; they listen to your description both confused and intrigued. By virtue of your sexual orientation and identity you are other. The experience described here is heteronormativity.

Heteronormativity and presupposed gender roles are systemic and so deeply engrained in culture that they even permeate the minds and ideologies of women who love and are intimate with other women. There are many stereotypes and labels within the Black Queer People of Color community such as Butch, Lipstick Lesbian, Hard and Soft Stud, Tomboy and Tomgirl, Pillow Princess, and High Femme. Many of the tropes of Black Lesbianhood are relegated to either side of the masculine or feminine binary. Furthermore, these expressions of Black Lesbian Womanhood are often caricatures of toxic manhood and Womanhood rather than authentic expressions of the true self. Building on the work of Judith Butler and her canonical work, *Gender Trouble*, I posit that not only is gender a performance, it is a performance of the images of gender that we have seen performed throughout or lived experiences (Butler, 1999). Many Black Lesbian relationships in, particularly those in less progressive geographies, mimic a heterosexual relationship; there is a Woman who assumes the roles typically associated with a male gender performance and a Woman performing Womanhood. These

performances are only problematic if these identities are an assimilationist act performed in the crooked room with the hopes of not being othered in an already marginalized group.

In exploring the void of Black Lesbians in academia and the perpetuation of a politics of sexual silence Evelyn Hammond said, “I would also argue that Lorde’s writing, with its focus on the erotic, on passion and desire, suggests that Black Lesbian sexualities can be read as one expression of the reclamation of the despised Black female body” (Hammond, 1997, pg. 100). Although, Evelyn Hammond’s *Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence* was written in 1997 her call to use Pleasure Politics and Black Lesbian lived experiences as a lens for reframing the Black Feminist agenda has gone largely unanswered. Queer Black Women’s open and multi-tiered love of Black Women is fertile soil for a reimagined and deeply rooted Black Feminist tree of knowledge that can withstand today’s cultural climate. The earliest pioneer and advocates for the women who live at the intersection of race, gender, and class, Anna Julia Cooper said, “Only the black woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me” (Cooper, 1892). Similarly, it is only the Queer Black Woman who says when and where I create space, free from predatory voyeurism and heteronormativity, loud and indignant in resistance from years of silence, outside of the gaze the other, then and there all Black Women enter with me. When the identities that live on the far margins of society are liberated, the more inward identities are liberated as well. It becomes a ripple of a liberatory politic.

In opposition to a liberatory politic and in alignment with a politic of silence is symbolic annihilation, which is a form othering. It destroys the images of minority populations such that anyone who does not fit into the narrow confines of the popular, yet derogatory images are made to feel like an outsider within or alienated from their own culture. As a feature of her residency at the Eugene Lang College's The New School for Liberal Arts, bell hooks hosted a panel discussion titled, *Are You Still a Slave?: Liberating the Black Female Body*. This panel featured film director, Shola Lynch, who introduced the media studies concept of "symbolic annihilation"; it describes the phenomenon of not seeing oneself represented at all or seeing only seeing oneself denigrated and victimized. Building upon the work of the founder of cultivation theory, George Gerbner, Gaye Tuchman defines symbolic annihilation as "the process by which the mass media omits, trivializes, or condemns certain groups that are not socially valued" (Tuchman, 1978, pg. 3-38). The images of Queer Black Women shown in media and the images never seen both align with Tuchman's three tenets of the term. "The absence of a particular group in the media instructs people, albeit tacitly, about how one should or should not act, and about what one should or should not look like" (Klein, 2009, pg. 57). Where am I in the images of Queer Black Women in media? Where can rich and complex representations of Black Queer Womanhood be located?

Many of the images seen of Black Lesbians on television programming perpetuate the image of masculine of center woman and a "lipstick lesbian" couple. This is seen on the very popular reality television show, *Love and Hip Hop New York*. The season seven cast features Felicia "Snoop" Pearson (Stud) and J. Adrienne (Femme). Snoop, most notably recognized from the hit HBO series, *The Wire*, is a cisgender woman who is

masculine in her gender presentation, mannerisms, and voice; her girlfriend, J. Adrienne, is a woman with a normative presentation of femininity who is totally reliant on Snoop for financial, emotional, and professional support. The couple's story line depicts J. Adrienne constantly questioning Snoop's fidelity to the relationship and baiting her into arguments about her involvement with other women while she is alone trying to foster homeplace for the two of them. Conversely, the show depicts Snoop out with the men of the cast at strip clubs and bars flirting and courting other women. *The Love and Hip Hop* series has approximately 5 million viewers each week. This level of exposure offers insight into a marginalized culture for members of majority culture that may never encounter such a couple if it were not for the show. While this fills the need for representation of Queer Black Women on television, the representations are stereotypical and stale. This symbolic annihilation is seen, consumed, and absorbed into the minds of the other and informs them about what Black lesbian relationships look like without questioning its validity.

