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Lemons Into Lemonade: Black Undergraduate Women's Embodiment of Strength and Resilience at a PWI

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a qualitative research project for Black undergraduate women and about Black undergraduate women. The aim of this dissertation is to lift, center, and share the lived experiences of Black undergraduate women as they reflect on the messages and memories of coming into their Blackness, their transition to and experiences while attending a PWI, and the ways in which they continue to make meaning of space. Informed by Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory, the framework and methods used in this project prioritize the care of the participants and allow them to be co-creators of their own experiences. I argue throughout that there is an opportunity in more traditional higher education literature to approach the work from an interdisciplinary lens, bringing in Black Feminist Theory as a critical body of scholarship that tells us something else about Black undergraduate women from an intersectional lens. Without approaching scholarship about Black undergraduate women from an intersectional framework, we miss the voices and stories that my participants shared. At a moment when the need to heal from racial trauma was heightened, this study demonstrated the power of SOLHOT as a method and the ways in which intentional design, sustained dialogue, and an understanding of Black women allows for a beautifully unique space in higher education at PWIs. Through this dissertation, I found that Black undergraduate women (1) receive ongoing messages prior to attending college that inform them and their coming into Blackness experience, (2) are resilient despite the barriers, obstacles, and violence they encounter at their PWI, and (3) seek space that allows them to show up as authentically as possible and affirms, honors, and acknowledges them as enough. This dissertation aims to disrupt the majoritarian narratives about us, educated Black women, and invites the reader to see, hear, and feel us as whole people with deeply powerful

stories and resiliency that is unmatched. As Black women, we always make lemonade when given lemons because we are innately strong, empowered, and fierce.

LEMONS INTO LEMONADE: BLACK UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN'S EMBODIMENT
OF STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE AT A PWI

by

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Dissertation
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in *Cultural Foundations of Education*.

Syracuse University
December 2018

I am a feminist, and what that means to me is much the same as the meaning of the fact that I am Black: it means that I must undertake to love myself and to respect myself as though my very life depends upon self-love and self-respect.

~June Jordan (1990, p. 174)

ACKNOWLEDGEMNTS

I am from a frizzy curl and a nappy kink on one single coil,
Springing up and down on the search for Easter eggs and afikomen,
I am from spiraling arguments embedded in perceptions of right and wrong,
Rooted in a pot that boils for both collard greens and bitter herbs,
I am from a ballet of pirouettes,
Spinning and spinning, but dizzy no more.
~Dr. Lindsey M. West

Thank you to the universe for giving me the ability to find myself. I am whole, messy, and complicated. I live in this world as a fierce, bold, creative, and imaginative human. I deeply believe in and live by the principle *ubuntu* – I am because we are, the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. With this, I know that my village influences, informs, challenges, and supports me daily. With everything I have in me, I dedicate this dissertation to my village.

Mama and Pops. You gave me everything that you could, and continue to do so, in order for me to pursue all of my dreams. I dreamt of the day I stood in front of a crowd of people and shared this work, but more importantly, the moment I could look up at both of you smiling back, proud, and witnessing me become Dr. Jordan Shelby West. Mama, when you were diagnosed with cancer, you prayed to see me defend and for this moment…Mama, we made it! Thank you both for your unwavering, unconditional, and deep love. My best cheerleaders. I love you.

Lindsey. You showed me that this was possible. From writing a dissertation to navigating the academy in our skin. You were there for me in each moment, including when I was trying to understand if I was using APA right to making meaning of my Blackness. My number one supporter on hustling and negotiations, and the person who may hold some of my deepest life secrets. Thank you for always telling me that the games of the academy are silly and cheering me to finish for myself, my participants, and for my future. I now have all the time in the world for Corinne. I love you and thank you, Michael, and Corinne for your support.

Joi. A human with the biggest heart, who never once forgot to ask me about my dissertation, my data collection, my timeline, and what I needed in order to keep going. Joi, you always reminded me that we have bags to get and planes to catch. You were committed to understanding my process and in my most challenging moments, you reminded me to get La Colombe and keep going. I couldn't ask for a better friend, truly a best friend, to be by my side.

Jon. In tough, confusing, celebratory, and of course unpredictable times, you have been right here with me. One text away and just one emoji needs to be sent for us to understand each other. We feel deeply and in similar ways. From freckles to fashion, we are meant for one another. Thank you for always calling, texting, and answering. My November dissertation twin!

#TheWinningTeam. I feel fully human when I am with you and that I am able to be loved with all of my qualities and characteristics. The most humble group of hustlers in higher education. You were ready to come to Syracuse with and for me in challenging times. You were a space I needed and you always showed up, showed out, and showed love in the most critical times. Jon, Cameron, and Diontrey…the last doctor has arrived! …Now let's get on a plane.

Shawna. The living form of a sister + scholar. I am grateful for you. For showing me, teaching me, and telling me many life lessons. You embody sankofa and daily remind me of what opportunities exist…sometimes we just need to ask because you never know what you could get. I love you and thank you for believing in all of me.

Tyrone. You were there when I made a decision to change my life and get a PhD. From sitting on the floor with each acceptance letter to looking up distance on google maps, you supported me through each and every moment. Your cheerleading skills are invaluable. Thank you for rooting for me, challenging me, and expecting me to be the best I can possibly be.

Megan and Alexis. You both were in this with me. Although we were each at different points on the journey, you were the two people closest to understanding what was happening with and for me in the moment because you were experiencing it too. Thank you for creating space to have every moment we needed while experiencing this whole PhD thing.

Roseilyn & Mason. You understand me in ways no one else will. You both remained by my side, flexible, and understanding throughout this process. You always wanted me to do what I needed in order to make it through. You cheered for me in the same ways that I hope I have and will always cheer for you both. Still ballin!

My Syracuse Family. Ernest and Talina, there will never be two humans in my life that I would rather be in a classroom with for the faces, affirmation, laughs, and hours of processing afterwards. I needed you both and you were always there. I was honored to be called a radikal bird, have space in your homes to be ratchet, and of course to just hug, dance with, and play Black Card Revoked while eating fried fish. Laura, Martin, Julie, and Camilla, you four always let me know that I was not alone and I thank you for your trust, friendship, and support. You four, in your own ways, made me accountable to being a scholar activist. Penny, I just love your spirit. I felt like I got a hug from you each time I looked your way. Your fierce poise is noteworthy and your continuous offering of support, space in your home, and confidence in me was invaluable. Now Kim and Kelsey…whew! My girls. It is no coincidence that we took the same courses during our last year of coursework. The universe wanted to be sure we created a bond that exceeds words. Thank you for each text conversation, making sense of different feminist theories, having my back during conversations in class, and for always leading your lives in the most authentic ways. Kelsey, thank you for inviting me to understand horses, what it means for you to be Native and back home, and of course Café 407…this space is more than good coffee and biscuits. Kim, thank you for teaching me how to show up fully unapologetic in such graceful ways. OMA, you held me down. I had a space on campus because I worked in OMA and had the privilege of seeing People of Color every single day. From battles with Jerrel, to Marissa's contagious and fulfilling laugh, to polite side-eyes when Dr. D made a joke in staff meeting, I will never forget ya'll.

CFE & WGS. Thank you. I read more than I knew existed, I was challenged to be better, and most importantly I feel more responsible as I develop as a scholar activist. CFE, you invited me to be part of the community and trusted, championed, and cheered for me at all times. Maryann, I owe you everything and thank you is an understatement. WGS Faculty, you are bold and fierce. I saw myself in each of you in different ways. You gave me the permission that I needed in order to fully show up in the academy. Seeing and being with CFE and WGS faculty during the sit/sleep-in will always stay with me and meant so much.

Dissertation Committee. I was challenged throughout this process and each of you made an impact on who I am and who I am working towards as a scholar activist. Thank you for committing to me and my work. Gretchen, you built a relationship with me for four years and guided me through many decisions since my first semester in CFE. Your passion for my research and building a strong connection between our work always mattered to me and was extremely affirming. Cerri, you always believed in me and were available when morale was getting low. You made yourself available and I felt like I mattered to you during my whole process. I could hear your smile on the phone each time we spoke and value your clear, direct, and loving feedback each time it was called for. Marcelle, you were there to get me through the finish line. Your excitement and energy for my project was so meaningful. Your strength and confidence as a Black Feminist and Womanist in the academy shows me that I too can and need to exist in these spaces. You are a role model and you show me and guide me towards new possibilities. Thank you for always showing up for me, rooting for me, and being with me in the most challenging moments of this process.

Finally, and most importantly, thank you to the women who trusted me as a researcher and signed up as participants in this project. You are beautiful and adorned in melanin that glows, glistens, and sparkles. You are everything, you have everything, you are Black Girl Magic. To the Black women who will read this one day…this is for you, this is for us.

Grandma, Grandpa, and Grandpa Mike…you are my angels.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"Sisters are more than the sum of their relative disadvantages: they are active agents who craft

meaning out of their circumstances and do so in complicated and diverse ways."

(Harris-Perry, 2011, p.46)

Statement of the Purpose of the Study

This research centers the narratives of Black undergraduate women in higher education,

challenging majoritarian narratives and creating counternarratives. The term Black women is

used in this project to describe individuals who identify along a spectrum of Black as their racial

identity and along a spectrum of woman as their gender identity. Black women, in this study, as

an identity group is inclusive of multiracial, biracial, Pan African community members, and

anyone identifying as a woman in mind, body, or spirit. Grounded in the work of Black Feminist

Theory and Critical Race Theory, this dissertation aims to: (1) challenge majoritarian narratives

of Black undergraduate women, (2) identify multiple voices of Black undergraduate women, (3)

explore the ways in which Black undergraduate women persist and are resilient in higher

education, and (4) explore the significance of creating intentional space and developing

sisterhood and relationships amongst Black undergraduate women in higher education. I

recognize the need for counternarratives to challenge the dominant narratives around historically

marginalized populations, specifically Black undergraduate women in higher education. In this

project, counternarratives serve to "celebrate women's resiliency and resistance in the face of

seemingly insurmountable challenges" (Ngunjiri, 2007, p. 2). Through the process of self-

definition (Lorde, 1978), the "shifting of discourses of Black womanhood from victimization to

empowerment" (Njoku & Patton, 2017, p. 145), this project seeks to provide participants with

whatever they need for themselves – space, empowerment, solidarity, sisterhood, something else – at the time of the project. The project creates and claims a space for *herstory*, challenging and changing history.

Theoretical Framework

The current literature on student development in higher education does not specifically address Black women (Porter, 2017). The absence of Black undergraduate women in the literature is informative and requires the need to pull from other spaces, inclusive of Black undergraduate women, to frame this project. This project aims to understand the experiences of Black undergraduate women in higher education through the use of Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory. While the context of this work is in a higher education setting, the voices and experiences of Black women should be understood through the lens of Critical Race Theory, and most importantly, Black Feminist Theory. In order to fully understand the participants and project, the theoretical frameworks will provide the lens by which the project is designed and implemented and the literature review provided situates the work contextually in higher education. I understand an area of opportunity to exist in the literature of Black undergraduate women and through my project I demonstrate a way of understanding and centering the voices of my participants. Black Feminist Theory provides a framework to understand intersectionality and the lived experiences of the participants and Critical Race Theory provides a framework to understand and use the language of counternarrative in my methodology; both frameworks highlight the significance of the intentional design and creation of the space itself, and work to disrupt white ways of knowing.

Black Feminist Theory

Black Feminist Theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), presented the complexity of

intersectionality and for Black women this offered scholarship that challenged single-axis thinking around identity. Although initially coined within the legal field, Crenshaw's contribution of intersectionality shows up fully within spaces of higher education (Museus & Griffin, 2011) and is essential in understanding Black Feminist Theory in this project. The ways in which race, gender, class, and multiple aspects of identity are all equally important and should be brought forward together in order to understand a whole individual, is responsible research and Crenshaw challenges scholars to take ownership of this process and feel accountable to it as well. In Crenshaw's initial argument for intersectionality in "Demarginalizing the Intersection" (1989), she offers, "Black female narratives [are] rendered partial, unrecognizable, something apart from standard claims of race discrimination or gender discrimination" (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013, p. 791). In understanding Crenshaw's argument, Black Feminist scholarship and this project more specifically, requires recognition of the need to take up race with gender with class because that creates a unique location for Black women in the United States. In a study led by Banks (2009), she uses intersectionality to frame the selection of her participants and honoring their voices. Pulling from Brewer (1999), Banks (2009) aligns her work with the five features of intersectionality, describing her participant selection process to be a "group of women, who hailed from a variety of physical, spiritual, and intellectual places, provided a wide range of insight into the lives of Black women undergraduates; this book is founded in their lived experiences" (p. 17). Intersectionality as a framework for my project in turn takes a thoughtful approach from the participant selection process through the data collection process, and of course into the analysis and final dissertation.

In her work, Crenshaw lays a foundation in Black Feminist Theory to understand how Black women are erased from theory and how Black Feminist Theorists have created language

and scholarship to offer frameworks that center and start with Black women. Crenshaw argues that Black Feminists understand intersectionality and work from that lens in their practice and towards action, which I aim to do in this project. It has not been acceptable and remains unacceptable to conceptualize the experiences of Black women from the understanding and experiences of those in a majority, privileged space and doing so in fact marginalizes Black women even further. This idea of framing the narrative of Black women from the lens of a privileged individual and group further suggests Hill Collins' (1991) point that, "Controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty to be a natural, normal, and an inevitable part of every life" (p. 68) for Black women. There is a need to disrupt the normalcy of positioning Black women in an inevitable, oppressive space, specifically in the United States.

The significance of creating spaces and structures that invite Black women's experiences and voices to be shared is salient in Black Feminist Theory. Black Feminist scholars, such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Patricia Hill Collins have framed much of their work with narrative and storytelling as their method. Through standpoint epistemology, some of these scholars have further interrogated what it truly means to consider counternarratives in their research.

> The long-term and widely shared resistance among African-American women can only have been sustained by an enduring and shared standpoint among Black women about the meaning of oppression and the actions that Black women can and should take to resist it. Efforts to identify the central concepts of this Black women's standpoint figure prominently in the works of contemporary Black feminist intellectuals. Moreover, political and epistemological issues influence the social construction of Black feminist thought. Like other subordinate groups, African-American women not only have developed distinctive interpretations of Black women's oppression but have done so by

using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge itself (Hill Collins, 1989,

p. 746).

Standpoint epistemology and theory directly addresses, acknowledges, and honors the experiences of Black women and the specific understanding and knowledge from living as Black women, inclusive of environment and structural conditions.

> While a Black women's standpoint and its accompanying epistemology stem from Black women's consciousness of race and gender oppression, they are not simply the result of combining Afrocentric and female values – standpoints are rooted in real material conditions structured by social class (Hill Collins, 1989, p. 758).

In turn, Black Feminist Theory takes up the "intersections and similarities that connect Black women" and serves as a "framework through which the experiences of Black undergraduate women can be individually and collectively placed at the core of empirical research studies" (Porter, 2017, p. 89). Echoed by Brewer (1999), intersectionality analysis is a conceptual tool that creates a bond and linkage across Women of Color to engage in conversations about racial justice and gender equity. Learning from the work of Ruth Nicole Brown (2007), this project "builds on Black Feminist Theory by reclaiming Black women's and girls' ideas challenging the very terms of intellectual discourses, as well as including the voice and experiences of Black women typically not thought of as intellectual" (p. 124).

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory stresses that racism is endemic through societal structures and institutions (Delgado & Stefanic, 2000; Stewart, 2017). In turn, Critical Race Theorists understand that there is an important epistemology around centering race and the experiences of racialized individuals in research. Through this framework, my project aims to produce a

counternarrative of visibility, inclusion, and success (Stewart, 2017) and by doing so, the experiences of the Black undergraduate women in the research project are prioritized over the current higher education student development literature that exists to reflect their experiences. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) clearly indicate:

> […]critical race theorists view this knowledge as a strength and draw explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color by including such methods as storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, *cuentos*, *testimonios*, chronicles, and narratives. Critical race methodology in education challenges traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of people of color. It exposes deficit-informed research and methods that silence and distort the experiences of people of color and instead focuses on their racialized, gendered, and classed experiences as sources of strength (p. 26).

In this project, the work of Critical Race Theory and development of counternarratives affirms and centers the knowledge of Black undergraduate women as valid and enough.

One has to make the distinction between narratives without a framework that interrogates forms of power and privilege and counternarratives that focus on the need to interrogate the majoritarian narrative by addressing oppression, power, and privilege directly. To center marginalized voices and experiences through counternarrative becomes radical in itself, knowing that we exist in the margins of higher education. "As we work from our own positions in the margins of society, we hold on to the belief that the margin can be more than a site of deprivation . . . it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" (hooks, 1990, p. 149). Creating projects that disrupt whiteness, understanding that whiteness as property – a form of social, cultural, and political power – is a central element in Critical Race Theory (Harris,

1993), is the only way to make this work liberating, empowering, and an act of resilience. Acknowledging and naming that institutions of higher education are property of white students, I aim to call attention to the ways in which the racialization of space in higher education is deeply connected to the exclusion of Black undergraduate women.

Critical Race Theory situates itself in my project as the foreground to begin to understand higher education as a racialized space. Through the recognition of exclusion and exclusionary practices, history, and traditions, Critical Race Theory identifies the problematic structure of higher education for Black undergraduate women. In response, the exploration and development of counternarratives and creation of counterspaces through the framework of Critical Race Theory gives space to Black undergraduate women to show up in their whole body and mind, taking control.

Counternarrative. For the purpose of my research, I will use the term counternarrative to represent and reflect the intentional commitment to giving truth to the narratives of Black women, undergraduate and otherwise. The term counternarrative functions as an act of reclamation and disruption to the narratives created, told, and assumed by those in a majority group – rooted in stereotypes and assumptions – about Black women. These problematic narratives often times show up about Black women in conversations with comments like "unruly hair", "aggressive and assertive behavior", and "hypersexual." Black women are rarely invited to share for themselves and I acknowledge that we may never be asked. In this project I seek liberation for myself and my participants, with hopes that those who choose to read and understand my dissertation are too liberated, heard, and resilient in a context that continues to try and capture, chain, and cage our minds and bodies.

Relationship to Research

My story, our story, the stories of People of Color are often times pieced together to form a narrative that is not our own. The small pieces of my life, the assumed paragraphs of our lives, and the assigned narratives of Black women come with ease from the majoritarian – whiteness, oppressive – perspective. The academy struggles to see us, feel us, to know that we are present, and this is hard and exhausting. The comfort in Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory provides me and us with recognition. The limits and boundaries of the academy are obstacles, and disrupting these norms grounded in whiteness sometimes comes with consequences of living within the skin as a Woman of Color, People of Color. I commit to telling the stories most often untold.

The academy reminds me daily that it is not a place for me, or for people who look like me, to come to learn, work, and just physically be - exist. The space of higher education and the intentional design of the academy has strategically created boundaries and pushed Women of Color to the margins. In order to be sustained and survive, spaces have been claimed and taken because they would not be given. Women of Color, Black women, have been theorizing through their lived experiences in the academy for a long time and the validity of their experiences has still been questioned, challenged, and disputed. Through counternarrative, storytelling, and standpoint epistemology, the lives of Women of Color in student, faculty, and staff positions have been centered for Women of Color to be resilient and empowered in the academy (Love, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2013). This project explores how methodologically counternarratives are liberatory approaches to research and scholarship in the academy that aim to disrupt majoritarian voices and center Black undergraduate women.

In this journey, I sought to create a sustained dialogue space for Black college women to come together multiple times and explore the intersections of identity, their counternarratives, and situate themselves and each other as knowers. Following a dialogic model, that honors the work of Intergroup Dialogue Programs across the country and builds from the foundations of Freire's culture circles (Freire, 1998; Freire, 2000; Souto-Manning, 2010), I worked with the women to create the space and the ways in which the space was utilized within the theme of *herstory*.

Through my understanding of feminist methods, Black Feminist Theory, and Critical Race Theory, I grew with the women in the space and build trust. My work was and will continue to be for my participants and for myself, recognizing that:

> When the ideology of racism is examined and racist injuries are named, victims of racism can find their voice. Further, those injured by racism discover that they are not alone in their marginality. They become empowered participants, hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments are framed, and learning to make the arguments themselves (Solórzano, Ceja, Yosso, 2000, p. 64).

This structure and dynamic of research and participant followed the scholarship and practice of Black Feminist Scholar Ruth Nicole Brown (2013), who created SOLHOT (Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths), an intergenerational collective organizing effort that celebrates and recognizes Black girls, and in this project undergraduate women, as producers of culture and knowledge.

Research Questions

The following research questions, framed by the work of Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory, guided the project:

a) How do Black undergraduate women experience and navigate higher education?

b) How do race and gender, and further intersecting identities that are significant for participants, influence the experiences of Black undergraduate women in higher education?

c) What do Black undergraduate women do in order to persist in higher education?

d) What sustains and empowers Black undergraduate women in higher education?

Organization of Dissertation

Chapter One provides an overview of this dissertation, including the study's background and purpose, theoretical framework, significance, and research questions. Chapter Two will review key literature related to the experiences of Black undergraduate women and Students of Color at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Chapter Three will focus on the epistemological, theoretical, analytical, and methodological frameworks and will highlight participant profiles. In addition, Chapter Three outlines the data collection and analysis process for the project. Chapter Four, Chapter Five, and Chapter Six will present key findings. Finally, Chapter Seven will provide a thorough discussion of those findings and share implications of the findings as well as recommendations.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Institutional and Social Context

Recognizing that institutions of higher education seemingly encourage and support racial diversity and inclusion, it is important to be critical about this and acknowledge how colleges and universities "tend to endorse diversity to the extent that it serves whites students…allowing People of Color to benefit from society's institutions only at the convenience of white society as an "interest convergence,"" (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, Solórzano, 2009, p. 664) where People of Color receive an education and white people learn from People of Color – the idea that everyone wins. Inequality, informed by historical oppression in higher education has uniquely, and continues to, impact the experiences of Black undergraduate women in higher education.

Institutions of higher education were built on oppressive, stolen grounds and through that history, the institutionalized harmful practices are engrained in various structures – physical and non-physical (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson & Allen, 1998; Rankin & Reason, 2008; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, Solórzano, 2009). Through objects, humans, and non-humans in the outdoor environment, classroom environment, and social environment the problematic ways in which higher education functions are clear and yet extremely subtle to the oppressor, and oppressed at times. Intentionally, and at times perhaps unintentionally, the academy sustains itself as a harmful place for people from marginalized identities and specifically Black undergraduate women.

Black students attending a predominantly white institution (PWI), often times as first-generation college students, struggle to transition into the university environment due to a lack of what they perceive to be commonality amongst their peers. For example, Dortch (2016) found

that microaggressions can have a significant influence on Black women's sense of belonging, especially on a white campus, and sense of belonging can impact Black women's sense of self-efficacy and experiences on campus. It is important to note that the majority of Black students currently matriculate through college at PWIs, where higher education is pairing a deeply problematic history with a lack of persistence and academic achievement (Stewart, 2013; Stewart, 2017). Black undergraduate women entering an institution with a majority population self-identifying as white, can potentially struggle with ease to integrate and may not feel they have a sense of ownership and belonging at that institution, and that manifests itself through exclusion, interactions, and much more.

> …Feelings of social and cultural marginalization make it more difficult for first-year
>
> [Students of Color] to find comfort within most PWIs, which negatively affects their
>
> engagement, persistence, and development (Harper & Quaye, 2009, p. 181)

For example, Gaertner and Dovidio (2000) found that African American students' feelings of belonging to the university community mediated the positive relationship between satisfaction and intentions to finish their degree through an increased sense of value and importance of themselves at the institution and attaining the degree. Additionally, the attention right now from the government given to the support and success of Black undergraduate students is centered around Black men, as demonstrated through government programs out of the white house, such as *My Brother's Keeper* (Office of the Press Secretary, 2014). Black Feminist Scholar Crenshaw, in acknowledgment of the ways in which Black women are overlooked from their death rates to persistence in K-12 and then pipelines overall, created #SayHerName through the African American Policy Forum to try and force the conversation and focus to include Black

women in the ways they need support too (African American Policy Forum, 2015), through funding, policy reform, healthcare, accurate data, and programmatic efforts.

Campus Climate for Black Students & Students of Color

Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1999), extending the work of Hurtado (1992), describe campus climate as the combination of an institution's historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion, psychological climate, structural diversity, and behavioral dimensions. Historical legacy includes an institution's history of resistance to desegregation as well as its current mission and policies. Psychological climate refers to campus perceptions of racial/ethnic tensions, perceptions of discrimination, and attitudes toward and reduction of prejudice within the institution. Structural diversity encompasses demographic diversity, facilities/resources, while behavioral dimensions of campus climate comprise social interaction, campus involvement, and classroom diversity across race/ethnicity. In this sense, a campus climate has the ability to influence the experience of individuals in the institutional environment. For individuals holding historically marginalized identities, their experience with the campus climate is likely going to be different from those in majority groups, and their perceptions and feelings about the campus will impact their social and academic experiences (Rankin & Reason, 2005; Worthington, 2008). Studies have found that for Students of Color in PWIs, their perception of the campus climate is less than favorable, and in fact hostile, unsafe, and toxic, which has an impact on persistence and performance (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). In addition, several scholars have identified that Black undergraduate women in particular are literally erased in the context of higher education because the assumption is often that Black undergraduates are men and all undergraduate women are white (Crenshaw, 1989; Hull, Bell Scott, & Smith, 1982).

It is a fair question to consider whom institutions of higher education are designed to support. While many colleges and universities claim that they are a *welcoming* and *inclusive* place for all people, in reality the literature on the experiences of Students of Color in the academy reflects a different feeling and climate. Scholars, such as Lori Patton (2016) discuss how higher education is deeply rooted in white supremacy and the history of higher education informs current practices. Patton (2016) shares:

> To further disrupt academic prose in higher education, I offer three propositions to inform educational inequity in postsecondary contexts and the embedded complexities of racism/White supremacy: Proposition 1: The establishment of U.S. higher education is deeply rooted in racism/White supremacy, the vestiges of which remain palatable. Proposition 2: The functioning of U.S. higher education is intricately linked to imperialistic and capitalistic efforts that fuel the intersections of race, property, and oppression. Proposition 3: U.S. higher education institutions serve as venues through which formal knowledge production rooted in racism/White supremacy is generated" (Patton, 2016, p. 317).

These three propositions by Patton (2016) are challenges to higher education to consider the ways in which their legacy of whiteness throughout their institutions matters now and affects Black undergraduate women, and Students of Color overall, which are identified more specifically later in this section.

It is important to acknowledge that the history of the academy challenges scholars, and perhaps even more so practitioners, in higher education to consider the campus climate (Hurtado, 1992; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Hurtado (1992) and Harper & Hurtado (2007) focus on the history, compositional diversity, organizational structure, psychological climate, and behavioral

dimensions when considering climate. For example, Hurtado's (1992) work begins to identify the ways in which physical structures, the history of the founding and creation of the institution, the representation of various racial identities across leadership, faculty, staff, and students, and policies all come together in ways that impact and influence how an institution will be experienced, particularly by Black undergraduate women as individuals within these intersections.

In the context of discussing the campus climate in higher education for Black undergraduate women, it requires the naming of race and gender in ways that may often times be avoided in the academy, particularly race. Calling out coded words, such as *diversity*, which tends to mean race, is necessary. The academy hopes for scholars to operate within the "safe" boundaries of social identities and that becomes a trap. Ahmed (2009) tells us:

> To embody diversity is to play their game. As my experience being a member of a diversity research team taught me to embody diversity is to be prohibited from even speaking about racism, as if you should just get over it. But we can't get over it. Racism is not something you can get over. We won't get over it. It is not over. To get over it before it is over would be to keep things in place. We must be the trouble they claim us to be: we must persist in being the cause of their trouble. It is time for us to reclaim our place as angry Black feminists even as we inhabit different places. The angry Black feminist, who insists on speaks about racism, who is not happy with diversity, can do things. We don't even know yet just what she can do. We need to be bad at embodying diversity. We need to fail to be happy for them. We need to stay as sore as our points (Ahmed, 2009, p. 51).

The process of naming race and gender, in turn calling out racism and other oppressive

behaviors, policies, and practices of an institution, is exposing and holding the academy responsible for the climate and also centering intersectionality. As Black women, the call to action from Ahmed (2009) is one that encourages a culture of being unapologetic within our actions as we embody multiple identities. Croom and Patton (2012) used intersectionality as part of a Black Feminist framework to analyze the experiences of Black women in higher education, and their analysis showed how issues of racism and sexism, mixed with power, have prohibited opportunities or Black women in higher education.

One argument that is often made and thoroughly researched in support of previous statements is the belief that "…different levels of engagement and learning gains are the "chilly climate" faced by Black undergraduate women at PWIs, and that institutional services and programs do not reflect the interests of Black [identifying] students" (Seifert, Drummond & Pascarella, 2006, p. 187). The term "chilly climate" refers to the hostile, oppressive, and exclusionary environment and this specific argument stems from the debate that institutional type impacts the experience of Black college students. The results from a study, which examined the level of Black student engagement at HBCU's versus PWIs found that "the average African American senior at an HBCU reported significantly higher levels of engagement and gains in overall development than did the average African American senior at a PWI" (Laird, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, & Holmes, 2007, p. 47). It has been reported, "not only did Black students recognize racism as a major stressor at a PWI, but they also discussed their internal struggle with acting "too white" or "too Black," an issue that, unlike their peers at HBCU's, they admittedly face every day" (Watkins, Green, Goodson, Guidry, & Stanley, 2007, p. 111). The impact and influence on how Black students socialize in the institution's environment has a significant impact them on their experiences – if they are constantly navigating racism, their

overall health is impacted, which leads to performance, exclusion, and much more (West, Donovan & Roemer, 2010). In a study by Kohli (2014), she created a space of dialogue as a method, to discuss race and racism in the lives of current teachers who identified as People of Color. Kohli (2014) found that:

> It was essential that they participated in dialogue about their experiences with racism and internalized racism specifically in the context of school. By acknowledging their own victimization with racism in school, and its impact on their self and worldview, it became easier for the participants to identify internalized racism within their students and think through strategies to address it in the classroom (p. 384).

While the project informed the ways that teachers interacted and understood their own classrooms, the study highlights the impact of internalized and ongoing trauma associated with race and racism, and how that informs Black women's sense of self and their long term meaning making process.

Classroom Experience

Recognizing the importance of the climate and institutional type as it relates to Black undergraduate women's college choice and experience, it is necessary to also review research that examines the faculty/student interaction for Black undergraduate women, and its effect on a student's integration into the university. Tatum (2004) explored the role of family and community contexts in the development of racial identity among Blacks in PWIs, as well as applying Cross' racial identity development model to understanding the role of racism in college classrooms (Tatum, 1992). In both studies, Tatum (1992, 2004) highlights the ways in which Black students are making meaning of themselves as they enter into PWIs and their lived experiences with racism.

Research has shown that faculty/student interaction and classroom experience as a whole have a significant impact on a student's, in particular a Black student's, performance and sense of belonging at an institution (Harper & Quaye, 2009). For example, "advantages experienced by students at HBCU's compared to students at research universities were overwhelmingly part of the learning environment fostered by the faculty" (Seifert, et al., 2006, p. 195). In comparison to Black students attending PWI's:

> Students at HBCU's experienced greater student-faculty contact, received more feedback on their class performance, and reported a learning environment with a more scholarly and intellectual emphasis than their peers at research universities" (Seifert, et al., 2006, p. 195).

When focusing on the classroom experience as a Black student at a PWI, a constant theme of tokenism is presented throughout a lot of research. "Students have talked about the fact that they were the only Black person in a classroom, and they noticed the low numbers of [racial] minority professors they encountered on campus" (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 514). Often times, Black students at PWI's "will find themselves in a position of being the only or "token" Black [identifying and presenting] student…these situations require them to develop coping skills that allow them to feel comfortable and whole" (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 515). To develop these recommended coping skills as Black students in college, it has been suggested based on research that "Black students connect with other Black peers to provide them with the support they need to deal with dominant context" (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 515). The belief in developing these coping skills is that "investment in learning from both of these perspectives allows Black students to relate to the dominant context while protecting their own

psychological development and learning about ideas and information germane to the Black culture" (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 515).

Undoubtedly, Black undergraduate women at a PWI encounter stereotypes about being Black on a regular basis, according to most research. Black undergraduate women at PWI's have reported that they:

> Felt they had to dispel stereotypes and myths about Blacks from peers and faculty and described feeling pressure to behave in ways that are considered "non-Black," involve themselves in events so that they could serve as a positive example of Blacks, and prove that they were smart so that people would not think they were accepted…because of affirmative action (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 514).

