NAMING OURSELVES FOR OURSELVES: BLACK WOMEN THEORIZING THEIR IDENTITIES AS EVERYDAY RHETORICAL PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

NAMING OURSELVES FOR OURSELVES: BLACK WOMEN THEORIZING THEIR IDENTITIES AS EVERYDAY RHEOTRICAL PRACTICE

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In this dissertation, I use Patricia Hill Collins' discussion of two Black feminist concepts, self-definition and self-valuation, as frameworks for interrogating Black women's word choices for naming, defining, and giving meaning to their identities specifically, and Black womanhood, generally. The purpose of this project was to better understand how Black women use their language power as a Black female literacy that allows them to resist, reclaim, and redefine misperceptions of Black female identities. Using a Black feminist methodological approach to grounded theory methods, I conducted a study with 12 self-identified Black women from diverse backgrounds. My methods for collecting data included pre-interview questionnaires, interviews, and a focus group drawn from a previous version of the study. Through these data collection methods participants shared specific words that represented their identities as Black women, and then used their voices, stories, and lived experiences to theorize and give meaning to their words.

To analyze data, I used a series of coding to categorize participants' responses and locate common themes and patterns across all sets of data. My findings indicate that *strong*, *loving* and *care*, and *sister* were the most popular terms used by Black women in my study to describe themselves, influential Black women in their lives, and Black womanhood more generally. Given the historical images, stereotypes, and continued misrepresentations of Black womanhood within television, film, popular culture, and other spaces, I present participants' self-definitions and self-valuations of their identities here to offer real Black women's counter-narratives to myths about Black female identities. Through their counter-narratives Black women,

individually and collectively, used their power over the word to reclaim, rename, and redefine Black womanhood(s) by themselves and for themselves.

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Chapter 1 When We Speak Our Truths—Listen: Black Female Literacies and Practices of Self-definition and Self-valuation

In my life, I have never been asked to define, describe, or openly discuss my identity. Perhaps it is because I am a Black woman[1]. Given the historical stereotypes, controlling images, and persistent misrepresentations of Black womanhood reprinted and remixed within popular culture, television, and the media, and the ways dominant culture constantly attempts to erase, omit, and silence the voices and experiences of people from historically oppressed and marginalized groups—perhaps—those who are *not me* assume that they already know what it means to *be me*.

Despite the perceptions of and projections on my body, I—like many other Black women—continue to self-construct and share a definition of my identity that recognizes the complexities of both my Black-ness and woman-ness, while celebrating all the other identifications, roles, and abilities I value about myself (e.g., daughter, sister, friend, funny, intelligent, beautiful, natural, etc.). Some days naming myself—my realities—is easier than others, but this constant practice of negotiating between authentic and distorted images of Black womanhood, reading contexts and analyzing others' responses to my words and actions, and deconstructing and rewriting stories about Black women, are practices I engage in daily. Within a range of everyday contexts, I make rhetorical choices about who I am, and my choices often offer an alternative, or counter-narrative, to others' expectations. I understand these practices of self-definition and self-valuation as literacies, as well as labor, that I engage in everyday in order

[1] Throughout this dissertation, I use the identification of Black woman, instead of African American woman whenever possible. For this study, I consider Black woman a more appropriate term because not all participants in this study identify as African American, although they all identified as Black women. My intention for using Black woman is to use a term that encourages inclusivity and collectivity, while also recognizing the diversity amongst women of African descent.

to affirm and share my lived experiences as a Black woman, avoid internalizing stereotypical images of Black female identities, survive oppressive, demeaning, and silencing situations and contexts, and resist and challenge others who attempt to equate me with, judge me by, or label me as being anyone—or *anything*—other than who I am: Ronisha.

Too often within scholarly inquiry, and everyday life, Black women's daily literacies and rhetorical practices are taken for granted and under-theorized. In this research, I situate Black feminist concepts of self-definition and self-valuation, as discussed by Patricia Hill Collins, as rhetorical Black female literacies in order to better understand how Black women call on, employ, and use these practices to survive, thrive, affirm, and empower ourselves within everyday contexts. Although self-definition and self-valuation are common practices amongst all people, it is important to consider how different individuals and cultural communities of people engage in similar practices differently from others. By using a Black feminist theoretical lens, I focus specifically on Black women's word choices for naming their identities, as well as the rhetorical choices we make when asked to define and give meaning to our words.

Although I am using Black feminist theoretical concepts, I understand a significant connection between self-definition, self-valuation, and African and African American rhetorical traditions. For example, African American rhetorical traditions draw from West African philosophical concepts like *nommo*, or the power of the Word (Karenga 8), which has been described as a life-sustaining force that is everything, and calls everything into being (Jahn 124). Although Collins uses a Black feminist perspective and does not directly connect self-definition and self-valuation to *nommo* or other African philosophical, rhetorical, and/or communicative practices/concepts, using a rhetorical lens, I understand self-definition and self-valuation as a way for Black women to claim their power to use language to name themselves and their

realities. I recognize self-definition and self-valuation as further acknowledgement of Black women's abilities to be powerful wielders of the Word. In her article "Power of the Word/Power of the Works: The Signifying Soul of Africana Women's Literature," Teresa Washington similarly identifies self-claiming, naming, and defining as powers of Africana women that is both used to develop more appropriate language for identifying Black female identities, as well as has connections to ancient Yoruba concepts Àjé and Òrò. According to Washington, Africana women's literature reflects and incorporates this ancient signifying soul that encourages Black women's personal, spiritual, and political power of the word. Similar to how Mae Henderson in "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman's Writer's Literary Tradition" uses terms like "mother tongue" and "speaking in tongues" to refer to the culturally specific, yet simultaneously multi-vocal nature of Black women's speaking and writing, and Geneva Smitherman in *Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans* gives the accolade of mastery of signification to Black women (i.e., "signification is the [Sista's] occupation") (69-70) to describe how Black women's language can be piercing, critical, and humorous, I understand self-definition and self-valuation as additional expressions of Black women's word power. More specifically, through self-definition and self-valuation, Black women give meaning to our own worlds, validating and refuting images of Black womanhood, and making meanings of Black womanhood that best represents our individual and collective perspectives.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I introduce key concepts used throughout this dissertation, including what I mean by Black female literacies, as well as provide further explanation of Collins' Black feminist concepts of self-definition and self-valuation. Next, I give a review of literature on what I refer to as Black women's rhetorics, which includes

interdisciplinary scholarship on Black female literacies, rhetorical traditions, language and communication.

Defining Key Terms: Black Female Literacies, Self-Definition, and Self-Valuation

In this dissertation, I situate self-definition and self-valuation as Black female literacies that Black women employ rhetorically within their everyday lives. In this section, I explain in more detail three key terms: Black female literacies, self-definition, and self-valuation.