Normalcy, The Other, Shame

In the fight for social equality and integration into dominant culture, Black People worked avidly against the stereotypes and prejudices that were used to substantiate our oppression. For Black men these stereotypes included the unintelligent brute, unskilled and inherently lazy, sexual deviant. For Black Women these stereotypes included mammy, the domineering workhorse, and the oversexed temptress. Black Women were viewed by slave masters as breeders and by mistresses of the plantation as simultaneously the other mother to her children and the sexy temptress to her husband. "The depiction of Black Women as sexually insatiable breeders suits a slaveholding society that profits

from Black Women's fertility" (Harris-Perry, 2011). Once freed, Black Women were still denied the same chivalry as white Women; white Women were to be honored, revered, and protected from any form of labor. As articulated by professor Barbara Welter, *The Cult of True Womanhood (Domesticity)* was a pervasive philosophy that emerged in the 1820's that outlines that women's identity was associated with four characteristics: piety, submissiveness, purity, and domesticity. It claimed that a Woman was morally superior to a man because she was removed from the filth that was the outside world; her place was inside the home nurturing her family (Welter, 1966). The slave Woman's place was outside. This philosophy most certainly did not apply for the Black Woman of the 19th century because she was seen as cattle and a breeder and was only allowed into the home as a slave to the mistress. Historian and Black Feminist scholar, Beverly Guy-Sheftall notes, "Black Women were painfully aware that ' they were devalued no matter what their strengths might be, and that the Cult of True Womanhood was not intended to apply to them no matter how intensely they embraced its values" (Guy-Sheftall, 1990, pg. 90).

Black Women have resisted the tropes used against us since their inception; we resisted in micro levels in our fight for freedom, love, and family and on macro levels in our fight for voter equality, social justice, and more recently wage equality. We have fought for everything and everyone; knuckles bruised and bloody from striking walls of racism, sexism, and classism. The goal of eradicating these stereotypes was more than an attempt to restore the humanity that had been denied to us; it was an attempt at ensuring our safety and advocating for our place in the democracy. Garnering our respect meant a step away from our standing as property and our forward progression into knowledgeable, informed citizens who could advocate for our own rights.

However, the call for respect was framed around constructing protests that would garner equal rights for Black people, but the true underlying fight was aimed at ways to legitimize Black malehood and his equality to white men with little focus to Black Women. Respectability as a site of political activism silenced Black Women and our right to agency over our lives, our bodies, and our pleasure as means of “overcoming” the tropes of the domineering Black Women: asserting manhood (Johnson, 2005,). The fault in establishing a respectability politics that denies Black Women voice and the fullness of their ability to love, derive pleasure, feel sadness, and need for assistance is that it acts as fertile soil for the festering growth of many tropes and stereotypes that exist today. By not allowing Black Women, Queer and otherwise, to be fully human and requiring that they shrink themselves into standards of Womanhood and pious femininity, which historically were not relegated to Black Women, is both stifling and suffocating in the name of patriarchy. Discourse during this time revolved around denying claims of sexual deviance and promiscuity, which consequently desexualized all black people. Literary critic, Hortense Spillers posits, “Black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb” (Spillers, 1984). This smothering of our pleasure and sexualities birthed controlling images like Mammy, Strong Black Woman, Sapphire, and Welfare Queen.

As an act of political activism, Blacks adopted a single-issue framework: Black. In the hopes of improving the political standing for African Americans, Black people decided to center their racial identity over other intra-racial differences such as sexual orientation, gender, sexual behavior, and social class. However, a single issue politic does not aid in progress for marginalized people especially in a patriarchal society that is

built on the foundation of white supremacy with walls (boundaries) lifted in the name of class, and heteronormativity.

“Marion Riggs's *Tongues Untied* became the battle cry for ‘black’ as a more inclusive umbrella category at a time within the field when some scholars were still suggesting that homosexuality was anathema to a black consciousness and, indeed, a ‘white disease’ that had infiltrated the black community” (Johnson, 2015, pg. 134).

Queer Black Women disrupt Black respectability politics that value the sanctity male-female relationships and the exclusionary interpretations of Christianity.