In a study by Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007), they found that typically when Black students were presented with a stereotype threat, as literal as the presence of a white counterpart, "they felt pressure to be aware of their actions and to not exhibit stereotypical behaviors" (p. 515). Thompson and Fretz (1991) identified these bicultural patterns as coping mechanisms reflective of a student's ability to manage the demands of a predominantly white campus (as cited in Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 515). However, it is important to understand that "African-American students face many different problems during their academic matriculation…and that African-American college students in majority institutions need academic, emotional, social, financial, and spiritual support in order to have success in college" (Booker, 2007, p. 3).

Social Integration

Not only is it important for Black undergraduate women to feel included in the classroom, especially at a PWI, but research also found the importance of forming an identity outside of the classroom. "Student involvement research overwhelmingly supports the view that

student involvement positively influences moral development, cognitive development, and vocational aspirations for college students" (Flowers, 2004, p. 634). The ways in which student involvement is defined and taken up potentially has limits and comes from a place of access that not all students have, particularly from groups that are marginalized in higher education. To be involved in campus organizations and in leadership capacities at an institution, there is a necessary social and cultural capital. For Black students who had the capacity and access to become involved with something on campus, their experiences varied, especially if they were closer to whiteness and white performance. Harper and Quaye (2007) found in a study that Black students identified two different Black identities that related to the development and expression of them on campus:

> One pertains to the impetus for their leadership and engagement in both predominantly Black and mainstream/majority White student organizations. The other focuses on the ways in which student organizations afforded the participants opportunities to develop valued cross-cultural communication skills, enabled them to learn from others who were racially different, and fostered among them care and advocacy for other disadvantaged populations (Quaye & Harper, 2007, p. 134).

At PWIs, Black students will engage and involve themselves in student organizations that cater to the white student population. However, findings show that "leadership and engagement were overwhelmingly situated in predominantly Black and minority student organizations" (Quaye & Harper, 2007, p. 134). Without expressing a dislike or dissatisfaction with the white serving groups, Black students have "articulated a commitment to uplifting the African American community and devote themselves to dispelling stereotypes, breaking down barriers, and opening new doors for other African American students on their campus" (Quaye & Harper,

2007, p. 135). Findings state that students "who chose to be exclusively involved in predominantly Black organizations did so because they were primarily concerned with being affiliated with groups that responded directly to African American students' needs and concerns" (Quaye & Harper, 2007, p. 135).

One of the most popular means of involvement for Black students on college campuses is through Black Greek Organizations (BGO). "Membership in the BGO clearly increases the sense of efficacy felt by the members and provides them with important social support" (McClure, 2006, p. 1049). Amongst Black families, there is often tradition to be a part of one of the historically BGO, known as the Divine Nine. At several HBCUs, more BGOs have been founded as well, but are not nationally recognized to the extent of the Divine Nine. Findings state, "Black Greek experience made graduates more likely to come back to campus as alumni and to feel more positively about their college experience" (McClure, 2006, p. 1049). Flowers (2004) additionally emphasizes that "African American students' involvement may further enhance their commitment to an institution and positively influence their retention on campus" (Flowers, 2004, p. 634). In general, a historically BGO "serves to integrate members into the wider campus community by providing them with a network of social support from which to negotiate the predominantly white environment," according to McClure (2006, p. 1051).

Black Undergraduate Women

While the experiences of many Students of Color are similar across multiple racial identities, the need to understand the relationship between race and gender in the specific context of Black women is relevant and important. "Understanding *black* (i.e., race) and *woman* (i.e., gender) as socially constructed categories with changing contexts is a necessary intellectual and conceptual space to attend when discussing systemic dimensions of the lives of black women..."

(Banks, 2009, p. 11). The racialized experience of being Black, the gendered experience of being woman, and the intersected experience of being a Black woman are all different social identities and come with the multiple layers of history and systemic oppression from objectification of their body, to their inequitable pay for work. For Black undergraduate women, they experience "internal pressures to conform to narrow definitions of perceived authentic Blackness also influence Black racial identity and performance" (Stewart, 2015, p. 241). It becomes complicated to discuss Black women by separating out social identities, nearly impossible in order to comprehend the complex social location in the United States. As Winn (2010) states in reference to the position of Black women in the United States:

> Black women lived their lives in a state of liminality – that is, 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony.' Much of whom and what these women could become were determined by others, which left little space, if any, for opportunities to forge their own identities and paths independent of stereotypes and characterizations (p. 428).

This state of liminality is real and comes with consequence – negotiating how to fit within the prescription of others in order to seem safe enough or to be fully authentic and develop voice and a unique identity.

Although there is some research about Black women in higher education literature, it is critical to ground research and literature on Black women from the lens of Black Feminist Theory. A void exists in the literature regarding the influences of gender and race on how Black undergraduate women experience college (Watt, 2006). Considering the experiences of Black undergraduate women in particular, "… Black Feminist Theory serves as a framework for understanding the challenges and outcomes of Black female college students…" (Henry, 2008,

p.17). From a framework of Black Feminist scholarship, the ability to understand the position of Black women, and specifically intersectionality, is honored and the whole individual is brought into the research by creating spaces that humanize and love Black women. The experiences of a Black women is its own unique identity in the United States and given the history of race and gender in the academy, the ways in which Black women are acknowledged and treated in higher education is deeply intertwined in the historical, and since sustained, racial and gender discrimination created and upheld in the academy. To be able to disrupt the harm, the work has to be situated in Crenshaw's (1991) perspective that "Women of Color occupy positions both physically and culturally marginalized within dominant society, and so information must be targeted directly to them in order to reach them" (p. 1250).

Experiencing the Academy

Research on the experiences of Black students attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs) shows that Black students are often challenged to find a sense of belonging at their institutions, resulting from various overt and covert occurrences of exclusion.

> Black girls face a variety of factors – historical, institutional, and social – that heighten their risk of underachievement and detachment from school, rendering them vulnerable to the lifelong consequences of dropping out. As with their male counterparts, the attitudes and institutional practices that limit opportunities for girls of color have deep historical roots (Crenshaw, et. al., 2015, p. 14).

In her study with African American undergraduate women, Winkle-Wagner (2009) suggests that institutions need to consider the ways in which their "retention policies, programs, and theories need to take the cultural background of students seriously and include discussions about cultural differences within the efforts to integrate students academically and socially" (p. 47). As Black

students navigate the system of higher education, it is essential that administrators and those involved in the structural and supportive aspects of institutions demonstrate intentionality around providing adequate resources. "Assisting university administrators, helping professionals, and student affairs workers in realizing that university environments produce different experiences for minority students may provide the necessary impetus for developing more culturally appropriate supports and interventions" (Espinosa, 2011; Glenn & Johnson, 2012; Malcom & Malcom, 2011). In a project by Mcunu (2018), she indicates that in her research, she found that in higher education, there is a "leaky pipeline," the representation of Black women in higher education is minimal, and the lack of role models negatively affects Black undergraduate women at PWIs.

It is necessary for Black undergraduate women to know their strength and have the ability to imagine themselves always working towards their fullest potential. Between 1998 and 2008, there was a 67% increase in African American women student enrollment, with a 60% growth in African American women pursuing bachelor's degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The shift and increase in numbers is significant in making sense of the desire of Black women to become educated through college. However, despite the numbers, oppression in the academy has the ability to prohibit Black undergraduate women from feeling whole. Learning to heal, often times in radical ways when you are still physically situated in the space of oppression, becomes necessary. It may be hard to imagine finding a space of empowerment when you are so immersed in the harmful environment and so it becomes even more important to find community and create that space in order to feel as empowered, authentic, and whole as possible. In 2009, Winkle-Wagner found that experiencing culture shock and isolation on campus was common among her participants, as there was a "dichotomous pressure to either speak on behalf of their

ethnic group or remain silent in the classroom, which forced them to either be in the "spotlight" or "be invisible" (p. 23). They were stuck in a "dichotomy of racial performance - needing to modify their behavior to neither be "too white" nor "'too ghetto' (i.e., 'too Black') among their peers" (p. 23). Croom et al. (2017) found that "one opportunity for assisting Black women with interrogating and articulating oppression at micro and macro levels as well as grappling with microaggressive environments is through the creation of sister circles and similar organizations" (p. 143). Creating a unique, yet specific, space for Black undergraduate women had a positive impact on their experiences.

Strong Black Women

When considering the experience of Black undergraduate women, it is necessary to understand the unique location of being racialized and gendered within the context of history. Black women have been continuously stereotyped in ways that connect to slavery and times when Black people were enslaved. These common roles and assumptions prescribed to Black women from their white slave owners became qualities and expectations of Black women to current day. Although constructed in forms of harm on Black women during slavery, these stereotypes have become important, desirable, and significant to Black women's identity in the United States according to a study by West, Donovan, and Daniel (2016).

> Women of all racial backgrounds are often faced with their personal interpretations of strength. Depending on the woman, strength may be an aspiration, a prerequisite to womanhood, or a stance of opposition to a sexist view of weakness. These potential definitions are relevant to Black women as well; however, the experience of strength in combination with independence and caring is unique to the Strong Black Woman stereotypical image (SBW), which is uniquely tied to the history of Black women in the

United States (West, Donovan & Daniel, 2016, p. 403).

This additional pressure, rooted in history and culture, are constantly present for Black undergraduate women and affect their negotiation and engagement with the academy. Interestingly, Turner (2001) found that despite experiencing the academy in less than positive ways, and often times having racist experiences given the history and structure of higher education, Black undergraduate women who were involved on campus in Black Greek organizations and Sister Circles, were more assertive and productive in the classroom.

Silence

For many Black people (including students, faculty, staff, and administration) in education, the experience of being silenced and needing to be silent for coping is constantly active and prevalent regardless of position in the institution. Haddix (2012) suggests that "being silenced" is a prevalent theme in the research literature on students of color in teacher education." However, in understanding silence among Black women in education, Haddix (2012) continues to challenge a majoritarian perspective and framework on *why* the silence exists and who *controls* the silence. It becomes emphasized and a focal point by Black Feminist scholars that when scholarship centers the experiences of those who are racially marginalized, in this case as Black women, their counternarratives demonstrate that silence is at times a *choice* and *deliberate*. It is important to understand this choice of silence does not resemble the choice within the context of a majoritarian identity – the responsibility is different because of social and institutional structures. In alignment with Brown (2013), it is important to create spaces in a way that "make room for silence" (p. 47).

Despite the intentional choice and decision making behind silence at times, I know and many other Black women in the academy know, that there may be consequences to silence

within our racialized skin. There are assumptions, rooted in stereotypes about Black women at various position locations of higher education, to perform in particular ways that align with expectations of being in a Black body in a space grounded in whiteness. The constant negotiation of expectations and personal decision may be a point of contention and concern. How Black women in the academy choose to perform, whether in silence or not (literally and abstract), matters. Through this project, in relationship to the work of Lorde (1984), the hope is that space is created for truth telling that becomes possible when silence is transformed into language and action – the existence of a space alone for Black undergraduate women, perhaps allows this to exist.

Knowledge

We enter the academy with different ontologies and epistemologies. For many Students of Color, there are shared forms of knowledge that are deeply rooted in the experiences of People of Color in the United States. This epistemological framework tends to exclude People of Color from other countries because the experience of and with race varies depending on locations globally. Many Black Feminist scholars argue that:

> The long-term and widely shared resistance among African-American women can only have been sustained by an enduring and shared standpoint among Black women about the meaning of oppression and the actions that Black women can and should take to resist it. Like other subordinate groups, African-American women not only have developed distinctive interpretations of Black women's oppression but have done so by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge itself (Hill Collins, 1989, p. 746).

Similar to Hill Collins, several scholars (Banks, 2009; Brown, 2013; Porter, 2013) have done

work in ways that produce and validate the knowledge of Black undergraduate women. It is significant that the knowledge of Black women is acknowledged and honored, while recognizing that many Black women in the academy are so stuck – from being voiceless, missing in positions of power, and issues with enrollment and retention – within some of the structured systems and do not know how to find this space of liberation.

Brown (2013) demonstrates the ways in which Black Feminist Theorists have the knowledge and ability to create spaces in unique ways, which inform this project. One of the most critical components of this work is to in fact believe and elevate that Black undergraduate women *know*. In Brown's (2013) work, she explicitly names that we are "required to create something that has never quite existed, as we've known it…the creation of a space to celebrate Black girlhood in all of its complexity" (p. 48). Brown's methods disrupts the power dynamics often times most apparent in research and is in fact the co-creation of an experience rooted in celebration and love *with* the Black girls and women, the participants themselves. While Brown suggests that this work is seemingly small to some, it is large and points to possibility, imagination, and freedom for Black women in the context of educational structures and beyond.

Survival & Resistance

Regina Berry and Nathalie Mizelle (2006) share that "In Western academic culture, it is challenging for connected knowers to survive: they are not given the opportunities and support necessary to develop. The academy is not a friendly place for connected knowers" (p. 26). Berry and Mizelle (2006) emphasize the importance of connected knowers and disrupt this sense of individualized identities as previously noted by the colonizer, and instead discuss the need to be "connected to your inner voice and value personal experiences and intuition" (p. 26). It is complicated and challenging to resolve the history of the academy and the harm that it created

and recreates daily. The roots of the academy are deep and to disrupt them and end the oppressive practices would be a large defeat of racism in the United States.

The impact of oppression on the human in forms of microaggressions – impactful and harmful messages and occurrences that oppress marginalized individuals – mixed with the oppression on the non-human in forms of representation (i.e., statues, flags, physical space) is imbedded in whiteness and colonialism. The academy is a place of harm for People of Color, Students of Color, and finding the strength to survive in the face of oppression, which you will experience at any time and in any physical space, becomes an act of resistance. "This is not to say that all Black women do is survive; this is to say that we are multi-taskers that always get things done in a world that is slowly and at times swiftly trying to kill us; the academy is no different, perhaps a different sort of death but death all the same" (Jewel Kwakye, 2011, p. 95). Kwakye's concept of a "different sort of death" refers to the ways in which Black women are harmed, hurt, discriminated against, and abused physically, mentally, and emotionally in higher education.

As part of surviving in the academy, the need to find and create space within community is essential for Black undergraduate women. Helms (1990) suggests that we need to develop spaces where Black women create an "environment in which they can engage in self-reflective consciousness-raising discussions and develop a sense of connectedness through positive identification, confirmation, mutual sharing, and bonding" (as cited in Henry, 2008, p. 20). As determined by Stevens (2002), when Black women undergo racial socialization, they learn to develop a measure of sass as a method of psychological protection against potentially harmful interactions with the broader community. It is the hope that Black women, and particularly Black undergraduate women participating in this project, are able to claim their space and

engage in an affirmative, empowering, and healing space collectively.

The development of sister circles, in the form of student organizations and other groups on college campuses are increasingly developing, similar to the ways in which we noticed Black Greek organizations developing in the early to mid-1900s. Several scholars (Mitchell, 2000; Patton & McClure, 2009; Porter & Dean, 2015; Watt, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2009, Croom et al., 2017) describe the sister circles as spaces that are created in response to racist and sexist experiences, often times isolating and harming Black undergraduate women from the campus community.

Empowerment

The community formed out of resilience becomes a way to ground Black women in the academy. While many college students hope to find friends during their undergraduate career, the bonds built, the bonds I built, were deeper than I could have imagined. The sister circles and sitting together in the dining hall was not by coincidence. Our creation of space made us stronger people, not just in lieu of the oppression we experienced from attending colleges and universities. To have space in a place that never gave you space was significant already, and so to gain skills from one another, feel affirmed, and have a support system was filling. "One way Black students cope with social segregation on a predominantly White campus is to form groups that are predominantly Black" (Fisher & Hartmann, 1995, p. 124). Without knowing it, these spaces – informal most of the time – become a disruption of power, a disruption of what is expected or given to us to make it through the academy.

You begin to learn that there were in fact advocates for you, sometimes who even look like you and working right under the same roof. These advocates support us from a Black Feminist activist approach, according to Perez and Williams (2014), who explain the importance

of going against the "hegemonic power for the dominant, [and supporting] a reimagined, Black feminist activist approach listens to and builds relationships with communities, working in step with their efforts to resist oppression" (p. 130). Further sharing, by reflecting on the work of Hill Collins (2008), Perez and Williams (2014) continues:

> As an activist scholar, I, too, embody and enact inter-personal power. Hill Collins (2008) reminds us that our everyday actions can contribute to or dismantle interdisciplinary oppression. Therefore, as a university faculty, my presence at community meetings and rallies, and my everyday interactions with participants at these gatherings, (re)produces interpersonal relations. Some academics approach involvement with communities as the all-knowing expert. However, this reifies already privileged power for faculty while marginalizing the very communities we hope to support. Thus, it is important that university professors' involvement in Black feminist activism comes from a place of learning from and supporting communities (p. 130).

Without the ability to name it at the time, these communities and circles of empowerment are integral to our navigation of the academy. In hindsight, it is apparent and clear, but in the moment the feeling does not always make the same sense, at least to the extent it becomes understood later. The happiness, community, and sense of belonging within these spaces brings together the beliefs of Afrocentric scholars who "suggest that significant intimate relationships as well as a healthy racial identity and cultural identity are crucial to the welfare of Black women" (as cited in Henry, 2008, p. 17). Additionally, curricular spaces encourage and allow Black undergraduate women to see, hear, and learn about their community in a way that continues to uplift them in higher education.

Black women's studies in the academy can be a strategic site for contesting such

simplistic notions of sisterhood. Black women's studies can serve as a corrective to gender and racial hierarchies in black studies and women's studies. It is a source of newly constructed knowledge and models of intellectual and political engagement both within and outside the academy. As bell hooks reminds us, a very significant goal of black women's studies is the reclaiming and reconstruction of the intellectual traditions and legacies of black women. Black women's studies can be a site where black women scholars and their work are developed and nurtured. It can also be a home base from which such scholarship, informed by feminist praxis, becomes "a theory in the flesh" that addresses conditions and public policy issues from the standpoints of black women's history and experience. Within this context, strategic alliances and coalitions among activist community women, elected policy makers, and university researchers can be imagined and realized (McCluskey, 1994, p. 109).

Identifying academic spaces as sources of empowerment and resiliency for Black undergraduate women is important and has the potential to validate the existence of these women on campuses. Additionally, the meaning behind an institutionalized department and claiming of space across aspects of identity that are marginalized in the academy and United States is an extremely intentional and political statement. Of course, this all requires the actual support from an institution through funding and resources, and its existence matters regardless because we know that it affects and influences our communities. Many campuses have cultural centers and academic departments that focus on the racialized experiences of Black and Brown individuals, which serve as sites of hope and liberation for many while attending college.

Black undergraduate women have been integrated into the academy and have been retained. While this fact is important, it is shared to make clear that Black undergraduate women

are resilient. To acknowledge the history and name the oppressive structures in place, while noting the persistence of Black undergraduate women is significant and should not be recognized as separate from one another. Banks (2009) reminds us:

> …just because black undergraduate women *can* succeed in the face of racism, classism, and sexism, does not mean that they should *have to*. They, like students whose social locations are more in line with dominant ideals, should have the opportunity to get an education without fracturing themselves to do the constant arduous work of challenging oppressive schooling conditions… (Banks, 2009, p. 147).

Black women are making intellectual contributions that are shifting the discourse around the experiences of Black women and making it clear why we should be here, seen, and recognized as significant. In the context of social change in the last few years, we note the ways in which Black women with varying educational backgrounds, upbringings, and identities came together to begin Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100), and so much more that if shifting the country. In spite of the barriers around us, Black women push through and find ways to do so. In higher education, there has been a continued increase of Black women hired into senior administrative positions, as noted in the *Journal for Blacks in Higher Education*.   In addition, several platforms exist to center the experiences of Black women in higher education such as Sister PhD, podcasts are rising as a space for People of Color in higher education to have an outlet such as *Scholar Tea*, and the amount of student organizations focusing on mentorship, wellness, and collaboration amongst Black students is evident. Scholars such as Sherri Williams, have created and claimed space in popular magazines that focus on Black women and healing through a platform called *Squad Care* – the unwavering care for and between Black women. Similar to Sherri Williams, Marcelle Haddix and Ruth

Nicole Brown designed and lead programs that focus on Black girls in K-12 and bringing college Women of Color into the local community to provide space, relationship building, and much more for younger Black girls and women.

Within the harmful structures of the academy, the development of a community of Black undergraduate women and Black women more broadly (inclusive of faculty and staff) is necessary. The social location of Black undergraduate women in the academy is a unique and rewarding place. In community, we are able to make sense of our experiences and support one another as knowers. "As Black women…we cannot afford to be fools of any type, for our objectification as other denies us the protections that White skin, maleness, and wealth confer" as "our wisdom encompasses a set of experiential principles or "lessons" arising from Black women's experiences that when shared and passed on, become the collective wisdom of Black women's experiences (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 256)" (as cited in Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2011, p.67).

Chapter One and Chapter Two provided an overview of the theoretical frameworks and literature informing this project. As described in Chapter One, I understand there to be an area of opportunity to exist in the literature of Black undergraduate women and through my project I demonstrate a way of understanding and centering the voices of my participants. Black Feminist Theory provides a framework to understand intersectionality and the lived experiences of the participants and Critical Race Theory provides a framework to understand and use the language of counternarrative in my methodology; both frameworks highlight the significance of the intentional design and creation of the space itself, and work to disrupt white ways of knowing. The theoretical frameworks provide the lens by which the project is designed and implemented and the literature review provided situates the work contextually in higher education, allowing

the project to be in conversation across disciplines and informed by scholarship that brings

together Black Feminist Theory and methods, Critical Race Theory and methods, and literature

in higher education about Black undergraduate women.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

In the context of higher education, the experiences and voices of Black undergraduate women are missing from student development theory, which informs the work of higher education practitioners. This is not to suggest that there is no work in higher education about Black women, as several scholars (Croom & Patton, 2012; Gregory, 2001) have done significant work about the experiences of Black faculty and staff women in higher education. However, it is my hope that this project offers new ways of understanding the experiences of Black undergraduate women in an accessible way that informs the frameworks and theories used to support and empower them as students and humans, building from the work of several scholars (Banks, 2009; Brown, 2013; hooks, 2013; Hill Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1978).

Additionally, it is my hope that in this work's intention and commitment to center Black undergraduate women and their truths, there is healing, growth, and sisterhood for the participants and readers. From my own experience, the potential impact on participants involved in a space modeled after SOLHOT (Brown, 2013), such as the Sister Dialogue Circle, may be rewarding and healthy, offering an opportunity that may even support an individual's persistence in higher education. While there are many Intergroup Dialogue Programs and similar dialogic models that honor the work and intention of dialogic pedagogy, creating Sister Dialogue Circles from the scholarship of dialogic pedagogy, and most importantly from frameworks of Black Feminist Thought is complex and unique. Inviting participants to inform and serve as co-creators of the Sister Dialogue Circle experience works to minimize hierarchies of power and centers participants as knowers. Black women have been doing this work and it has not been invited in the academy, but I am claiming space for it to exist.

SOLHOT (Brown, 2013) as described by Ruth Nicole Brown is a performative and creative methodology of a visionary Black-girlhood practice that "saves our lives and facilitates the hearing of truths" (p. 4). SOLHOT, in turn when in action, is the "complex entanglements of identity, power, and representations among Black women and girls…that actively promotes self- and collective expression through relevant activities that address the issues deemed important to participants" (Brown, 2013, p. 6). As evidenced by Brown's work, SOLHOT produces feelings of belonging – the creation of a community – and builds authentic relationships that center the lived experiences of Black women across the diaspora. For Brown (2013), "SOLHOT as practiced, the process and productions of our labor, proves that we are more than possible, that Black girls are beyond what we know and should never be underestimated" (p. 7-8), and that informs this project and my methodology.

This chapter will provide an in-depth outline of the structure of the project, emphasizing the details of the methods chosen, how the data was collected, and how the data was analyzed. Throughout this chapter, there will be a focus on using an ethics of care (Graham, 2007) and how the participants remained the most important and centered in the project. All of the participants will be introduced in this chapter and the project will become humanized in that regard. As the researcher, I offer the ways in which my identity and positionality are deeply intertwined with the Black undergraduate women who participated in the study and I provide an understanding of how I managed my role as researcher and participant in the project.

Rationale for Study

The space of higher education and the intentional design of the academy strategically creates boundaries (Patton, 2016) in an *attempt* to push Black women to the margins, as described in Chapter One and Chapter Two. In order for Black women to be sustained and

survive, spaces have been claimed and taken by us because they would not be had otherwise. Black women have been theorizing through their lived experiences in the academy, and beyond, for a long time and the validity of their experiences has still been questioned, challenged, and disputed, however "claiming the theory-making process on their own behalf is a necessary engagement for black feminists" (McCluskey, 1994, p. 108). Through narrative, storytelling, and standpoint epistemology, the lives of Black women in student, faculty, and staff positions have been centered for Black women to persist in the academy. Building from the work of scholars (Hill Collins, 2000; Banks, 2009; Brown, 2013; hooks, 2013), this project explores the ways Black undergraduate women disrupt majoritarian voices and center their experiences in order to negotiate and engage with the academy. The project demonstrates the importance of developing and providing Sister Dialogue Circles, groups for Black undergraduate women, with intentional design, curriculum, and collaboration, outside of spaces of higher education in order to support them and support the building of a community of sisters.

Research Methodology

For my project, I used theoretical frameworks and specific methods from Black Feminist Theory (Hill Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1990; Brown, 2013) and Critical Race Theory (Ngunjiri, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000) to understand the experiences of Black undergraduate women at a predominantly white institution. Specifically, I used SOLHOT (Brown, 2013) as my method, rooted in work by Black Feminist scholars, to inform the creation of Sister Dialogue Circles. In addition, I used counternarratives as a method, rooted in work by Critical Race Theorists, to address, critique, and hold higher education accountable. Through the frameworks of Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race

Theory, I grounded the project in centering the voices, experiences, and knowledge of the participants, Black undergraduate women. Centering the perspectives and lived experiences of Black women is critical for understanding the ways in which Black women negotiate and engage with the academy and further allows for the whole self to be honored and understood. The reconciliation between the Western epistemic framework and the communal epistemology that centers Black women's racialized identity is challenging and requires a social consciousness that confronts whiteness. Haddix (2012) writes, "Voice scholarship in the field of education asserts and acknowledges the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge" (p. 171). In that same sense, Brown (2006) shares from her experience as a scholar:

> What I know from the past four years of working with [Black] girls is that they just as much as I do, need a space in which we can talk and discuss our life's struggles and successes. We all benefit from creating a space in celebration of all of who we are and that which we see in each other (p. 106).

Both Haddix (2012) and Brown (2006) inform us that the creation of space, building community, and affirming people of color, in particular Black women and girls, as knowers is critical. It is apparent that the validation and support for what is known will not come from outside of our community, at least in the academy, and to exist in the academy these spaces need to be intentionally created because they do not organically exist. Using these methods requires a deep level of responsibility as the researcher and I describe the level of intention and care I used to confidently create the Sister Dialogue Circles and do no harm to the participants in the project, grounded in an ethics of care (Graham, 2007) rooted in Black Feminist methods.

SOLHOT as a Method

Ruth Nicole Brown's (2006, 2013) creation of SOLHOT informs this project. SOLHOT as a methodology creates opportunity to ask *who we are* and *how we do it* as Black women, and girls and centers love at the core and foundation. The space of SOLHOT is emancipatory and asks participants, Black girls and women, to center their radical interpretive sensibilities. Black women have been coming together in space for years to tell their stories as acts of survival, celebration, and being in community and Ruth Nicole Brown's creation of SOLHOT builds upon the histories of what we know and have been doing. By using SOLHOT as a method, this project creates fullness of a visionary Black woman. By pulling on representations, memories, and lived experiences, SOLHOT invites participants to exist in their full humanity, critiques social conditions, and allows us to exist together across a diaspora of Black identity. In addition, through her research, Brown (2013) shows us that SOLHOT as a method disrupts the discourse that suggests Black women (and girls) to be problems and emphasizes the importance of recognition and reflection of self, others, and the ever-evolving ways of coming into ones sense of self as Black women. SOLHOT as a method is for and about Black girls and models how a similar space can be created for and about Black women, from the most intersectional lens possible with flattened hierarchical structures, validating everyone's existence and participation as intertwined. SOLHOT is a "celebratory space made through time, specifically time that is fluid and transcendent" (Brown, 2013, p. 53).

SOLHOT (Brown, 2006; 2013) prioritizes intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1997; 2018; Crenshaw & Cho, 2013) throughout the flexible structure. More specifically, SOLHOT holds together the idea that as Black women, we are unable to separate our gender identity from our racial identity from our class identity from the structures of power, privilege, and oppression.

SOLHOT holds this intersecting relationship between identity and structures together to explicitly disrupt the ways in which Black girls are expected to be and releases the boundaries in order to imagine possibilities for the futures of Black girls. SOLHOT, in its raw existence, dismantles white supremacy and affirms Black girls as their full selves. More specifically, SOLHOT fosters an experience of "creative retelling to resist a simple and coherent narrative structure" (Brown, 2013, p. 54).

Sister Dialogue Circles. Building from the work of Ruth Nicole Brown and the design and structure of SOLHOT (2006, 2013), Sister Dialogue Circles were created and used as a method for this project. Sister Dialogue Circles, in various ways, are methods that Black women have been using to come together and be in community, while also disrupting structures and systems of power. The reclamation of space by Black women has always existed and this project sought to claim space for Black undergraduate women in higher education.

For the purpose of this project, the Sister Dialogue Circles are for Black undergraduate women attending a PWI, which serves as the site of the research. The Sister Dialogue Circles are both literal and figurative in design. Literal in that they are physically designed in a way that the Black women gather in a circle of chairs, with flexibility to sit on the chairs or not, but to remain in a circle. Physically coming together in a circle allows for the women to always see one another, engage with one another both verbally and non-verbally, and does not create a dynamic where any person is invisible. Figurative in that the physical circle symbolizes a space of Black women in community, a space of sisterhood, and something that is never ending even when we are not actually together and in person. The Sister Dialogue Circles represented a space of healing, authenticity, and showing up unconditionally for ourselves and one another, even in moments that felt the most challenging.

Although Ruth Nicole Brown's model of SOLHOT centers Black girls, the ways in which it invites Blackness to be explored by the girls from an intersectional approach, encourages the girls to be co-creators in the process, and remains a space of radical imagination and possibility for the futures of the participants, informed the Sister Dialogue Circles in this project. It was important that the Sister Dialogue Circles did not assume the need or purpose of the space for the Black undergraduate women, and that as a researcher I did not position the space to automatically be or assume one of sisterhood, empowerment, or anything similar that could in fact not be what happened in the space or be what participants needed and wanted. Too often, programs and efforts for Black women are designed in transactional ways from a deficit model, where the assumption of Black women is that they need something and/or do not have authority, control, or decision-making power to inform what they need or want. The Sister Dialogue Circle structure for this project does not support that ideology or model, and instead invests in and centers the ways in which space is created to invite radical possibilities. The thought and intention needed to create the Sister Dialogue Circles was approached with an ethics of care (Graham, 2007), ensuring that participants were safe enough and ok.

Narrative

Some scholars define narrative as a "sequence of events, experiences, or actions with a plot that ties together different parts into a meaningful whole. Through the events the narrative includes, excludes, and emphasizes, the storyteller not only illustrates [their] version of the action but also provides an interpretation or evaluative commentary on the subject. In addition, the sequencing of narrative form is important because its structure reveals what is significant to people about various practices, ideas, places, and symbols" (Feldman, Sköldberg, Brown, & Horner, 2004, p. 148). The boundaries of narrative go beyond the assumed stories of any

individual or community of people. "The terms narrative and story are often used interchangeably. They have many of the same characteristics, such as chronological order and thematic ordering of events. […] we draw a distinction between the encompassing narrative and, embedded within it, stories" (Feldman, M. S., Sköldberg, K., Brown, R. N., & Horner, D., 2004).

The complexity of a narrative requires a commitment to honoring the specific voice and lived experiences of people on individual levels and centering individuals as the creators of their narratives. The intimacy of a narrative to the individual is deeply rooted and connected, often times challenging the individual to be vulnerable and honest in ways that disrupt the assumptions, barriers, and limits placed within and around them otherwise. Narrative in its more pure state is authentic, messy, and whole. If and when narratives are created and taken up from the outside, the truth gets lost and there is a need to create our stories and truths in ways that challenge an outsider's version.

Counternarrative as a method. The meaning and use of counternarrative as a method and concept is salient in work deemed "critical." The absence of particular experiences and voices, both literally and more imaginatively becomes misunderstood and told incorrectly, perhaps even from a deficit only approach when the voices of those being researched is missing and the only perspective is from a master and majoritarian point of understanding.

> The use of a master narrative to represent a group is bound to provide a very narrow depiction of what it means to be Mexican-American, African-American, White, and so on . . . A master narrative essentializes and wipes out the complexities and richness of a group's cultural life . . . A monovocal account will engender not only stereotyping but also curricular choices that result in representations in which fellow members of a group represented cannot recognize themselves (Montecinos, 1995, p. 293-294).