Black Female Literacies

When considering the relationship between Black women and their literacy practices within my own research, I find it most useful to refer to how other scholars have discussed the term "literacy" within their Black female-centered research. For example, in her book *Sista Speak!: Black Women Kinfolk Talk About Language and Literacy*, sociolinguist Sonja Lanehart describes literacy in the following way:

> To read, write, and comprehend. *To feel secure in your knowledge and understanding*. To express your feelings, opinions, convictions, hopes, desires, dreams, fears, frustrations, and anxieties in a meaningful and insightful way. *To be respected for your words and thoughts*, which can easily be conveyed in the way you talk, and for the very act of writing with self-assurance. (ix)*(my emphasis)*

In this passage, Lanehart first explains literacy in a way that is recognizable, that is, "to read, write, and comprehend," (ix) while also moving beyond this general definition of literacy to

incorporate the personal experiences of those engaging in a particular literacy. Within her definition, literacy is deeply connected to feelings and the lived experiences ("opinions, convictions, hopes, desires, dreams fears, frustrations and anxieties") of a person. Although comprehension, acquiring knowledge and understanding is a part of literacy, a person must feel comfortable and confident in what they know in order to be able to use and share their knowledge with others in "a meaningful and insightful way" (ix). Through this connectedness with self, a person is able to share their knowledge in multiple ways (orally and textually) that are respected by others. In this sense, literacy is about both knowing and feeling, and being able to express one's knowledge with others in ways that is meaningful/understandable to them without negating one's own experience.

The second definition I draw from comes from rhetoric and composition scholar Elaine Richardson in her article "To Protect and Serve: African American Female Literacies." In her definition of African American female literacies, Richardson says the following:

> The concept of African American female literacies as I explore it here refers to *ways of knowing and acting and the development of skills*, vernacular expressive arts and crafts that help females to advance and protect themselves and their loved ones in society. African cultural forms that are constantly adapted to *meet the needs of navigating life in a racist society influence these practices and ways of knowing and coping*. African American females communicate these literacies through storytelling, conscious manipulation of silence and speech, code/style shifting, and signifying, among other verbal and nonverbal practices. Performance arts such as singing, dancing, acting, steppin, and stylin, as well as crafts such as quilting and use of other technologies are also

> exploited to these purposes (e.g., pots, pans, rags, brooms, and mops); African American females' language and literacy practices reflect their socialization in a racialized, genderized, sexualized, and classed world in which they employ their language and literacy practices to protect and advance themselves. Working from this rhetorical situation, the Black female develops *creative strategies to overcome her situation*, to "make a way outa no way." (680) ***(****my emphasis)*

Richardson's definition similarly moves beyond a standard definition of literacy to include the unique cultural, social, and political standpoints of Black females in the United States, while also considering how literacies can be reading and writing, as well as other practices of making (crafting, quilting, and cooking), use of cultural language and unique linguistic features of Black female speech (silence, code/style shifting, signifying, etc.), and other embodied practices of communication (dancing, acting, steppin, stylin, etc.). From Richardson's definition, I understand African American females' literacies as unique, creative, strategic, and they function rhetorically in the ways that they are used for the specific purposes of survival, protection, and service to others.

Finally, I reference Jacqueline Royster's work at the intersections of African American women and literacy. In her own discussion of the shift of the focus of literacy studies in *Traces of A Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*, Royster says the following about contemporary notions of literacy:

> […] operating now under the assumption that the territory of literacy is *both text and context*, not one or the other, and that, in being so, literacy also connects more generally

> to other symbolic systems of representation, for example oral practices, signs, or other visual systems, all of which collectively constitute a communicative matrix. Paying attention to the ways and means of *literacy as a communicative practice*, therefore, underscores the notion that literacy *functions rhetorically as part of the sociocultural fabric of our lives.* (Royster ix)

In this sense, literacy is depended on the moment, situation, social/cultural/historical/political situation and/or moment in which it is being enacted. Royster argues that literacy is a matrix of systems of representations and is itself a communicative practice, which means literacies represent, make, and distribute the knowledge(s) of their enactors. By focusing on elite African American women and their use of language within 19th century socio-political contexts, Royster is able to interrogate how literacy functioned rhetorically as social action (i.e., more than writing, but as an intricate part of the lives, well-being, and survival of Black women).

Drawing from Lanehart, Richardson, and Royster's definitions of literacy in relation to Black women, I understand Black women's literacies within my own study as ways of using one's positionality and personal/lived experiences as rhetorical tools for critically engaging and actively participating in a world dominated by systems of oppression. Black females' literacies are about Black women and girls using whatever means available within a particular context—in this case word choice—to name and communicate their knowledge about and understanding of themselves to themselves and others. More generally speaking, I understand Black female literacies as a continuous process of reflective, resistant, and reactionary processes where Black females make and wield their own communicative texts, tools, and technologies in order to be seen, to be heard, to be respected, to be protected, to survive, and to thrive.

Self-Definition and Self-Valuation

As discussed in Richardson's quote above, there are particular practices that have been identified as Black women literacies and language practices (e.g., storytelling, signifying, and manipulation of silence/speech)[2]. Although there are various literacy and language practices linked to Black female identities, in my study I focus on Black women's use of *self-definition* and *self-valuation*. In both her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*[3] and article "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," Patricia Hill Collins describes self-definition and self-valuation as a part of a collective Black woman consciousness. These practices allow Black women to resist being objectified as Other, negotiate contradictions between their own perceptions of themselves and misrepresentations of Black female identity within negative and positive stereotypes and controlling images, and contribute to Black women's journey to independent definitions of their identities. In *Black Feminist Thought* Collins says the following about self-definition:

> The insistence on Black women's self-definitions reframes the entire dialogue from one of protesting the technical accuracy of an image…to one stressing the power dynamics underlying the very process of definition itself. By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African-American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define. When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting

[2] I am not suggesting that these practices are exclusive to Black women. Instead, I am arguing like Richardson and many other rhetoric, language, and linguistic scholars that due to their positionality within culture and society Black women have developed unique and creative ways to develop and use these practices within various contexts.
[3] I will refer to this text as *Black Feminist Thought* from this point forward.

> them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definitions validates Black women's power as human subjects. (Collins 125-126)

According to Collins, self-definition is not just about a person defining him/herself. Instead, it is an interrogation of power when it comes to Black women and representations of our identities. Although Collins did not initially describe self-definition from a rhetorical standpoint, I recognize a connection between self-definition and rhetorical appeals like *ethos*. To explain, using a rhetorical lens, I understand self-definition as an interrogation and critique of the credibility, position of authority, and intentionality (i.e., *ethos*) of those who attempt to name, define, and make images of Black womanhood. Hegemonic narratives of Black womanhood are primarily the mythical products of racist and sexist perspectives attempting to control the minds, bodies, and spirits of Black women. These historical and dominant perceptions and controlling images of Black women (e.g., Jezebel, Mammy, Matriarch, Sapphire, etc.) rely on the authorities, credibility, and power of people who are not Black women.

Despite this lack of appropriate ethos, or at the very least the input of real Black women, these images proliferated throughout history and persist within contemporary society as if they are true. This process of generating false images of Black women is both unethical and illogical, but this creation and distribution of controlling images is masked by power. Black women being a part of two historically and systemically oppressed groups did not have the same positions of power as the White males who developed these myths about them; therefore, White male power negated and silenced Black female realities/truths. Self-definition challenges the credibility and reasoning behind representations of Black female identity, exposes the power dynamics that

influence how and why Black women are viewed in particular ways, and then resituates Black women as the primary authorities and most credible sources for naming and defining their own humanity.

While self-definition allows for questioning the authority and credibility of those *attempting* to name and define Black female identity, Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* says, "self-valuation addresses the actual content of these self-definitions" (126). Collins notes that many myths about Black womanhood are created by dominant culture to counteract and distort qualities about Black women that threaten the status quo (126). " In "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," she defines self-valuation as "namely, replacing externally derived images with authentic Black female images" (16-17). Self-valuation is a way for Black women to reclaim aspects about their identity that they value, including characteristics that have been marked via stereotypes as problematic, such as Black women being assertive and strong. Self-valuation allows Black women to challenge and rewrite controlling images in ways that relocate the value and functions of different aspects of their identities; for example, as discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, strength has various meanings for individual Black women that offer counter-narratives to the strong Black woman/superwoman myth.