Beverly Guy-Sheftall says that the white gaze and imagination still informs how we discuss Black sexualities; it is a manifestation of preoccupation over how we desire to be viewed by the racial other (Byrd and Guy-Sheftall, 2001). If the goal is true liberation we must engage in a critical discourse about the many intersections of our identity and embrace that the fight is not for equality to white people, but the freedom to be our diverse and complicated selves. An example of such a critical discourse is exactly what I am exploring in this body of work: a modern day exploration of the conflation and division between Black Women and Queer Black Women. The goal is this discourse was articulated by Hammond when she said, “And ultimately my hope is that such an engagement will produce black feminist analyses which detail strategies for differently located black women to shape interventions that embody their separate and common interests and perspectives” (Hammonds, 1999, pg. 102).

Queer Black Women boldly and radically step outside box of normalcy, thus dismantling the “See, we are just like you! Now will you accept us?” narrative. Kevin

Mumford, a history professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, thinks there is a basic dynamic in action here: Many black people refuse to give up the privilege of normalcy (Mumford, 2016) If heterosexuality and respectability are the most prevalent and primary deployable tools Black People can use to construct some semblance of equality, it is no wonder that “abnormal” lives of Queer Black Women have been outcasted to the margins of Blackness. “What would it mean for both queer and African diaspora studies to take seriously the possibility that, as forcefully as the Atlantic and the Caribbean flow together, so too do the turbulent fluidities of Blackness and queerness?” (Tinsley, 2008, pg. 193). Critical questions like these amplify the voices of Queer Black Women, strengthen the Black Feminist Politic, and claim critical geographies in the Ivory Tower and the curriculum of life.

CHAPTER 6

DEED OF MANUMISSION: FINDING FREEDOM AND CLAIMING SPACE

Once upon a time, I worked at an elementary school on the Southside of Atlanta as an Enrichment Teacher. I taught the students (grades 2-5) about DJ techniques, music, and hip hop culture. I, also, performed as a DJ at all of the school dances and field day events. My first time Dj'ing at the school, a fourth grade girl walked up to my DJ booth and shouted over the music, "Are you a girl or a boy?!" Puzzled and offended, I asked her what she thought I was. She replied with a shoulder shrug. I could tell that she was very confused. I asked her what made her ask me that; she replied, "Well you look like a girl, but you don't have any hair and you are a DJ. Only boys DJ." Seeing this as a teachable moment I told her that there many "girl DJ's" and that as a girl she could be one too, if she so desired. She smiled and walked away. She had never heard of any women DJs or even seen one on television; there was only me. This is the same for any young girl aspiring to be doctors, lawyers, physicists, or any other profession. It has been said that you cannot be what you cannot see. My dissertation aims to expand the realm of possibilities for what Queer Black Women are allowed to feel, how we should be treated, and what we can accomplish in this society.

Sandra Bland was a 28-year-old college educated Black Woman. She was a member of a BGLO, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. She was a higher education professional. On July 10th, 2015, Sandra Bland was leaving an interview at her alma mater. She had just called a close friend to inform him that, after a string of temporary positions in Community Engagement and Civic Organizing, she had gotten the job.

Shortly after that phone call she was pulled over for a minor traffic violation, and after following an argument and physical altercation with Officer Brian Encinia, she was arrested. She did not have \$500 to post bail and was consequently held in jail. Then, 64 hours after her arrest, she was found dead by hanging in her jail cell (Nathan, 2016). When I learned of what had happened to yet another Black person, this time a Black Woman, I was heartbroken. I was working in a job that I hated and no one in my office, though members of the African Diaspora, appeared to care. They were silent. I went into my private bathroom and collapsed on the floor in deep hurt, anger, and despair. I wept. I am a Black Woman. I am college educated. I was 29. I am a member of a Black Greek Lettered Organization. I am a higher education professional.

This bond with Sandra Bland is a perfect articulation of fictive kinship. She felt like an extension of me. My kinship with her reminded me that just as she was arrested, aggressively handled, and denied basic human rights at the hand of police, so I could be as well. Melissa Harris Perry's definition of fictive kinship examines the power of positive and negative reflections of shared minority identities, but with all of the people who look like me, share my kind of love, and live where I live being killed by state sanctioned authorities, fictive kinship is a stark reminder that I could be killed too. The realization that it could have been me was petrifying. Bland's death resonated because she *was* me; she was not a teenage boy walking home in the middle of the night. She was not a teenage boy accused of stealing a cigarillo from a convenience store. She was not a 12-year-old boy thought to playing with a gun in a neighborhood park. She was a Black Woman who changed lanes without signaling properly. However, thinking critically, I wondered what the metalanguage was and unwritten curriculum that influenced the

interactions between Sandra Bland and State Trooper Encinia. I would argue that Sandra was met with aggression because the controlling images of Black Women as attitudinal, sassy, violent, and hostile spoke before her directly to the (un)consciousness of Officer Encinia. The concept of fictive kinship helps to explain my connection to Sandra Bland and the relevance that her identities and her life story holds for my life. Similarly, the concept of fictive kinship connects me to the diverse Black girls and women for whom this dissertation was written. It implies that anyone sharing my same identities could find hope and possibility in the stories of my life which could ripple into redefined curriculum, more progressive politics, reimagined relationships, and fundamentally, more love.