Often times it feels that the subscription of narrative to research is misused and assumed to only support the narrative and voices of white people, further supporting whiteness and heteronormative epistemologies. "Whether we refer to them as monovocals, master narratives, standard stories, or majoritarian stories, it is important to recognize the power of white privilege in constructing stories about race" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). While I consider this and understand the critique of narrative as a method, I recognize the need for counternarratives to challenge the dominant narratives around marginalized populations, specifically Women of Color in the academy. Counternarrative serves to "celebrate the women's resiliency and resistance in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges" (Ngunjiri, 2007, p. 2).

The use of developing counternarratives for People of Color and creating physical spaces for Black women to share stories is my work and central to my work. The need to disrupt majoritarian narratives about Black women is important and more importantly is the sense of ownership over experience and the recognition that one's experience is uniquely enough. The use of counternarratives with Black undergraduate women challenges the "bundle of presuppositions, perceived wisdoms, and shared cultural understandings persons in the dominant race bring to the discussion of race" (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993, p. 40). Hurtado (1992) found that racial tension may arise in environments of higher education where there is a lack of concern for an individual from marginalized identities and oppressed groups. Coming to understand Hurtado further emphasizes the ways in which counternarrative has a place in the academy and offers a way to begin to honor the experiences of Black women. Solórzano & Yosso (2010) found that creating a space for counternarratives in their study allowed for their participant to "create new categories for those of us left out or pushed out of existing ones" (p.487).

Space

Using Sister Dialogue Circles, based on SOLHOT, and counternarrative as methods requires a level of intentionality, consciousness, and care that centers the voices of the Black undergraduate women participating in the project and strategically decenters whiteness. In finding ways to use Sister Dialogue Circles and counternarrative as methods to disrupt normative practices in higher education, it is important to consider how both are the claiming of space and the need to consider what space is actually utilized, literally and in abstract ways. "A growing body of research…suggests the need for researchers and practitioners to advocate for "spaces" that afford opportunities to make meaning of identities. Such physical and metaphoric spaces help to have the voices [of People of Color] and their identities affirmed" (Muhammad, 2012, p. 205). Knowing that in "both the curricular and co-curricular experiences [of the academy] for Black women, a supportive environment in which they feel empowered can be provided…" (Henry, 2008, p. 20) calls scholars and practitioners to be thoughtful in their design and implementation of space, leaving room and inviting individuals to create that for themselves as well.

In higher education, not all spaces are felt to be safe enough and welcoming to People of Color, and in the context of this project Black undergraduate women, at all positions in the academy (Patton, 2012; Stewart, 2012). This lack of desire to be in those unsafe spaces requires researchers using methods such as Sister Dialogue Circles and counternarrative to consider physical space. Utilizing and meeting in a place of potential harm, which could be in a classroom, residential space, student center – could be a conflict to the research. The meaning and symbolism of space has an effect on the ways in which we each show up. Understanding that it is important to find and create counterspaces to the potential sites of harm within research

is central.

> Academic and social counterspaces for coping with [racism] have been identified as
> essential for the academic survival of Black college students…The safety inherent in
> counterspaces can provide sanctuaries for Black students to (a) make sense of their
> experiences on campus and determine whether a racial microaggresion has even
> occurred, (b) find support and validation for their experiential reality, and (c) identify
> alternative ways for responding to such identities (Grier-Reed, 2010, p. 183)

In my work, counterspaces are community centered, racially conscious, and justice-oriented

spaces that are given personality by the participants who enter, perceived to feel safe to Black

women, and feel accessible for Black women. Some of these spaces may be apartments,

community centers, cultural centers and museums, and parks. In SOLHOT, the space is a "sun-

drenched intimate cathedral of space created for the questions Black girls want to ask…the

meeting house, where the soul and the eyes of Black girls connect" (Saving Our Lives Hear Our

Truths, 2018). This space is a symbol, and participants in SOLHOT believe that it in fact can

exist figuratively in one's intention, digitally, and otherwise. Regardless of where, SOLOT is

always outside of cites of trauma and exists in spaces where Black girls and women's positions

are respected, their ideas are honored, their experiences are accepted, and participants are doing

something to hold space where they can be together.

Research Site and Participant Recruitment

Research Site

The research site for this project was at a predominantly white, New York State, private

institution. The institution is a mid-size four-year degree granting Research University with

bachelors, masters, doctoral, and certificate programs. The institution offers a variety of areas of

study to students and provides a variety of organizations to support student engagement in curricular and co-curricular ways. The institution had several student demonstrations and protests on campus between 2014 and present day, to the extent where student demands were put forth to the senior administration. Some of the protests included several days of sitting and sleeping in the senior administration building on campus, creating and circulating petitions, and walk-outs from classes, meetings, and campus-wide events.

Within these demands there were specific areas of concern related to race and the campus racial climate, in addition to concerns at the intersections of race and other identities. For example, Queer Students of Color had specific concerns related to their safety regarding gender, sexuality, and race at particular parts of campus. Community members with disabilities, with various races and genders represented, expressed concerns and frustrations about the accommodations and accessibility of campus. Out of the significant energy and time put forth in protest came demands and the development of other institution wide committees and workgroups to provide various recommendations to the senior administration. To date, there are currently several forms of data collected in response to the recent campus climate that addresses the areas of concern and opportunity regarding the campus racial climate. Finally, there was a campus climate assessment completed by a third-party consultant firm after several demonstrations and protests occurred and the results further emphasized and supported the issues on campus related to race. In the executive summary of the report, approximately 60% of Black/African American identified undergraduate students and approximately 23% of Multiracial undergraduate students indicated that they experienced exclusionary, intimidating, offensive, and/or hostile conduct done to them at the institution. Additionally, the report shared that approximately 34% of Black/African American identified students and approximately 37% of Multiracial identified

students indicated that they considered leaving the institution with approximately 68.6% of all respondents indicating that their reason when considering leaving was due to a lack of sense of belonging.

 While the project focuses on race, gender, and the campus climate for Black undergraduate women, it is important to also acknowledge the complexity of intersectionality. In referring to the demands and expectations from student activism and other committees and workgroups, it becomes important to recognize how several community members at the institution are impacted directly by their multiple marginalized identities in addition to their racial identity.

 For the purpose of this project, the institution will be given the pseudonym Beychella University. This name, similar to the pseudonyms offered below in the Participant Profiles, is intentional and holds meaning in various ways that connect to the Black community, Black women, and Black people in higher education. In a 2018 performance by Beyoncé Knowles, she set her entire performance in the context of higher education by bringing together marching bands from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), emphasizing the Black Greek Community through stepping, a pyramid structure, and the Greek letters Beta Delta Kappa, presented a full display of majorettes through movements and attire, included of a variety of dance forms rooted in the Black community, and represented Black women of all body types as a focus, centered, and unapologetically present force. The formation of the performance represented a pyramid structure, not to reinforce power, but to pull together components of Blackness rooted in Egypt, which connected to Beyoncé's entrance on stage in attire that embodied Nefertiti and Black Queens. From the blend of the Black Panthers with the beret hats, to the jumpsuits to represent people on line to join a Black Greek Organization, to the singing of

the Black National Anthem, this performance was undeniably Black. In connection to this project, Beyoncé's creation of an imaginary, Black future, rooted in the history of our community, centered higher education through the creation of the Beychella University crest and centered Black women as Beyoncé being the first Black woman to headline, disrupt, and set new expectations for the ways in which we understood the music festival space. Beyoncé's creation of Beychella University is used in this project to show how the Black women who participated in the project started with lemons and made lemonade – challenging the norm, disrupting white spaces, and learning to fully live in their most authentic Black-women-selves.

Participant Recruitment

Black undergraduate women are important participants for the project, as the research centers their experiences and counternarratives. It was important during communication of the project that individuals from a spectrum of Black identities felt invited and welcomed as well as individuals from a fluid gender spectrum of women. It was my intention to recognize the complexity and multiple ways in which Black undergraduate women show up within all of their identities in order to disrupt and challenge the notion that there is only one Black undergraduate women's experience. The ways in which identities become told, lost, ignored in majoritarian narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) is problematic, limiting, and further oppressive.

The research site provided multiple opportunities to invite people from student organizations, offices on campus, and particular academic programs into the project. E-mails were shared with campus partners to include in ongoing communication with students. The communication included an invitation to participate in the Sister Dialogue Circles.

Within all communication, specific language was used to express the importance of identifying as Black undergraduate women. Additionally, in the communication about the Sister

Dialogue Circles there was information about the expected time commitment (4 Circles, 1.5 hours each, 6 hours total), compensation ($30/participant), the food (meals at each Circle), and resources (community and campus resources, books, articles) that were provided to participants. The specific location for the Sister Dialogue Circles was shared during the recruitment process. Individuals interested in participating in the Sister Dialogue Circles were able to communicate via email to a specified email address to express their interest.

Participant Profiles

In this section I present the profiles of nine Black undergraduate women at Beychella University, a four-year private institution in the northeast of the United States, who self-selected to participate in the study. I placed the participant profiles at this point of the dissertation to allow readers to have an understanding of the study in order to appreciate the profiles in depth, as the project is about the participants. While the profiles could follow the section on participant recruitment, it is my fear that their stories would be overlooked, misunderstood, or most importantly forgotten and that goes against the ethos of my dissertation.

The participants in this study self-disclosed information throughout the Sister Dialogue Circles that describes them as full humans, beyond and including their academic identity, and some of that information informed the development of their profiles. Each participant discussed multiple aspects of identity that influenced who they are, their decision to be part of the study, and about their experiences being Black undergraduate women throughout the duration of their participation in the Sister Dialogue Circles.

The pseudonyms of each participant come from various points of reference captured during the Sister Dialogue Circles. In the Black community, naming and names are significant, "names can be more than tags; they can convey powerful imagery…so naming – proposing,

imposing, and accepting names – can be a political exercise" (Martin, 1991). In our space, music was significant – we made music significant. There was music playing before each Sister Dialogue Circle began, when participants entered and were getting food. The songs I chose to play were informed at times by my mood and interests, and all artists intentionally selected were Black women. The names of each participant all represent Black women artists who each participant reminded me of either from appearance or swag, the participants expressing an interest in and emotional connection to the artist, or based on specific comments made that made a clear connection to an artist's image, vocals, or lyrics from my interpretation of the artist and participants. It is important to note that as a researcher, I created the pseudonyms for each participant after the completion of the Sister Dialogue Circles and data analysis to avoid any projection of my thoughts about the artist onto the way I understood the data. Additionally, it feels important to add that all of the artists selected with a deep level of intention, are all artists that I particularly like.

This section is intended to provide a framework of understanding about participants and to honor them individually, as it is their voices that make this scholarship significant. Table 1 and Table 2 highlight some of each participant's voice and story.

Table 1: Sister Dialogue Circle #1 Participant Self-Reported Demographics

Sister Dialogue Circle #1						
Participant	**Significance of Pseudonym**	**Racial Identity**	**Gender**	**Academic Year**	**Major**	**Organizations & Involvement**
Kardi	Demeanor, Self-description of body, Discussion on hair, Self-confidence, Sexuality	Black	Woman	Junior	Major: Public Relations Minor: African American Studies	Black Women's Empowerment Organization, Academic Organizations in Public Relations

Destiny	Description of multiple lived experiences based on geography, Desire for true friendships	Biracial – Black and Latina	Woman	First year	Major: Communications and Rhetorical Studies	Women of Color Mentoring Organization
Tina	Free spirit, Hair journey, Family	Black	Woman	Sophomore	Major: Anthropology Minor: Information Management and Technology	Writer for two University Magazines, Involved with organizations for Students of Color, Student Employee on campus
Nicki*	Image, Left too soon in process, Demeanor, Description of partners	Black	Woman	Sophomore	Major: Television, Radio, and Film & Psychology Minor: Management and Technology	Involved with Black student organizations broadly
Baker	Discussion of relationships, Desire to find a partner	Black	Woman	Sophomore	Major: Film	Student Employee on Campus

Participant attended two Circles and did not return for last two – communicated with me about unexpected conflict

Table 2: Sister Dialogue Circle #2 Participant Self-Reported Demographics

Sister Dialogue Circle #2						
Participant Name	**Significance of Pseudonym**	**Racial Identity**	**Gender**	**Academic Year**	**Major**	**Organizations & Involvement**
Monáe	Swag, Confidence	Black – African	Woman	First Year	Arts & Sciences	POSSE

Sade	Personality (perceived opposite), Conflict in partnership mixed with desire	Black - African	Woman	First Year	Management	Students of Color Academic Mentoring Organization
Faith	Determination and Resilience, Strategic, Relationship with Mom	Black – Haitian and Hispanic	Woman	Senior – Transfer Student	Psychology	Resident Assistant, Pre-Law Fraternity, Women of Color Mentoring Organization
Alicia	Swag, Demeanor, Connected, Well-known, Keeps personal business tight	Black – African American	Woman	Junior	Broadcast and Digital Journalism & Political Science	Women of Color Mentoring Organization, Caribbean Student Association

Kardi

Kardi is a junior at Beychella University where she is majoring in Public Relations, with

an African American Studies minor. Kardi identifies as a Black woman who is brown skinned.

Kardi is from Philadelphia, specifically the suburbs right outside of Philadelphia. Kardi

describes herself as a friendly and bubbly person and takes pride in being self-motivated. Kardi

emphasized that as a Black women in society, she feels like a very motivated person in general

and takes pride in being successful. Kardi was a Resident Assistant at Beychella University

during her sophomore year and felt it was important to take on the role for a year to gain

experience. Kardi went to private school prior to attending Beychella University, where she said

that attending college was not an option – everyone went to college. Kardi comes from an

educated family, where her mom is a gynecologist and described her family home as being filled

with medical books from her mom and pictures hanging of her dad from when he was in Black

Enterprise Magazine. She said that her dad's Master's degree is hanging on the wall with other diplomas and certificates and she remembers her mom always having her stethoscope and scrubs on in the house. Kardi shared that she traveled a lot when she was younger – summer vacation, spring break, and winter vacation. Kardi is involved with multiple organizations at Beychella University, specifically related to her academic interests, and is highly involved in a social organization focused on Black women.

Destiny

Destiny is a first year student at Beychella University where she is majoring in Communication and Rhetorical Studies. Destiny's father is mixed, and she says that is why she is light skinned, and her mother is Black. Destiny said she was always told that she is Black. Destiny is originally from Florida, but moved to Brooklyn where she has lived for the past two years. She described her experience in Florida as being mostly surrounded by Hispanic people and when she moved to Brooklyn, she said that she lived in the hood and was surrounded by Black people. Destiny described herself as being reserved, but loves to have a good time, and is a huge Beyoncé fan. Destiny went to public school prior to attending Beychella University and described attending college as a choice and something she decided to do for herself. As a first generation college student, Destiny shares that the opportunity to continue her education feels like a way to change her future. Living in the hood, as Destiny describes, her mom has been her strongest support system to achieve her goals and positively change their life.

Tina

Tina is a sophomore at Beychella University where she is majoring in Anthropology and minoring in Information Management and Technology. Tina identifies as a Black woman who is very light skinned. Tina is from Texas and describes a lot of differences coming from the

Midwest to Northeast. Tina is really close with her mother and grandmother and identifies them both as strong, motivating women in her life. Tina went to private school in the hood for middle school in a school that was predominantly Black and Latino, and went to private school for high school on the opposite side of town in a school that was predominantly white. Tina is a first generation college student and describes her experience attending college as "the gift that keeps on giving" to her and her family. Tina is very active at Beychella University, writing for two magazines, working on campus, and involved with various organizations for Students of Color. Tina traveled a lot since attending Beychella University and is always searching for the next internship or opportunity to go somewhere new.

Nicki

Nicki is a junior at Beychella University where she is double majoring in Television, Radio, and Film and Psychology, with a minor in Information Management and Technology. Nicki identifies as a Black woman who is light skinned, with both parents identifying as Black. Nicki is from the southside of Chicago, growing up in a predominantly Black and Latino neighborhood. Nicki went to private school from pre-school to eighth grade in a predominantly white school. Nicki said to keep herself busy she does work for class and has several hobbies, especially watching movies. Nicki is involved on campus, formally and informally.

Baker

Baker is a sophomore at Beychella University where she is majoring in Film with the Trans Media Department. Baker identifies as a Black woman who is brown skinned. Baker is originally from Atlanta, but recently moved with her family to Greenbelt, Maryland. Baker's mom went to college at the University of Maryland for undergraduate school and Webster for graduate school, now working as an executive in human resources. Baker's father didn't go to

college – his highest education was high school. Baker shared that her dad, despite not going to college has always been really supportive. Baker's mom is her motivation and inspiration, giving her career advice and support, and her father is the person she goes to for life advice. Baker's grandfather went to college at Benjamin Franklin, currently known as George Washington University. Baker's grandmother went to college and identified as a housewife. Baker went to private school since kindergarten and said she remembered growing up thinking she was going to go to Harvard or Princeton. Baker attended a predominantly white elementary and middle school in the suburbs of Georgia. Baker was working on campus, but quit the position during our time together in the study.

Monáe

Monáe is a first year student at Beychella University where she is a pre-medicine major in Biology. Monáe identifies as a Black women, specifically Nigerian and dark skinned. Monáe shared that she and her family are immigrants and there are a lot of family beliefs related to the American Dream that motivated them to leave Nigeria. Monáe was born in Nigeria and moved to the United States when she was three years old, only remembering a little about her childhood in Nigeria. Monáe is very much rooted in her culture and says that she loves everything about being Black and Nigerian. Monáe came to college from Miami, Florida and chose to come to Beychella University as part of the POSSE Miami group, and probably would have attended community college if it wasn't for her package and opportunity with POSSE.

Sade

Sade is a first year student at Beychella University where she is majoring in Finance through the business school. Sade identifies as a Black woman, specifically African, and shared that her father is from Senegal and her mother is from Haiti. Sade described growing up poor

and coming from a really strict household and spoke about her dad's rules and expectations throughout the study. Sade said that her father struggles at times because he didn't get to finish college and does not want that for Sade. Sade is from Brooklyn, New York and shared that she went to all Black schools until she attended Beychella University. Sade came to Beychella University with her high school best friend and they room together on campus. Sade is involved with an academic and leadership program on campus through the Multicultural Center.

Faith

Faith is a senior at Beychella University who transferred from community college in New York City during her junior year of college in 2016. Faith is majoring in International Relations and is a Resident Assistant on campus. Faith identifies as a Black woman and specifically shared that her mom's family is Honduran and her dad's family is Nigerian. Faith's mom came to the United States in 1975 and Faith spoke about both of her parents coming to the United States with a strong work ethic and belief that this would be a better place. Faith is from Brooklyn, New York. Faith is a first generation college student and said that she always believes that she needs to work harder given her identities. Faith hustles scholarships for academic and need-based reasons on a regular basis. Faith plans to go abroad during the spring 2018 semester and received multiple funding resources to travel. Faith is involved in a pre-law fraternity and serves as a mentor in a Women's organization at Beychella University. Faith is determined to go to graduate school and is looking at law school once she graduates.

Alicia

Alicia is a junior at Beychella University where she is majoring in Broadcast & Digital Journalism and Political Science. Alicia identifies as a Black woman, African American. Alicia is very close with her mom and describes her mom as her strongest support. Alicia shared that

she recently started a blog where she addresses a lot of issues and experiences of being a Black woman. Alicia strongly believes in traveling and went abroad to Madrid during the summer between her sophomore year and junior year at Beychella University. Alicia is very socially connected at Beychella University and strongly believes in having good grades and enjoying her time in college with friends. Alicia is involved in multiple organizations at Beychella University through her academic interests and related to her identity as a Black woman on campus. Alicia spoke about being on Dean's list multiple times and her commitment to continue that through graduation.

All nine Black undergraduate women who participated in the study came from various backgrounds and experiences prior to attending Beychella University, while all being connected through identifying as Black undergraduate women attending the institution. The experiences of each participant influences how they navigate being full time undergraduate Black women students at Beychella University. Each participant discussed various motivations that influenced their decision to be an active participant in the study, connected to their identities, which will be expanded upon further in Chapter Five. The findings of the study will be presented in the following chapter, Chapter Five. In Chapter Six, the discussion surrounding the findings, practical and research implications of the study, and future recommendations will be presented.

Positionality

My project is a clear reflection of the complexity of my journey in my doctoral studies, which really came at a time when my identity as a Black Woman, Woman of Color, Feminist, and as a racial justice scholar activist became symbiotic. My project embodies my spirit, my challenges, and my love for myself and the work I find myself doing now as a racial justice scholar activist. The resilience I found in myself during the most challenging, violent, traumatic,

and oppressive times made sense in my graduate studies. The experiences of individuals who are marginalized, why oppression exists, the roots of systemic oppressive structures, and my voice became extremely clear. I was no longer able, if I ever really was able to before, to separate myself from myself. I came into my authentic self in a way that felt empowering, fierce, and bold. I was filled with fear and fearless at the same exact time and truly understood my purpose in life – an scholar activist.

I find my dissertation to be my platform as an emerging scholar activist, a space where my voice is vulnerable in order to tell the truth and for women like me to find themselves as individuals who matter, are valid, and are more than enough. My work is selfishly selfless. It is my hope that the ways in which I approached this project and work within community, to build community, and form sisterhood is and has been healing, purposeful, and meaningful to anyone who has the opportunity to engage with the project.

I recognize that I carry my lens with me into this project. I too am a Black woman who has an undergraduate experience and multiple relationships with higher education. I come from a city where depending on which end you live on, the east end or the west end, your life feels and looks really different. I attended private school for 12 years and how that gets taken up in my understanding of the world is something I constantly work through because I know what that experience gave me and what it never gave me. I understand what it feels like to lose your body despite the fact that each morning you wake up, pull your body up, and go through the day – totally in control, without feeling. I am still the key eyewitness in a three-year court case about racial profiling and police brutality and can feel the burn on my skin and in my eyes from pepper spray, while trying to shake traumatic images from my memory, in the midst of learning to carry them with me each day. I can still remember wanting to cover my thighs in the 5th grade when

we were allowed to wear jeans to school and looking for the biggest sweatshirt at home to hide everything about me under the fabric. I laugh now at the day my high school boyfriend broke up with me because I did the *big chop* and went from being light skinned with long hair to light skinned with no hair, in his mind. I can feel the gaze of my white professors, particularly men, who doubted me and assumed I cheated, when I actually just studied. I am able to feel all of this and it lives within me daily. I embody the beautifully complicated layers of Black womanhood and confront the ways in which whiteness lives inside and outside of the messaging I was always told.

My work is to disrupt the stories people assumed about me, about where I am from, about what I have and do not have. The access and ability I have as a scholar to create space, to create relationships, and to create a sisterhood among Black undergraduate women is something that I wish I had during my undergraduate career. I craved a space to feel enough and a space where I did not have to explain why I could not wash my hair every single day without question or I did not have to participate in class in order to show a professor I was present, engaged, and smart. I am conscious of how I bring all of this into the project and how my experiences and lens inform how I interpret and understand the data, the voices, and the women.

Although I understand this project from a very positive framework, as an act of resistance, I know that it comes with weight and responsibility. This project required me to dig deeper into myself as an individual and as a scholar. I learned more about myself, confronted difficult memories, and found a new place in my understanding of who I am. My identity as a scholar is one of privilege and shows up each time I entered this space of sisterhood.

For me one of the most important pieces of this work has been to approach and produce the project without a deficit framework. I shaped the project and feel responsible to share the

authentic voices of the participants. I also know the impact and consequences of reading and sharing the experiences of Black women from a deficit framework and do not want to reproduce that work. I want my community to feel proud and that sense of pride comes from all things, positive and challenging. It has been my role to be just in this process and to allow the knowledge and identity of my participants as knowers to come forward and illuminate the project.

Relationship to Black women

When I think of the voices of Black women in higher education, I instantly feel an emotion. I feel connected to the group, I feel like I am able to contribute to the space, I feel like I will find similar people in the space. The idea of a space of Black women feels like home. Sometimes I get stuck when I think about the ways in which I connect so deeply, so personally, to Black women and so I am intentional in writing Black women, while also existing confidently as a biracial woman. I am Black and white – biracial. My racial identity has always been clear to me as soon as I understood race and what race meant in the context of the United States. I proudly identify as biracial and openly come out as biracial in any and all spaces and my experience in this world is Black – super Black.

To me, Black women in this work is inclusive of biracial and multiracial individuals and members of the Pan African community. There is no room in this project or my work for individuals who seek to coopt spaces for and about Black women, claiming an identity they do not hold. While the majority of individuals in this community of Black women may identify as one race, there is a unique experience for biracial and multiracial people who may identify with multiple races and experience life in a certain mono-racialized, and in general a racialized way. At the same time, there is a unique experience for those who identify as one race, in this case

Black, who are biracial and multiracial. The ways in which we form our racial identity is personal and individualized, while also negotiating the ways in which our racial identity is formed by other's perception of ourselves. It took me awhile to place this on paper because I felt like I disowned a piece of me by connecting specifically with the Black community. Although my close relationships and ties to the Black community are clear and understood throughout my family and those who matter most in my life, it felt like I was lying, betraying myself and my mom, and engaging in something dishonestly. I was unable to find the language to explain the ways in which I am so closely connected to the experiences of Black women and still confidently and clearly identifying as biracial – Black and white.

Although it may seem so simple, I needed to take the time it took for me to be at a point where this is the work, my work. The process I feel I went through, very much alone and internally, is something I read about in literature that explores Black Feminist methods by scholars such as Ruth Nicole Brown, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and many others. This idea of positionality was not even something I could dive fully into because I was still complicating the work, the space, the people, and really my relationship to the community. It felt like once anything was on paper, it was solidified and the ways that others perceived the work was also their assumption about me, who I am and I did not feel that I could initially articulate my whole self in my work before working through the language and my own relationship to the language.

Additionally, I identify as a cisgender woman and this social location is positioned differently from someone who identifies as trans, gender queer, and without the gender binary. It is important for me, in my work, that I am creating a space to invite anyone identifying as a Black woman to join in the journey. I acknowledge my cisgender identity and will constantly interrogate that within my scholarship. I hope that in my work, "many of whom are people

marked as youthful, Black, feminine, queer – become not disposable and marginalized, but alive, valued as prodigies of the kind of knowledge essential to our collective survival" (Brown, 2013, p. 36).

Data Collection

Black Feminist Theorists and Critical Race Theorists approaches to research are important because of the ways in which the frameworks and methods consider the space, people, interactions taking place, and larger systems and structures impacting and influencing everyone and everything. There are multiple ways that researchers consider methods when conducting qualitative research – for example: observations, interviews, narrative and storytelling, and discourse analysis. It is important when creating spaces and entering spaces that researchers consider their relationship to the space, community, and people involved. My methods for data collection were intentional and centered the participants, their voices, their experiences, and their knowledge. The methods I chose are important to the work of Black Feminist Scholars and Critical Race Theorists who focus on storytelling, narratives, counter-storytelling, and counterspaces as ways to center voices that have historically been marginalized and disrupt white supremacist practices.

Sister Dialogue Circles

I used Sister Dialogue Circles as a method in my project, from a critical dialogic perspective designed by and for Black women, and modeled after SOLHOT (Brown, 2013) as described above. This methodological approach was chosen for multiple reasons, one significant reason being the acknowledgement that "many Black girls [and women] throughout the diaspora desire a space to be more than the expectations that others have for them" (as cited in Brown, 2013, p. 3). In this method, the focus was on creating space for Black women in higher

education to share who they are and how they exist within the academic – inclusive of all of their life experiences before entering college. In addition, counternarratives was used as a means to carry the conversations and interactions between participants in a particular way that emphasized intersectionality and invited participants to bring together their racial and gender identity in relationship with the academy. The structure and design of the space was based on SOLHOT (Brown, 2016) and dialogue curriculum and scholarship around Intergroup Dialogue programs (Kohli, 2012; Nagda & Gurin, 2007; Nagda, Gurin, Sorensen & Zúñiga, 2009; Zúñiga, Lopez & Ford, 2014). Closely modeling after Kohli's (2012) work with dialogic spaces, the Sister Dialogue Circles worked to promote dialogue and analyze inequity and injustices, specifically within spaces of higher education. It is important to reemphasize SOLHOT (Brown, 2013) because it specifically brings forward the significance of how space is created for Black women to show up in their full humanity with radical possibilities. In addition, this project pulls from the work of other scholars (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Gonzalez et al., 1995; Yosso, 2005), who through their own research determined that for many Students of Color in higher education, "to survive and resist the racism they encounter, they create and participate in counterspaces that exhibit the cultural resources of their families and home communities" (Carter, 2003).

There were two Sister Dialogue Circles held for the project. The first Sister Dialogue Circle had five (5) participants who came together four times for one and a half hours each time. The second Sister Dialogue Circle had four (4) participants who came together three times for two hours each time. Additional information regarding the Sister Dialogue Circles will be shared in Chapter Four, Chapter Five, and Chapter Six. The participants of the Sister Dialogue Circles were recruited through various spaces on the campus site that focused on Women of Color, specifically Black women. Some of the spaces identified included student organizations

with missions that focus on Black identity, the Women and Gender Studies Department, and the African American Studies Program. Participants voluntarily chose to be part of the Sister Dialogue Circles and had the expectation that they would commit to attending all Circles. A schedule of times and dates were provided to participants and once the group was formed, there was some flexibility to meet when the group was available if there were any foreseen conflicts.

The Sister Dialogue Circles met in a counterspace (Solórzano, Ceja, M. & Yosso, 2000) from the university. It is important that in racial justice work, from a Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory framework, that research takes place outside of the space of potential harm and I prioritized this in my project. In this case, meeting formally on the university property could have been problematic for the women participating as undergraduate women in higher education. Additionally, the significance of space mattered and I chose to meet with participants in a location off campus that is a community cultural space that also prioritizes the experiences of People of Color, and more closely the Black community.

For this project, the location was a community art space that is accessible to the campus with a variety of rooms available to ensure privacy and confidentiality. The community art space is part of the African American Studies Department at Beychella University. The focus of the space is:

> [community art space] values our role as a vibrant cultural and artistic hub committed to the promotion and development of artists of the African Diaspora. [community art space] mission is to exalt cultural and artistic pluralism by collecting, exhibiting, teaching and interpreting the visual and expressive arts. Public programming includes exhibitions, film screenings, gallery talks, workshops and courses in studio and performing arts. A proud unit of the African American Studies Department at [Beychella] University,

[community art space] is a beacon of artistry, creativity and cultural expression engaging

the community, the region and the world (Community Art Space website, 2018).

In addition, the "primary motivation and objective for the establishment of [Community Art

Space] was to provide a high-quality showcase for African Diasporan artists, creating a setting

for dialogue and interaction among emerging, mid-career and professional artists" (Community

Art Space website, 2018). While the art space is owned by the university, it is physically distant

from what most identify to be the physical campus of the university. It is common for people

affiliated with Beychella University to not know about the community art space and when they

learn about the space, there is often times a sense of surprise that something so Black exists in

the university area and community. During the time of the project, the community art space was

under the leadership of multiple Black women and my relationship with the leadership, in

addition to their connection to my research, made the partnership to share the space come

together seamlessly. Similar to studies by hooks (1990), the hope of using the community art

space was to allow for the space of the project to function as a "site of resistance – as a location

of radical openness and possibility" (p. 153).

In addition to using the community art space, I also provided food that is connected to the

participants culturally during each Sister Dialogue Circle, such as soul food and Caribbean food.

There is a deep meaning in the Black community around breaking bread and being in community

with one another over food, and it was important for me to uphold that in the context of the

project. It was my hope that this space, from the physical location to the ways in which the

ambiance was created, gave participants a sense of comfort, safety, and a welcoming

environment that felt new, yet familiar, where we were able to build together.

The curriculum of the Sister Dialogue Circles was co-created by myself as the researcher and the participants in the space. It was important that the participants invested in the space and by co-creating the themes of each time together, with flexible guidance, to be able to collectively commit to all of the Sister Dialogue Circles. Each Sister Dialogue Circle centered the creation of counternarratives and were built from the structure of SOLHOT (Brown, 2013) and dialogue pedagogy (Zúñiga & Nagda, 2001). During the Sister Dialogue Circles, I asked guiding questions for each Circle and adjusted those questions based on the experiences and interests of the group participants. Some examples of questions were: What does it mean for you to be a Black woman? What experiences have influenced you as a Black woman? How did you decide to attend college? Where do you find community on campus? What is your story? What does success look and feel like for you? What guidance would you offer to other Black women at Beychella University? Participants in the project were also given the space to lead a specific topic individually or collectively during the Circle. Each Circle centered on the experiences and voices of Black undergraduate women. It was important for this space to feel semi-structured in order to provide some guidance during our time together, while also allowing for an atmosphere that invited participants to build with one another, with me as the researcher, and to minimize as many power dynamics between me as the researcher and participants in the space.

As the researcher in the space, I also intended to show up in a way that allowed me to participate too. In being cognizant of how that influences power dynamics, I was intentional about showing up authentically and vulnerable, while also giving the space and focus to participants. In building trust among the participants, I found it important to be engaged and participatory in the space – sharing and taking part in the various dialogues and experiences as it felt appropriate.