From a rhetorical perspective, I understand self-valuation, particularly its emphasis on Black women's active engagement in theorizing and sharing their own understandings of their identities, as connected to African American rhetorical traditions. Maulana Karenga in "Nommo, Kawaida, and Communicative Practices: Bringing Good into the World," identifies themes of rhetoric within African and African American traditions, including: rhetoric of community, rhetoric of resistance, rhetoric of affirmation, and rhetoric of possibility. I situate self-valuation

as a continuation of all of these themes, but especially themes of African peoples (women's) resistance and affirmation. Self-valuation as defined by Collins is about Black women resisting narratives about and images of their identities. Karenga says that African American people's history is embedded with struggle, including the "holocaust of enslavement" (6), and the rhetorical practice of constant resistance is an effect of this oppressive history (6). When Black women reclaim and rewrite externally derived images of their identities they engage in this African rhetoric of resistance. Similarly, I connect self-valuation to a history of African people's rhetoric of affirmation. Karenga describes a rhetoric of affirmation in the following way:

> It is self-consciously committed to the reaffirmation of the status of the African person and African people as bearers of dignity and divinity, or their right to a free, full, and meaningful life, and of their right and responsibility to speak their own special cultural truth to the world and make their own unique contribution to the forward flow of human history. (Karenga 6).

Through their actions of naming, Black women use self-valuation in ways that allows them to reaffirm their "dignity and divinity" (6), while claiming their right to freely "speak their own special cultural truth[s] to the world" (6). In this sense, self-valuation is a rhetorical act of reaffirmation that has roots in extensive African traditions of naming and celebrating African people.

In other words, self-valuation is the action—the practice of naming and making sense of Black female identities; it considers what aspects of their identities Black women celebrate, validate, and affirm. As noted above, I do not believe Collins originally intended self-valuation

to be considered a rhetorical literacy and practice, but given the emphasis on action and doing, particularly within a range of cultural rhetorical traditions like African American rhetorics, I claim self-valuation as a Black female literacy practice. Instead of relying on others to create their own definitions of Black womanhood, Black women throughout history have found their own ways to resist stereotypes and hegemonic narratives about them; they have used self-valuation to reaffirm things about themselves deemed inappropriate, unfeminine, unattractive, and inferior, while simultaneously passing on this practice of self-love to others, especially their children, community members, and future generations. From my perspective, self-valuation and self-definition are rhetorical and they are literacies in the same ways as other literacies associated with Black females like storytelling, signifying, and silence.

As noted earlier in this introduction, although situated within Black feminist theory, self-definition and self-valuation seem to have connections to key African and African American rhetorical and communicative practices like *Nommo* or the power of the Word. Nommo is described as a powerful life-sustaining force, word magic, and is tied to ethical principles essential to everyday human-life. In his discussion of Nommo in *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World*, Jahneinz Jahn says that Nommo "is water and the glow of fire and seed and word in one. Nommo, the life force, is the fluid as such a unity of spiritual-physical fluidity, giving life to everything, penetrating everything, causing everything" (124). From this African philosophical perspective, one can begin to understand the significance of language within African American oral and rhetorical traditions. It carries a power that is beyond naming, but is also life sustaining and gives the world meaning. By situating self-definition and self-valuation as having an ancestral link to this African philosophical belief in the power of words, I hope to

claim further these practices as a part of African American/Black rhetorical traditions that need to be more explicitly theorized from the perspectives of Black women.

As Black feminist concepts, what make self-definition and self-valuation unique are their emphases on Black female perspectives specifically. Self-definition and self-valuation are tied to histories of Black women's resistance to oppressive systems. They also are quite visible as practices within the everyday lives of Black women and girls, in spite of the fact that some Black women (like myself) are rarely asked to share our experiences in ways that are empowering instead of exploitive. Because of the unique and strategic ways that Black women daily employ these practices, I understand my study on Black women's naming practices as a means to use Black women's words to better understand our individual and collective beliefs and values about Black female identity.

Literature Review: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Black Women's Rhetorics

Within the field of rhetoric and composition, many scholars have used their research to shift the discipline in ways that acknowledge and include the voices, experiences, and contributions of people from diverse cultural and community backgrounds. Within this scholarship, three rhetorical perspectives, or lenses, that inform my own research include feminist rhetorical practices, African American rhetorics, and cultural rhetorics. In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, Jacqueline Royster and Gesa Kirsch discuss how a range of feminist scholars within rhetoric and composition and literacy studies have successfully rescued, recovered, and re-inscribed non-traditional rhetorical subjects, spaces, histories and practices into these disciplines. The labor of feminist rhetorical scholars has greatly expanded our view of rhetorical histories by demonstrating how valuing plurality of experiences and voices and engaging in the often-tedious

practices of critical imagination, strategic contemplation, social circulation, and globalization creates more robust and dynamic understandings of rhetorical histories and the various actors within those histories.

As argued by Royster in her article "Disciplinary Landscaping, or Contemporary Challenges in the History of Rhetoric," using alternative approaches is both about shifting our perspectives and also shifting our practices and the ways that we think about knowledge to recognize and value people, places, spaces, cultures and ways of making knowledge that may not align with elite, Western, male perspectives. Within African American rhetorics and cultural rhetorics scholarship, there is an understanding that rhetoric and culture are inextricably linked. As discussed by Malea Powell, Daisy Levy, Andrea Riley-Mukavetz, Marilee Brooks-Gillies, Maria Novotny, and Jennifer Fisch-Ferguson in "Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics" a cultural rhetorics perspective is "generally, to emphasize rhetorics as always-already cultural and cultures as persistently rhetorical. In practice, cultural rhetorics scholars investigate and understand meaning-making as it is situated in specific cultural communities" (Act 1 Scene 1, 4). Drawing on Michel De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, they situate rhetoric and culture as something that everyone has in spite of the ways that colonialism/capitalism have not presented and recognized all cultures (and rhetorics) equally; the authors situate cultures as being composed of different practices accumulated over time within specific contexts (4). A cultural rhetorics perspective is incredibly informative to my own work for its bridging of culture and rhetoric, as well as its emphasis on how collective everyday cultural practices can destabilize dominant systems of oppression like colonialism and capitalism (5). Although I situate my own work as Black women's rhetorics that is both informed by feminist rhetorical practice and African American rhetorics, I also see it as cultural rhetorics in

the ways that it prioritizes and recognizes the liberating power of Black women's everyday cultural and rhetorical practices.

Given the ways in which rhetoric and composition is an interdisciplinary field, I recognize scholarship across disciplines that focus on Black women's rhetorics, literacies, language, communication and discourse as contributing to my understanding of Black women's rhetorical traditions. Black feminist and womanist theories often inform work in this area, which means that these scholars *intentionally* place the voices, experiences, and practices of Black women at the center of their inquiry. This shift in focus is a direct response to the limited visibility of Black women subjects within their respective disciplines. They use their research to broaden the scopes of their disciplines to acknowledge the contributions of Black women (and other historically marginalized and omitted groups), provide alternative frameworks for understanding Black women's experiences and practices, and bring more recognition to the voices, ways of being, and knowledge of Black women within a variety of contexts and situations. The following is a review of literature within rhetoric and composition, and intersecting disciplines, which focuses on Black women's rhetorics. For the purpose of my study, it includes scholarship on Black women's rhetorical traditions and histories, African American/Black female literacies and language practices, and Black women's alternative discourses.