With the exception of Melissa Harris Perry and recent lectures by bell hooks, many of the works that acted as the catalyst for my interest and exploration of Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought were written years before I was born. These works were authored alongside the emergence of Africana Women's studies programs in the late 1970's and early 1980's. Many of these scholars were fundamental in the development of this field of study and forged the path for future scholars like myself. Today, they remark in disappointment that more Black Women have not joined them on the jagged shores they bravely explored and claimed. Societally, we seem to live in a culture where we are drowning in shallow waters. Swimming and frolicking gleefully in bodies of water that are as deep as rain puddles. Black Women are so thirsty for representations of our daily life that we drink high fructose corn syrup juice drinks in the form of *Love and Hip Hop*, *Basketball Wives*, *Empire*, and the *Bad Girls Club* by the gallon. Like any beverage, these television programs would be fine in moderation as long

as they are balanced with other representations. Shows like *Insecure*, *Queen Sugar*, *Blackish*, and *The Carmichael Show* seek to fill that void, but there must be more.

Blog, Vlogs, and Podcasts have been given voice to thousands of Black people, Black Women, Queer people, and every possible intersection of these identities. They are free, unfiltered, and uncensored modes of expression for individuals who have been silenced by mainstream media and the “good old boys club” that perpetuates the same stale tropes and outdated narratives of Black Women and ignore the plight of Queer Black Women. These modern forms of journals and editorials have resulted in new careers, increased all of media’s responsivity rate to cultural phenomenon, and decreased the length of the media cycle. These freelance journalists can provide commentary without bureaucratic barriers such as reviewing editors and CEO approval. These media are critical geographies that allow marginalized communities to speak for ourselves, to ourselves, and about ourselves. We have claimed and proclaimed righteous territory and defined what is “cool” and “popular” for the world. Black Women bloggers, vloggers, and podcasters have the power to dictate what is noteworthy in fashion, music, and television.

Black Twitter, for example, is the pulse of Black thought on any contemporary issue from the comedic to the deeply hurtful. Widely popular websites the *Shaderoom*, *The Root*, and *ForHarriet* are examples of the far-reaching benefits of Blogging. Political and Social Commentators like Fransческа Ramsey, Luvvie Ajayi, and Janet Mock have turned vlogs and blogs into book deals, television appearances, and large media platforms that can be used to amplify the voices of oppressed peoples. These women and others have put forth images of Black Womanhood that move beyond static and controlling

images. In the words of Patricia Hill Collins, they talk back to tropes like Mammy, Angry Black Woman, Sapphire, Strong Black Women, and Welfare Queen to show complicated and realistic images of Black Women (2000). Despite the progressive roles of Black Actresses such as Ruttina Wesley, Keri Washington, and Issa Rae, the more regressive roles of Black Women are still popular and pervasive. Children sing along gleefully to misogynistic songs like *These Hoes Ain't Loyal* and *It Ain't Nothing to Cut that Bitch Off* and most people do not blink an eye. How, in a culture dominated by a bombardment of images, likes, follows, and clicks do we disrupt this antiquated curriculum? Using autoethnography to re-enter and re-member my early curriculum, I unearth present day truths of learning, unlearning, and liberation that can provide a new curriculum that is as intersectional as its students.

As the LGBTQIA communities fight for acceptance, inclusion, and visibility, I yearn for these new images of Black Queer Women to exist outside of the patriarchal, misogynistic, heteronormative gaze. At present, the images that exist either illustrate Black Lesbians as hyper sexual, shallow caricatures of toxic masculinity, or simply confused. Queer Black Women are multifaceted, diverse, and are the embodiment of how fluid the gender spectrum is. We provide an education on the meaning of gender as a social construct and its performative nature. Queer Black Women evoke an active unlearning of what Black love can be and unilateral images of the Black family. Black Women who love other Black Women provide a counter narrative to the denigrating images of the Black Body that are shamed, abused, and othered in Eurocentric standards of beauty and Eurocentric geographies.