Reflective writing & journaling. Reflective writing and journaling (Dillard, 2006; Tatum, 2007; Kohli, 2009; Brown, 2013) was part of the curriculum and experience in the Sister Dialogue Circles that offered an additional space for participants to share and for me to gather data from the participants in the Sister Dialogue Circles. After the second and final Circle, participants were invited to share reflectively about their experiences as Black undergraduate women, experiences in the space, the meaning of the space to them, and how this space impacted them in their life on campus. From Dillard (2006), it was my hope that providing this space and opportunity to participants, I honored the ways that "as people of African ascent throughout the diaspora, we can only really live into our greatness when we re-member (that is, put back together) and respect the spirit within, our own brilliance, as human beings, and the grace inherent in the Creator's gift of breath" (Dillard, 2006, p. 109). By writing reflectively while participating in the Sister Dialogue Circles, the various ways in which participants may feel comfortable and ready to remember, came with flexibility.

Data Collection with an Ethics of Care

Each component of my data collection was done through the lens of a Black Feminist framework, prioritizing an ethics of care approach. The design of the Sister Dialogue Circles, the location of the Sister Dialogue Circles, the co-creation of how the space functioned and evolved, and the logistics and details that informed how each component of the project was executed, was done with the safety and potential impact on participants at the forefront. When considering the community art space, not only did I confirm that participants would be able to access the space via free transportation, I also wanted to know what other events would be taking place at the time of the Sister Dialogue Circles and how those could influence the experiences of participants. It was important that the space I chose also welcomed outside food, in order for me

to provide food options that were owned by People of Color in the community. Finally, I wanted

to ensure that the space was one that participants could visit and find as a resource after the Sister

Dialogue Circles ended. For example, I did not want to meet in a counterspace that existed only

for the Sister Dialogue Circles, but rather a space that was sustained and that we shared with the

community for the Sister Dialogue Circles. It was important to me that the women could visit

and use the space if they chose to after the Sister Dialogue Circles ended.

The reflective writing and journaling submissions created an opportunity for participants

to share their experience and feelings in a way that was unique to them and without specific

guidelines. For those reasons, it was important to me as a researcher that I provided additional

outlets and ways for participants to communicate with me, knowing that everyone may not

always want to share, feel comfortable sharing, or have enough time to process and develop their

own thoughts to share in the Sister Dialogue Circles. From the perspective of Black Feminist

Scholarship, allowing participants to make choices and providing multiple ways to share, was a

form of caring and considering the individuality and multiple ways that as Black women, we

each feel most comfortable sharing.

Data Analysis

My project was a practice of qualitative analysis that sought to grasp and

elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a

person or group of people (Patton, 2002). To ensure truthful results, I used the following

strategies to increase the validity of my study: (1) triangulation and (2) member checks

(Groenewald, 2004; Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2004; Tuffard & Newman, 2010; Welman

& Kruger, 1999). I used triangulation – or the use of diverse sources of data – to avoid brevity

and to ensure data I collected that was a true representation of my participants' experiences

(Patton, 2002; Patterson, 2015; Rossman & Rallis, 2004). The data was collected from the Sister Dialogue Circles, inclusive of the full transcripts of the Circles and reflective writing and journaling by participants who chose to participate in that way. Additionally, the data was brought together with the various memos that I created as the researcher. At various points throughout the project, participants participated in member checking to confirm, edit, and offer feedback, remaining involved in the project.

Transcription

There was a total of seven (7) individual Sister Dialogue Circles across the two formal groups of participants. At the first Sister Dialogue Circle for each group, I shared the consent forms with each participant and reviewed it out loud, opening room for questions and clarification before the participants signed the form. Every participant signed the consent form to participate. In the consent forms, participants agreed to being voice recorded throughout their participation in the project. Prior to turning on the voice recording devices, I also verbally asked participants to confirm their consent to being voice recorded, in addition to the written signature they provided in the consent form. All participants across both Sister Dialogue Circles confirmed their agreement to being voice recorded.

I used two voice recording devices, placed at different points of the room, to record the Sister Dialogue Circles. I began recording at the designated start time of the Sister Dialogue Circle and stopped recording once participants left the physical space. After participants left each individual Sister Dialogue Circle and I ended the voice recording, I transferred the voice recording to my password protected laptop and saved it in a file specifically for the voice recordings of the Sister Dialogue Circles. After leaving the research site following the individual

Sister Dialogue Circle, I began to transcribe the Sister Dialogue Circle once completing memos from the Sister Dialogue Circle, which are further captured and described below.

I transcribed each individual Sister Dialogue Circle by hand. As the researcher and as a Black woman, I felt very responsible for transcribing the voice recordings myself. I was not willing to take any risks by sharing the voice recordings from participants with any outsider who would not understand the full context of the project, potentially misunderstand the discourse, and most importantly, mishandle the voices, experiences, and tone shared by participants. I also recognized that the women in the project shared experiences that were harmful, sad, filled with joy, and filled with pain and it worried me to consider the potential and unknown harm that could be done if their voices were left up to the interpretation of a third party. I was in the space with the women, and while that does not eliminate any bias of understanding and interpretation, it leaves little room for creating a false narrative.

Each transcription was completed in two-three weeks from the completion of the individual Sister Dialogue Circle. After completing the full transcription of a Sister Dialogue Circle group, I went through my transcription while listening to the voice recordings again. By listening to the voice recordings while reading my transcriptions of the individual Sister Dialogue Circles, I was able to make edits to the original transcription if any words were wrong, incomplete, and/or when it was helpful to share emotions communicated in the Sister Dialogue Circles, such as laughter and silence. With multiple participant voices in each Sister Dialogue Circle, it was important to spend a significant amount of time with transcription to ensure that all of the voices were captured in each moment.

Reflective writing & journaling. The reflective writing and journaling that some participants chose to share was collected and read line-by-line to understand the messaging,

voice, and story that participants were offering. Similar to Ford and Malaney's (2012) study, participants were able to critically reflect on their experiences through writing and journaling, and as the researcher I ensured that confidentiality of the participants was upheld and each submission was read multiple times. For those who chose to share a reflection, they used their individuality and creativity to express. Some shared through poetry, others through handwritten journaling with doodles, and some through images and photographs. The variety of submissions allowed for participants to express in ways that felt the most important and comfortable for them at the time. The reflective writing and journaling were brought into the coding process with the transcriptions from the Sister Dialogue Circles.

After receiving the submissions from any of the women, I reviewed and began to make sense of what was shared through a line-by-line coding process and analysis of the particular words chosen by participants. Appreciating the different formats of the submissions, it was important to take note of the delivery of their communication and capture the depth of what was being told. Each line in the submissions was reviewed and I made summative comments on the margins for each section of the submission. This summative section offered an understanding of what the participant was communicating in each portion of their submission. After making meaning of what the participant was sharing in the document, word choice, and ideas communicated, I drew parallels between the submissions and the codes from the transcriptions.

Memos

In addition to the data collected through transcription from participants in the Sister Dialogue Circles, I used the following memos to document my experiences during data collection and to support my analysis of the data: (1) observational notes, (2) field notes, (3) methodological notes, and (4) theoretical notes. These memos were created by me and future

research and used to capture my experience, my observations, and my process on paper as I was leading the project in a participatory researcher capacity. It was important for me to collect my own thoughts in real time from comments shared by participants that were resonating with me to the logistics and details of food ordering for each individual Sister Dialogue Circle, while ensuring that the method was being used in honorable ways. Below I offer additional context to each memo type created and used to inform how I understood and was experiencing the Sister Dialogue Circles.

Observational notes. I created observational notes to describe behaviors I observed during each Sister Dialogue Circle. While I had the voice recordings on for the duration of our time together, some of the physical, non-verbal dynamics of the participants could not be captured simply by using the voice recording. In addition, the observational notes were a space for me, as the researcher, to capture general energy that I was feeling and sensing in the space from the participants and for myself. For each individual Sister Dialogue Circle, I wrote an observational note within an hour of leaving the participants and community art space. Some of the notes described who entered the community art space together, who was exchanging information about their weekend plans and potentially hanging out after the Sister Dialogue Circle, and the general feeling in the space – focus, distraction, sadness, laughter, demeanor overall. Finally, the observational notes captured what else was potentially happening in the community art space that day when we were meeting. For example, on one Sunday, there was a yoga class and several People of Color also using the community art space and on one Friday, there was an open art exhibit that drew several attendees who were mostly People of Color. During these two instances, the dynamics in the Sister Dialogue Circle could have shifted because of the additional presence of guests at the community art space. In some cases, the

women spoke about the people they observed during the day of the yoga class and the women chose to go through the art exhibit when it was available. Without fully knowing how significant each moment beyond the voice recording could be, it was important to capture as much as possible that was observed and these notes allowed for that to happen.

Field notes. According to Patton (2002), field notes are inclusive of interpretation, and I used my field notes as summary memos to draft personal reflections after each Sister Dialogue Circle to capture how I was thinking, how I was making meaning from the Circle, and what I could do to prepare for the next Circle. Different from the observational notes, I gave myself space as the researcher to claim field notes as a space for myself to be honest, reflective, critical, and messy in order to be sure that whatever I was bringing in to each Sister Dialogue Circle and taking from each Sister Dialogue Circle was captured. At the time of my data collection, I was working full time and traveling to my research site to lead the Sister Dialogue Circles. I did not know if or how the traveling process could impact how I showed up in each Sister Dialogue Circle, and took about 15 minutes before each individual Sister Dialogue Circle to write how I was feeling, what was on my mind entering the space, and what I needed to name for myself before sharing the space with the participants. After each individual Sister Dialogue Circle, I captured my thoughts and feelings through the field notes after writing the observational notes.

Methodological notes. The content of my methodological notes consisted of reflection on and critiques of my methodological procedures. Given the structure and fluidity of the Sister Dialogue Circles, it was important to me that I kept a clear write up about my perception of the safety of the space, ensuring that through the design that no harm was done from my end to the participants and participants to one another, and constant reflection on how I understood participants to be making meaning of the space. Thinking back to the description of components
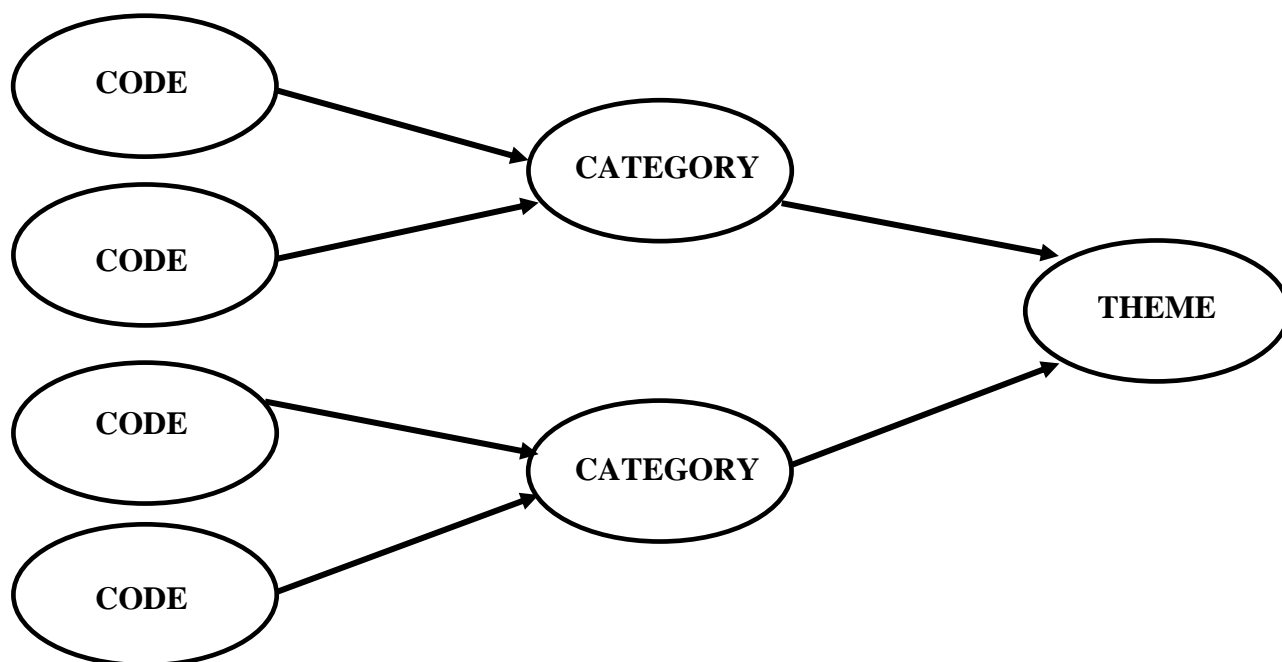
of SOLHOT, I wanted to know that the space as a method was not replicating white supremacist practices and that it constantly invited participants to exist in their full humanity, critiqued social conditions, and allowed us to exist together across a diaspora of Black identity. Lastly, I found myself building connections between the real time methodological notes and the transcription and analysis process by noting in the transcriptions where there was potential opportunity for the method to be expanded upon and/or considered in new ways in a future research project.

Theoretical notes. I used theoretical notes to make meaning of the participants' respective experiences with reflexive praxis. These memos were beneficial as I defined the theoretical frameworks built upon the themes that began to emerge from the data. The theoretical notes were captured throughout the transcription process and developed with the creation of themes from the codebook, described in detail below. Understanding that the theoretical framework informed how I understood the participants and their experiences, the notes were more organic and not happening solely at one set time. It was important for me that I spent time drawing connections between the literature and emerging themes in order to make more sense of the participants, before formally developing the Participant Profiles. In addition, through conversations with my Dissertation Committee Chair, I found myself creating additional theoretical notes that challenged me to continuously go back into the data collection and analysis process to see, make sense of, and dig further into the ways in which I was understanding the participants and their experiences – to fully understand the data and stories.

Coding

I used open coding and axial coding to connect emerging themes from the data collected through reading and rereading the Sister Circle Dialogue transcripts (Patterson, 2015; Patton, 2002). Multiple reviews of the Sister Dialogue Circle transcripts allowed me to identify

categories that informed the process to create themes. Open coding allowed me to create codes based on concepts, terms, words, and ideas that came up when reading line-by-line through the transcriptions. From the open coding process, I created a codebook that informed the creation of categories, which pulled the codes into larger and connected groups. After shifting the codebook to list the individual codes in the same categories in particular sections, I developed themes from the categories. My codebook process modeled this structure:

```
  CODE
           ↘
             CATEGORY
  CODE     ↗          ↘
                        THEME
  CODE     ↘          ↗
             CATEGORY
  CODE     ↗
```

Member Checking

Throughout the data analysis process, beginning with the emerging themes from the transcription of the Sister Dialogue Circles, I reviewed the all of my data and performed a form of member checks with participants to ensure validity. Participant validation, or member checks, involves the process of presenting the emergent themes to participants, who review and clarify preliminary research findings (Patton, 2002; Patterson, 2015; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Within the context of this study, I conducted member checks through participants' review of my emerging themes and data analysis, which were drawn from the Sister Dialogue Circles. Including participants in the data analysis process in the ways that I intentionally did, comes from feminist methods, where centering the participants as knowers and creators of their experiences is grounded in the process (Banks, 2009; Brown, 2013). It was important for me as the researcher to make sure that participants were ok and one aspect of being ok, from my lens, was to be sure that they felt comfortable with their experiences being captured and shared in the ways that I did for the project. While they all signed the consent forms, I appreciate that the Sister Dialogue Circles became a space for many, perhaps all, to openly share points of trauma, violence, and embarrassment, which were experiences that I wanted to protect and hold in confidence if participants were not ready or in a place to have that shared through my project.

After completing the transcription, coding, and initial phase of analysis, I connected with the participants via email to share an update on the project and discuss the participant profiles, emerging themes, and some of the categories that I noticed coming out of data from the Sister Dialogue Circles. In this process, participants were invited to share concerns, questions, retract data, and provide clarity to any content that felt inaccurate. It was important during this process to allow participants to share their thoughts, while also balancing the desire to put forward the most complete data from the project.

To continue providing a space for participants to be involved in the project, I shared a copy of my dissertation with each participant once it was finalized through my committee. I also invited participants to my dissertation defense in order to be present and engaged as the individuals whose stories were captured, brought forward, and led to suggestions to inform

practices in higher education. The participants are the most important component of the project and will remain the most important.

Data Analysis with an Ethics of Care

As described above with data collection, Black Feminist Scholarship informed the ways in which I analyzed data as well. Approaching the data analysis process with an ethics of care was extremely important to me as the researcher. I felt responsible and obligated to collect, hold, and share the stories of my participants in a way that valued and honored their voices and also offered them control to determine what was actually shared.

I chose to transcribe the data myself, by hand and line-by-line, because it worried me that passing along the voice recorded data from the Sister Dialogue Circles to someone outside of the space without context, without shared identities, and potentially with biases (positive or negative) about Black women and/or higher education, would be harmful. The participants trusted me to hold their stories and share them in a way that was authentic and accurate. By being present and participating in the Sister Dialogue Circles, I was able to remember the details, full context, and what was happening as I listened to the recordings over and over again.

As I worked through the coding process and developed themes that were key to my findings, I also led with an ethics of care. In these instances, I brought the participants into the data analysis process through member checking, to confirm if they were comfortable with the content and findings coming forward. I wanted to provide the participants with a sense of safety and control to curate their stories from developing each Participant Profile with their consent and review, to making choices to include or exclude information about a participant's dad that was deeply painful to the participant for example. The decision to exclude certain information shared

was important and being in communication with participants on what those components were also felt incredibly significant.

Finally, by creating a process to memo in ways that allowed me to capture my own experiences, reactions, and thoughts related to the conversations in the Sister Dialogue Circles, the methods, theoretical framework, and general observations, I was able to create space for myself in the project to also share. Recognizing the balance between researcher and participant, I understood the emotions and weight of the project on my own body and mind. Intentionally developing spaces in the form of memos to name what I was thinking and feeling felt healthy and was a form of me caring for myself and my participants.

Risks and Ethics

As a researcher, identifying as a Person of Color and Feminist, I recognize the significance and vulnerability of marginalized student populations. In this, I understood the need to make sure that participants did not feel and were not taken advantage of in the project or that they did not experience negative consequences as a result of participating. I was open as a researcher about my intentions and also shared how the information in the space was going to be used towards my dissertation project. I shared with participants how I collected and coded the data, providing pseudonyms and de-identifying participants in the coding process. Additionally, I shared how participants were able to be involved in the data analysis process and also receive copies of the final dissertation.

My project prioritized the confidentiality of the participants as much as possible. In qualitative research, the personal lived experiences of participants is salient in the work, and knowing that Students of Color and individuals from marginalized backgrounds are much more identifiable at their institutions, it was important to protect the participants as much as possible.

With that, I recognized it is also impossible to ensure absolute confidentiality and that always poses a potential risk to the participants and project overall. Without the ability to control individual's choices to share about their experiences in the Sister Dialogue Circles, there would always be a risk of information being shared outside of the space. As the researcher, I shared the expectations and need for confidentiality prior to participants attending the first Circle and invited an open discussion and commitment to one another in the space during the first Sister Dialogue Circle in both groups around confidentiality. I shared the potential impact on individuals and the entire group if confidentiality were to be broken.

It was important in this project to be prepared with resources (e.g., counseling, advocacy centers, identity centers, community spaces) at the university and in the community that understand the significance of supporting Black undergraduate women and the needs of the population. These resources were made accessible to participants in hard copies during each Sister Dialogue Circle and through constant communication in each Circle about the resources.

Additionally, as a Woman of Color, Black, Biracial, I was conscious of my race and gender and the need to continue doing self-work and community work. My experiences have informed my epistemology and the ways in which I feel responsible and committed to liberatory anti-racist practices in my research and in my life as a whole. Black Feminist Theorists and Critical Race Theorists have guided my work in collaboration with my experiences. Through counternarratives, with a focus on centering my racial and gender identity and experience while disrupting whiteness and patriarchy, I have found myself as a researcher and I have been able to make sense of my world as it relates to my scholarship.

It is important to name that there are limits in Black Feminist Theory, as with Critical Race Theory and other frameworks to understand the lived experiences of any people,

specifically with marginalized social identities. A significant amount of scholarship that informs

my work comes from the perspective of cisgender Black women. While I think that a lot of

work includes the voices of Queer Black women, that work does not often times come without

the exclusion of the transgender, gender neutral, gender non-binary, and gender non-conforming

community who may also identify as Women of Color and Black women. In order for my work

to be inclusive I hope to always work towards naming and addressing the ways in which some of

my theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches continue to further marginalize

communities – it is important and makes me responsible as a researcher to continue inviting

people to self-identify through their narratives.

The profiles of the participants in the study were shared here in Chapter Three and the

themes, categories, and findings from the study are highlighted in the next three chapters. The

findings of this study are set to address the following research questions and explicit connections

will be expanded upon in Chapter Seven:

- How do Black undergraduate women experience and navigate higher education?

- How do race and gender, and further intersecting identities that are significant for
  participants, influence the experiences of Black undergraduate women in higher
  education?

- What do Black undergraduate women do in order to persist in higher education?

- What sustains and empowers Black undergraduate women in higher education?

After a comprehensive analysis of the data, the major themes that emerged from the study were

(1) socialization as Black women (2) experiences as Black women in higher education attending

a PWI (3) meaning of space for Black undergraduate women in higher education attending a

PWI. Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory guided the analysis of the findings,

leading to the categories and themes of the study. Chapter Four and Chapter Five will focus on dialogue as a method of the study and Chapter Six will focus on space as a method for the study. The discussion of the themes and findings in relation to the analytic framework will be expanded upon further in Chapter Seven.

"We have to consciously study how to be tender with each other until it becomes a habit because what was native has been stolen from us, the love of Black women for each other."

(Lorde, 1978, p. 31).

CHAPTER FOUR

BLACK & WOMAN ENOUGH:

MAKING MEANING OF MESSAGES AND MEMORIES

"My hair defies gravity, my body absorbs the sun…you can't tell me I'm not magical"

~Unknown

The experiences of Black women and validation of them as knowers, rooted in their unique experiences living as both Black and women in the context of the United States, are enough. Black Feminist scholars (Hill Collins, 1991, 2000; Brown, 2006, 2013) share with us that the ways in which meaning making occurs for Black women is rooted in their experiences from girlhood. It is impossible to fully understand the ways in which Black girls become Black undergraduate women, in the context of this project, without explicitly bringing forward the ways in which the participants understood themselves as Black women prior to attending Beychella University. To exist as Black and women, particularly in the political climate surrounding the project, were not separate from one another. Through the framework of Black Feminist Theory, the messages and memories shared by the Black women in the project were brought forward in their voices during the Sister Dialogue Circles. Black Feminist Theory, as a framework for understanding the messages and memories and for disrupting whiteness, allowed for the themes and findings to be analyzed and interpreted, and that is highlighted throughout this chapter. Being Black enough was a salient theme throughout both Sister Dialogue Circles. Coming into one's Blackness – "the *intersection* of constructs that locate the Black collective in *history* and in the *specific moment* in which Blackness is being imagined – the "now" through which all imaginings of Blackness will be mediated" (Wright, 2015) – was a unique experience that each of the women in the study could relate to and describe in complex ways. This chapter

explores the ways in which the participants in my project made meaning of their being and sense of self as Black women prior to attending Beychella University through their socialization as Black girls and women. The women's exploration and sharing that is described in this chapter brings together their journey as Black women, coming to an evolving understanding of their Blackness, and making sense of what the world tells them as Black women as it relates to presentation and performance. Describing their understanding and feelings about their complexion, hair, body, and overall image is a journey that many of the participants felt they were still on, while sharing about their multiple experiences before attending Beychella University. Various emotions, behaviors, and interactions are brought forward in the chapter based on the voices of the women in the project. From humor, to sarcasm, to sadness, and more, these Black women showed up. While this chapter focuses on the dialogic methods of the study, some of the behaviors, such as emotion, experiences with social media, and attention from men continue to expand as findings in Chapter Five in connection to their experiences in higher education and in Chapter Six in the context of the space. This chapter honors the voices of the women in the study and their coming into Blackness and Womanhood journeys – a practice of Black Feminist Theory that asserts that the voices of Black women are central to their experiences (Patton, 2009).

Messages For, Towards & About Black Women

Socialization and the ways in which we become socialized through various messages, directly and indirectly, inform our individual sense of understanding and meaning making of the world, our experiences, and interactions with others. Bobbi Harro's cycle of socialization (2000) outlines context that gives us permission to understand where messages come from in our individual lives. While Harro's cycle depicts a cycle that we all may experience, Black

communities have been making meaning of the world in various ways that show up as forms of

knowing given the commonality of a historically racialized experience in the United States.

Despite ways in which some people potentially refute what is described as Black women's ways

of knowing and existing (Hill Collins, 1989; Allen, 1998; Harris-Perry, 2011), there is literature

and scholarship that describe the passing between generations of intergenerational trauma

(Barden, 2013) that roots itself in the origins of slavery, in addition to learning cultural norms

and practices which could be considered going against white, heteronormative, patriarchal, and

Euro-centric ways (Levine, 1978; hooks, 1992; Patton, 2006; Harris-Perry, 2011). As this

chapter explores the messages that the Black women in this project shared prior to attending

Beychella University, it is important to hold these messages with an understanding of messaging

in terms of socialization, and particular patterns of messaging associated with trauma, culture,

and Euro-centric ways of knowing in the Black community.

The participants in the project demonstrate the complexity of coming into their Black

identity as women, and the constant filtering of messages from multiple sources. There is a

tension presented in ways that could appear in conflict or perhaps challenging to sift through, as

the women explore receiving messages from family and loved ones, with the constant circulation

of messages from media, men, teachers, peers, and other people around them at the same time.

In the study, the women focused on describing messages from family and loved ones and

messages about beauty most explicitly. While neither category of messaging was independent

from one another, who the messages came from and what the messages were about were clear

distinctions that sometimes came together in ways that required the women to feel a sense of

picking and choosing between the who and the what. Below I offer a figure (Figure 1:

Messaging) to depict the ways in which the women described receiving the messaging and how

they were socialized as Black women before attending Beychella University.

Figure 1: Messaging
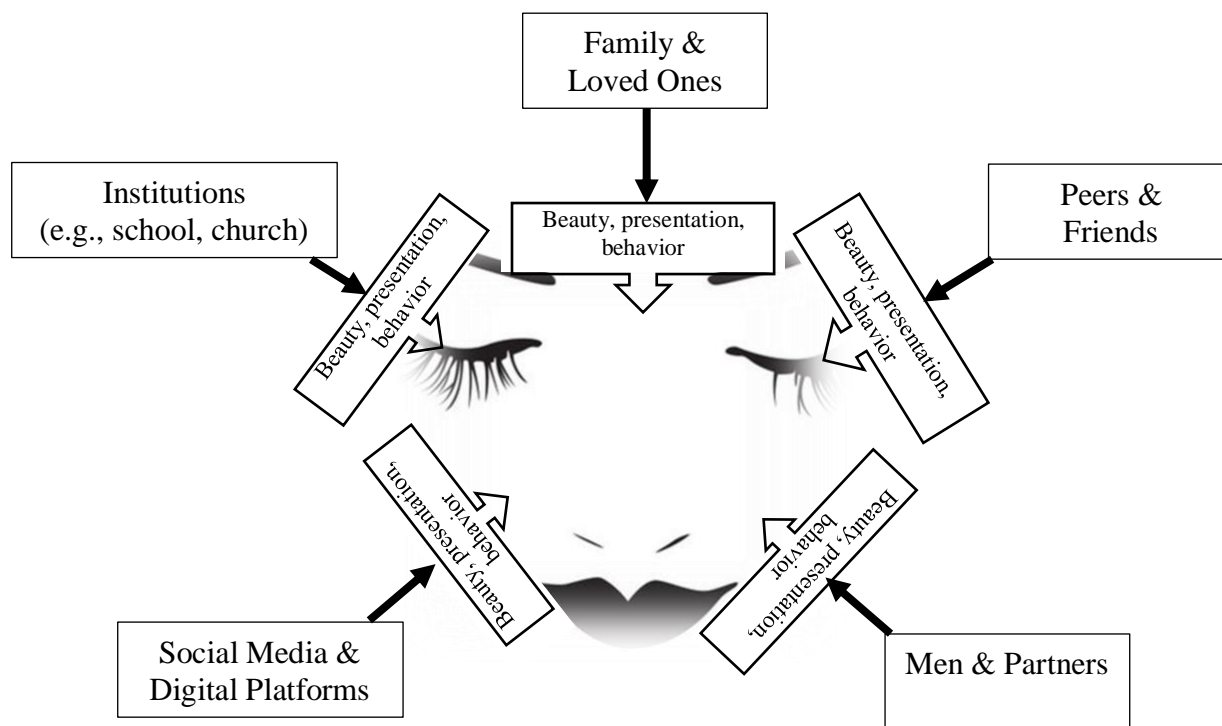
Messages from People

The women made a strong distinction between who shared messages that still resonate with them and influenced how they understood themselves as Black women from the types of messages they received from their surroundings. While there was overlap at points, it was far more complicated for the women to conflate the types of messages with who they received them from, which presented itself as a tension because of the value placed on the relationships with family and loved ones. For example, if a message about beauty that they disagreed with came from a family member it was sometimes given more value in the lives of the women in the project, compared to the same messages they receive in the media, which they felt they were able

to distance from if they wanted. Throughout the chapter, an analysis of the messages and discussion between the women will be further explored and the focus on this section is to bring forward the messages themselves.

Family Affair: Family Values & Messages

Each of the participants recalled specific messages, moments, and conversations with family and adults in their lives that still resonated with them at the time of the study. In many cases, the messages are humorous to some of the women now and it was evident that the messages were distinct, clear memories that had multiple impacts over time. Humor showed up in the form of laughter, sarcasm, and non-verbal expressions that ultimately led to laughter in most cases. At times, in what could feel like a very serious moment of sharing, a participant would quickly begin to make a joke of their own sharing or instance. The humor showed was described by some of the women as ways to distance themselves from the messages now, discomfort with the messages, and for some it was the first time thinking about, hearing themselves repeat, and sharing the messages out loud. I emphasize humor upfront because I think that the ways in which it shows up could be misunderstood, particularly outside of the Black community, as a way to make fun of or light of the impact of the messages, when in fact I think most of the women felt the burden and weight of the messages at times in exhausting, traumatic, and problematic ways. While humor is described here, it is expanded upon further in Chapter Six as it relates to the ways in which certain spaces, such as the Sister Dialogue Circle spaces that we created, allow, invite, and foster an experience for various emotions, expressions, and honesty from Black women to coexist, while honoring their sense of self.

The women had distinct recollections of messages from parents that they were quick to share with other members of the Sister Dialogue Circles. Inserting jokes and various intonations

throughout, Sade laughed with sarcasm as she described how strict her father is and the impact that has on her now. Sade shared that her father would tell her, "I want you to be perfect" and continued by saying:

> My grades had to be up there, I couldn't get in trouble at school, you couldn't call me at the house, you had to be great, there was no other room. My father used to tell me, "you only have one chance to make one mistake…after that, life could be over." He stressed not messing around with boys.

Monáe related to Sade, both coming from families where their parents identify as immigrants. Monáe shared, "especially being immigrants, it was like "we came here for you…we came here to better your life and so you need to do good and you need to make a good life." Both Monáe and Sade described these messages as often times feeling like a lot of pressure, where you want to "please yourself and do well for yourself, but at the same time you are trying to please your family too."

Often times, the messages that the women received were related to their parents' perceptions of the treatment of people who look Black in the United States; many of the messages were in comparison to white people. Monáe recalled her mom telling her, "these white people have it easier than you…you need to go to school, you need to stay focused, don't let the teacher discourage you, always work hard, bring home straight As, don't let any of them put you down." In the same context, Baker shared, "I was told to wear my hair in a certain way, don't go out here acting a fool in front of these white people."

As the women described these experiences and particular memories, they emphasized how difficult it was to be in a situation where they wanted to please and appease their family members, while also feeling as if they wanted to fully be themselves, which were at times in

conflict. Some of the feelings expressed highlight an intergenerational conflict related to being Black in America and what you "needed to do as Black people" in order to move through the world, be successful, and in ways play into whiteness. Nicki shared:

> I just felt like I wasn't allowed to do a lot of things while I was at home, so I just kind of stayed to myself. My family thinks "she's just so nice and so respectable and she's such a sweet girl," and it's just literally because I don't know what I'm supposed to say or not to say when I'm at home or around my family. At home I have to speak properly…I have to use proper English. If I use slang, I have to be selective about it, like it has to be stuff that's not too slangy.

The other women nodded their heads at Nicki, and some smirked at Nicki's experience in a way that demonstrated their ability to relate. This tension between Nicki's idea of her Blackness – sense of self, expression, and presentation – and her family's expectations of her Blackness, as explained by Nicki, reappears throughout this chapter as the women describe their journey with their appearances.