Literature Review on Black Women's Rhetorics

Within rhetoric and composition, several scholars have made significant contributions to our understandings of African American/Black women's rhetorical traditions, especially our knowledge of 19th century Black women's use of public speaking and writing as means for

resisting systems of oppression and social activism. For example, Shirley Wilson Logan's book *We Are Coming: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women* considers how 19th century Black church and clubwomen uniquely incorporated rhetorical strategies within their speeches, essays, and letters to appeal to diverse audiences about social, political, and personal issues like the abolition of slavery, anti-lynching and mob violence, women's rights, and racial uplift. Similarly, Jacqueline Royster's *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women* uses rhetorical, historical, and ideological frameworks for analyzing 19th century elite African American women and their literacies. Focusing primarily on their use of essays, Royster provides the historical contexts during which each woman was writing, while considering how these women used their literacies to create space for themselves, resist, and advocate for sociopolitical change. In addition, Johnnie Stover's work on 19th century Black women writers provides insight into how these women used the genre of autobiography to offer critiques of society and culture and resist systems of oppression such as slavery. In both her book *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography* and her article "Nineteenth Century African American Women's Autobiography as Social Discourse: The Example of Harriet Ann Jacobs," Stover also identifies Black women linguistic and physical features (what she calls "mother tongue") that Black women employ to demonstrate their resistance and communicate their perspectives within an oppressive world.

Other scholars add to our understandings of the rhetorical contributions of Black women historical and contemporary public figures, including intellectuals, educators, and performers. For instance, in *African American Women's Rhetoric: The Search for Dignity, Personhood, and Honor* Deborah Atwater provides a historiographical account of how Black women have used their literacies—speeches, autobiographies, music, etc.—to resist stereotypical images and

broaden what she calls "tight spaces," or attempts to deny Black women their human and civil rights and access to personal, educational, and professional opportunities. Beginning with the life of Sara Baartman and then moving to the lives and contributions of various Black female political businesswomen, journalists, educators and musicians like Maria Stewart, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary McLeod Bethune, Madame C.J. Walker, Shirley Chisholm, Bessie Smith, and Queen Latifah, Atwater traces a history of Black women's use of their voices and their literacies to fight for respect, human rights, equality, education, and advancements for themselves and for others. Both Tamika Carey's article "Firing Mama's Gun: The Rhetorical Campaign in Geneva Smitherman's 1971-73 Essays" and Coretta Pittman's "Black Women Writers and the Trouble with Ethos: Harriet Jacobs, Billie Holiday, and Sister Souljah" interpret the practices of contemporary Black women rhetors, while also demonstrating how individual Black women must negotiate their unique context, situation, audience, and position of power to effectively present and argue their messages. In addition, Carey's most recent book *Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood* interrogates the popular self-help texts of African American writers, including Oprah Winfrey and Iyanla Vanzant, to discuss discourses at the intersections of rhetorical healing and Black women's wellness.

There is also a considerable amount of Black women's rhetorics scholarship that focuses specifically on African American/Black female literacy practices. For example, as mentioned above, Elaine Richardson's article "To Protect and Serve: African American Female Literacies" points to the importance of Black women's means for negotiating various contexts and situations, and also identifies and illustrates seven literacy practices associated with African American females, including storytelling, performative silence, strategic use of polite and assertive language, style shifting/codeswitching, indirection, steppin/rhyming, and preaching. In

this article, as well as her other works, Richardson calls for more holistic understandings of African American culture and literacy that includes African American women and how their histories and current positions and roles affect their literacies, language practices, and knowledge. Scholarship like Richardson's provide a framework for other scholars to study Black female literacies that moves beyond traditional notions of literacy as reading and writing only. For instance, Rachel Grant's essay "African American Female Literacies and the Role of Double-Dutch in the Lives and Literature for Black Girls" draws on Richardson to interrogate double-dutch rope play as a Black girl literacy, as well as a space for Black women and girls to learn, share, and sustain their raced and gendered identities, and empower themselves (98). Others like Regina Spellers' essay "The Kink Factor: A Womanist Discourse Analysis of African American Mother/Daughter Perspectives on Negotiating Black Hair/Body Politics and Lanita Jacobs-Huey book *From the Kitchen to the Parlor: Language and Becoming in African American Women's Hair Care* have considered Black women's literacies and language in relation to both public and private discourses about their identities, especially their hair.

Hip-hop continues to be an important public counter-space for understanding Black women's rhetorics. Gwendolyn Pough's book *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* offers a hip-hop feminist re-reading of the public sphere that makes visible the Black public sphere and Black women's ways of making themselves visible and heard within these realms. Using hip-hop culture as a point of inquiry, Pough considers how Black women in hip-hop use the rhetorical tool of resistance called "bringing-wreck" to challenge male dominated spaces, beliefs, and values, as well as pre-conceived notions of Black womanhood. She situates hip-hop as a site for airing out concerns and advocating for change. Similarly, Aisha Durham, Gwendolyn Pough, Rachel Raimist, and Elaine Richardson's

edited collection *Home Girls Make Some Noise*, Celnisha Dangerfield's use of womanist theory to analyze Lauryn Hill's album *The Mis-education of Lauryn Hill* in her essay "Lauryn Hill as Lyricist and Womanist," the popularity of the online space and recent publication of *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, and others, demonstrates Black women's long-standing contributions to hip-hop and how hip-hop has served as a backdrop and framework for understanding Black women's literacies, language practices, and everyday experiences/resistance.

There is also scholarship outside of rhetoric and composition that studies Black/African American women's literacies and language that broadens our understandings of Black women's rhetorics. For example, English and women's studies scholar Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis' work on African American women's oral narratives collects the stories of professional Black women educated in the early 20th century (1920-1940). In both her article "Standing Up and Speaking Out: African American Women's Narrative Legacy" and book *My Soul is My Own: Oral Narratives of African American Women in the Professions*, Etter-Lewis includes an analysis of professional African American women's negotiations of their language and the choices they make as they share stories about their lives. Mae Henderson in "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics and Dialectics and The Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition" focuses on Black women's use of multiple voices, or abilities to "speak in tongues," and how their multiplicity of voice is a part of Black women's literacy and language style. Language is such an important component of African American rhetoric, and a majority of the scholarship mentioned above is greatly informed by linguistic and communication studies scholarship, including research on African American women's language (AAWL). Sociolinguistic and communication studies scholars like Geneva Smitherman, Denise Troutman, Marcyliena Morgan, Marsha Houston, Karla Scott, and others have researched the unique linguistic features of African American women's talk that

differ from both Black men and White women's language practices. This research focuses on AAWL linguistic features like Black women's signifying, use of indirection, assertiveness, politeness, talking with an attitude, indirection, and nonverbal communicative practices such as laughter, cut-eye, and suck-teeth, as well as analysis of everyday Black women's perspectives on their own language practices.