Historically, Black Women's bodies have been public terrain. Our bodies belonged to slave masters and used to ensure the perpetuation of chattel slavery through breeding and child birth. Following the abolishment of slavery, Black Women's bodies were subordinated to a woman's father or her husband. Our bodies have belonged to science, entertainment industries, film, and domestic labor spaces. We have belonged to every except ourselves. Today, for issues either related to self-esteem, desire for fame, or to solicit sexual attraction, many Black Women have gone to great lengths to exaggerate their form through butt and breasts enlargements, hair weaves, and lip injections. The shapes of our bodies were labeled and discarded as other; this othering was used to justify a narrative of sexual insatiability and subsequent sexual violence. Respectability politics was a failed attempt to confront and combat the conquering and colonization of the Black female form (Higginbotham, 1992). This politic, however, only stifled the natural and liberatory expression of our sexuality. True liberation exists in our ability to progress from a politic of silence to a politic of articulation. A politic that allows us to derive sexual pleasure unabashedly and embrace the erotic towards our own pleasure and passions.

I come to this body of work vulnerable, open, broken, rebuilt, restored, anguished, wounded, healed, hopeful, connected, resilient, and in communion and solidarity with those who have come before me, those who stand with me now, and those who will tread the trails I will emblazon. The decolonization of my mind from heteronormativity, sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, classism, and racism has been a righteous reclamation of the most critical geography I could occupy: my mind, body, and spirit. The curriculum I ingested through schooling, transgenerational ways of knowing, film, music, violence,

art, and life taught me that surviving life as a Queer Black Woman would be submission to a life of subjugation, passivity, and silence. Initially, I found bravery in asking critical questions, but soon I realized the true bravery lay in my ability to seek truth in the answers that would be given. To read, internalize, and question the metalanguage and master narrative that lies just beyond the surface of my multivalent identities takes courage.

The latter realization, just beyond asking questions and submitting to uncomfortable truths, is understanding that the answers could tap into a deep latent pool of anger. Black Women exist in extremes and polarities that either ignore or confine us. Queer Black Women are either shamed or fetishized. It is a maddening conflation of DuBois's Double Consciousness (1903). We are perceived as inferior for being women, hated for being Black, and shamed for being Queer, but still asked to be the crux of the Black family and mummies for all. How could we not be so deeply hurt that pain reverberates in the fibers of our bodies and manifests as anger? Where does the anger go if it is repressed and left to seep out and taint the air like carbon monoxide leak? The anger is either turned inward and results in a number of health issues or released into our families to leave indelible generational wounds. The repressive doctrine about Black Women and Queer Black Women is infuriating and poisonous, but through an emancipatory unlearning we can reclaim our narratives and freedom.

Along the journey of reclamation, I am emancipating myself from the poisonous indoctrination about what it means to be a Black Woman in a country (world) that seems to hate women, despise Blackness, and seeks to continually and deliberately trample upon the inalienable rights guaranteed to those who live on the margins of white, cis-hetero,

Christian, capitalistic, patriarchy. I am doing so by authentically expressing myself on my terms in this academic arena and by defining my own standard of femininity or masculinity in my personal life. This self-definition creates space for others like me to dance freely and gleefully on the margins of macro-society, but at the center of our own happiness. Despite my marginalization, I would rather embrace my intersectional life than to have any portion of my identity suffocated in shame, obscurity, and secrecy. From the Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice of the South* to Kimberle Crenshaw's *Mapping the Margins*, the rich narratives that are derived from the intersectional nature of our lives paints a beautiful tapestry society and culture. Intersectionality also provides grounds for a more equitable politic for marginalized people because it forces hegemonic structures to acknowledge that the compounded effect of many minority identities demand the eradication of all systemic oppressions. Intersectionality makes the other more familiar by addressing each of us in totality not as the convenient parts.

I decided to free gaze from the pious cult of white Womanhood and look inward and outward at the reflections of Black Women and Queer Black Womanhood that I see in my daily sojourn through life's labyrinth. There I could find Women that act as mirrors for who I am today, who I am aim to be, and the legacy I hope to leave through fictive kinship and reimagined homeplaces. In these mirrors, I have constructed a new curriculum for all that Black Womanhood is and the power that lies in telling our stories. I honor these women, though I may not know their names, their stories, or their hopes, but through this body of work, I speak their names, I create space for them, and I empathize with their struggles.

Curriculum Studies Significance

It is my hope that this body of work provides justification for the importance of a research paradigm that is critical and progressive in exalting stories of scholars, writers, poets, and thought leaders who died at the margins of society and whose works were figuratively buried with them. Dr. William Schubert posits that the field of Curriculum Studies should be diligent in asking what is worth knowing and why? (Schubert, n.d.) My dissertation inquiry into Cultural Curriculum Studies asks, “What is worth knowing and for whom?” This question is an inquisition into who determines what is taught, both formally and informally, who does it service to continue to teach these “lessons”, and who does it service to continue this master narrative. Maxine Green writes, “Without the ability to think about yourself, to reflect on your life, there’s really no awareness, no consciousness. Consciousness doesn’t come automatically; it comes through being alive, awake, curious, and often furious” (Greene, 1973).