The ways in which the women in the project received messages from family, often times made with comparison to white people, was deeply rooted in the histories of race in the US. Despite not wanting to be compared to white people, the Black women in the project felt the societal norms that aligned with whiteness impacting their lives and sense of self. Regardless of their actions and choices, the comparison to white people is something that Black Feminist Theory works to disrupt. The power to give white people control to set the norm for Black women was in fact something the women in the project described wanting to change. The tension between their familys' perceptions and beliefs on how to be Black women and the participants' perceptions, beliefs, and desires was in fact the embodiment of the core of Black

Feminist Theory. The Black women in the project sought to disrupt many of the messages and memories that positioned them as less than, not enough, and in comparison, to white people. The Black women in the project wanted space and the ability to be fully seen in their unique positions of being Black and women.

Although many of the messages described by the participants came from family and loved ones, there were also moments shared about messages from other authority figures. Monáe recalled a memory from high school where she described a teacher who was patronizing her and shared, "She told me I was an awful student…she had me crying under the table. She was bothering me…she was really bothering me." While the other women in the Sister Dialogue Circle did not verbally respond to Monáe's comment, there was a loud silent roar of non-verbal communication where the other women showed empathy and a sense of understanding, familiarity with Monáe's experience. In this moment, it was as if the women experienced a shared pain, perhaps a distinct memory of collective moments when they were individually told as Black girls that they were not good enough, able enough, or filled with potential futures. No words needed to be shared, and the pain in the Circle was evident and heavy – this was the standpoint of Black women. We found ourselves sitting in silence for a few minutes and felt more together in this space than we had yet in the Sister Dialogue Circle.

The messages and memories shared by participants reflected what they carry with them as their foundation. In most cases, these messages are salient for them while attending Beychella University. Although some of the women described their processes to disrupt the messages, they felt like it was difficult and that some messages were deeply rooted in their fabric as people. It was apparent that the women were unable to separate their memories and the messages they received from their current interactions in higher education. While not explicitly named as

connected to one another, the ways in which these messages show up further on in the data and Sister Dialogue Circles indicated a lasting impact that informs their behaviors, decision making, and sense of self today – some in ways of disruption and going against, others in alignment and assimilation for survival, which we know from Black Feminist Theory is a salient component of being Black and women.

Sources of Messages

The women received messages from multiple sources, primarily describing their communication with family, highlighted above. However, it is not without the influence of messaging from others that the Black women in this project made sense of themselves and made meaning of being Black women. The ways in which messaging happened, as pictured in *Figure 1: Messaging*, includes messages from men, social media, digital platforms, institutions, peers, friends, and family. Through these multiple sources, the Black women in the project described messaging about beauty, presentation, and behavior. It is important to emphasize this in text and through *Figure 1: Messaging* because the ways in which the Black women made sense of themselves before attending Beychella University were layered, complicated, and each source informed one another and were interrelated. To suggest that one source shared one message that fully informed an individual, would be dismissive of the complexity of their Blackness – the history and the now related to the women's racial identity. The repetitiveness of the same messages from multiple sources in fact suggests the desire to control the individuality of Black women and works to put limits and boundaries on the possibilities of Black women, rather than disrupting assumptions of who Black women are able to be and how they are able to create their own sense of self.

Men. The women in the study offered various ways in which they received messages

from men and how that influenced their sense of self and desirability. While some of their experiences and messages from men will continuously be shared in this chapter and subsequent findings, it is important to pull forward this as a finding that continuously appeared throughout the Sister Dialogue Circles in the form of messages from men, and examples are offered throughout this chapter and Chapter Five. It is important to not assume the sexuality of the participants based on their comments related to messages from men and how they connected that to a sense of desirability or not, knowing that the context of the study and participants is in the US and a heteronormative system that gives power and authority to men to determine the value of women.

Social media & digital platforms. In addition to receiving messages from people, the women in the study highlighted the influence of messaging from social media on multiple occasions in both Sister Dialogue Circles. Unlike many other studies, the comparisons that the women in the project made to images on social media and in digital spaces were present throughout. When the women described themselves, and their perceptions of self, their descriptions were typically based off of the value that was put on certain images of Black women in the media. Similarly to the messages from men, examples related to social media and digital platforms are offered throughout this chapter and Chapter Five. Naming social media and digital platforms upfront, in the category of who, is important because of the ways in which the women referenced these platforms in ongoing ways during the Sister Dialogue Circles.

Messages About Beauty, Presentation, and Behavior

As described at the beginning of the chapter, the women made a distinction between who said a message and the type of messages. At times, the messages from "the who" and the type of message did not seamlessly come together. The women emphasized that they received several

messages about beauty from multiple sources, inclusive of family and loved ones, men, and social media and digital platforms. It was salient for the women that the messages about beauty were constant and typically came in subtle, unsolicited, and indirect ways.

Don't Touch My Hair: Hair, Body & Image

All of the participants related to one another, across both Sister Dialogue Circles when sharing their stories about hair, body, and image. The common knowledge about a Black woman's hair journey to references about the "ideal Black women's body" (Kelch-Oliver & Ancis, 2011), informed by media, the participants quickly recalled stories from growing up and more current memories about appearance.

Complexion. "Coming to terms with that, like having to remind myself that I am Black is really like a lifelong, or has been a lifelong struggle," Tina shared. Similar to Tina, all nine (100%) of the participants in the study described difficulty with identifying as and being Black, specifically connected to their skin complexion, and coming into this identity confidently. Across the participants, as described in the participant profiles in Chapter Three, there were a variety of complexions represented amongst the women. Regardless of complexion, the women each described it being difficult to feel confident and comfortable with their complexions. At times, it was unclear if the discomfort and struggle was specific to being of a certain Black complexion, or simply just being Black and having to name that. Given the history of colorism in the United States, where often times lighter skin tones are perceived to be more valued, those who were lighter in the Sister Dialogue Circles expressed some of the most difficulty coming into their Blackness as a point of pride. For example, three participants described their memories of being told when they were kids that their families or the hospitals tested them for jaundice because of how light they were as infants, specifically compared their parents. These distinct

memories, from such young ages, were comments that their family members repeatedly shared with them because it was believed by the women in the study to be used as a joke to differentiate them in their family.

These memories continued to inform their understanding of themselves as adolescents and into their young adulthood at Beychella University. For example, in an exchange between Destiny and Nicki, they shared:

> Destiny: I'm already as light as it is, but I always wanted to be lighter. Then when I moved to Brooklyn, I experienced a lot of colorism. I never hated myself as much as I did then, but now it's like a journey. I'm just trying to really appreciate it…appreciate it a little more.
>
> Nicki: In terms of skin, I'm always that light skinned person who wants to be darker. It's like the rest of my family is darker. When it comes to summertime, my family will be walking in the shade and I'll be standing in the sun, like it's my time to tan. I'm going to finally be dark…like I'm excited! I'm going to blend in with my family. No one is going to question it. I still want to be darker. That's just…I hate being light skinned. It's just like, why am I so pale? It's just something I struggle with.

The experiences told by Destiny and Nicki reflect the ways in which they continue to negotiate their experiences as Black women with lighter skin tones. It seemed to be freeing – their bodies visibly relaxed and tears filled both of their eyes as if they never said this before and a weight was lifted by naming these feelings – in the moment of the Sister Dialogue Circle for them to be able to describe how heavy their feelings and experiences related to their complexion were in terms of their understanding of their racial identities. Additionally, both Destiny and Nicki offered in vulnerable ways that they recognize their complexion could not significantly change,

with the exception of tanning in the sun, and yet they felt really consumed by how their complexion was valued and informed their sense of belonging. Even more critical to their exchange, the desire to feel part of their family and not feeling as if they do, was received as heartbreaking to the other women in the Circle, with Kardi responding to the exchange between Destiny and Nicki by saying, "I can't even imagine that…to feel like you don't belong or get questioned, made fun of by your family or shit, the hospital. Like that's terrible."

While Destiny and Nicki continued to make sense of their complexion, particularly as it related to family, Sade and Monáe described their feelings about their complexion in peer spaces. Sade told the group, and was echoed and affirmed by Monáe:

> There's still a difference because I'm Black and other kids are light skinned or whatever, you know. So, in elementary school, that was a big thing…I remember being happy that there was a girl blacker than me who was new to the school because it got the heat off me.

Sade's description that "it got the heat off" her was heavy. It was a clear, specific moment from elementary school that Sade held with her in current day. The other women in the Sister Dialogue Circle showed that they knew exactly what this meant – what it meant to feel happy to have someone else draw attention away from you that was rooted in pain – when they nodded their heads, some chuckled, and others slowly blinked their eyes as they tightened their lips and nodded slowly in affirmation. Although I do not think the women were happy to know that another Black girl experienced this treatment in elementary school, it was a shared experience that there was relief or burden lifted from Black girls and women when they were no longer the center and receiver of bullying, mistreatment, and being made fun of because they are Black. This experience shared by Sade highlights the ways in which colorism and complexion become

internalized experiences that Black women do not want, but are placed in and carry with them as they enter into various spaces. The idea that Sade felt such relief when someone darker came to her school reflects on the ways she understood to place value on complexion and how she felt she was experiencing school with others as being the "darkest person" until someone else arrived.

Complexion and making meaning of complexion was uncomfortable for the women in the Sister Dialogue Circles. Although it seemed as if they were able to share experiences, messages, and memories about their complexion, it was tough. Knowing that the racial identity of participants was a salient component and draw to participating in the Sister Dialogue Circle, the conversations about complexion showed how this was perhaps a space that they needed in order to continue making sense of their racial identity. While complexion does not encompass all that comes together for one's racial identity, the experiences that the women had based on how others perceived their complexion and in turn how they made meaning of their complexion was with them and deeply connected to how they later described their experiences as Black women in higher education.

Hair. Hair and coming into each individual hair journey was a big point of connection for all of the women in the Sister Dialogue Circles. No matter what complexion each person had in the Circle, they all demonstrated a connection to one another through hair. Each of the women could remember specific memories about their hair and were able to offer their hair journey, based on their unique understanding of being Black women and having various hair textures, access to salons, and stories about Black women's hair.

From the onset of the Sister Dialogue Circles, we each made comments – specifically compliments – about one another's hair. Whether it was discussing products, to asking how long

we were natural, and much more. As the researcher, I was aware of how many participants in both Sister Dialogue Circles asked about my hair, in particular, when they entered the community art space for the first Circle. It was unspoken, yet clear, that the participants made meaning of me as the researcher, as a Black woman, instantly once they saw my hair. Quickly a few of the women, almost right after introducing themselves to me, felt the need to justify or offer context to why their hair was "not as good as it usually is" based on how they made sense of me and my hair. Kardi sharing, "I didn't really do my hair today…it will look better next time you see me" and Aaliyah sharing, "I just rushed over here…I couldn't look as poppin as you right now." In addition to these two comments, other women spoke about it being the end of the week and wash day was on the weekend, as if to indicate that their hair appeared how it did because they already wore it nicely in their minds throughout the week. In my memo on September 29, 2017, I wrote:

> I was a bit taken back by the women's comments about my hair. It was unpredictable that they would find such a fascination, maybe just a strong feeling, with my hair. I struggled because I said "thank you" when they offered me compliments, but also felt like it set up some sort of dynamic that I just couldn't put my finger on or name at the moment. It was like maybe they saw me as someone they wanted to look like, well at least my hair, but it also felt like they might be experiencing some intimidation or inferiority around not looking Black enough, pretty enough, or natural enough. I really don't know. I need to consider if wearing my hair out should continue in the Circles. This was unexpected and feels like it served as a distraction, but also a positive representation for the women of pride in my Blackness. I'll continue to make sense of this…maybe I am getting in my own way.

As we came together and began the conversation about hair, many women started with a current feeling about their hair or described their journey to how they currently wear their hair. Tina began by offering to the group:

> I started getting relaxers before I can remember. I hate it, like dear God, I hated relaxers. They burned. I didn't like straight hair because I was like it's so thin. My hair has a very brown/red tint to it, so in middle school with my hair very straight and my skin very light…and I was just starting to grow freckles at that point, it was just like I can't…I just hated getting my hair straightened. Then I got into high school and my parents wanted to play this respectability politics games…like you're going to have your hair straight and look decent in front of these white kids.

Tina's journey resonated with the other women because it brought together the ways in which Tina made sense of her own experience, from hating relaxers, to disliking how thin and straight her hair would be with relaxers, and the negotiation of messages from parents and family. Despite the false norms in literature that perhaps emphasize the assumed desire for Black women to present in Euro-centric ways, Tina disrupts those assumptions and stories by emphasizing her frustration and hate, to use her words, about fitting into whiteness. Tina's expression and feelings about her hair and the relationship to whiteness were connected to Nicki's earlier comments about language and performance with family in ways that align with whiteness. Tina, like many other women in the Sister Dialogue Circles, imagined big, kinky, expressive images of themselves and fought against the pressures from family and their social settings to fit in, in order to be accepted into white spaces. Tina's example and communication with family does not center her interests in how she wanted to present herself, but rather took away her choice on how she wanted to express her Blackness as a Black woman.

As the researcher, I was sad when I heard this from Tina. I navigated my own experiences with hair and what it meant when I fully came into my presentation related to my hair. Tina, unlike me and others in the space, was so confident with her hair at an early age and was not allowed to express herself without consequence from family. I shared in a memo that, "it was a beautiful moment to hear Tina's pride in her hair at a young age, but so sad to know that she was told it was not beautiful enough…really white enough." It mattered in the Sister Dialogue Circle for the women to be able to share and support one another as they each described some of these more challenging memories, as they also sat in the space with joy around who they are now and who they are becoming as Black women with expressive hair.

Appreciating the familiarity that the women may have with one another simply based on being Black women at the same PWI, even if they never formally met one another before, they shared moments of how they understood one another prior to the Sister Dialogue Circles in ways that connected to expression and hair in this case. Many of the women in the Circle felt inspired by Kardi's hair journey and her sense of confidence on campus with how she wears her hair. Kardi was tall, noticeably tall, and carried herself with such positive energy and confidence. Kardi's hair was out, full, a mix between a kinky and curly fro that bounced and moved as she talked. Kardi wore a headband of some sort that offered an accent and gave a sense of her style – she was filled with personality and carried it with her on her sleeve. Despite how Kardi was seen, perhaps with the assumption that she always expressed in these ways, it was an important moment when other women learned from Kardi:

> Growing up…it was hard because I remember wanting to have straighter hair. I didn't wear my hair like this until high school, and even like my junior year of high school, so I always had straight hair. I'd always press it for a weave, whatever. I would say that I

struggle a lot with understanding the beauty of being Black, especially being a Black

woman.

Kardi sharing what landed on other women as a moment in time when maybe she was less

comfortable with her hair, took some by surprise – Kardi was only known at Beychella

University as a confident, natural, secure Black woman. However, I think this moment and

interaction in fact highlighted how complicated and complex hair and the experience of women

coming into their Blackness through hair was, despite assumptions and what was noticed on the

outside. In this moment of the Sister Dialogue Circle, it was as if humanity was brought to some

of the women in the Circle. As described, people knew of one another even if they did not know

one another, and to experience the Black women in the Circle shift their understanding of one

another and also share in vulnerable ways, was a healthy process for all of us in the space.

In both Circles, women shared about transitioning from relaxed and permed hair to

natural and curly hair. Some of the women offered stories about hair color and their desire to

self-express through color, texture, and style even when it was at odds with the messages and

expectations of their family members. Many of the conversations that the women had about hair

were with women in their life, likely mothers or grandmothers, prior to college that correlated a

certain hairstyle to receiving opportunities. In many ways, these messages connected to the

experiences that Nicki and Tina shared about whiteness and their desires to push against

assimilating into whiteness as part of coming into their Blackness. Tina, sitting in the Circle

with statement glasses, magenta fo-locs, and a colorful outfit humored the group with a story

about a conversation that she had with her mom:

I wanted to get my hair in gray and my mom was like "it'll make you look old and you

won't get a college interview" so I went with light brown/blonde color and then I got this

done. She was like, "you're not going to get the internship now," but it was at a point in the summer where I could dye my hair magenta if I wanted to and so here I am now!

Along the same lines, Alicia, hair wrapped tightly under a hat, bundled up in her sweats shared with the women:

My mom was always like…because I want to go into broadcast journalism…my mom is always like, "Oh what are you gonna do? You're gonna have to get a perm and perm your hair," and I'm like, "No! We gonna figure something out."

Both Tina and Alicia, in their separate Circles, had the other women laughing. We were all able to put ourselves into the story whether it was from our own experiences of battling our family members based on how we wanted to express, or just simply because these two were funny storytellers. This moment of laughter in each Circle was a tie between the women where they showed one another their confidence, sometimes their fight to express themselves, and determination to get their way because it was their body and expression.

The women recalled receiving positive messages about their hair, amidst the challenges. Faith shared:

It took me awhile to embrace my natural hair 'cause I remember when I was an early teen, I would look through Seventeen Magazine, Teen Vogue, and I would see a picture of like white blonde hair, and that was a struggle for me in terms of thinking, "wow why can't my hair be straight?" So it was really an internal battle, but my mom always told me that I had beautiful hair, but I still remember like…it took me a long time to embrace it.

Whether through family or otherwise, the women all sought out positive images and the desire to fully embrace their hair as part of who they are as Black women. Tina shared about the attention she receives when her hair is a certain way and how that makes her feel really good, even though

it could be rooted in something problematic. For example, Tina said, "When my hair is pulled up towards me, I'm just like "wow, I look great!" but when I have my twists in, because it's longer, it's like I get…more guys are attracted to me." In each case, everyone expressed wanting to feel beautiful. Alicia shared with the group about her experience traveling to Europe and for the first time, feeling wanted and desired. She spoke about how different she was to the men in Europe and the feelings she had when they told her she was beautiful, sometimes even enjoying the term "exotic" that a few used in conversation. Recently returning from Europe, I responded to Alicia:

Jordan: You liked being called exotic?

Alicia: Yes, I mean it felt like they saw me as beautiful and different and I don't get seen as anything special here it seems

Jordan: Who is they?

Alicia: Well…guys, all types of guys. White guys, Black guys, just guys

Jordan: I just got back from Paris and had a similar experience, but I did not like how it felt in the ways you positively described…it felt like I was something unheard of or unimaginable…like we don't actually exist

Alicia: I get that and I guess I liked exactly that…I liked having this attention from men because it is foreign here. My hair was out, it was up, it was big, it was something different all of the time and they liked me no matter what

My interaction with Alicia was so significant, probably in personal ways and as it relates to the research. The attribution of beauty to attention from men offered so much control to men and yet made sense for all of us sitting in the Circle because it was simply the feeling of wanting to be desired as a Black woman – a human thing, I believe. As we closed out this conversation in

Kardi's Sister Dialogue Circle, she left us with beautiful words that felt needed for many of the women, "I think it's really important to love ourselves. My expression through my hair is…I love being Black. I love having this curly, crazy, non-pin straight hair," shared Kardi.

Body & image. Separate, yet related to complexion and hair, participants described ways in which their perceptions of their bodies aligned with or did not align with what "Black women should look like." Before we began this conversation, I think it was already an unspoken dialogue amongst the women. Similar to hair, and my experiences with the women when they entered the space and complimented me or asked about my hair, the women made comments to one another about their clothing and one even shared with another about how they liked their dress and the way it fit their body. While indirect, there were implied messages about noticing one another and each other's bodies.

As we spoke about bodies and body image, Kardi and Nicki shared:

Kardi: I don't have the ideal Black women's body

Nicki: I have the ideal Black women's body**…**I guess I have the typical Instagram model, music video vixen body. I have boobs, I have a butt, and my waist is relatively smaller. So for me it's just my mom almost instilled this insecurity in me. Not like insecure with my body, but just like I can't show it off. I have to be careful what I wear. If I wear like one thing, people are going to think a certain way about me, and it just kind of got annoying at a point because it was like "she's wearing the same thing as me," but people are going to look at me differently.

Kardi: Yeah…I just have a flat butt, but that's ok…I've come to grips with that

Despite the desire that many participants shared when it came to having what they considered the "ideal Black women's body" with curves, a small waist, and large butt, Kardi told

the Circle about her struggle to "always want to be thinner, even though the Black woman ideal is to be thicker" and Baker responded sharing:

> It's just been this thing where people in my family urge me to lose a lot of weight. Me personally, I do want to lose weight, but I do not want to do it to the point where I'm stick thin…I just want to be healthy.

Baker's comments were shared with hesitation in the Sister Dialogue Circle. As she spoke, you could hear the tremoring in her voice and that she felt sad. Despite wanting to change her health for herself, this external pressure from family made this challenging, and in turn impacted her feelings about her body and image. In my memo after this Circle I wrote, "I hope someone in Baker's life tells her that she is beautiful and I hope that she feels beautiful after leaving our Sister Dialogue Circles. How do we disrupt some of these deep and heavy messages that tell us we are not enough? We are Black enough…Baker is Black enough, beautiful enough."

Within the mixed messages about the "ideal Black women's body," the desire to be healthy, and hope to be desirable in ways connected to Alicia's comments about hair, Destiny, Kardi, and Tina spoke about the "trend" of stretch marks.

> Destiny: I've been technically full figured since I was in middle school and I've always gotten negative attention from older men. I've always wanted to change. I think something that isn't given enough positivity is stretchmarks. Sometimes I think, "do other people really have them?" because I'll see it on Instagram, but it'll only be on your thighs or your butt…
>
> Kardi: I've got them right here
>
> Destiny: Yeah, right here. They're not even white. I don't know why they're purple.
>
> Kardi: They're NOT white!

> Destiny: I don't know where they came from
>
> Kardi: It's like the color of your shirt
>
> Destiny: Yes, like they're purple
>
> Tina: The butt stretch marks are cute because that means you've got a fat ass
>
> Destiny: But that's the only thing…I have them on my arms and I always make sure that my shirt covers them. I don't wear tank tops in person anymore. I think, "if people see it, then they won't like me." Then I'll think, "will a guy like me if I have stretch marks on my arms and everywhere else," and so I think it really needs to change

It was not explicitly mentioned between the women, likely because it was implied, but the messages about stretch marks as "trendy" are very much informed by social media's messages about Black women, where the hashtag #stretchmarksarebeautiful pulls almost 10,000 posts and pictures mostly of Black women's butts. Connected to Nicki's comments about looking like a video vixen, the stretch mark "trend" is in line with the same messaging about and towards Black women.

Depending on the messages the women received growing up, and currently take in, they expressed different feelings about their proximity and desire to have the "ideal Black women's body," as somewhat outlined above – some wanting it and some working not to have it. Baker told the Circle:

> Like my friends say, "Oh Baker, I wish I had your breasts!" and stuff. I'm like "You don't want this!" My back constantly hurts, I have strange pains in my chest, I freak out that I'm dying.

Baker's comment and expression of the discomfort, which gets applauded as a positive attribute for Black women, illuminates the ways in which Baker as a Black woman is complimented for

the curves of her body by Black friends despite the physical pain she experiences, and her family suggesting her to lose weight. Knowing too that Baker's friends repeatedly talk about her breasts in these ways, even when she shares her physical pain, suggests that it is worth the pain to have these attributes that have been deemed desirable and/or beautiful for Black women.

While Baker expressed external messages about attributes of her body that others admired, Tina described the conflict with performing to present as a certain type of Black woman in order to please others. At the intersections of race, gender, and religion, Tina named the complexity of a Black woman's image in a "church-going and praying family." Tina shared with the Circle about her experiences growing up in a Pentecostal church:

> It's like you can't have bare shoulders, you can't have skirts that are above the knee, you can't wear nail polish, you can't have your hair a certain way, you have to wear stockings all of the time, you have to have all of these things. It's like if you even miss one of these things, you are immediately like a jezebel, this seductress that was distracting people from the love of God.

Tina continued by sharing that she was told that it was "un-Christian" if she wanted to wear shorts or pants, and told the Circle that "it was very suffocating…I was like "I just want to wear shorts so I can go do cartwheels with my friends," and you're just over here complaining." Tina's desire to express herself and present in ways that felt authentic to her Blackness as a Black woman were constantly met with the barriers of her family and community members. Tina's experiences shared are exactly where intersectionality is most salient – at the intersection between race, gender, class, and religion in the context of a power structure where oppression is sustained at the core. Understanding intersectionality as it relates to Tina's experience, and Tina's description and use of the term suffocating, really stuck with me as the researcher. In my

memo following the Circle, I wrote:

> I hope that Tina got to play. As a Black girl it feels so important to learn that playing is
> ok. To me, I think playing as Black girls is a liberating experience…a moment where we
> can imagine ourselves without chains or fear. Did Tina ever experience a space of
> worship without chains or fear? I wonder how this space of worship feels now. Would
> she ever go back? It scares me…the idea of suffocating because you are not allowed to
> be who you feel like you are and want to be. I suppose it's the idea of a double
> consciousness, but maybe not. It's less code switching and passing and a double
> consciousness, and more internalized hate, depression, and suffocation as Tina described.
> This makes me sad. I hope that Tina got to play.

Tina's experience with her body in the space of church offered a perspective that Black women may not always be given the power to own their bodies. Part of ownership is expression and choice and the ability to say no. Several women, when discussing body image, connected their body to someone else – giving control and power to someone else to determine what happened to and with their body, in a policing-like dynamic. In response to body image, specifically the challenges of the journeys that the women in both Circles shared, Baker offered a point about ownership of the body and Black women's bodies:

> A lot of this has to do with the way men perpetuate our bodies. They think it has to look
> like this or else I'm not dating her, and I'm like, "what about you? …I mean you're out
> here with like crusty lips."

Within the humor of Baker's comment, naming the power and control given to men was supported throughout the dialogue of both Circles in ways that connected to Alicia's experiences in Europe and comments about desirability. Although the tone that Nicki described having the

body of a video vixen was to suggest unhappiness, she also shared how it gives her attention from men in ways that felt positive. These various messages and experiences communicated by the women about their body image highlighted the want to be desired by men, but challenged the motivation of that desire being connected to their body image. In that sense, the women seemed to want to be desired by men and felt like that desire was linked primarily to their body image, and more specifically the perception of their body image's proximity to what social media said was a beautiful Black woman. However, these women expressed wanting to be desired for more than their physical body and as Black women, they felt trapped to present in a way that aligned with "what Black women should look like" in order to be desired. In Chapter Five, the women discuss their partnerships and relationships with others, and there is a connection between how the women understand themselves as desirable and how they find or do not find themselves in partnerships that reflect their values and authenticity as Black women.

Within the navigation of each woman's journey, they held on to positive images and messages that they seek and find on social media and through friendships. Kardi shared in her Circle, "…like I'm trying to identify and find myself in a really healthy way instead of trying to be something that I'm not." While Monáe shared in her Circle:

> It takes a lot of getting used to and getting comfortable in yourself and to stop…not
> caring what other people think, and it's difficult. But it's like you know you can't care so
> much about what other people think of you because you can't live like that.

The feelings expressed by both Kardi and Monáe show the process that these Black women are moving through and reflect their journey to becoming themselves. Through all of their experiences, prior to attending Beychella University and current day, they want to love themselves fully. Through the most difficult messages and memories shared, these Black

women saw themselves as strong, confident, and a work in progress.

The women tried to make light of some hurtful and traumatic moments, and identified them as points of pain and learning. For the women, it was as if they carried some of these more salient moments and experiences with them daily to inform and shape how they navigated the world. Connected to standpoint theory (Hill Collins, 1986; Hill Collins, 2002) in Black Feminist scholarship, the participants had a particular way of knowing that only Black women, in the context of the United States, have and understand. There are no other identity groups who are able to fully understand the experiences of Black women, beyond Black women, and how that is taken with them and informs their sense of self as Black women is evident in this project. These women did not perceive themselves from a deficit lens, despite the ways in which many would, nor did the women in this project understand themselves as less capable despite the messages from teachers, peers, and family that would suggest otherwise. The Black women in this project proudly, confidently, and unwaveringly held on to the messages, experiences, and moments of learning as their armor. Their armor protected them, made them stronger, and was continuously built upon. What comes forward from the women in this project, through their experiences prior to attending Beychella University, are the following: (1) recognition that they need to build armor in ways that others do not (2) they all knew to build armor, even if it may look different, and without always being told (3) they did not expect to ever stop building armor (4) despite any pain, hurt, or trauma, they needed to continue progressing and (5) this was all exhausting.

At no point did the women share any regret or seem to question opening up to the other members of their Circle, and in fact expressed a deep sense of appreciation for having a space – in some cases for the first time – to complicate, name, acknowledge, and own how the messages they were told and memories that exist in their lives today, shaping their sense and meaning of

being Black women. In both Sister Dialogue Circles, these Black women affirmed one another as being Black enough and held on to one another literally and figuratively as sources of strength and empowerment to show up fully as Black women. The care that each of the women had for one another, after just meeting in most cases, was in fact an additional burden for Black women. Despite the genuine desire and interest to be in community, the need to even be in community becomes an extra obligation and task for the women in the project – if the space existed already and the structures were supportive for Black undergraduate women, their need for the space would likely not exist and there would be no need for a *counter* to the narrative. The desire and ability to come together in beautiful relationships with one another, for a sustained amount of time, in the midst of multiple academic and personal commitments, the mere fact that the women came together to participate in the Sister Dialogue Circles and how they cared for one another, was in itself a disruption to the assumptions most often times made about Black women – angry, distant, disengaged, unable to work together, and more.

Through Chapter Four, the voices of the women in the project continue to take shape and their individual and collective journey to feel Black enough comes to life. Through the messages from family, to their hair journey, and owning their bodies as beautiful and enough, these Black women created space together to show up as authentic as possible and make meaning of their experiences. As we move into Chapter Five, I continue to hold these stories and the voices of the women to understand what experiences they had before attending Beychella University, which inform how they show up and exist in higher education at a PWI with all of themselves as Black undergraduate women who are Black enough. As the women shared throughout Chapter Four and continue into Chapter Five, the ways in which they find themselves healing amidst their experiences comes forward. In Chapter Six, the significance and meaning of space, as is relates

to healing, is expanded upon. Just as we closed out multiple Sister Dialogue Circles with the first Sister Dialogue Circle group of participants, I close Chapter Four with the quote I offered at the beginning that the women ultimately used as a title for their GroupMe chat space to stay in contact: "My hair defies gravity, my body absorbs the sun…you can't tell me I'm not magical," by Unknown.

CHAPTER FIVE

SITES OF TRAUMA, ACTS OF RESISTANCE: HIGHER EDUCATION

Pulling from Critical Race scholars (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Hurtado, 1992), who describe the ways in which the history and contexts of higher education come together to inform a campuses' racial climate, we know that it is impossible to understand the experiences of Black undergraduate women without using the histories of the academy to inform how their experiences are understood. Knowing that there is a history of exclusion in the academy (Stewart, 2011), this chapter brings together the experiences of Black women, a historically marginalized population in higher education, with higher education itself. Through this lens, the findings of this chapter are brought forward.

Before coming to college, all of the women in the study had experiences that impacted the ways in which they would understand Beychella University as Black undergraduate women, captured and described in Chapter Four. At the intersections of each participant's identities, explicitly shared and those not brought forward in the study, are the realities of the relationship between identity and power structures. The findings of the study that appear in the context of higher education are understood through the framework of Critical Race Theory and the lens of intersectionality from Black Feminist Theory – identifying the distinct relationship between Black women and structures of power in the United States – and will be analyzed throughout the chapter and further in Chapter Seven. Most importantly, this chapter seeks to demonstrate the ways in which the participants describe their experiences as Black undergraduate women in white dominated spaces of higher education. Throughout the chapter, the participants emphasize how the ways in which they navigate their authenticity – showing up as fully as possible as Black women in their own Blackness – continues to shape their sense of self and their process of

becoming.

It is important to read the findings presented in this Chapter from an anti-deficit model of Black undergraduate women in higher education. Our bodies as Black women are not expected or invited to exist in higher education, and yet we do because we are able, smart, and have imaginative successful futures. I ask that these findings are understood from a critical lens that recognizes the complex, problematic structures of white dominance in higher education to be the problem and the participants in this project to be demonstrations and living examples of resilience, defiance, and disruption to the academy.

Seat At The Table: College Decision Process

In different ways, each participant shared their college decision journey and process. Recognizing that across the participants there were various points of exposure to college, from K-12 schooling experiences – private and public – to being a first generation college student in their family, they all described college as their only way to what they perceived to be success. Remembering some of the messages that the Black women in this project received as Black girls, the value placed on attending college was rooted in various motivations. Regardless of their childhood and K-12 experience, there was an imagination in each of the women for success and a correlation between success and attending college, and graduate school as well for some. Throughout this section, there is a focus on intersectionality, as the ways in which race, gender, and class come forward in the contact of the education system and access to resources is evident and distinct.