Within education scholarship, more attention is being given to the affects the current social and political climate, especially the violence against Black women and girls in the United States and around the world, has on our abilities as educators to teach and Black female students' abilities to learn. For example, in her special issue of *English Education* titled "Why Black Girls' Literacies Matter: New Literacies for a New Era, editor Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz constructs a collection of essays that offers an urgent response to the disproportionate treatment of Black girls within and outside educational settings. With a focus on "Black girl literacies," the contributors to this issue offer an interdisciplinary review of literature on Black girl literacies, investigations of the use of social media to leverage Black girl literacies and provide support to Black girls' social activism and self-definition, while also providing educators with a Black Girl Literacies Framework for acknowledging the individual and collective experiences of Black girls within and outside our classrooms.

Although the scholarship reviewed here alter traditional frameworks within rhetoric and composition that omits, marginalizes, and/or subsumes Black women's histories, theories, and practices, a majority of this research primarily focuses on *written texts* (autobiographies, essays, lyrics, recorded speeches, sermons, etc.) of *elite* historical and contemporary Black women writing, speaking, singing, and performing within *public* spheres as primary resources for understanding Black women's literacies and rhetorics. This scholarship has been invaluable to

our understandings of African American/Black women's rhetorical histories and Black female literacies, but there is still limited research within rhetoric and composition that considers the daily literacies and language practices employed by Black women who are not public figures within *everyday* contexts, places, and spaces like at home, amongst family and friends, at school/work, etc.

My research is primarily interested in the word choices Black women use for naming, defining, and describing Black womanhood. At the center of my inquiry are texts—written and oral—created by Black women participants that focuses on their understandings of their own identities. By allowing self-definition and self-valuation to serve as primary practices for generating and collecting data within my study, I interrogate these Black feminist concepts as rhetorical practices.

In the next chapter, I provide a more detailed description of my research project. I discuss the qualitative methods, such as my use of grounded theory approaches for collecting and analyzing data, and an explanation of my use of Black feminist epistemologies as a guiding framework for this project. This dissertation includes three finding chapters. Chapter Three is the first findings chapter and focuses on the most popular term used by participants to name, define, and describe their identities—*strong*. This chapter considers multiple myths of the strong Black woman image, and puts these myths into conversation with the self-definitions and self-valuations of real Black women and their use of the term within their everyday lives. Chapter Four is another findings chapter that interprets participants' word choice for naming, defining, and describing influential Black women in their lives. Using Patricia Hill Collins' Afrocentric feminist standpoint on Black mothering as a framework, I interpret the ways in which Black women participants specifically name their mothers, othermothers, and other motherly but

unrelated Black women, as exemplifying and embodying their definitions of *care* and *loving*. In Chapter Five, I discuss participants' various meanings and definitions of 'sisterhood.' Given the popularity of the word 'sister' in both my pilot study focus group, and data collected in this study, I consider the history of sisterhood within specific Black women-centered communities/spaces and how participants' use of 'sister' speaks to a legacy of 'sisterhood' as a practice of survival for Black women. In my concluding chapter, I discuss the implications of this study, particularly as a means for claiming self-definition and self-valuation as Black female literacy practices as an areas within Black women's rhetorics that we must continue to recognize and better understand. I also discuss the limitations of this current research design, and my next steps for furthering this scholarship.

Chapter 2 Methods and Methodology for Studying Self-Definition and Self-Valuation: A Black Feminist Research Design

> Although it is tempting to claim that Black women are more oppressed than everyone else and therefore have the best standpoint from which to understand the mechanisms, processes and effects of oppression, this is not the case.
>
> Instead, those ideas that are validated as true by African-American women, African-American men, Latina lesbians, Asian-American women, Puerto Rican men, and other groups with distinctive standpoints, with each group using the epistemological approaches growing from its unique standpoint, become the most "objective" truths. Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished. Each group becomes better able to consider other groups' standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or suppressing other groups' partial perspectives…Partiality, and not universality, is the condition of being heard; individuals and groups forwarding knowledge claims without owning their position are deemed less credible than those who do.
>
> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 290

As a Black (African American) woman researcher, I enter into this interdisciplinary conversation on Black female literacies with both personal and professional investment in this topic. Throughout my life, I have witnessed Black women's power over the Word, and this research is about me continuing to observe this power as it is employed by Black women from diverse backgrounds to name, define, and describe their identities.

In the excerpt above, Collins speaks to the power of partiality, and how one group's standpoint can contribute to all of our larger understandings. Obviously, my close proximity to my research, especially my identity as a Black woman researcher conducting a study on Black female literacies produces a particular partiality and bias. As a researcher, I acknowledge the ways in which my race, gender, background, and personal relationships with a majority of my participants affect this research in ways that are both positive and negative. Because of this, I approached the constructing and facilitating of this project in the only way I see fit, that is, with respect, care, and love for the Black women participants who shared their knowledge with me, for the many other Black women and girls who may be impacted by this research, and for myself. In no way do I claim that this research represents, or could ever wholly represent, the voices, experiences, and knowledge(s) of *all* Black women. However, my research offers a partial lens for understanding how *some* Black women name and theorize their identities.

Using a qualitative research design that incorporates constructivist grounded theory methods informed by Black feminist epistemologies, I consider the following research questions:

- When asked to identify, name, and describe their identities, what words do Black women use?
- What do these words mean to individual Black women? Black women collectively?
- How do self-definition and self-valuation function as rhetorical practices? How do Black women use/employ self-definition and self-valuation?

In this chapter, I will explain my methodologies and methods for conducting this research on Black female literacies. Since Black feminist epistemologies greatly influenced all aspects of my

research design, including my methods for recruiting participants, my reasoning for having multiple forms of data collection, and my methods for interpreting data, I will begin with an overview of Collins' four key principles of Black feminist epistemology. Next, I will generally discuss the overall design of the project, including previous versions of this study and my use of constructivist grounded theory approaches to collecting and analyzing data. I end this chapter with a preview of the three themes that will be explored further in the following data chapters, particularly focusing on my process for locating these patterns within my data.

Black Feminist Epistemologies: A Research Framework

In her article "Teaching Theory Construction with Initial Grounded Theory Tools: A Reflection on Lessons and Learning," Kathy Charmaz makes the following claim about the relationship between theories of knowledge and methods, she says, "the methods we choose and how we use these methods flows from our epistemologies" (1612). As a Black woman researcher studying Black women participants' use of Black feminist literacy practices of self-definition and self-valuation, it is appropriate and important for me to provide an overview of a U.S. Black feminist epistemological perspective.

According to Collins in *Black Feminist Thought*, U.S. Black feminist thought is a critical social theory that "reflects the interests and standpoint of its creators" (269) (i.e., Black women) and emphasizes "the importance of intersecting oppressions in shaping the U.S. matrix of domination" (269). In her chapter titled "Black Feminist Epistemologies," Collins discusses how dominant perspectives create limitations on what is recognized as truth and knowledge. Because of this, Black women's (and other subordinated groups') knowledge is subjugated in ways that make it difficult for intellectuals to study and for outsiders to understand. In response, we—that is researchers placing Black women at the center of our inquiry—must be creative by using

alternative methods for understanding, disseminating, and validating Black women's knowledge (270).

Other scholars across disciplines who use Black feminist theory to frame their research often refer to Collins' guiding principles of a Black feminist epistemology (see Kristie Dotson, LaShawnda Lindsay-Dennis, Marsha Houston and Olga Davis, and others). For example, LaShawnda Lindsay-Dennis in her construction of a Black feminist-Womanist research paradigm says that researchers using Black feminist perspectives to theorize African American girls [and women] should be guided by both "academic knowledge and everyday experience" (509). In this sense, academic knowledge which is embedded with Western, elite, and patriarchal beliefs and expectations should not dominate our theorizing of Black female-centered research; instead, we should (must) be informed by the unique and everyday knowledge of Black women and girls to more thoroughly understand their realities.