The exploration of the lived experiences of women who are all connected through race, gender, and locale is a daunting attempt at awakening and shifting the consciousness of individuals who sit in the seat of authority of education. It is my hope that the inquiry I shared shall serve two purposes: similarly to what William Pinar describes as “*currere*”, my inquiry allows me to situate and substantiate my space in the Ivory tower and my responsibility to generations of future students. Pinar is the creator of the method of “*currere*”; it is exploration of the self that is regressive, progressive, analytical, and syncretical. “From another perspective, the method is the self-conscious conceptualization of the temporal, and from another, it is the viewing of what is conceptualized through time” (Pinar, 1975). Another example of *currere* being used in

this fashion is Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*. It is a manifestation of the currere in that it implores Black women to employ the erotic, uniquely feminine power, to discover who we are and what fosters true joy in a society that attempts to subordinate and control women (Lorde, 1984). Secondly, this autoethnographical text will act as the catalyst for others to fully examine their schooling and education (life) as it relates to their space in society.

True education is a destructive and constructive process because at its best it draws out the best in all who care to learn; decolonizing the mind from thoughts, beliefs, and norms that perpetuate the status quo while denying heterogeneity and self-identification. The constructive portion of education rebuilds individuals and communities that may have been kept small in the box of group think and blind faith to political systems and oppressive cultural norms. It has the ability to disrupt outdated narratives about marginalized populations, dismantle institutions of systemic oppression, and demolish ideas of inferiority by affirming counter narratives and heralding underrepresented stories of intersectionality. Furthermore, education can build bridges that narrow the distance between the self and other. When properly used, education can construct a new house of inclusion and acceptance. It can pave new roads of self-understanding that leads to society that co-constructs a more loving and accepting reality. At present, however, schooling has failed racial and GSM populations, particular to this body of work, *Black Women* and *Queer Black Women* by retelling a grand narrative that is mostly old, white, heterosexual, and male. Using narrative inquiry and digital story telling as a tool of autobiographical ethnography of a Queer Black Woman hoping to use

education and schooling to claim a space and place for generations of women whose identities meet in the same intersection as me.

It is my hope that following the reception of this dissertation into academic, future research and scholarship in the areas of Black Queer Studies, Black Cultural Studies, Black Feminist Thought, and Critical Race Feminism will simultaneously pay homage to the work of our Black Feminist foremothers while remaining vigilant in the critique of the gaps found in early bodies of work. Today, the imaging of Black Women has become more prevalent and the tropes and stereotypes have become more nuanced. Class and celebrity culture have influenced Black Feminism in such a way that Black Women have become tools and vessels for our own oppression by using social media as tool to promote negative stereotypes to gain more followers or accepting shallow roles for financial gain. A more progressive and inclusive examination of scholarship, film, music, art, and other media must be deployed. This piece of scholarship can act as the catalyst of a more progressive and dynamic critique of culture and society.

This body of work invokes an intentionally complex understanding of femininity and masculinity in the context of Queer Black Women and calls for the creation of safe spaces that do not require conformity or silence. These critical geographies move Queer home places from obscurity into public domains like academia, education, government and politics, and popular forms of media. Subsequently, future generations of students will know that a gay Black Man with a penchant for white male prostitutes, Bayard Rustin, was a key organizer in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s non-violent movement, civil rights movement (Anderson, 1997). These attributes will not be used to denigrate his legacy, rather they would be used to acknowledge the humanity of a prominent figure of

the past. Just as the life partners of prominent heterosexual figures are acknowledged, revered, and seen as paramount to carrying on the legacy of their loved one's, so will partners of Queer figures. The sexual orientation of these individuals should not be mentioned as triviality or tokenism, it should be mentioned as a contributing factor of what they believe to be true in this world, how they interpret reality, and what they choose to honor with their research. It all matters.