Participants who went through private schooling before attending Beychella University did not imagine doing anything other than going to college after high school. Tina shared that she "100% saw it as an obligation…I've been going to private school since 1st grade…they were

like, "you're going to finish your education with as much as we've spent on it so far." From

Tina's perspective, finishing her education meant attending and graduating from college and

"making enough money to pay everyone back." Baker offered that attending college was "this

thing instilled in me." While the majority of participants in the first Sister Dialogue Circle went

to private school, Destiny did not. Destiny shared and engaged with other members of the Circle

> Destiny: I don't have to be here…
>
> Kardi: Oh wow…I can't really imagine that
>
> Baker: I think like everyone from my school went to college
>
> Tina: Not even an option
>
> Destiny: I was always encouraged to pursue education, but it was never like "this is what
>
> you have to do" and I was always told "whatever you want to do, we will support you

When Destiny shared with the other members of the Sister Dialogue Circle that she did

not have the same expectations placed on her, specifically from attending a private school, there

was a pause in the room. The women who attended private school were unable to wrap their

minds around the idea that someone could graduate from high school without going to college.

In the space, dynamics of class show up, as Destiny offered to the group that attending private

school was not even an option or consideration. In an interesting way, it was unclear if the

women who attended private school felt "better than" Destiny or if they felt some resentment

because Destiny did not have the same pressures they felt they experienced, particularly

connected to assimilation and performance under the gaze of whiteness. While Destiny still

experienced barriers that impacted her as a Black undergraduate woman, it was almost as if she

felt less obligated to perform for her family and had ownership over her body and mind – noting

how that was taken from some of the other participants in different ways as described in Chapter

Four. In a memo following this Circle, I wrote:

> As Destiny struggled to say that her experience was different from the women who attended private school, she also dismissed any assumptions that one had about attending a private institution as a Black woman. Destiny "made it" too and was successful…shit, Destiny found this opportunity to participate in my project as a first-year student in her first month of school. It was like Destiny understood what it meant and felt like to work towards liberation and being a free Black woman, but could see and feel how the walls of Beychella University were creeping in on her in maybe what Tina described as suffocating ways. Destiny did not want to come from private school and the dynamic in the Circle made it seem like successful Black women came from private school – Destiny moved boldly through this Circle with a "look at me now" type of demeanor, that was perhaps self-affirming and also humbling for those who thought private school was a point of status in the Black community. I am happy to have Destiny in the project – being different in the Sister Dialogue Circle space was invited and expected, as it was about your individual Blackness and womanness in here…not about conformity or performance.

Through the exchange between Destiny and other participants in the Sister Dialogue Circle, and across both Sister Dialogue Circles, the women communicated the ways in which attending college was bigger than themselves. In some instances, the women described being first generation college students and in other cases, the women described the pressure to continue a legacy of education in their family. While different feelings were attached to both, it was apparent that none of the women took for granted the opportunity to be in college and claim their seat at the table at Beychella University.

Strange Fruit: Classroom & Peer Experiences

Participants discussed a variety of experiences in the classroom, from interactions with faculty, to interactions with white peers, and to finding the courses that are for them, by them, and about them. In both Circles, the women rattled off the faculty who were "good" at Beychella University and those who were problematic, which typically meant they were racist and sexist. There were moments when the women were going back and forth about faculty and could finish one another's sentences. It was known across the women, even if they never took a course with the specific faculty member, that they were problematic and if you are Black and attending Beychella University that you should never take their course. Interesting, yet not surprising, the same exact names were shared in both Circles without any knowledge of what each group of participants discussed. Regardless of academic year at Beychella University, the women all heard of or knew that there was a list to reference before choosing their schedules for each semester. Some of the women spoke about having access to this list when they joined POSSE or a mentoring group for Students of Color, and in turn had a network of upper-class Black students to receive guidance from in order to genuinely survive their time at Beychella University. Dialogue that highlights exchanges between the women in both Circles about faculty and finding faculty to take courses with is captured below:

Alicia: Oh yeah, I mean you take class with Professor A and you'll be good

Monáe: I heard about him…heard he was dope

Alicia: He's real dope and like I just show up, say hey, and participate…like no need to worry about what I'm wearing if I need to talk to him afterwards

Sade: Word…like you got to dress up to talk to these white professors

Kardi: Definitely take a course with Professor A, Professor B, and Professor C

Tina: I love Professor C…first super Black class I took

Baker: I never knew about Professor B, but I've heard about Professor A and Professor C

Destiny: How do I get into their classes?

Kardi: I'll help you with your schedule…there may be a waitlist because all of the Black kids fight to get into their classes, but I'll try and hook you up

Tina: Once you take a class with Professor C, you will make sure you have a class with them each year until you graduate…it reminds you that you're sane and meant to be here

In addition to knowing which faculty to take a class with, the women also discussed what it meant to take a course at a PWI with white faculty – for some this was a first. Quickly in the Sister Dialogue Circle, Faith shared that "I don't think I ever had white teachers or was in a classroom with a white person until I came to Beychella University." Faith's concise point and experience was succinct and matter of fact. She was clear on how the experience of having a white faculty member and white peers impacted her, possibly in an unknown way. Perhaps attributed to the K-12 schooling experiences of the women in the Sister Dialogue Circle, Faith's comment elicited a reaction from some of the women, almost as if they were surprised and taken back. The body language communicated signaled a difference between the ways in which the women transitioned into Beychella University, coming from different backgrounds – class, education, geographic. In a memo following the Circle when Faith shared this experience, I wrote:

While Faith probably spends time considering what it means to be taught by a white cis man and be in a classroom with white peers for the first time, I know the faculty member and peers are not thinking twice about Faith's experience. As a faculty member, considering the identities of students and the possibility that they have never been taught

by someone white is a thing. Does Faith feel heard? Does Faith get called on? Does

Faith get treated differently?

While collectively agreeing that the transition from high school to college was a process

as highlighted in Faith's experience above, all participants expressed a level of confidence in

navigating the change. However, despite their readiness and preparation, some participants felt

their hard work did not eliminate challenges in the classroom. Challenging the all too common

majoritarian narrative that "if you work hard, you will be successful," the women suggested that

it may not be so simple for Black undergraduate women. Alicia shared:

I don't know, but sometimes I feel like they don't want to see our class, grace, and

success…sometimes even our own people…at the university and in our classes, I feel like

professors see it and don't want to.

The women in Alicia's Sister Dialogue Circle sat back after Alicia's comment, almost sinking

into their seats with a sense of affirmation and validation. There were several head nods in the

space when Alicia spoke, as if the women collectively experienced the same thing as Alicia and

were living with these thoughts and feelings without knowing if they were alone – they were in

fact all in it together. Alicia's comments pull forward and expose the ways in which as a Black

undergraduate woman, who was doing academically and socially extremely well at Beychella

University, she was able to notice the difference in treatment and the ways in which people

silence her and work to make her invisible. I wrote in a memo, in response to Alicia's comment,

"this reminds me of all of those quotes and more importantly the work of Black Feminist

Scholars who describe the biggest threat to white supremacy is the educated Black person." For

Alicia, and others, they are doing well and yet they are experiencing barriers that make the idea

of "working hard" seem like the impossible solution to an equitable experience.

Monáe, Sade, and Alicia shared a moment they made humor out of during the Circle when they collectively expressed strong feelings against group projects, with Alicia sharing, "they just act like you don't exist, like you didn't just say that." The women in the Sister Dialogue Circle collectively laughed, some rolled their eyes, and the comment instantly led to side chatter across the women that was a blend between saying "yes, yup, uh huh" and "girl, if this doesn't happen to me every single day," as Sade shared. Alicia's comment and the affirmation from others to her comment was also surrounded by comments about sharing an idea in the classroom and it being disregarded and then having a white peer or man say the same comment right after and receiving praise – mansplaining. While the example in the Circle focused on group projects, it was far more deeply rooted. Group projects happened to be a salient and clear example, and the reality for these Black undergraduate women in the Sister Dialogue Circles was that this feeling of "not existing" and constant re-explaining by people from dominant identities is toxic, continuous, and exhausting. During moments of learning in the classroom, the women explained how they are navigating their desire to contribute, show their presence to the faculty member, and push through continuous moments of being silenced and minimized by their peers in ways that the Black women in the project did not feel happened to other women or racial identity groups. In addition to simply existing as Black women, these women carry the experiences and messages from Chapter Four and the daily interactions with faculty and peers that reinforce their silence, invisibility, and need to over perform in positive ways in order to be noticed and acknowledged at Beychella University. No matter how hard they work, the women described themselves in ways that depicted them as the strange fruit in the classroom – *existing as protest*.

White peers

Interactions with white peers on campus and in the classroom are familiarities that came up for several participants in the study, as alluded to above. In most cases, the discussion of white peers came forward by participants when describing their experiences at Beychella University compared to what they perceive to be the experiences of their white peers. It was really hard, and in fact impossible, for the women in this project to reflect on their experiences at Beychella University without naming the ways in which they see and feel themselves experiencing the campus compared to their white peers. Although it was not the intention or suggested to the women in the project to operate within a Black and white binary of race, it was a salient dichotomy that was clear for the participants as Black undergraduate women at a PWI. The experiences of white peers were positioned as the norm and the experiences of Black women were felt and described as far from the norm, if anything the perception of the women was that their treatment and experiences would be opposite of whatever they perceived their white peers experiencing.

Although race and whiteness were clear, evident, and very much present for the Black undergraduate women in the project, race was not clear for their peers and that also impacted the participant's experiences as Black undergraduate women. Tina shared that she finds often times in the classroom, specifically in her courses where race is named and discussed, that:

> white people are not going to identify as white necessarily…they'll say like I'm Russian
> or Eastern European or whatever…it's like they'll say they're white, but won't actually
> say that because they want to seem cultured.

Tina's tone when sharing how she experienced her white peers in the classroom was one of frustration and annoyance – almost as if white people had permission to detach from their racial

identity or not own in, latching on to ethnicity, while as a Black woman she did not have the access, choice, or maybe desire to detach and that came with consequences. In a memo following this Sister Dialogue Circle I wrote:

> I felt Tina's exhaustion. In her words she shared something that I think we all notice and experience, but it felt heavier when she named it in the way that she did – I'm not sure why. Tina did not suggest that she wanted anything besides what she observes her white peers experiencing…exactly what Black Feminist Scholars always say. We just want to exist too and not exist with the additional layers and barriers to navigate. But, my existence is actually what changes my treatment right away. I can't hide, Tina can't hide, and we don't want to hide…we just don't want to be less than, miss opportunities, be treated poorly, and whatever else, simply because we love our Black selves.

In addition to how white peers identify racially in the classroom, participants, particularly in the second Sister Dialogue Circle, named a disconnect around motivation that shows up when interacting with white peers in the classroom. Carrying the messages that they received, described by the women in reference to their family and loved ones in Chapter Four, the women existed at Beychella University with a pressure to perform in certain ways in order to gain access and in ways to just keep up with whiteness. Monáe, Sade, and Alicia shared with one another:

> Sade: It's like you're not credible…you're not white, like, "Okay!" But you came to this school with more knowledge than some of them, more than half of them
>
> Monáe: And I feel like on top of what she just said, I feel like we come with so much more drive and so much more…I'm ready to put in work, I'm not here to play, I'm not here to have fun, I'm ready to graduate and do good. For them it's like, "are you going to graduate?" and I'm like "What?!"

Alicia: "You know, my mom told me to apply so I did...I got in, so yeah"

Monáe: And they drop out two weeks later

Sade: They'll be like "Yeah, I'm not going to lecture today." I said, "Really? Tell me more." Meanwhile, most of us…we go to class every day to just tell the teacher, "I'm still here"

The experience with white peers resonated with Sade, Faith, Alicia, and Monáe. While recognizing these experiences as less than positive interactions, they all named that they could not have the same attitudes and behaviors they see in their white peers if they want to do well, get good grades, and graduate as Black women at Beychella University. Sade shared that "you don't want to feel like the only Black person in your class, but at the same time, you know you are…and the differences between us [Black and white people] is our drive."

Although all participants spoke about some of the classroom challenges being at a predominantly white institution, they also spoke to the ways in which they navigate the classroom experience by finding courses that feel more welcoming, as mentioned at the beginning of the Chapter. Participants who took more courses in the liberal arts named specific courses and faculty that made them feel as if they existed as Black women, and more broadly acknowledged and honored Black people. Baker shared that she was taking a course in African American Studies about Black culture at the time of our Sister Dialogue Circle and said that the majority of the students in the class were Black and Latinx and offered with a very energized and positive tone, "it's like a Black people class basically." Baker continued to share that this was one of her favorite courses at Beychella University so far. Kardi and Nicki echoed the sentiment from Baker about the favoritism of the course, and both shared that they intentionally take African American Studies and Women and Gender Studies courses each semester. Kardi shared:

it's just so refreshing for me coming from [my academic department]…I've taken an

African American Studies class since my freshman year and I'm a junior now and taking

a 400 level class called Black Pop Culture.

At Beychella University, there is a high concentration of Faculty of Color in the Women and

Gender Studies Department, with the majority of faculty being Women of Color from the United

States and international locations. In addition, the content taught by the faculty in the Women

and Gender Studies Department is done through a feminist, decolonial, and intersectional lens,

which lends itself to be rooted in justice, un-silencing the voices that have been silenced, creating

and claiming space, and affirming the existence of Women of Color in the academy – the

Women and Gender Studies Department is disruptive at Beychella University.

In addition to finding an academic space on campus, particularly through the African

American Studies and Women and Gender Studies Departments at Beychella University,

participants in both Circles spoke about the ways that they feel support in the classroom from

other Black peers and Students of Color. Although small in numbers, these support spaces in

each course or major seem to organically form for each participant. Monáe shared:

I know people in pre-med that are minorities and they say…they're like as a minority, sit

in the front of the class, make a statement, don't be afraid to raise your hand. So it's like

I feel like we're also supporting each other, like we all have each other's back so that we

don't really feel as isolated when there's only one of us in a group or class.

As a first-year student, Monáe had this space and network that would be with her through her

time at Beychella University. In my memo, in response to Monáe's experience, I shared, "it is

like the black book in PWIs…you find out the unwritten rules for being Black in the academy if

you hope to survive." It was clear that the women in this project all found and were working to

continue finding the unwritten rules, which increased their social and cultural capital at Beychella University and allowed them to maintain their seats at the table.

A Woman's Worth: Friendships & Relationships

All of the women spoke about their various relationships with people during college. In different ways, each participant spoke about the value and worth of these friendships and relationships and the significance to their experience at Beychella University. Three participants shared that they are in relationships with Black men and two participants shared about recently ending relationships with Black men. The participants who did not share about a current or former relationship, did not explicitly identify their sexuality or discuss any involvement in previous relationships.

Friendships

Each participant shared about their friendships and equally described them as core to their wellbeing, persistence, and support. All of the participants described various friendships that feel important to them since beginning at Beychella University. Participants in their first year at Beychella University discussed the challenges of transitioning from high school friendships to college friendships, making a distinction between the two. One participant shared, "In high school…I had like a really strong support network of friends. In college, it was little bit different like especially your freshman year like you're starting to build those relationships."

While finding what the women described as real relationships was an obstacle for some during their first year of college, others spoke about the challenges building relationships with other Black women overall. Each participant described groups of Black women they are friends with and all related to finding, and the process of finding, authentic relationships. Nicki shared:

In general with Black women, I feel like there are definitely Black women who are

manipulative, and like don't really want to help uplift you. And that's unfortunate for

them. And then you have others that are just like "you're going to do something, you're

going to be great, like I believe in you." Like I'm definitely that type of person like I'll

see things that my friends wanna do and if they didn't receive the message, or whatever

I'll pass it along to them like "hey I saw this thing and it's something you'll definitely

love doing." So it's just a matter of like who you are as a Black woman. Do you want to

be the manipulative one or you're going to be the one that's like here to help and uplift

everyone?

The women affirmed Nicki by nodding their heads, as if to share with Nicki non-verbally that

they experienced something similar and could relate to what she was communicating. Nicki's

last question, while rhetorical to the women in the Sister Dialogue Circle, was powerful and left

the group in a pause – true silence – for a moment. It was unclear if the women were asking

themselves the question and/or deeply resonating with and relating to what Nicki felt and

communicated.

Despite some of the challenges while experiencing the journey of building authentic

relationships with others, particularly other Black women, the group all valued the relationships

they found in their individual processes. Baker spoke about her relationships, sharing:

My support group would be my one friend named Tiffany…and like surprisingly she's

like a friend that I've met through Tumbler, so we haven't actually met yet, but I always

like talk to her on the phone or like Skype and stuff. We've known each other since

2015. But like alongside that, I also have like just my friends here that I've made over

freshman year…a lot of them like really support me and make sure that I'm okay.

While Baker did not go into much explanation about her relationship with Tiffany, it was a point

that resonated with me for a while as the researcher. I did not need to make sense of the relationship and wanted to be sure to highlight the importance of the virtual relationship that Baker described, and how that sustained her in more ways than other relationships that may exist in person. Although no one else spoke about a virtual relationship, Baker's experience potentially pulled forward the ways in which authenticity in relationships sometimes exists or does not when the physical is involved and/or present.

From Baker's experience and description of relationships, other women offered how they determined the value of relationships. Kardi shared in a written reflection:

My whole self

Being a Black woman at Beychella University is not hard but it is far from easy

But the best thing about it is

I know I will always be surrounded by my community when and where I want

And though we are a small percentage when compared to the majority

It makes all the difference

When you are surrounded by people who get it, in times of struggle or discomfort

We don't call ourselves an HBCU

But we call ourselves HBC…

Kardi's emphasis on community and being surrounded by community when and where she wants, and perhaps needs, appears in a similar capacity as Baker's reference to Tiffany. The commonality in these different experiences with relationships is the consistency of having the support, presence, and seemingly unconditional commitment to one another.

Respectability politics. Throughout both Sister Dialogue Circles, there was a theme of respectability politics that multiple participants named. In the case of this project, respectability

politics were described by participants as the ways in which some Black people police other Black people for not performing and behaving in line with white ways of knowing – rather than challenging and disrupting the mainstream. In the examples given, the participants were in conversation with other Black people who they felt they had close relationships with.

Sade expressed frustration and disappointment with people in the Black community because of the ways in which individuals are caught in respectability politics. Sade told the Circle that she has received comments about being loud and often times feels like her natural volume mixed with her passion when she speaks is criticized within the Black community, and she gets labeled as the "angry Black woman" by people from all races. Sade shared about an exchange with a friend who she said was a Black man:

> So yesterday we were at the dining hall and this boy that's our friend is like, "why are you guys always so loud?" And I'm like, "the problem that you have here is not that I'm loud. The problem that you have is that I'm Black and I'm loud. So you're upset because you feel like I'm negatively representing the community. You don't have a problem with the fact that I'm loud, you're just mad that I'm Black and loud." And his response was, "oh there's a time and place for everything."

The women collectively seemed disappointed in the Black man from hearing Sade's story and also expressed a sense of sadness through empathy for Sade. In a memo following this Circle, I wrote:

> Sade's analysis of the situation, and quick response to the man, was unwavering. She is a bold, confident, and brilliant woman. Her readiness to name that the man's issue was not in fact with her being loud, but rather being Black and woman and loud was a critical call out. Go Sade. And, how often does Sade have to respond to this critique from Black

people about her tone and communication? It's like Sade has to continuously justify or

defend her existence, her worth, for who she is as a Black woman *who is not white*.

Reflecting on the messages from men, specifically Black men, described in Chapter Four and

presented here, they continue to show up for the women at Beychella University. What is

unspoken and salient in this instance with Sade, and perhaps the shared experience by other

Black women, are the ways in which Black women navigate receiving this policing of their

language, body, and presentation when the messages come from their own community members.

Relationships

Of the three women who shared about current relationships, two were in long distance

relationships, dating people who do not attend or live near Beychella University. One of the

women, Tina, shared that she met her partner of seven months (at the time of the Circle) on

Tinder and that he lives in Texas and attends a community college. When Tina goes home, she

sees him and spoke about the expectations that her family has when she is home and how that

conflicts with seeing him at times. Tina shared, "We met in December and so I made it very

clear that I'm a student who is in school in [the northeast] and it's difficult, but I told him right

off the bat, so he understands."

Unlike Tina, Sade shared that she has been in a relationship with someone from home in

Brooklyn since high school and her family is unaware of the relationship. Sade shared that her

boyfriend is "figuring things out with his life" right now and that she "doesn't know how long

things will last and was just over it." Sade described some of the conflict she was feeling with

him by saying, "The problem be like my life is more lit than his now, and that wasn't the case

back home. And I'm like, "I can't help you." He has his own problems about that."

In both cases, Tina and Sade described their relationships as something important to them

and also as relationships that would not distract them from their academic goals – points they both seemed to also make clear to their partners. The women, regardless of being in relationships or not, all spoke about wanting to be in relationships, but feeling that it is really difficult to find people who want the same thing at Beychella University. The women collectively communicated wanting to find people who identified as Black and how that alone limits their options at Beychella University, particularly with the common feeling that "Black athletes are reserved for white women here," as Alicia and Kardi both expressed in their separate Sister Dialogue Circles. There was a feeling shared across the women that as long as they were educated Black women, they would find it difficult to meet Black men to date.

The women described caution that they take with any sexual relationship, knowing that even if there's a desire to engage with someone sexually, they could jeopardize their whole reputation in the Black community at Beychella University. Kardi and Tina both laughed as they made comments back and forth:

Kardi: Like don't get caught up thinking you're the only person having sex with him

Tina: True. There's always another girl…she just may not live on [side of a campus]

Kardi: Word. Like do your homework, check their social media because right when you leave, someone else is coming

Tina: It sucks because you may actually like a person and then you find out from others that they're dating someone and because the school is big, you may not know that especially if they're not dating a Black girl

Kardi: I always tell new girls…just because he dances with you at the party or invites you to the kickback after the party, does NOT mean a thing

As Tina and Kardi reflected on their experiences and perhaps unspoken rules for Black

women at Beychella University, Alicia shared in her Sister Dialogue Circle her own advice and experience. Alicia spoke about how important it has been to her to navigate being intimate with people on campus and shared, "like most guys will say whatever it takes to get you to come over and for me, if you call…let's be real, they will text and not call…after 10pm, then I just don't want to even gas myself up and get interested." Alicia said to the group that she is a virgin and when that was known by a few people on campus, it was as if all of the Black community knew and "every guy was determined to win." The other women in the Circle, some in surprise to learn that Alicia was a virgin, also expressed disgust through facial expressions that "guys were determined to win." With two first year students at Beychella University in Alicia's group, their curiosity around Alicia's comments were named and Alicia said, "we can talk later, and I'll tell you everything you need to know." It was collectively important for all of the women to be in relationships where their partners knew and understood their worth, and if learning Alicia's advice would support that, the women were all ready to learn from Alicia.

They See Pictures, They Say Goals: Imagining Futures of Black Undergraduate Women

In both Sister Dialogue Circles, women shared about distinct memories that they carry with them today and inform the ways in which they push forward at Beychella University. With each obstacle presented to them, particularly those who identified as upper-class students, the women emphasized the potential, strength, and resilience that they see in themselves and in other Black undergraduate women. Participants put forward excitement and pride in being Black women and the possibilities of their futures. Destiny shared with her group, "I am so motivated from hearing all of your stories" as the Circle's energy in the room increased in a positive way. While the Sister Dialogue Circles took place during a time in social media when the hashtag #goals was trending, it was evident in conversation that the group collectively felt they could see

and feel goals in one another.

Goals & Success

Participants want to be successful and know what that means for them. Despite being in different majors and minors, the perception and meaning of success from the participants all got described in terms of job titles, caring for family, and most importantly to them was having money, being rich, and being wealthy. Depending on participants' childhood, their response to success varied. Participants who had experience traveling with family referenced traveling as a symbol of success and participants who identified as growing up in the hood described success as being able to purchase certain materials and tangible items.

For many participants, the motivation to be successful stemmed from where they came from and what they do not want for themselves or their families, based on what they experienced. Sade shared, "my drive is that I'm going to make $100,000 a year one day…I didn't struggle all the way back then to continue to struggle. So I'm gonna make it happen somehow." In a similar way, Monáe shared:

> I feel like I know where I come from and I feel like I just know where I'm going. I wouldn't see my mom often 'cause she was always working, she was a single mother. I want my kids to have things a little bit easier than I did, so it's like ok I'm pushing for myself to have a good future, but not only for myself, but for my family and just in general, the people around me.

As described at the onset of this chapter, the women's motivations to attend college were often times based on things bigger than themselves, and this reappears here as they consider success as well. Faith connected to the experiences and feelings that Sade and Monáe shared, all identifying as being from families of immigrants. Faith shared:

My mom…coming in as an immigrant and also she owns a house, she's about to retire. She came here speaking no English…and me, I'm almost done with school. It's just inspiring to see this as a first generation American. I think for me it's just all an internal thing and I think that it's a gift we all have, which I think is really phenomenal. I don't know, I just…I just wanna kill it…it will never stop.

From a different lens than Sade and Monáe, Alicia shared about how her experiences growing up are what she feels prepared her to be strong today. Alicia shared:

I see myself being pretty wealthy and building a nice family and stuff, but then I'll be like, "I kinda want my kid to grow up in the struggle" because I feel like really the only thing that sometimes pushes me is the struggle because it all gets so tiring. I feel like, "dang you're all here trying to double-major, be in this club, work, get an internship, look good, have friends." Like this is too much and you have family stuff going on.

With various motivations and reasons, all participants had an imagination about success and a desire to be successful. While some measures of success were rooted in having money and tangibles, two participants emphasized their happiness as a measure of success. Baker described success as "being able to afford to live in America…to afford to live and having the ability to do stuff that I like and enjoy." Even further, Tina described success as "constantly being the best person that I can be…just growing and absorbing information and being satisfied. Making good quality connections to me. To be happy is success." Regardless of their perceptions of success, participants felt success was possible and something they are currently working to build.

Advice

In both Sister Dialogue Circles, there were pieces of advice shared by the upper-class participants to younger participants in the project. In the same sense, this advice was offered for

all Black undergraduate women at Beychella University and in college.

When asked by Sade and Monáe what guidance she would give to them as first year students at Beychella University, Alicia shared:

Work on your reputation now because it goes a long…your reputation your freshman year determines the way…how people will perceive you as a woman in your junior, senior year. It carries you. When people know who you are, you have a good reputation and how you carry yourself, I feel like it opens a door for opportunities later on.

In response to the same question, Faith shared with the women in the Sister Dialogue Circle, "I just think it's really important to knock on doors…make an effort to go to places on campus, don't just stick with your home college."

Less directly connected to a question from another participant in the Sister Dialogue Circles, Baker and Kardi used the Circle space as an opportunity to motivate one another and offer advice and points of reflection. Baker shared:

We do a lot of freaking shit…I feel like we need to appreciate just the fact that we've been through it all. I love this thing where it's all like…no one else is doing it and a Black woman is all like, "fuck it, I'll do it!" because if it has to be done, we'll do it.

Kardi followed up to Baker's comment with a deep sense of passion and conviction:

Just celebrating the fact that we are strong, dealing with everything that we deal with, with us being Black women in society today, on a daily basis, just the thoughts and the things that we run into and the things that affect us, the way that we handle it. The true strength I feel like all Black women have, I feel like that's so beautiful to me.

Through their strength and resilience, the Black women in this project shared how they continued to make lemonade when only being given lemons at Beychella University. Pulling

together their life experiences before attending Beychella University, where they navigated messages and memories to inform their sense of self as Black women, to their ongoing development as Black women in higher education, these women are enough and have everything that they individually and collectively need. Despite assumptions, obstacles, and barriers presented to these women, they continue.

Chapter Five captures multiple experiences in higher education while attending Beychella University as shared by the women in both Sister Dialogue Circles. The women offered explicit experiences related to their college decision process, navigating the classroom with faculty and peers at a PWI, and how they formed or worked to form relationships with others at Beychella University. Despite the continuous examples of moments when the women were challenged as valid and enough, their determination to be successful showed up even in the most traumatic moments when others at Beychella University questioned the worth of the women in the study – they were resilient. The experiences of the women in higher education are not detached from the messaging they received prior to attending, and in Chapter Seven, a deeper analysis is offered to connect the ways in which the messages and experiences in higher education come together. In Chapter Four and Chapter Five, the focus was on the dialogic findings of the study and Chapter Six will focus on the ways that space as a method came forward as an additional finding.

CHAPTER SIX

GET IN FORMATION: SPACE

One of the most salient findings from the study was the meaning and symbolism of space – physical space and metaphorical space. The ways that the women understood – individually and collectively – how to navigate space, make meaning of space, and create space when there was none, remained constant throughout the Sister Dialogue Circles. There are four components to space that come from this project: (1) space as home (2) space as higher education (3) space as community art space, and (4) space as the Sister Dialogue Circles. In all four concepts of space, the women claimed space as a way of working towards becoming their fullest selves. In many cases, the meaning of space was not always explicitly named by participants. Most importantly, through the findings the complexity and fluidity of space for the participants becomes evident. In ways, the physical structure of space is pulled forward at times, for example when participants described a physical location. However, in other ways the metaphorical structure, feeling, or understanding of space is pulled forward more, for example when participants are discussing their sense of safety, comfort, and emotions attributed to experiences, structures, and people. In order to honor the voices of the participants, the shifting of space between physical and metaphorical remains fluid in this Chapter and invites the reader to feel the complexity of space for Black undergraduate women.

This chapter captures the behaviors and feelings that took place during the Sister Dialogue Circles that reflected the meaning of the space for the women. In some cases, space was comforting, gave permission to participants to be authentic, and provided a sense of safety and affirmation, while other spaces felt more complicated. This chapter expands on the theme of space by bringing forward specific examples that highlight how participants claimed space, made

meaning of space, and the importance and significance of Black girls and women centered spaces, through the frameworks of Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory.

Space as Home

Throughout Chapter Four, the ways in which the women in this project received and experienced messages in their space of home shaped how they would understand the meaning of the space of home – literally and figuratively. While the messages that the women received prior to attending Beychella University were not all necessarily in the physical home they lived in, they were associated with home for the women. Throughout the Sister Dialogue Circles, the women captured their life prior to attending Beychella University as "home." In all cases, home was attributed to particular people and often times that came with a reference to a physical location, even if that location changed or shifted in ways, and particular feelings.

When asked about "home," the women described all things that provided them with consistency, stability, and a sense of safety. For example, Destiny shared with her Sister Dialogue Circle that moving from Florida to New York was a significant transition, but that she "always had her mom." Kardi offered to the group a description of her home and described the "degrees on the wall" and the routine of "traveling together during school breaks." For Sade, Faith, and Monáe, home was "the place where our parents fought to come to and build for us to be successful." Home was associated with family in metaphorical ways, independent of physical location.

Regardless of where the women came from, they each described the active motion of going home – wanting to go home, questioning whether they should go home, and associated a feeling with their decisions to be or not to be home. Particularly once the women began their college career at Beychella University, they started to navigate when and why to go home. In

some cases, their families moved or changed the physical layout of their homes when the women went to college, and that left a sense of disconnect for some of them – trying to remember home as what it was and not what it became after leaving. Other women shared the potential tensions that existed between them and their families related to their decision-making since attending Beychella University. For example, Tina knew that when she went home, it would be hard to navigate the "church space" and the expectations that her family had about her presentation and appearance – Tina did not want to deal with those opinions, but yet wanted to be home to visit her partner, grandmother, and mother. Alicia shared with her Sister Dialogue Circle that she already spoke with her mom about not returning to their physical home after college and that had some of the other women in shock. Alicia said, "I mean I will visit, but I have so much that I want to do…want to see…just places to go and handle my business. My mom may be sad, but she can visit. I'm trying to hustle and be successful." Having experienced multiple summer internships and jobs that kept Alicia away from home, she was more comfortable with the idea of potentially not returning, at least for awhile, unlike Sade and Monáe who just began their college careers and could not fathom physically going anywhere besides home on a break, even if they did not want to do so all of the time.

The idea of home as a space of meaning and significance to the women was evident. Whether it was from learning about their perception of the messages received at home, to the behaviors expected of them at home, the women felt like there was an emotion associated with home that was positive. Entrenched in moments of confusion, development, and coming into one's sense of self as Black women, home metaphorically remained constant, consistent, and safe to the women in the project – a space of belonging. In some cases, home had to be something that the women could actually package up and move, for others home was the kitchen

table where family came together. Regardless of the physical, metaphorically, the women seemed to have a sense of comfort in the idea that their home could never fully be taken from them – while perhaps their dwelling and literal bedroom could change, their sense of home could not be taken. For the women in this project, the significance of space as home was not as much about an object, but rather about their relationship to others.

Space as Higher Education

The history of higher education, some of which is highlighted in Chapter One and Chapter Two, demonstrates the ways in which the institution of higher education as a larger system and structure, is not inclusive of or always welcoming to Black undergraduate women. To acknowledge this and also exist in the structure as a researcher and as participants in this project is complicated. The space of higher education broadly, and specifically the space of higher education at Beychella University, has a history of exclusion. The intention behind creating a counterspace in itself acknowledges the problematic structure and yet does not eliminate the reintegration back into a space of whiteness for the Black women in the study. The ways in which the women had to strategically navigate the physical spaces of Beychella University, from their descriptions of the white fraternity and sorority housing areas to their classroom experiences, is ongoing and exhausting.