In her discussion of a Black feminist epistemology, Collins outlines four principles that inform this perspective, which (again) she describes as partial but representative of a Black woman standpoint. I outline Collins' four Black feminist epistemological principles below:

- *Lived experience as a criterion of meaning*: This tenant recognizes that there are two types of knowing—knowledge and wisdom. Collins says, "As members of a subordinate group, Black women cannot afford to be fools of any type, for our objectification as the Other denies us the protections that White skin, maleness, and wealth confer" (275-276). In this sense, knowledge is not enough for Black women's survival due to our intersecting oppressions. Instead, we must also have wisdom, which is acquired through lived experience. From this epistemological perspective,

the status of ‘expert’ and one’s ‘credibility’ is dependent upon having not only knowledge of a subject/topic, but also having lived experience—wisdom—that informs one’s actions in relation to that topic.

- *Use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims*: Collins says, “For Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community” (279). I understand this tenant as being rooted in African philosophical, rhetorical, and oral traditions that emphasize the importance of communal deliberation in the process of making knowledge (See Molefi Asante and Maulana Karenga) where dialogue (especially using the communicative practices of call-and-response and storytelling) and reliance on pre-established community relationships are essential.

- *Ethics of caring*: Collins describes ethics of caring as having three interrelated components, including: 1) emphasizing the unique expressions of individuals; 2) recognizing the appropriateness of emotions; and 3) developing a capacity for empathy (282-283). Collins recognizes how these African American views on ‘ethics of care’ share similarities with feminist perspectives that recognize the importance of inner voice (283).

- *Ethic of personal accountability*: This principle requires that individuals construct knowledge claims through dialogue, but also take responsibility for the knowledge claims that they make. Collins says, “Assessment of an individual’s knowledge

> claims simultaneously evaluate an individual's character, values, and ethics. Within this logic, many African Americans reject prevailing beliefs that probing into an individual's personal viewpoint is outside the boundaries of discussion" (284). In this sense, an individual's knowledge claims are always subject to questioning and further dialogue, particularly when considering an individual's ethics and ethos. Claims made by individuals who are "respected for their moral and ethical connections to their ideas will carry more weight than those offered by less respected figures" (284).

These four Black feminist epistemological principles informed all aspects of my project design and practices. The inclusion of this Black feminist perspective allowed space for multiple and diverse Black women voices (including my own) to contribute to my understanding of Black female literacies. As I will discuss further in the next section, Black feminist theory aligned well with the purpose and intentions of qualitative research, and it acted as a lens for how and why I adapted grounded theory methods to best suit the aims of my study.

Qualitative Research Design and Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods

I constructed this project using a qualitative research design. According to John W. Creswell in *Research Design: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods*, qualitative research is:

> […] a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures; collecting data in the participants' setting; analyzing the data inductively,

building from particulars to general themes; and making interpretations of the meaning of the data. (246-247)

Creswell identifies several characteristics of qualitative research that greatly impacted my decision to choose qualitative methods over quantitative or mixed methods, including how qualitative research: 1) situates the researcher as a key instrument for collecting data, 2) encourages the use of multiple sources of data, 3) emphasizes the participants' meaning of a topic/issue/problem along with the researcher's interpretation, 4) situates reflexivity as an essential part of the research process, and 5) attempts to provide a holistic account of the subject (185-186). These characteristics align with Black feminist perspectives including how it emphasizes the incorporation of multiple voices in the making of knowledge through dialogue, its understandings of knowledge as situated and reliant on a person/groups unique standpoint, and how Black feminist thought holds the individual, in this case the researcher, accountable for her words, claims, and actions.

As an inductive approach to qualitative research, I used constructivist grounded theory approaches to collect and analyze data. According to Kathy Charmaz in *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, "grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves" (2). Although grounded theory was developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss within the contexts of social sciences and includes a prescriptive structure, this method has been adapted to meet the needs of other disciplines and communities. In her article "Constructivist Grounded Theory," Charmaz offers a

brief commentary on this method including contemporary revisions. Unlike previous versions, Charmaz says that new adaptations of constructivist grounded theory requires the researcher to:

> 1) assume a relativist epistemology, 2) acknowledge their own and research participants' multiple standpoints, roles, and realities, 3) adopt a reflexive stance toward their background, values, actions, situations, relationships with research participants, and representations of them, and 4) situate their research in the historical, social, and situational conditions of its production. (299)

Through this grounded theory approach, I interpreted my data in ways that acknowledged the positionalities of both participants and myself as the researcher, identified categories that represented the most common themes across all participant responses, and interpreted my findings by placing these themes amongst real Black women in conversation with historical depictions of Black womanhood.

Since within qualitative research studies it is important to collect quality and rich data, I used various methods for collecting and analyzing data, which included pre-interview questionnaires, interviews, initial coding practices, comparative methods, memo writing and charting. Prior to beginning this study, I conducted a pilot study with focus groups that greatly informed the design of this current research project. Below I briefly discuss this early study and explain how it affected my current project.

Pilot Study: Early Trials and Errors

As a trial to the current research project, I conducted a pilot study where three self-identified Black women and I participated in a focus group. The purpose of the focus group was to consider the following:

- What words or phrases do Black women (you) use to name themselves (yourself) and/or other Black women?
- What words or phrases do others use to name Black women (you)?
- How do Black women (you) define these words/phrases?

What was interesting about this early study was that all participants (myself included) had pre-established relationships with each before the study was conducted. We all were either peers or friends, and had built some degree of trust and comfort with each other through these relationships. According to Collins in *Black Feminist Thought*, Black women's relationships with other Black women greatly contribute to Black women's self-definition practices. Three primary Black women 'safes spaces' include Black women's friendship and family interactions, the Black church, and Black women organizations (Collins 112). I believe conducting this focus group within a research context that provided an informal, private, and affirming space like a Black female friendship group greatly affected the research setting (feel/mood/enthusiasm) and the data collected in this pilot study.

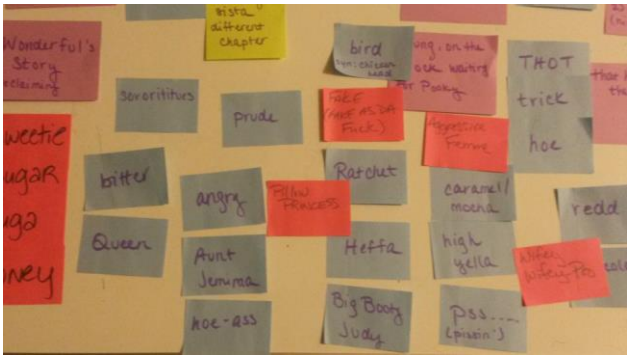
The focus group discussion and process for collecting data was split into three parts. At the beginning of the discussion, participants were provided journals. Within these journals, they were asked to spend 10 minutes generating lists of words in response to the above questions.

Next, participants were asked to share their individual words with the other participants. To do so, participants wrote each individual word on a sticky-note and placed it on a large white board. The purpose of this process was to create a visual and collaborative representation of all of our words [See Figures 1 & 2 below for illustrations of the word board]. Finally, as a group, participants were asked to begin to define each term. Although there was no suggested structure for how they would define terms, participants moved from collaboratively defining terms they shared some commonalities with (e.g., sister) to individually defining terms that represented their unique experiences.