Shifting sexuality, pleasure, and the erotic from the object to the subject centers marginalized Women and provides an example of a progressive education praxis. This praxis invites students to bring themselves into their schooling and education rather than acculturating into a system that has historically supported rote memorization, information regurgitation, and blind acceptance of the status quo. An example this reimagined praxis and education policy is highlighted in Dan Kindlon's, *Alpha Girls: Understanding the New American Girl and How She is Changing the World*. According to Kindlon, this updated rendering of young girls as Alpha Girl means they are risk takers, competitive, collaborative, and relationship oriented. She is the hybrid of both traditionally feminine and masculine traits (Kindlon, 2006). However, the models that young girls are using to build their ideal of modern day girlhood are wildly traditional in their gender expression and race. In a poignant critique of Kindlon's work, Pamela Bettis, Nicole Ferry, and Mary Roe asks, "Why are all of the heroines in *The Hunger Games*, *Frozen*, *Divergent*, white and heterosexual and why do they physically embody traditional feminine body proportions?" (Bettis, Ferry, Roe, 2016). Where are the Black girl heroines? Where can young Black Girls look for examples of Black heroines who are shaped like them, with hair like them, and a family that reflects their own? Through this dissertation,

administrators and education policy makers may realize the power of representation, acceptance, and inclusion beyond the realm of self-esteem, but towards an increase in efficacy and an expansion in realms of professional and academic possibilities.

By intersecting cultural curriculum studies, Black Queer studies, Black Feminist thought, and critical race Feminism, new truths about the lived experiences of Queer Black Women can emerge. The revelations that lie at the intersections of these identities highlight various forms of knowing that only exist in these critical geographies. From our vantage point on the periphery of acceptable Womanhood, Queer Black Women hold the power, ability, and leverage to remove the invisible hand that seeks to keep us silence and subsequently powerless. When we are emancipated, we open wide the freedom gates for all Women, all Black People, and all Queer people (Height, 2009). When we are free, everyone can be free to bring their full selves into education, politics, the arts, relationships, motherhood, sports, and social justice without fear of alienation, objectification, or being reduced into a monolithic culture that is more suffocating than accepting.

In a triumphant poem from spoken word artist, Amir Sulaiman, he declares that, collectively, we must prioritize our needs and claim victory over every system that has attempted to defeat us.

“We Must Win. We Have Died So Many Times. They Have Killed Us So Many Times. We Have Died So Many Deaths. We Have Died For Everyone! We Have Died For Everything! We Have Died For Nothing! We Are Done With Death! We Will Not Die Another Day! We Are The True And Living And We Must Win” (Sulaiman, 2013).

Queer Black Women and Black Women alike have given our lives and bodies in service to perpetuation of slavery, the nurturing of the Black family, the advocacy for Women's rights, and the struggle to convince dominant culture that lives of our sons, brothers, and husbands matter. This body of work is my own Emancipation Proclamation. By virtue of our existence on this earth, Queer Black Women have always had voice. We have claimed agency over our lives in safe spaces and in our homes. Our lives on the margins has drafted a progressive agenda for our peace and liberation. This body of work is its amplification. It is my hope that the words in this dissertation ring so loudly throughout the diaspora that it is impossible to ignore and forces everyone living under the tyranny of silence and the status quo to seek their own emancipation and pursue their individual freedom with reckless abandon out of love for themselves and for all that they represent.

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APPENDIX A.

Glossary of Terms

AG/Aggressive	Woman whose gender aligns with their sex, but style, gender presentation, mannerisms, voice, and other signifiers align with masculinity
Aromantic	Identity for people who do not feel romantic feelings for anyone without regard to gender. However, they may have a sexual attraction for any gender or sex.
Asexual	Identity for people who do not feel a sexual attraction to anyone without regard to gender. However, they may have romantic feelings for any gender or sex.
Bi-Erasure	The symbolic annihilation and attempted invalidation of the people who identify as bisexual by invalidating their attraction to two genders or sexes through out popular media or society
Biphobia	Hatred, fear, and intolerance for people who identify as or is perceived as Bisexual
Bisexual	Historically, intended to identify people who are attracted to both men and women. More recently, the term has been used to describe someone who is attracted to either two sexes or genders
Black Feminism	A belief and practice that considers the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation in the fight for equity,

	parity, and social justice for Black Women
Cis	Same
Cisgender	Gender aligns with sex (genitalia).
Dom (Dominant)	Person who plays an active, controlling, more masculine role in relationships or courtships
Feminism	A belief and practice of social parity, equity, and justice for men and women.
Femme	Woman whose gender aligns with their sex and embodies the traditional qualities of womanhood. Submissive and passive in courtship and dating.
Femme Aggressive	Woman whose gender aligns with their sex and embodies the traditional qualities of womanhood and exhibits dominant and aggressive traits typically associated masculinity.
Fluidity	Term rooted in the scholarship of Alfred Kinsey that posits that all sexuality exists on a spectrum with no absolutes. Posits that no one is absolutely Gay or Absolutely Straight. (Kinsey,1949)
Gender	Socially constructed qualities ascribed to women and men which is presumed to be aligned with the sex assigned at birth. The concept of man and woman is fluid and may vary culturally.
Gender Expression	The act of expressing one's intrapersonal (inward) gender identity in an outward fashion through mannerisms, voice, clothing, hair, and other external markers