White Spaces

The women's experiences in higher education, described in Chapter Five, bring forward the ways in which Beychella University is laced with whiteness. In this sense, the institution is structured for white ways of knowing and white students, faculty, and staff. Inevitably, this poses a barrier for the Black women in this project to constantly navigate. From the examples in the physical classroom during group projects when the women would be disregarded and

silenced, to the invisibility that many of the women experienced with their faculty in the classroom, the women acknowledged and described being in a *white space*. In this constant navigation, the women prioritized their own success – academically and socially – and yet found themselves needing to understand the ways that white peers operate in the space in order to determine the unspoken rules at Beychella University. As Sade highlighted in Chapter Five, showing up to class was not an option for her as a Black woman and she noted how her white peers could pick and choose when and where to show up academically, with little to no consequence. Although Beychella University was a white space, the women had distinct experiences learning what it meant to exist as Black undergraduate students, and how to feel a sense of belonging to the space when they knew they in fact found it difficult to feel part of the institution that was not meant for them.

F.U.B.U.: Black Spaces on Campus

A constant point raised by the women in the project connected to a theme of "for us, by us" – F.U.B.U. While F.U.B.U. is rooted in the Black community in many ways, from a clothing brand to a recent song on an album by Solange Knowles, it captures the ways in which the women expressed finding, creating, and claiming spaces during their time at Beychella University in both physical and metaphorical ways. The idea and action of spaces rooted in F.U.B.U. is an indication that spaces did not exist otherwise, and as the women participated in the Sister Dialogue Circles, the lack of physical space, significant and meaningful space, and space for Black undergraduate women to show up authentically and enough was limited.

At Beychella University, most of the participants who were sophomores, juniors, and seniors at the time of the project were aware of designated physical Black spaces on campus. These spaces were described as spaces that Black students on campus knew about and

understood as spaces where they could find community who shared similar experiences at Beychella University. During the second Sister Dialogue Circle, Alicia shared with the other women that there are specific ways to find a Black community at Beychella University and outlined that process clearly for Sade and Monáe. As highlighted by Alicia in the Circle, finding community begins in the summer, volunteering during move-in each year, getting to know Black Greeks on campus, eating in the student center during lunch in a specific area/corner, and moving to south campus as soon as possible. Echoed by Kardi in the first Circle, Kardi described the importance of the Black Greek community at Beychella University. Kardi highlighted that Black Greeks control the social options for the Black community on campus sharing, "Greeks control the social life of the Black community…basically if you're Greek, you have the parties." Alicia shared, "[Student Center] in general is for minorities. White people don't know what goes on in [Student Center] and Black Greeks set the trend."

Tina and Kardi had a similar feeling about the social spaces for Black students at Beychella University. Tina described parties in the following way:

So you pay. It's like, generally hosted by Greeks so you pay for the ticket to go. They'll have like pretty much all Black people…Black and Hispanic people. There's a few of those white girls, some Asian girls…they all think they're Black I guess, or whatever. And that's like a big event for the Black community…it's like the parties in [Student Center]. You could have a pre-game and then you have [Student Center], the actual event, and then the end of that event…all the Greeks are strolling and then the lights come on. Then there's an after-party somewhere…could be at the Alpha House or Sigma House or the Pound…that's the Que's house.

For some of the women in the Circles, it was their first time learning that there were actual

physical social spaces for Black people at Beychella University. Of the women who were not familiar with these social spaces, they quickly asked more questions and for details about upcoming parties during the weekends of the Circles.

Space as Community Art Center

The study was intentionally held in a counterspace to Beychella University, while still accessible to participants. Participants reflected on the space during both Sister Dialogue Circles and some of the participant's thoughts and feelings associated with the space are shared through their voices. At the beginning of both Sister Dialogue Circles, prior to the women signing the consent forms and in turn before recording devices were turned on, the women had multiple questions about the community art center. All of the women indicated that they never knew it existed prior to the study and arriving in the space for the first Sister Dialogue Circle. In my memo from the first Sister Dialogue Circle for each group, I reflected on the feelings and non-verbal facial expressions shared by the women who commented specifically on the physical space. The women were surprisingly pleased and also felt confused about how this space existed and they were so unaware of all that it offered to the community – yoga classes, creative arts workshops, gallery exhibits, and much more. At the first Sister Dialogue Circle, Tina said, "I've never entered a space that felt this Black near Beychella University before." The other women in the Circle laughed and echoed Tina's sentiments, with Kardi quickly following up by saying, "right, how many times do you walk into a place where all of the pictures are of important Black people and not old white men?"

While not planned to occur at the same time, a free community yoga class and the last Sister Dialogue Circle of the second group were happening concurrently. The yoga class attracted several women who the participants perceived to be Black and "older than college

aged," according to Sade. The yoga class attendees had to pass the room where we were meeting in order to get to their room, and without any direction or verbal communication to one another, several of the participants gathered near the door to watch the yoga attendees come down the hallway and go to their space. It was an innocent moment where some of the women in the Sister Dialogue Circle stood in amazement that these other Black women existed in the community around Beychella University. Monáe turned to me and asked, "do you think they went to Beychella University?" and I responded, "I'm not sure." After a large group of attendees for the yoga class entered, the participants in the project returned to their seats to eat breakfast. They all were smiling, they seemed lighter, and their energy was positive. Something happened in that moment when the Black women from Beychella University participating in my project saw themselves in other Black women, saw other Black women period, and could feel the significance of the community art center space. Being accustomed to knowing or at least feeling a sense of familiarity with other Black people on campus at Beychella University, this moment seemed like a pleasant surprise for the women in the Sister Dialogue Circle.

At the end of first Sister Dialogue Circle, during their final Circle, one of the Black women in leadership at the community art center came to meet with the participants. It was an impromptu request I made for the staff member to say hello and offer more information about the space, that came about when Kardi, Destiny, Baker, and Tina all expressed wanting to revisit the space in the future and attend events. The women wanted to know more, were eager to sign up for things, and all felt an attachment to the space. As the staff member shared some of the history of the space and listed upcoming events and ongoing ways to be part of the space, the participants appeared visibly invested in what they were learning. Kardi asked the staff member, "would it be possible to host events here for student organizations…well I'm thinking of my

Black women's mentoring group" and the staff member responded, "just fill out the request form." Kardi's face lit up and the women all quickly broke into side chatter with one another and the staff member, in excitement that they could come to the community art center's space, provide their peers with a similar introduction to the space, and also feel like the space was for them as Black women.

In various ways, the women expressed positive energy and deep appreciation for meeting in the community art center. The space held meaning on its own and of course a deeper meaning with the association to the Sister Dialogue Circles. It was my intention as the researcher to provide the women with a new space that was for them and to meet in a space counter to Beychella University. While all of the women in the Sister Dialogue Circles may not feel that Beychella University was a place of violence, trauma, or harm, scholarship on the experiences of Students of Color in higher education indicate that it is a high possibility for Black women, and my responsibility to my participants was to meet in a different space if it avoided further harm. Through the findings shared in Chapter Five, the women were affected by their experiences at Beychella University, and from watching the women sign up for events and workshops at the community art center, explore the current exhibit at the time, and vocally share their appreciation to the staff as they left their last Sister Dialogue Circle, it was evident that the community art space carried a positive meaning for the women.

Space as Sister Dialogue Circles

The Sister Dialogue Circles were created with deep thought, care, and intention. In alignment with the ways in which Black women consistently work to center care in Black Feminist scholarship, I prioritized the same in the creation of the Sister Dialogue Circles. As the researcher, I pulled on many experiences that felt personal and informed by my own educational

background to guide me through the design of the space. As a Black undergraduate woman at one point, I recognized the lack of physical space and the unique ways that we too formed together in the student center during lunch – creating space physically and metaphorically. I can recall moments of hoping for a physical space to discuss my experience, while being conflicted that when I did, I would be met with doubt or consequence. I also can name the specific moments of learning in dialogue spaces where trained Facilitators would bring me and people from various identities together to discuss police brutality, racism, and other identity related topics. In dialogue spaces, I could find myself and my voice.

As I continued into my career, through graduate school and new opportunities, I always came back to the ways in which space has the ability to be created well if someone with a background in facilitation puts time, care, and intention into the process. Although many Black women create similar physical spaces in the community and otherwise, my initial entry point to space, specifically for Black women and Students of Color, was from dialogue models in higher education. It was my hope that this physical space, the Sister Dialogue Circles, existed as a metaphorical space of permission, for the Black women who participated, to be themselves – emotion filled, strong, tired, confident, affirmed, confused, and more. Most importantly, the physical and metaphorical space, especially the metaphorical, of the Sister Dialogue Circle was to be created together – taking everyone's contributions – and be for each individual and the collective in whatever ways were needed at the time. In the Sister Dialogue Circles, you and we were enough, and that was to never be questioned.

Feel

As Black women, we rarely have space to feel. Perhaps this seems confusing or impossible, and yet so true and clear to us. To feel and show that you feel – happiness, sadness,

joy, liberation, anger – are moments that often times result in us being penalized. We have limited space – of all kinds – to remember or experience joy, playing, what some may describe as girlhood. We have limited space – of all kinds – to remember or experience anger, hurt, sadness because it positions us in ways that appear weak, less than, or as problems. With this weight of navigating emotions, the Sister Dialogue Circles hoped to give physical and metaphorical space for all emotions felt – and it did. As long as the women were willing to show up for one another, the Sister Dialogue Circles beautifully and organically constructed themselves into a safer space for the women to feel. The desire to feel or need to feel may have existed prior to the Sister Dialogue Circle for some of the women, and the ways in which the women experienced the space created for the Sister Dialogue Circles allowed them to fully feel if they were ready and wanted to do so. Tears, yelling, silence, laughter, all coexisted.

The use of humor, as mentioned in Chapter Four, appeared in the Sister Dialogue Circles and functioned as a way to navigate and feel out the permission for emotion in the space. Often times the women would use humor quickly after sharing something that elicited sadness or pain. Humor showed up in these conversations and interactions as a way to cope and negotiate the readiness for the space. The physical and metaphorical space always supported the various and multiple emotions that existed and that appeared when the women would physically touch one another to show support, tissues were passed around, and common laughter ensued when the experience was so real for so many of us at the same time.

Reflection

For each participant, there were different motivations to join the study. Destiny shared, "I've never really been around or seen Black girls in a positive light…that's why I chose to do this." For Destiny, the desire to find possibility models was something that she emphasized

throughout her Circle. In many ways, Destiny created different relationships and bonds to the women in the Sister Dialogue Circle. Destiny formed one relationship in particular with Kardi and quickly they described themselves to be in a mentoring/mentee-like relationship. Destiny wanted that relationship and wanted it to be authentic and real. Through their experience in the Sister Dialogue Circle, the benefit and interest in investing in one another as Black women even further motivated Kardi and Destiny to build a relationship in the ways they described wanting to have with Black women in general.

While some expressed needing the compensation that was offered as part of their reason to join the project, all participants shared that they sought to find an actual community, a place where they were understood, and a safe enough place to be fully Black women. Baker shared, "being able to come here and talk is good for uplifting your spirit and making sure you're with people who have similar experiences as you and so…I've just been really grateful for that." Additionally, Monáe shared, "This space provided me with an actual sisterhood feeling…like we're here and it's chill…I even forgot we were being recorded."

One-to-one, Faith shared, "Thank you so much for this space…it's the first time I feel like I've been heard since I came to Beychella University and it just feels so good to come here." While Faith shared this feeling as a senior, Destiny offered the meaning and impact of the space for her as a first-year student. Destiny shared:

> I think that a space is something that so many people, if they're not finding it, they'll…So many people don't search for it, I would say. And I think that it was just so nice to come here and have soul food. I think that the conversations we've had here, these are like the first conversations I've had since being here because it's not like small talk, and to have conversations that really are just changing the way I'm thinking, I think it's like…it's

been life changing being part of this. It's really cool.

When leaving our final Sister Dialogue Circle for both groups, women cried. Kardi shared with us at the close of the first Sister Dialogue Circle, "I just want to say goodbye…I don't want to cry, ok I'm going to cry. This space has been really special." It was fine, allowed, permitted for Kardi and other women to cry. While it was challenging to leave the space with the women at the final Circle for each group, I trusted that they would work to maintain their relationships if it was of interest. If nothing else, I knew as the researcher that this space would not be forgotten by the women – it meant something to each of them, for different reasons, and at different moments in their life and career at Beychella University. As we began to hug one another, participants from the first Sister Dialogue Circle committed to creating and using a GroupMe to stay in contact at the conclusion of the final Circle, using a quote I shared with the women during the experience as the name of the group, and offered in Chapter Four. The women in the second Sister Dialogue Circle exchanged contact information with one another at the conclusion of the final Circle. After six (6) hours spent together for each of the Sister Dialogue Circles, the meaning of the space, the feelings associated with the space, and the known and unknown impact of the space was present. We had space, we were allowed to show up, and we were seen, felt, and heard.

Space, the creation of space, and the claiming of space is intentional, disruptive, and necessary for Black women and in this project, Black undergraduate women at Beychella University. The lack of space – physically and metaphorically – at Beychella University for Black undergraduate women was felt. The ways in which space had the ability to carry meaning and give permission for the women to be authentically Black women was critical. While naming the need for physical space at Beychella University could not come easily at the onset of the

project, the women were able to describe the need by the end of the Sister Dialogue Circles. For the first time in some cases, and for a rare time in other cases, having a space to feel – emotions, purpose, importance, affirmed – was all too uncommon for these women on a daily basis. The ways in which a physical space can take up meaning and significance – positively or negatively – is present throughout this study. Most importantly, what comes forward in this finding around the significance of space, is that the women want and need space at Beychella University and the intentional, co-constructed design, and flattened power dynamic of the Sister Dialogue Circles, centering the participants as knowers and as enough as Black women, was powerful and had a positive impact.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six provided the key findings in the study. The overarching themes revealed in the study include descriptions of the (1) socialization as Black women (2) experiences as Black women in higher education attending a PWI and (3) meaning of space for Black undergraduate women in higher education attending a PWI. These themes highlighted the experiences of nine Black undergraduate women and the value they put on persisting at, and beyond, Beychella University. This study allowed participants to center their race and gender as part of their development as undergraduate students at Beychella University. In Chapter Seven, the discussion of findings will be expanded upon through the lens of Black Feminist Theory (BFT) and Critical Race Theory (CRT). In addition, Chapter Seven will address limitations, provide implications for policies and practices in higher education, and identify specific recommendations for Beychella University and higher education to center the experiences of Black undergraduate women in higher education.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LEMONS INTO LEMONADE: EMBODIMENT, STRENGTH & RESILIENCE

"God bless the child that's got her own…"

~Billie Holiday

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 offered specific examples from participants reflecting on their experiences as Black undergraduate women at Beychella University. The findings presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are further analyzed in this Chapter in relation to Black Feminist Theory (BFT), Critical Race Theory (CRT), and current literature about Black women in higher education. While this body of literature is limited in ways, as it relates to being specifically about Black undergraduate women and their sense of self, the work of Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory are used to support my research. Implications, limitations, and recommendations from this study will also be provided in this Chapter, centering on Black undergraduate women at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) and the significance of creating intentional space for Black undergraduate women.

Black Feminist Theory

Black Feminist Theory (BFT) allows us to be us, validating our existence as enough and our experiences living as Black women as a form of knowledge. Black Feminist Theory shaped this study by centering storytelling as a methodological approach for Black undergraduate women to share their experiences.

> The practice of storytelling or narrative is deeply rooted in African American culture. It is a tradition based on the continuity of wisdom, and it functions to assert the voice of the oppressed. Storytelling is not merely a means of entertainment. It is also an educational tool, and for many, it is a way of life (Amoah, 1997, p. 84).

Through this project, the use of storytelling and creating a counternarrative was intentional and sought to give an opportunity to Black undergraduate women, a historically marginalized population in higher education, to claim and reclaim their voices. Additionally, Black Feminist Theory "arises from an understanding of intersecting patterns of discrimination" (Simien, 2008) and requires that race, gender, and class be taken up as coexisting identities affecting Black women. In addition, Black Feminist Theory informed the practice of care that I used as the researcher in this project. Leading with an ethic of care about the participants, in the specific ways done, is rooted in Black Feminism. Lastly, and very salient, Black Feminist Theory informed the design of the space. In partnership with ethics of care and aspects of Critical Race Theory, the Sister Dialogue Circles are the embodiment of Black Feminist practices.

Black Feminist Theory was an essential theoretical framework to understand the findings of this project. Focusing on the ways that Black Feminist Theory (1) centers the voices and lived experiences of Black women (2) intentionally takes up race and gender as connected identities impacted by systems of power and privilege and (3) validates the need for specific spaces for Black women to be in solace with another. The findings from this study align with the literature on intersectionality in higher education (Crenshaw,1989; Museus & Griffin, 2011), demonstrating the unique location and experiences of Black women as an embodied way of knowing and existing in the United States. In addition, the findings manifest as a disruption of whiteness in the academy, upholding a major component of Black Feminist Theory's purpose.

Space

Black Feminist Theory identifies the need for specific spaces to come together with other Black women for community and in many cases for empowerment, validation, and for safety (hooks, 1989). Through her work, Brown (2013) describes the significance of space and

thoughtful design in creating a space for Black women. Similar to Brown, my research

demonstrated that Black women sought a space of community, with other Black undergraduate

women. Each participant made meaning of the space and identified the impact of the space, as

outlined in Chapter Six. The desire for space, specifically a space that felt safe enough, and in

this study a counterspace, was intentional and resulted in the development of a community of

women from the Sister Dialogue Circles. The participants all agreed that using the community

art space that focused on the work of Black artists, combined with eating soul food, was

significant. The space created was associated with the Sister Dialogue Circle, as opposed to any

trauma or negative associations that could be attributed to Beychella University.

Patton (2006; 2016) describes the meaning of spaces in higher education, such as cultural

centers and other university spaces, to have institutional significance and potentially missing the

mark on possible outcomes and impact. Through my research with the women, several spoke

about the insignificance of spaces such as the cultural center on campus, and it rarely came up in

conversation as a space that felt safe enough and for community building. In fact, multiple

participants shared that if you do not immediately join a program or initiative at the cultural

center at Beychella University, specifically during your first year of school, you will not likely

be able to join later on and in turn not receive support from the space. This model at the cultural

center at Beychella University suggests that students, in this case Black undergraduate women,

enter college knowing what they want and need in terms of support and space.

The yearning for a space that honors the various ways in which the participants identified

as Black women was salient. The women who had the opportunity to take courses in Women

and Gender Studies or African American Studies, in addition to those who were involved in

student organizations that centered Black students and People of Color, often times described

those spaces as rare, urgent, and affirming. For the participants, there was a recognition that there was not an abundance of space to offer these feelings and experiences consistently at Beychella University.

During the Sister Dialogue Circles, participants spoke about being "Black enough," which is described in more detail in Chapter Four. The idea of being "Black enough" stemmed from particular interests (e.g., music, hobbies), being educated, and subscribing to certain ways that did or did not align with stereotypes of being Black in the United States. Participants were able to validate one another around their Blackness and created a culture of all being simply enough. The choice that the participants made to have our space in this project serve as a site of affirmation and honor each person individually, was understood as unique to the participants, compared to many other spaces they have to navigate at Beychella University.

The participants themselves said, the space became a site of empowerment, validation, and sisterhood. The disappointment and sadness expressed at the conclusion of both Sister Dialogue Circles was a demonstration of the need and desire for the space to exist, beyond a study. The participants did not know what to expect from the space when joining – literally and figuratively – and discussed the strong level of appreciation and need to continue forming similar communities since they do not organically or institutionally exist at Beychella University. The importance of space, more resources, and support for Black undergraduate women at Beychella University – sites of possibility that are seen and felt as a counter to sites of oppression – is evident.

Voice

Black Feminist Theory scholars (Hill Collins, 1989; hooks, 1990) describe two of the most important components of BFT to be centering Black women in the work and to disrupt

whiteness. In distinct ways, this project does both, and prioritizes the voices of Black undergraduate women. Regardless of each participant's motivation to be part of the project, they fully contributed to the Sister Dialogue Circle and put forward their voices.

In many examples presented in Chapters 4 and 5, participants were seeking to find their voice throughout their identity development prior to attending Beychella University and that process continued during their time in college. Coming into their Blackness and being women was a journey for participants. From learning about their complexion, to understanding their hair, and to making sense of their bodies were all distinct processes for each participant to develop their voice. In many examples, participants described their various decisions about who they are as being in conflict with family messages, values, and beliefs. The layers of messaging, and complex messages about their beauty, presentation, and behaviors was not to be understood in segments or in a linear way – it was in fact impossible. The multilayered process of coming into one's self showed up in ways that demonstrated gaps in literature about Black undergraduate women. The lived experiences of the Black undergraduate women in this project were far from simple and were deeply informative prior to them attending college. The constant negotiation of previous messages with the current sense of self was not finished and informed how the women showed up at Beychella University daily.

Participants strongly expressed their ability and confidence to be Black women in a way that did not support or align with complacency and inauthenticity, specifically not adhering to white norms to be successful. The various descriptions of image, classroom interactions, and personal relationships were indicators of how the women challenged themselves around authenticity and resisting the expectations for them to either fulfill negative stereotypes about Black undergraduate women and/or be submissive to white supremacy and whiteness. While

very aware of the potential consequences of pushing against whiteness, the participants all spoke

to wanting to feel their integrity was always in line with their values and lived experiences.

Through the development of their voice – internal and external – the participants continuously

explored who they are as Black undergraduate women and their commitment to working towards

being their most authentic selves.

Intersectionality

Black Feminist scholar Crenshaw (1989, 1991; Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw et al., 2015)

explicitly identified that we are unable to discuss Black and women as separate identities. The

ways in which race and gender are intertwined in the politics of the United States with the

structures of power that exist, creates a unique, and oppressed, location for Black women that is

different from others. In my research, at no point could I separate the participants' identities of

being Black and being women. As a Circle, we named the unique location of Black women in

the United States and did not separate that connected identity at any point.

In many comments shared in Chapters 4 and 5, the women specifically referenced their

identity as being Black women and the experiences unique to holding that identity in higher

education. One example that demonstrated the ways in which power dynamics intersected with

being Black women was shared in reference to the classroom experiences. In this example, a

participant was "mansplained" during a group project and her contributions were disregarded,

despite her comments being the same as the white man in the space who was validated and

praised for his contribution.

The various examples in the classroom, coupled with the conversations on relationships,

image, and navigation of higher education were all specific to Black women's experiences.

Black Feminist scholars who wrote the Combahee River Collective (1977) developed the

Collective from an antiracist and antisexist position and their work is important to this research, as they identify that "the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us" (p. 212). The participants in this study demonstrated a strong belief that they are the only people to get them where they imagine themselves going and name the differences they experience in that regard compared to their white peers and Black men. With every obstacle presented by participants, they followed with a comment about persevering, resisting, and being resilient to what felt like barriers. In this manner, the participants knew their potential, and the strength they innately had in order to continue and come out of what may have felt like a challenging space.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is important in this study, specifically in the context of education, as it emphasizes the inequities in education and identifies how race and racism influence educational practices and structures (Yosso, 2005). Ladson-Billings (1999) calls forward the ways in which CRT exposes racism in education and other scholars in higher education have agreed with Ladson-Billings and suggest that CRT is used to identify racism in higher education. For this study, I use CRT to expose racism and the multiple racist experiences of and towards Black undergraduate women in higher education at Beychella University. In addition, CRT in this study supports the creation of a counterspace to engage in conversations about race and to disrupt majoritarian narratives about Black undergraduate women. The voices of the women in the study challenge assumptions and tell a story that participants did not feel they always had space to share, be heard, and be believed before the Sister Dialogue Circle.

Space

Through the lens of CRT, this study created a counterspace (Yosso, Smith, Ceja,

Solórano, 2009) to serve as a physical space that was distant from and safer than potential locations associated with trauma, and specifically racism, at Beychella University. Acknowledging that it is never fully possible or guaranteed to eliminate racism in a space, I worked to be intentional in the design of my project to do little harm, with a goal of causing no harm for participants.

Upon entering the space, for both Sister Dialogue Circles, the participants asked several questions about the space. There were no participants across both Circles who ever visited the space before and no one was aware of the space existing prior to the study, as described in Chapter Six. In my email communication with participants prior to our first Circle, I shared the location and name of the space and offered a brief explanation of why we would use the specific space. Despite the explanation, participants were still very surprised that a space existed near Beychella University that had a mission to support Black artists and the community. I spent the first 10 minutes in each Sister Dialogue Circle explaining the opportunities at the space. While I brought the food into the space, it was evident that there being soul food and other food from local People of Color was noticed, deeply appreciated, and discussed by participants. Additionally, during some of the Circles, I placed quotes from Black women on the walls in the room we used and I noticed that some participants took pictures of the quotes and wrote them down in their journals. Each time we met, I had music of Black women playing in the background that naturally flowed and invited the women to ease into the space more comfortably. The space took up meaning for the participants and created not only a starting point for informal discussion during the first Circle for both Sister Dialogue Circles, it also became a place where participants felt they belonged.

Access & Capital

Patton et al. (2007) describe how racism is at the core of institutions of higher education, and through CRT, the inequities in higher education, due to racist practices, becomes exposed. In my study, participants identified the ways in which they experienced the classroom and described specific examples of times when they felt excluded from group projects because of the design, lack of accountability by the faculty, and deeply rooted racist practices in the curriculum. In Chapter Five, several participants shared memories of being ignored in group projects and during participation in class, working harder for the same outcomes of white peers, and having to be intentional about where they sit, raising their hands, and being noticed in class by the faculty. These behaviors, though not liked by participants, were identified as necessary in order to successfully pass a course and make it through Beychella University.

Sade shared with her Circle that there was a moment during her first few weeks in the business school at Beychella University when she noticed that her white peers referenced their parent's job titles and positions or listed their own educational experiences that prepared them for the business school. Sade spoke about questioning her decision to be in the business school since she did not have the same resources and access, but understood that given her identities – race, gender, and class specifically – she would not have those same opportunities and would need to teach herself a lot right away in order to keep up in the class.

Faith and Alicia spoke about their choices to study abroad during their time at Beychella University and shared that this was expected of undergraduate students at Beychella University. Both acknowledged a sense of pressure to fit in and be competitive for graduate school and job searches, and felt that going abroad would provide a boost in their credentials if they were competing with other students at Beychella University. While both Faith and Alicia wanted the

experience and exposure from traveling abroad, they also shared about peers who would go abroad and not have resources, struggle financially, and in turn struggle academically, but felt like they had to go abroad to "be part of Beychella University." In these examples, class was significant in relationship to race and gender, and positioned some of the participants as different from their white peers. The feelings presented by participants in the study suggested that if the women did not go abroad, they would lessen their chances for future opportunities, particularly in comparison to their peers with financial support.

Finally, the emphasis that multiple participants had on taking courses where they felt like they were part of the curriculum was salient and connected to Patton et al. (2007), who discusses how the curriculum could be racist in ways that render Students of Color to be invisible. The participants who had the opportunity to take courses in African American Studies or Women and Gender Studies spoke about those departments and the courses they completed to be some of their best experiences at Beychella University. Knowing that the majority of participants were not in African American Studies or Women and Gender Studies, but sought to take courses each semester in one of those departments, demonstrated the significance those courses, faculty, and departments had on them as Black undergraduate women. Through the lens of CRT, this feeling expressed by the women suggested that the curriculum and content in other courses did not feel welcoming, inclusive, or connected to the experiences of Black women. Something different happened for the women in the classrooms outside of African American Studies and Women and Gender Studies.

Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory informed the design of this project and the lens in which the findings were analyzed. Providing a deeper understanding of the connection between both frameworks and the findings of the project bring together the voices of

the Black women to inform and situates their lived experiences as knowledge, valid, and research.

Research Questions

As previously indicated, I sought to answer the following questions in my study:

- Question 1: How do Black undergraduate women experience and navigate higher education?

- Question 2: How do race and gender, and further intersecting identities that are significant for participants, influence the experiences of Black undergraduate women in higher education?

- Question 3: What do Black undergraduate women do in order to persist in higher education?

- Question 4: What sustains and empowers Black undergraduate women in higher education?

In this section, I offer a clear response to each question based on the findings from the study and the analysis of the findings through the frameworks of Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory.

Question 1: How do Black undergraduate women experience and navigate higher education?

Black undergraduate women in the study named specific examples about how they navigate higher education. Participants indicated that most importantly they find community of other Black undergraduate students. In some cases, it takes time to find the spaces and authentic relationships at Beychella University, but all participants identified finding community of other Black students to be critical to their experience and wellness. Several participants, particularly

those who were upper-class students at Beychella University, spoke about how to build a positive reputation and gain access to Black spaces – naming who to know and where to go.

In addition to community, several participants referenced the resources they sought out on campus, from people in staff and faculty capacities to learning the ways to gain capital – social and cultural. The idea of needing to be resourceful for yourself was clear, as participants collectively named that no one at Beychella University was reaching out to them individually, or even considering them in most cases. Some of the participants shared about the various Excel sheets they have and lists that they keep about scholarships, internships, and networking in order to continue to have access to the current and future goals.

Finally, an important theme that came forward for the participants about navigating higher education was related to learning what white peers did or did not do to be successful. In both Sister Dialogue Circles, women spoke about what they observe for white peers to be successful or not and how to maneuver around them or network with them based on what they perceived to be the most helpful, in order for them to get where and what they needed. The women were very observant about the capital of white peers, mentioning how many come to Beychella University with family connections, financial support, and a base understanding of the material covered in class. Connected to the messages received prior to attending Beychella University, the participants identified the ways in which they work harder and work smarter to get to the same outcomes or better than their white peers.

Question 2: How do race and gender, and further intersecting identities that are significant for participants, influence the experiences of Black undergraduate women in higher education?

The participants offered several ways in which their identities, specifically being Black

women, impact their experiences in higher education. Participants offered a lot of information about the experiences they entered college with and how those experiences already positioned them differently than their peers of other identities. Participants connected their hair journey stories and memories to experiences at Beychella University where their peers ask questions about their hair, with one participant describing their experience with their hair while living in a residence hall to feeling like "a zoo animal." In this case, the participant shared how their peers would watch them do their hair, ask offensive questions, and show a sense of disgust about the participant's hair. Multiple participants spoke about how they "learned the hard way" when first washing their hair in the residence halls and how much it became a discussion and ultimately led to them all, coincidentally, waking up very early to do their hair before others on their floor would be able to see them or watch.

Additionally, participants shared ways in which their identities influence their interactions with peers and faculty in the classroom. In Chapter Five, I shared the experiences of some participants who offered examples of times when they would contribute in class and be overlooked. The story offered by Monáe, when her peers told her how to survive as a pre-med major, and the same sentiments echoed by others about needing to find a support group of Black peers in their major, was something they offered and described as unique to their identity. Sade shared similar experiences in the business school where she quickly noted that peers were less engaged, not attending courses, and entered with experiences in finance and other content areas that positioned them in a place she perceived to be of advantage, compared to her in the classroom.

Finally, all of the participants who spoke about relationships, specifically partnerships, mentioned the challenges they believe they face compared to other identity groups on campus.

Several women spoke about the number of white women they notice dating Black men and the feelings that many Black women carry about that results in a feeling of not being "good enough" as Black women. In this same case, several women spoke about their overall image and attributed their feelings about their physical appearance to desirability by Black men. Women shared about the "ideal Black women's body" and discussed the difficulties many of them had with being light or dark enough and big or small enough.

Question 3: What do Black undergraduate women do in order to persist in higher education?

The Black undergraduate women in this study did so many things to continue pushing through during their time at Beychella University. As noted in Table 1 and Table 2 in Chapter Three, several participants were double majoring or majoring and minoring. In all cases, the participants spoke about taking their academics seriously and working towards Dean's List and other academic honors at Beychella University.

In addition, these women were highly involved on campus and participated in organizations related to their academic majors, career interests, and leadership and social interests. Multiple participants had executive board roles in their respective organizations and others spoke about developing new organizations at Beychella University because they felt like something was missing. For participants who were upper-class students at Beychella University, they spoke about being intentional and strategic with their involvement, and learning through their first and second year at Beychella University that involvement in certain spaces led to more opportunities.

While many of the participants understood that being involved and learning the politics of Beychella University and attending a PWI were important in their success, they also identified

their support systems that they relied on in order to emotionally and mentally succeed and continue on each semester at Beychella University. All of the participants identified their support systems and they varied from immediate family members, to friends who did not attend Beychella University, and then friends who they met since attending, or came with, to Beychella University. In all cases, the participants emphasized the need for these relationships to be authentic and dependable, which some struggled to find, while others had them more confidently.