With the consent of participants, all of the data from this focus group was collected by me. At the conclusion of this focus group, a total of 85 words were collected via participant journals and the collaborative word board. I took photos of the collective-board and transcribed the audio recording of the focus group. I used grounded theory methods to interpret the data.

Figure 1: Word Board Image A

Figure 2: Word Board Image B



From this pilot study, I learned several things that ultimately influenced the design of my current research project. First, it demonstrated to me the importance of studying Black women's literacies within the context of a Black-female centered space. Although I was concerned about the affects a friendship space would have on the quality and quantity of data collection, through this pilot I was able to develop a significant amount of data through multiple methods within a relatively short period of time (i.e., 1-hour). Despite this ability to gather a large quantity of data, I learned that because I was collecting data within a typically informal, private space I needed more structure for organizing, managing, and interpreting this data.

In addition, this initial research design emphasized collaborative and communal knowledge making which aligns with Black feminist epistemologies, but individual Black women's words, definitions, and unique deviations from collective thoughts and beliefs could have been better represented and acknowledged within the study. I also learned that within a group setting—especially a Black women friendship setting—voices can be both heard and muted; in other words, Black women friendship spaces have their own power dynamics and women within these spaces communicate with each other using verbal and nonverbal communication practices that can be difficult to account for within the context of a research

study. In response to these observations and experiences, in my current research project I opted to continue to draw from my own Black women friendship and family spaces to recruit participants for my study, but I chose to conduct one-on-one interviews instead of a focus group to better prioritize the voices of individual Black women.

Another lesson learned from this pilot study was the need to have multiple methods for collecting participant responses and to allow space and time for self-reflection and theorizing. The combination of journaling, sharing, and building the collaborative word board offered participants moments to pause and think through their individual and collective meanings of terms, listen to each other's perspectives, and practice communal deliberation. This whole process took a lot of time, and although 85 words were collected during this focus group less than half of the words were actually defined at the conclusion of the meeting. From this experience, I learned the importance of allotting enough time for participants to reflect and make sense of the words they chose to share prior to asking them to define these terms with others. As I will discuss later, in my current research project, participants' responses were collected in phases, as opposed to all at once, to give them an opportunity to reflect and make sense of their words and definitions prior to sharing them with others.

Finally, through analyzing the data from this pilot study, I was able to gain early insight into possible words, themes, and phrases other Black women might use to name, define, and describe their identities, while also locating major errors in my research design. For example, within their journals and while constructing the collaborative word board, participants in my pilot study spent a significant amount of time discussing their roles and relationships with other Black women, including their friends, sisters, and mothers. These themes remained popular within my current project. Also, since the research questions for this pilot study asked

participants to identify words that "others" (i.e., non-Black women) use to name, define, and describe Black women, a significant amount of time was spent writing words that all four participants would NOT normally use to describe their identities as Black women. For example, a significant portion of the words collected included words that represented negative images of Black female identity, including words like bitch, ho, and Aunt Jemima. I consider this a serious error in the design of my pilot study. In response to this issue, I eliminated this question from my research questions to encourage participants to speak from their own perspectives of Black womanhood, as opposed to directly speaking on/from non-Black female viewpoints about Black womanhood.

Revised Project: Methods and Methodology for Studying Black Female Literacies

In my current research, I aimed to learn from my experiences within my pilot study and adjust the overall structure of the project to better understand Black women's literacy practices of self-definition and self-valuation. In this section, I discuss my current project, which is a revised version of my pilot study. I provide a breakdown of all major components of my research design, including my recruitment of participants, incorporation of grounded theory methods for collecting and analyzing data, and an introduction to my findings.

Participants

As noted above, recruitment of participants began with me first referring to my own relationships with other Black women, especially my own familial and friendship safe spaces. This process of recruitment was conducted primarily through email where I sent invitations to participate in my study to my Black female friends, family members, peers, and colleagues. Within this invitation, I provided a detailed description of my project, participant and researcher

roles and responsibilities, and a timeline for the completion of interviews. I also encouraged these women within my network to invite other Black women within their own networks to participate in this study; by drawing on Black women networks, I was able to extend the pool of participants beyond my immediate family and friend relationships, while still maintaining a degree of connectedness to, and familiarity with, each participant.

The only requirements for being a participant in my study was that a potential participant had to self-identify as a Black woman, and they had to be living in the U.S. during the time of the study.[4] In this study, the identification of "Black woman" is understood as an inclusive term where "Black" refers to diverse groups of women throughout the African diaspora, as opposed to using "African American" which may have deterred Black women who did not identify as "African American" from participating in my study. Ultimately, twelve (12) self-identified Black women from diverse backgrounds with age ranges from 18-57 years old volunteered to be participants. Because of my method for recruiting participants, I had various degrees of previously established relationships with all participants, which resulted in a modification of my previous study that allowed me to continue to situate my research within the context of Black women 'safe spaces.' As a member of these spaces, my role as a researcher was not to pursue universal knowledge about Black female literacies, but to better understand Black women's literacies by dialoguing with and carefully listening to the lived experiences of multiple Black women (including my own).[5]

[4] Participants did not have to be from the United States to be a part of this study, but since I am using Collins' viewpoint on U.S. Black feminist theory as a guiding framework for my study, it was important for participants to have lived experiences within U.S. society and culture.
[5] This project was IRB Approved, and all participants were required to sign a consent form to participate within this study.

Data Collection

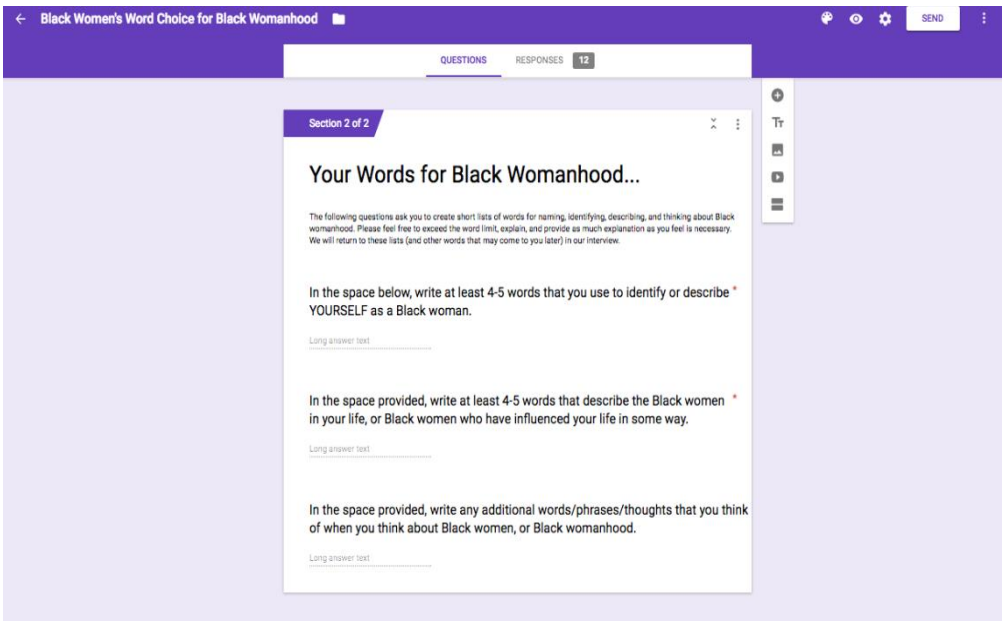
There were two primary forms of data collection for this study: pre-interview questionnaires and interviews.