Gender Identity	The gender that a person identifies with internally. May differ from a person's assigned sex and their gender expression
Gender Non-Conforming	Person who does not subscribe to the typical gender presentation, behavior, or mannerisms associated with their gender or sex
Gender Policing	The attempt to govern, dictate, or control how an individual expresses their gender at a given time.
GenderQueer	People who exist in the liminal spaces on the gender binary or may express many genders.
GSM	Gender and Sex Minority
Hetero Mimicry	The practice where by queer individuals engage in behaviors that perpetuate norms, stereotypes, and traditional roles identified in heterosexual relationships.
Heterofemininty	A stylization of femininity associated with traditional heterosexual relationships and heteronormativity
Heteronormative	The pervasive ideology that permeates politics, social media, and popular culture by asserting that heterosexual (male-female) relationships are normal and morally just
High Femme	A woman who identifies as a lesbian and expresses the woman gender an expressively traditional manner. Short for highly feminine.
Hip Hop Feminism	A belief and practice that considers the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation in the fight for equity,

	parity, and social justice for Black Women that incorporates Hip Hop music and rap artists either as a point of critique or politic of articulation
Homofemininity	A stylization of femininity associated with traditional same sex relationships and regulatory queerness
Homophobia	Hatred, fear, and intolerance for people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Queer/Questioning
Hyper Masculinity	A hyperbolic form of gender expression that features exaggerated aspects or behaviors usually associated with men.
Intersex	
Ladylike	Stylization of femininity. Governs the ways in which women are should behave within the patriarchal gaze.
LGBTQIA	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trangender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Aromatic
Lipstick Lesbian	A woman who identifies as a lesbian and expresses the woman gender an expressively traditional manner
Masculine of Center (MoC)	A person who identifies as woman but expresses of gender associated with men or manhood. See Stud/Dom/AG
Misogynoir	The specific hatred, dislike, distrust, and prejudice directed toward black women. Created and coined by Crunk Feminist Scholar, Moya Bailey. (Bailey, 2014)
Misogyny	Unreasonable bias or hatred expressed towards women that

	guides interactions and how we co-construct our environment
Pansexual	A sexual orientation that describes a person being attracted to another person regardless of gender.
Pillow Princess	A woman who engages in same sex practices in a passive manner
Queer	Not Straight. An umbrella term used to describe a politic and a state of being. Used as a unifying moniker for the LBGQTQIA communities. Reclaimed.
Questioning	Sexual orientation that describes an inquisitive or exploratory phenomena in one's sex life
Regulatory Queerness	The belief and practice of espousing a monolithic and static standard of what is means to be LGBTQIA
Sexism	The systemic belief and practice of subjugating creating a hierarchy between male and female whereby the women is inherently inferior
Sexual Orientation Behavior	A description of how one acts upon their sexual attraction. It is not aligned with either gender expression, sex, or gender.
Sexual Orientation Identity	A description of where one identifies internally on the scale of sexual attraction. This attraction may not have been acted upon and subsequently may not align with Sexual Orientation Behavior. It is not always aligned with gender expression, sex, or gender.
Slut Shame	The act of denigrating and belittling women for their style of

	dress, behavior, or other attributes that would not evoke the same reaction if they were conducted by a man
Soft Stud	A masculine identified woman who still expresses attributes associated with femininity e.g. make up, form fitting clothing, and nail polish.
Stemme	Woman who embodies the characteristics of both a Stud and a Femme. Could either be a Tomboy or Tomgirl.
Straight	Colloquial term used to describe someone who is heterosexual in their sexual orientation behavior
Stud	Female whose gender aligns with their sex, but style, gender presentation, mannerisms, voice, and other signifiers align with masculinity
Submissive	Person who plays a passive role in relationships or courtships
Tom Boy	A woman who wears pieces of clothing or apparel typically associated with men in a feminine way or with a feminine affect
Tom Girl	A woman who wears pieces of clothing or apparel typically associated with women in a masculine way or with a masculine affect
Trans	Change
Transgender	Term (Adjective) used to describe a person who does not identify with the sex or gender assigned to them at birth
Victim Blame	The act of blaming women for instances of sexual assault, rape, abuse, violence by attributing the crimes to some

	behavior or attribute possessed by the woman
Woman	Social construct assigned to females and those who identify as girl. Involves submission, femininity, passiveness, and piety.