Most importantly, the participants in the study themselves are their motivation to persist. With their various experiences and motivations that led to attending Beychella University, they all spoke to the challenges they experienced and continued to experience as Black undergraduate women. It was clear that in many cases, it seemed easier to stop or leave Beychella University, but they imagined their future selves and felt that their potential for success is tangible. The confidence and self-motivation to persevere at Beychella University was undeniable and unwavering for the participants. Kardi shared:

> This past summer, just like recently, I've made peace with the fact that I'm me and I
>
> love that. No one is going to change who I am, how I am, even if it's not what is normal

or like what it's supposed to be.

Question 4: What sustains and empowers Black undergraduate women in higher education?

Through the study and when exploring the findings, it became clear that some of the items that sustain the participants overlapped with what they do to persist. More specifically, participants shared about their relationships with others as being sustenance during their time at Beychella University. However, in a different way from persistence, the relationships that the

women described that sustain them are often times the relationships beyond Beychella University. The majority of participants spoke about their family being essential and core, often times their role models and the people who ground them the most, even when they identified tension and conflict. In these cases, the relationships described with family members were the most authentic and came from individuals who genuinely wanted the best for the participants in the study. The women in the study expressed the most comfort, confidence, and honesty about the relationships they had with family.

In the same way that family sustained the women, it was clear that family also empowered the women while they attend Beychella University. When we spoke about their motivation, role models, and decision making to attend college, the women all named their family members – mothers, fathers, grandparents. The individuals they named were described as the individuals in their lives who believed in them the most and supported them unconditionally, with confidence that they would do well.

Without a doubt, the women empowered themselves and felt empowered being with other Black undergraduate women, as they experienced in the Sister Dialogue Circles. There were multiple examples by the participants in the findings where they named how uplifting it was to be with other Black undergraduate women and how empowering it is to be Black women in general. There was joy in their voices and on their faces when they spoke about the power, success, brilliance, and beauty that Black women all embody and felt pride being part of that community. Alicia shared:

> I always say it's just something about the Black woman. It's just power. I always feel
> the same. It could be a presentation and I kid you not, the Black woman who gives a
> presentation is gonna go up there and just kill it. It's just something about it. I'm just

like damn, you're bad, you're doing your thing. You know what I mean? One of the clearest pieces that came forward in the study was that participants knew they could do whatever they wanted and have already proven to themselves that some of the biggest challenges put in front of them, as they described – growing up poor, living in the hood, being very light, being thick or thin, having money or not, going to private or public school – all positioned them to be resilient and feel empowered to go wherever they want and imagine their possible, beautiful futures.

Limitations

There are two specific limitations of this study. First, although inclusive of multiple voices of Black undergraduate women, the study was only done at Beychella University. For this reason, the study was limited to students attending Beychella University, a 4-year, medium-sized, private institution in the northeast. In turn, the results from this study may not be applicable to all 4-year, private, PWI institutions of the same size in the United States. It is possible that students at other institutions who identify as Black undergraduate women could have different experiences at private 4-year PWIs.

Second, this study recruited participants who identified as Black undergraduate women. While the call for participants was open to people identifying across a spectrum of race and gender, it is possible that the language, Black undergraduate women, felt exclusive or inaccessible to particular people despite the fluidity. There were participants who identified as coming from various backgrounds, particularly as it relates to race and ethnicity, but the language could have been inviting or not to others. The similarities of the Black undergraduate women in the study does not mean that all Black undergraduate women in higher education or at Beychella University experience higher education and Beychella University in the same ways.

Implications for Practice

My findings present several implications for practice in higher education. Most importantly, the women in this study tell us that higher education is not doing what it needs to do to fully support Black undergraduate women. The women in this study show up and offer their counternarratives as raced and gendered people in higher education who want a better experience. The participants offer ways, which if thoughtfully and intentionally implemented, could support in fostering their success at Beychella University.

Very clearly, the women in the study are asking for physical space that is safe enough and designed with an understanding of their experiences and needs. These spaces need to be built from the frameworks and design of sustained dialogue spaces and sister dialogue circle models that already exist in spaces for Black women. From first year students to seniors in the study, all participants expressed feeling different in the Sister Dialogue Circle and wanted to be part of the space, wanted to return, and did not want the space to end – this matters and is significant. If institutions of higher education pay attention, they should be able to identify where people are able to come together in community, knowing that in-group space is significant and matters for retention, support, and persistence based on these findings and the histories of the academy.

From the findings, it also becomes important to create required learning spaces for faculty and white peers to engage in conversations about race and other identities. In a learning space for faculty and white peers, the hope would be for a curriculum that offers the opportunity to learn about bias, microaggressions, and the impact of those behaviors. Additionally, it will be important in these learning spaces to develop and communicate institution-wide expectations about appropriate and inappropriate behaviors that will be held accountable. These learning

spaces are not meant to communicate that People of Color in higher education are rid of bias and microaggressive behaviors, and it acknowledges the constant labor and expectation that marginalized people in higher education have to take on to educate faculty and their white peers. It is important to consider where and how to offer additional spaces created for people across the institution, considering identities and positions within the institution (e.g., student, staff, faculty, senior administration), to engage in dialogue about identity, experiences, and social issues that do not repeat a deficit framework.

In addition to learning spaces for faculty and white peers, it is important for faculty, staff, and senior administrators to be present at events for students from various identities. If leadership at Beychella University is unable to identify a space for Black undergraduate women that was created in partnership with Black undergraduate women and receives support from the institution, it is important to then get access to Black undergraduate women and learn where they go and what they need. In many cases, people in leadership roles do not attend student events if they are not asked to be present and the power dynamics need to shift to where faculty, staff, and leadership are seeking out the spaces to be present in when appropriate and not problematic. More typically, senior leadership in higher education tend to be present in spaces with Black students only in reactive ways – after an incident on campus.

While students in the study expressed various ways how they are finding spaces and support from other Black peers and some faculty and staff who share similar identities, it is important to consider how Black women are being recruited to PWIs and Beychella University. As shared in the findings, Black women, and other Students of Color, come to summer programs where they have an experience that feels very Black. These recruitment weekends and focused programs are beneficial, only to the extent that they depict an honest reflection of the experience

during the academic year. On more than one occasion, participants spoke about creating their own HBCU-like experience at Beychella University in order to replicate where they thought they were going based on summer programs and recruitment weekends that presented the institution as a very Black experience. In order to have the Black undergraduate women enter PWIs with realistic expectations of the racial demographics, it becomes important to offer an accurate picture of the experience.

Additionally, institutional resources for Black undergraduate women seem limited based on the findings. There was a common thread between the participants that they had to become resourceful about information that they felt they should have access to on campus. For example, finding scholarships, learning the financial aid system, getting internships, and academic support were areas that the women felt they had to piece together, but were not obvious or accessible if you did not know the politics of the institution. Providing specific support, if it has been identified that a population of people are not getting the necessary resources, seems critical if institutions truly desire to recruit, retain, and graduate Black undergraduate women.

Finally, but certainly not exclusive of all possible implications, this study demonstrates the importance of bringing theoretical frameworks from outside of traditional higher education student development literature into practices and scholarship on populations in higher education. Some of the most foundational scholarship in higher education was put forward to discuss the experiences of white, cis, heterosexual men in higher education. As populations of historically marginalized students are recruited into higher education, the need to center the scholarship that is about these populations has to be known and understood. Creating policies and practices about Black undergraduate women without understanding Black Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and other frameworks about marginalized populations, is problematic and dismissive of

the unique ways in which people from various identities could experience higher education.

Despite all of these areas of opportunity for higher education, the women in the study persist in the current oppressive structures. The obstacles presented to Black undergraduate women are disappointments on behalf of higher education, but serve as barriers to move – and they get moved – by the women in the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research project had a goal of identifying an area of opportunity in theory and in practices in higher education. The project used Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory as frameworks to discuss the experiences of Black undergraduate women in higher education, attending Beychella University. Unlike many other projects on undergraduate students, this project did not depend on student development theory in higher education, as that is not for Black women and excludes the lived experiences of Black undergraduate women prior to beginning college. More specifically, this project (1) pulls from bodies of scholarship outside of higher education theory to identify the true experiences of Black undergraduate women and (2) identifies clear practice shifts that could occur in higher education to align mission statements of institutions with inclusive practices that support Black undergraduate women in college.

It would be my recommendation that future research projects use a similar model and sustain the space for a longer period of time and recruit larger numbers of participants for each Sister Dialogue Circle. By creating a space that goes for a longer period of time, there would be an opportunity to provide more support for participants that served as a positive, empowering, and uplifting experience in this project. Recognizing the difficulty some participants had leaving the space, an extended period of time would address a need for physical, intentionally designed space in higher education for Black undergraduate women. An extended period of time given to

the Sister Dialogue Circles would also allow for an opportunity to create collectives, develop action items for support beyond the Sister Dialogue Circle, and provide additional time to participants to share and prepare more for closure.

Although this project initially had higher response rates and more confirmed participants, as in any qualitative study, participant attendance and follow through is not guaranteed. Determining the best practices for recruiting and retaining more participants, upwards of 10-12 per Sister Dialogue Circle, would offer another experience to participants who desire a space. While the participant numbers in my study still resulted in strong findings and had significance to the participants and me, as the researcher, it could be even more powerful to have more participants have the opportunity to engage in one created space.

Finally, my research was conducted in the middle of the fall semester at a PWI. It would be valuable to consider the timing and location of a future study. Depending on the institution, the structure of the academic calendar could impact the participation, from availability to need and desire for the space. Similar to time, the institution type also impacts participation and need and desire for the space. Considering various institution types, such as a public institution, community college, and Historically Black College and University settings, would serve as an interesting comparison about the need for a space for Black undergraduate women across higher education and where the needs exist.

I offer these recommendations because I believe that the findings in this project demonstrated a need for Black undergraduate women and I feel committed to naming the need and taking action. I encourage continued research that gives a space to Black undergraduate women's voices, centers their experiences, and disrupts the majoritarian narrative and tells our stories by us, in the safest space possible. This study shows that we want to be in higher

education and will be resilient regardless, but if we had fewer obstacles and there was more awareness about our lived experiences and the impact on how we experience college, we might feel like we actually belong. Nonetheless…we will always turn lemons into lemonade.

"My hair defies gravity, my body absorbs the sun…you can't tell me I'm not magical"

~Unknown

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JORDAN S. WEST

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EDUCATION

Doctoral Candidate, Cultural Foundations of Education   **Fall 2018**
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
Dissertation Committee: Drs. Marcelle Haddix, Gretchen Lopez, Cerri Banks
Title: Lemons Into Lemonade: Black undergraduate women's embodiment of strength and resilience at a PWI

Certificate of Advanced Studies, Women and Gender Studies   **Spring 2016**
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY

Master of Education, College Student Affairs   **May 2010**
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

Bachelor of Arts, Psychology   **May 2008**
University of Maryland, College Park, MD
CIVICUS Living and Learning Program Citation (2006)

HIGHER EDUCATION WORK EXPERIENCE

DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

Director of Diversity & Inclusion Education   **August 2018 – Present**
Office of the Provost at The George Washington University

- Establish core goals of the position, directly linked to the Response Action Plan for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, as the inaugural Director for Diversity & Inclusion Education
- Create university video on institution's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Partner with Everfi to implement a new, mandatory online learning platform for first year students
- Design and facilitate customized learning opportunities for students, faculty, and staff (e.g., inclusive classroom design, foundational terms, unconscious bias, race and racism, identity on college campuses, inclusive hiring practices)
- Develop institution-wide remarks, responses, and position on diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Create institution-wide curriculum for diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Establish institution-wide assessment, evaluation, and feedback structures for diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Collaborate with colleagues across the institution to evaluate protocol, policies, and processes impacting students from historically marginalized identities
- Reduce and eliminate barriers impacting accessibility for all community members
- Oversee campus-wide climate assessment and efforts to improve campus climate
- Establish user-friendly website platform for educational efforts, training requests, and resources for campus
- Oversee planning and implementation of Annual Diversity Summit and Race in America Speaker Series
- Serve as a member of the Bias Incident Response Team (BIRT)
- Respond to incidents, concerns, and situations across campus related to diversity, equity, and inclusion

Senior Diversity & Inclusion Training Specialist   **October 2016 – August 2018**
Diversity & Inclusion and Learning & Development, Human Resources at Princeton University

- Established core goals of the position, directly linked to the Trustee Reports on diversity and inclusion, as the inaugural Senior Diversity & Inclusion Training Specialist

- Managed a budget of $500,000
- Served in a consultative capacity to Princeton University regarding diversity and inclusion topics, learning opportunities, and team and individual development
- Evaluated and revised current diversity and inclusion learning offerings
- Inclusion & Diversity Certificate Program
    - Designed and managed 18-month Inclusion & Diversity Certificate Program for staff and faculty with 6 Core Courses, 6 Elective Courses, service and action projects, reflective writing, Conversation Circles, Lunchtime Matinees, and Final Practicum
    - Designed Curriculum for Foundations I, Foundations II, and Practicum Core Courses
    - Oversaw design, development, and facilitation of all Core and Elective Course Curriculums
    - Developed and implemented 20-month assessment plan for Certificate Program
    - Vetted and selected external and internal Facilitators to serve as faculty of the Certificate Program
    - Oversaw 10 Certificate Program Facilitators
    - Developed orientation process for Certificate Program Facilitators and Cohort
    - Recruited 24 Cabinet-level and Cabinet direct reports to participate in pilot of Certificate Program
    - Designed Certificate Program logo with Princeton University Office of Communications
    - Worked with vendors to purchase program supplies and paraphernalia
    - Facilitated three Core Courses of Certificate Program: Foundations I, Foundations II, and Practicum
    - Engaged with Cohort Members in Core Course reflective writing through feedback, to provide ongoing learning
    - Established 18-month Communication Plan to introduce, promote, and recruit members of the campus community to the Certificate Program
    - Developed SharePoint website for Cohort and Facilitator use to house all Course materials, reflective writing submissions, a discussion board, and documentation related to the Program
    - Served as Princeton University team member and benchmark Program/case study for institution-wide diversity and inclusion assessment policies and practices with RTI International and the Vice Provost for Equity and Inclusion's Office
    - Worked in collaboration and partnership with colleagues in Human Resources to design, promote, and manage the program
- Department Training and Learning Opportunities
    - Developed learning plans for campus departments connected to their diversity and inclusion strategic plans
    - Facilitated half-day, full-day, and retreats for department specific learning engagements connected to learning plans
    - Vetted consultants to determine best internal or external Facilitator for learning goals and plans
    - Created and implemented trainings and other learning opportunities for Princeton University community with up to 300 participants
    - Developed evaluations for training and learning opportunities
    - Created themes from training and learning opportunities and presented them to department leadership with recommendations to improve department/office climate
    - Partnered with Finance & Treasury and General Counsel to develop unique contracts for engagements

SUSTAINED DIALOGUE AND DESIGN

Coordinator   **August 2014 – October 2016**
Conversations About Race & Ethnicity (C.A.R.E.), Division of Student Affairs at Syracuse University
- Directed an institution-wide dialogue program offered every semester to students, staff, faculty, and administration
- Created and implemented new curriculum in spring 2015

- Recruited diverse participants through university departments, majors, and co-curricular involvement
- Supervised 24 compensated Facilitators
- Developed dialogue Circles of 150 participants from various identity groups
- Created a Facilitator application process and selection process
- Designed and implemented Facilitator Skill Training
- Trained Facilitators on curriculum for program
- Created and maintained a weekly check-in process for 24 Facilitators
- Created and conducted assessment through Qualtrics Surveys on the participant experience and Facilitator experience
- Presented data from assessment to campus stakeholders and Facilitators, including Senior Administration
- Reassessed curriculum based on assessment data
- Managed a budget of approximately $60,000
- Facilitated dialogue Circles for the Office of Residence Life full-time staff
- Planned and implemented a 10th Anniversary Celebration with all partners and stakeholders

Coordinator   **January 2009 – May 2010**
UBUNTU Intergroup Dialogue Program, The Pennsylvania State University
- Recruited diverse participants through university-wide distribution lists, publications, and small presentations
- Planned and co-facilitated UBUNTU Facilitation Retreats at the beginning of Fall and Spring semesters
- Co-facilitated the "Gender" and "Women of Color" dialogues for participants
- Co-facilitated the Practicum Course with UBUNTU Faculty
- Awarded grades to 9 Facilitators and 27 Participants
- Constructed syllabi for 5 different dialogue experiences offered
- Worked with campus faculty senate and administration to approve course credit for Participants and Facilitators
- Developed skills to work with differences, disagreements, and conflicts as opportunities for deeper understanding
- Worked to understand social identities and the role of social structures and institutions in creating and maintaining inequality
- Developed curriculum to train Facilitators on the skills of Intergroup Dialogue

CAMPUS CLIMATE RESEARCH AND ASSESSMENT

Research Associate & Qualitative Specialist   **January 2009 – Present**
Rankin & Associates Consulting LLC
- Traveled to institutions of higher education throughout the United States
- Facilitated multiple focus groups among specific institution constituents related to their identity
- Transcribed and coded notes from focus groups
- Created and submitted multiple reports for each institution, including recommendations for positive climate change

RESIDENCE LIFE

Residence Life Coordinator   **August 2010 – May 2014**
Department of Residence Life, The Pennsylvania State University
- Contributed to the construction of the vision, mission, and values of the Department of Residence Life in efforts to create a holistic co-curricular experience
- Proficiently supervised, supported, trained, and evaluated 10 Resident Assistants, and indirectly managed the productivity of approximately 320 residents
- Supervised the Special Living Option (SLO) for ROTC residents
- Served in an on-call duty rotation with 8 other Residence Life Coordinators for 4,300 first year students

- Managed a budget of $2,000 for Resident Assistants, a $400 house budget for the year, and a $200 SLO budget
- Successfully collaborated with University Housing, Food Services, ROTC, the Counseling Center, and other University partners in fostering a safe, secure, and supportive residential experience
- Planned and implemented monthly cultural based programming efforts for 4,300 residential students
- Served as a committee member for: Search Committee, MACUHO SSLI Conference Committee (Entertainment)
- Created the weekly newsletter, *Stall Stories*, for our first year residential area
- Created and coded assessment for the campus wide Residential Curriculum Institute (RCI) and quality of life surveys

Interim Assistant Director   **March 2013 – August 2013**
Department of Residence Life, The Pennsylvania State University - The Harrisburg Campus
- Supervised 1 full-time Residence Life Coordinator, 1 20-hour Graduate Assistant, 1 20-hour Staff Assistant, and 4 Work Study
- Served in an on-call duty system for 10 apartment style residential spaces, housing approximately 480 residents
- Created a syllabus, assignments, and rubrics for the final month of the course, College Student Affairs 397A: The Role of an RA
- Created an evaluation system for Resident Assistants to receive feedback from the Coordinator at the completion of the spring 2013 semester
- Created a formal system of accountability for Work Study, the Staff Assistant, and the Graduate Assistant, related directly to payroll and hours worked
- Implemented programming expectations and a development plan for creating programs for residential students
- Developed a co-curricular plan, designing learning objectives and learning outcomes for the residential community, Resident Assistants, and the Graduate Assistant
- Created a summer curriculum for residential students, including hiring student staff, developing programmatic standards, and an on-call duty system
- Managed a campus wide budget for residential students

Assistant Resident Director, ACUHO-I Summer Bridge Intern   **May 2009 – August 2009**
Office of Student Development, Residential Living, University of California Berkeley
- Trained, supervised, evaluated, and mentored 8 Resident Assistant's and 1 Community Coordinator
- Served in a 24 hour on-call position for 6 weeks
- Worked on a team of Student Affairs professionals from athletic, academic, advising, and counseling offices
- Managed a budget of $2,500 for hall programming and staff development
- Oversaw the organization and implementation of educational programs that are consistent with department values
- Advocated for students full-time admittance into UC Berkeley
- Worked with Summer Bridge Resident Director to complete an end of program report

FRATERNITY AND SORORITY AFFAIRS

House Director   **August 2014 – October 2016**
Omicron Chapter - Delta Delta Delta Sorority, Syracuse University
- Facilitated community development for 31 live-in chapter members
- Upheld policy and expectations for Delta Delta Delta live-in chapter members
- Served as a liaison between live-in members, Advisors, and Housing Corporation
- Supervised the daily roles of the House Chef, House Assistant, and Cleaning Person(s)
- Managed an annual housing and dining budget of approximately $100,000

CONSULTATION

Consultant & Facilitator   **May 2017 – August 2017**
Department of Residence Life, University of Colorado Boulder

- Served in consultative role with leadership to develop learning plan for department-wide fall training on equity, inclusion, and justice
- Developed customized 3-hour equity, inclusion, and justice curriculum for Hall Directors
- Met with Hall Directors to train and prepare for curriculum facilitation
- Led 3-hour department-wide workshop and keynote for approximately 300 attendees inclusive of all full time staff and Resident Assistants
- Reviewed evaluation feedback and offered recommendations from experience and feedback

Consultant   **June 2014 – August 2014**
Division of Student Affairs, Lafayette College

- Evaluated campus environment and created master plan for upgrading facilities to be student-centered
- Created student organization handbook for policies (i.e., fundraising) and practices of all recognized student organizations
- Developed student leadership training for all students holding positions within recognized organizations
- Established partnerships with multiple food vendor trucks for multiple campus-wide events, including orientation and welcome week
- Revised accountability structure for student employees within the Division of Student Affairs

INSTRUCTION & FACILITATION

Facilitator   **November 2016 – August 2018**
Development Dimension International (DDI)

Facilitator   **July 2016**
National Student Social Justice Training Institute (SJTI)

Guest Instructor   **October 2015**
Education for Transformation, Syracuse University

Guest Instructor   **September 2015**
Culturally Competent Healthcare, Syracuse University

Panelist   **September 2015**
Transfer Forum on Diversity and Social Justice, Syracuse University

Group Interview Facilitator   **April 2015**
Greek Leadership Association in the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Affairs, Syracuse University

Facilitator   **November 2014**
Institute on Social Justice (ISJ), American College Personnel Association (ACPA)

Guest Instructor   **October 2014**
Culturally Competent Healthcare, Syracuse University

Facilitator   **January 2013 – May 2014**
Student Leadership Practice Inventory (SLPI), The Pennsylvania State University

Instructor   **August 2012 – May 2014**
CSA501, Introduction to Student Affairs, The Pennsylvania State University

First-Year Testing Consulting and Advising Program (FTCAP) Presenter **May 2012 – July 2012**
Division of Undergraduate Studies, The Pennsylvania State University

LeaderShape Family Cluster Facilitator **May 2012**
The LeaderShape Institute, The Pennsylvania State University

It's a Colorful World Discussion Group **January 2012 – May 2014**
LGBTA Student Resource Center, The Pennsylvania State University

Instructor **January 2011 – December 2012**
CNED302, The Role of the Resident Assistant: Theory and Practice, The Pennsylvania State University

Instructor **August 2011 – December 2011**
CSA507, Social Justice, The Pennsylvania State University

Teaching Assistant **August 2009 – December 2009**
EDUC 100S, First-Year Seminar; College of Education, The Pennsylvania State University

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

West, J.S. (2018). *Disrupting White Supremacy: Creating Intentional Dialogic Pedagogy in Higher Education.* Presentation to the American College Personnel Association – College Student Educators International (ACPA). Houston, Texas.

West, J.S. (2017). *Inclusion & Diversity Certificate Program at Princeton University.* Presentation to the Ivy Plus-EEO Conference. Princeton, NJ.

West, J.S. (2017). *Creating Space to Discuss Race: Critical Pedagogy in Higher Education.* Presentation to the American College Personnel Association – College Student Educators International (ACPA). Columbus, Ohio.

Parson, B., Williams-Brown, K., & **West, J.S.** (2016). *Demystifying the Journey to a Ph.D.: Three Narratives of Doctoral Identity.* Presentation to NASPA. Indianapolis, Indiana.

West, J.S. (2016). *Conversations About Race & Ethnicity (C.A.R.E.): Critical Pedagogy in Student Affairs.* Presentation to the American College Personnel Association – College Student Educators International (ACPA). Montreal, Canada.

West, J.S. (2016). *Authentic Interviewing.* Presentation to the American College Personnel Association – College Student Educators International (ACPA). Montreal, Canada.

Applebaum, B., Burnam, H, **West, J.S.**, & Wolken, D. (2015). *Love, Peace, and Justice in Critical Race Dialogue: Possibilities and Dangers.* Presentation to the American Educational Studies Association (AESA). San Antonio, Texas.

Cameron, T., Lane, T., Patterson, S.M., & **West, J.S.** (2015). *Black women in higher education: Research, narratives and outcome [Extended Session].* Presentation to the American College Personnel Association-College Student Educators International (ACPA). Tampa, Florida.

Harris, J. & **West, J.S.** (2014). *Coloring Outside the Lines: How to Advocate for Multiracial Students on the College Campus.* Presentation to the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). Indianapolis, Indiana.

Cameron, T., Lane, T., Patterson, S.M., Watts, U., Williams, T., & **West, J.S.** (2014). *Black women in higher education: Research, narratives, and outcomes.* Presentation to the American College Personnel Association-College

Student Educators International (ACPA). Indianapolis, Indiana.

Cameron, T., Jones, S., Lane, T., Patterson, S.M., Watts, U., Williams, T., & **West, J.S.** (2013). *More than just "The Help": Blackwomen in higher education.* Presentation to the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). Las Vegas, Nevada.

West, J.S. (2011). *Understanding You and Your Influence Through Experiential Learning.* Presentation to the Mid-Atlantic College and University House Officials. University Park, Pennsylvania.

Smith, E. & **West, J.S.** (2011). *Giving Voice and Serving Justice to Silenced Populations.* Presentation to the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). Baltimore, Maryland.

INVITED PRESENTATIONS & WORKSHOPS

West, J.S. & Griffith, K. (2018). *Foundations of Student Affairs.* Guest lecture in Higher Education, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

West, J.S. & McGowan, B. (2018). *Black Populations in Higher Education.* Guest lecture in Higher Education, University of North Carolina Greensboro, Greensboro, NC.

West, J.S. & Taylor, L. D. (2018). *Toxicity, Pettiness, and Politics in Higher Education.* Guest lecture for HED 8010: Practicum in Student Affairs, Department of Educational Leadership, Mississippi State University, Starkville, MS.

West, J.S. (2017). *Creating Our Stores: Past, Present Future.* Workshop for BETAS Retreat. Morrisville State College.

West, J.S. (2016). *Leadership Equity and Inclusion Training.* Workshop for President's Cabinet. Morrisville State College.

West, J.S. (2016). *Be An Agent of Change.* Workshop Presentation and Training: Binghamton University. Binghamton, New York.

West, J.S. (2016). Keynote Address: New England American College and University Housing Officials (NEACUHO) Social Issues Retreat. Saratoga Springs, New York.

West, J.S. (2015). *Race and Ethnicity: What's The Difference and Who Are We?* Workshop Presentation and Training: fullCIRCLE Mentoring Programs, The Office of Multicultural Affairs. Syracuse, New York.

West, J.S. (2015). *Critical Racial Moments and Their Impact on Us.* Workshop Presentation and Training: WellsLink Leadership Program, The Office of Multicultural Affairs. Syracuse, New York.

West, J.S. (2015). *Powerful Women.* Keynote Address: National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Club. Syracuse, New York.

West, J.S. (2015). *The Passion Retreat.* Panelist: Office of Residence Life. Syracuse, New York.

West, J.S. (2015). *Extraordinarily Powerful.* Keynote Address: Office of Residence Life. Syracuse, New York.

West, J.S. (2013). *BLUEprint Facilitator Training.* Workshop Presentation and Training: Paul Robeson Cultural Center. University Park, Pennsylvania.

West, J.S. (2013). *Every Tootsie Matters*. Workshop Presentation and Training: Department of Residence Life. University Park, Pennsylvania.

West, J.S. (2010). *The Power of College*. Presentation: Spend A Fall Day Recruitment Event. University Park, Pennsylvania.

Smith, E. & **West, J.S.** (2009). *Plan Around Your Passion*. Presentation: Spend A Fall Day Recruitment Event. University Park, Pennsylvania.

PUBLICATIONS

Beatty, C., Patterson-Stephens, S., Blockett, R., Davis, T., Hernandez, E., Holmes, A., McElderry, J. & **West, J.S.** (2018). Episode: #groupchat. *Scholar Tea Podcast*. https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/scholar-tea/id1367161013?mt=2&i=1000410892424.

Beatty, C., Patterson-Stephens, S. & **West, J.S.** (2018). Episode 6: Mayonnaise Sandwiches. *Scholar Tea Podcast*. https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/scholar-tea/id1367161013?mt=2&i=1000410892424.

West, J.S. (2016). I am enough. *#SisterPhD*.

West, J.S. (2015). Dear Officer Bogash. *The Journal of Critical Scholarship in Higher Education and Student Affairs*.

UNIVERSITY SERVICE ACTIVITIES

Princeton University
• Princetonian Womxn of Color	April 2017 – August 2018
• Q'nnections Mentor, LGBT Center	August 2017 – August 2018
• Ivy Plus-EEO Group	April 2017 – August 2018
• Forbes Fellow, Forbes Residential College	March 2017 – August 2018
• Vice Provost for Equity and Inclusion Diversity & Inclusion Practitioner Group	October 2016 – August 2018

Syracuse University
• Fraternity and Sorority Affairs (FASA) Director Search Committee, Member	December 2015 – April 2016
• Cultural Foundations of Education Council, Co-President	November 2015 – September 2016
• Chancellor's Workgroup on Diversity and Inclusion, University Nominated & Selected Member	October 2015 – March 2016
• Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender (LGBT) Resource Center Associate Director Search Committee, Co-Chair	July 2015 – August 2015
• Senior Vice President's Council on Diversity and Inclusion, Member	January 2015 – October 2016
• Express Yourself Workgroup on Participatory Education, Student Co-Chair	March 2015 – October 2015
• Black Graduate Student Association, Charter Member & Social Chair	October 2014 – May 2016
• Cultural Foundations Students of Color Collective, Member	September 2014 – Present

The Pennsylvania State University
• LOCKS (Loving Our Curly Kinky Hair), Advisor	October 2013 – May 2014
• Springfield THON, Advisor	June 2012 – May 2014
• McNair Social, Mentor	May 2012 – May 2014

- University Hearing Board, Board Member   April 2012 – May 2014
- Residence Life Staff Search Committee   January 2011 – May 2011
- DOWNE, Advisor   September 2011 – February 2013
- Sue Paterno Mentor/Academic Trainer   June 2010 – May 2011
- Office of Student Conduct, Advisor   January 2009 – May 2014
- Commission on Racial/Ethnic Diversity (CORED), Student Team   January 2009 – May 2010

GRANTS & FUNDING

Travel Grant Recipient   **2017**
School of Education Graduate Student Organization, Syracuse University
SOE Travel Grant Recipient   **2015, 2016, 2017**
School of Education, Syracuse University
GSO Travel Grant Recipient   **2015, 2016, 2017**
Graduate Student Organization, Syracuse University

ACHIEVEMENTS & HONORS

CREDO Award   **February 2018**
Office of Human Resource, Princeton University
2018 ACPA Advocate Award   **March 2018**
Coalitions + Networks, American College Personnel Association (ACPA)
Rainbow Recognition Award for Social Justice Nominee   **April 2016**
LGBT Resource Center, Syracuse University
Himan Brown Scholarship Recipient   **April 2015**
School of Education, Syracuse University
Outstanding Student Organization Advisor of the Year   **April 2014**
Division of Student Affairs, The Pennsylvania State University
Stewards of Children Certification   **January 2013**
Stewards of Children
National Residence Hall Honorary Inductee   **November 2012**
Nittany Chapter, The Pennsylvania State University
Exceptional Service to Students Award   **May 2012**
Division of Student Affairs, The Pennsylvania State University
Achieving Women Award   **May 2010**
Commission for Women & Office of the Vice Provost, The Pennsylvania State University
Exemplary Social Justice Contribution by a Graduate Student Award   **January 2010**
Commission on Social Justice Educators, American College Personnel Association (ACPA)
Outstanding Chair   **May 2009**
Black Graduate Student Association, The Pennsylvania State University

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION ACTIVITIES

American College Personnel Association (ACPA)   **January 2009 – Present**
- Governing Board
    - Assembly Coordinator for Coalitions + Networks: 2019 – 2021
    - Assembly Coordinator for Coalitions + Networks Elect: 2018 – 2019
- Pan African Network (PAN) Directorate Board Member
    - Immediate Past Chair: 2018 – 2019
    - Chair: 2017 – 2018
    - Chair-Elect: 2016 – 2017
    - Equity & Inclusion Chair: 2015 – 2016
    - Executive Secretary: 2013 – 2015

- Director of Equity & Inclusion Advisory Board Member
- Writing for Publication Workshop
- Conference Program Reviewer
- Equity & Inclusion Planning Committee – Tampa Convention

American Education Research Association (AERA)   **August 2014 – Present**

- Division G Campus Liaison – Syracuse University

Social Justice Training Institute (SJTI)   **June 2012 – Present**
NASPA   **September 2009 – September 2010; January 2016 – Present**