Pre-interview questionnaires were distributed via email as an online form. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire prior to being scheduled for a follow-up interview [See Figure 3]. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part asked general background information about participants, including their name, age range, contact information, and whether they self-identified as a Black woman. The second portion of the questionnaire asked participants to generate three separate lists in relation to Black womanhood:

- List #1: Create a list of 4-5 words that you would use to name, define, describe YOUR identity as a Black woman
- List #2: Create a list of 4-5 words that you would use to describe influential Black women in your life
- List #3: Create a list of any additional/words/phrases/thoughts you may have about Black women

These lists required participants to engage in practices of self-definition and self-valuation, and each list was informed by Black feminist theory as discussed by Collins. For example, List #1 was informed by Collins' argument that "identity is not the goal but rather the point of departure in the process of self-definition" (125), and List #2 was informed by the Black feminist beliefs that "[s]elf is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others. Instead, self is found in the context of family and community" (124).

Figure 3 Image of Online Pre-Interview Questionnaire



Participants had up to three weeks after the distribution of the online questionnaire to complete and submit their responses. Within a week of completing their questionnaire, I contacted participants to schedule a follow-up interview to further discuss participants' lists of words. A total of 136 individual responses were collected within the pre-interview questionnaire.

Interviews were the second primary data collection source. Interviews were conducted either in person within a private and convenient setting agreed upon by each participant and myself, or over the phone. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by me. Although a total of twelve participants completed the pre-interview questionnaire, only ten women were available for follow-up interviews. To provide structure and symmetry across interviews, each participant was given notecards with their word responses from their pre-interview questionnaire printed on them [See Figure 4]. This allowed participants to refer to their questionnaire responses throughout the interviewing process. Also, I structured each interview via seven open-ended questions that moved each interview from a general introduction, to discussion of Lists

#1-3, additional follow-up questions, and final thoughts. The overall length of interviews was varied from one participant to another with interviews ranging from 14-46 minutes. At the completion of each interview, I transcribed each audio recording and provided a copy of the transcript to the appropriate participant to review/edit/revise/omit/approve the information provided during the interview.

Figure 4 Example of Participant Response Notecard

BW5 Pre-Interview Response: Question # 1

4-5 words that you use to identify or describe YOURSELF as a Black woman

Strong

Rebellious

Complicated

Family/community-oriented

Misunderstood

Non-conformist

Giver

All of the women who participated in my pilot study discussed above also continued to be a part of this revised project. Because of this, I include the data collected from the pilot study focus group as secondary data. Since my primary data sources rely on individual Black women perspectives and dialogue between participant and researcher, the data collected from the focus group allowed for more collective dialogue amongst multiple Black women discussing a similar topic. Although the focus of the pilot study and this current study are slightly different, I believe that the data collected in the pilot study is still applicable within this study as a secondary source.

Data Analysis

In her book, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, Kathy Charmaz discusses grounded theory approaches to analyzing data as continuous engagement with data throughout the research process. She suggests the use of initial coding methods to begin to make sense of/ask questions about data early in the study, as well as an analytical phase where the researcher begins to synthesize the data and move towards general understandings. Following Charmaz's guide to constructing grounded theory, in this study I used coding practices as a part of my initial analysis of data, as well as memo-writing and charting to build categories and make comparisons across data sets. Through these methods, I located the most common themes and patterns across participant responses, which I interrogate further in the chapters that follow. Below I discuss my methods for interpreting data collected in this study.

Coding

Coding was one major method I used for analyzing data collected from pre-interview questionnaires and interviews. In *Constructing Grounded Theory*, Charmaz describes coding as pivotal moment where the researcher begins to interrogate what is happening within the data (46). She divides grounded theory coding into two phases. The first is "an initial phase involving naming each word, line, or segment of data followed by…a focused, selective phase that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize integrate, and organize large amounts of data (46). Initial coding practices used within my data collection included *word-by-word coding* of pre-interview questionnaires and *line-by-line coding* of interview transcripts.

Since pre-interview questionnaire responses asked participants to generate three lists of words that they would use to name themselves (List #1), influential Black women in their lives (List #2), and Black womanhood generally (List #3), a majority of participants did not include

meanings or definitions of these terms as part of their responses. As a researcher, I used word-by-word coding as a way to begin to define these terms written by participants. *Word-by-word coding* consists of going through each word in data and applying a code, or meaning to each word. For my study, word-by-word coding was beneficial for initially analyzing pre-interview questionnaire responses, which primarily consisted of individual words.

To write these codes for words collected in pre-interview questionnaires, I relied on two factors: 1) my personal experiences with how these terms are used and defined generally and by Black women specifically (including myself), and 2) my knowledge of how participants have used these terms in the past (either within friendship groups, or as participants within my previous study). This method for applying initial codes to data relied on my own lived experience as a Black woman to begin to make sense of the data as a researcher, while also placing my perspectives in dialogue with my knowledge about individual participants (See Appendix for Table 1, which provides an excerpt of my initial word-by-word coding of pre-interview questionnaire responses). As a result of this word-by-word coding process, I was able to chart my own general understanding of the terms, identify deviations in word choices, and locate general patterns in how I was defining similar terms (e.g., beautiful and pretty, powerful and strong, and intelligent and brilliant). Since this coding took place prior to follow-up interviews, it allowed me to engage the data early in the research process, and provided some topics to pay closer attention to during follow-up interviews.

As another initial analytical practice, I also used *line-by-line coding* to begin to interpret the actions taking place within participant interviews. Drawing on Glaser, Charmaz defines line-by-line coding as "naming each line of your written data" (50). After transcribing the audio recording of each interview, and receiving edits and revisions from participants (if needed), I

then applied codes to every line of each participant's transcript. This process of line-by-line coding was very informative because it required me to pay close attention to participants' words and definitions, but also to observe their practices for defining terms (e.g., stories, reflection, examples, physical objects, writing, etc.), their moments of uncertainty, and topics that seemed to inspire particular emotions, including happiness, sadness, frustration, pride, etc. Although I tried to remain empathetic and open to participants and their perspectives throughout the research process, I believe line-by-line coding required me to continue to remain engaged and open as a researcher while interpreting data. This process of slowing down to see and hear participants through this method of coding often took me as a researcher back to interviews and evoked many of the emotions I personally felt while conducting these interviews. In these moments, both participants and I were often quite vulnerable and honest about our lived experiences as Black women and line-by-line coding allowed me to re-claim that emotion as a part of my analytical process (See Appendix for Table 2, which is an example of how I used line-by-line coding to code each participants' interview transcript)**.**

Also for analytical purposes, line-by-line coding allowed me to verify, revise, and omit the codes I developed within my initial word-by-word codes of pre-interview questionnaire word responses. Since my word-by-word codes relied solely on my own perspectives and assumptions about the meaning of these terms, line-by-line coding transcripts where participants *explain for themselves* the meaning of the terms that they wrote created an opportunity for me to better understand the data from participants' perspectives. Line-by-line coding also helped me to account for the additional words and phrases that participants *did not* write in their pre-interview questionnaire, but *did* write and/or use to describe themselves or other Black women within their interviews. For example, during one interview a participant handwrote an additional word into

her list of words to describe herself (i.e., List #1 responses). Finally, line-by-line coding created an opportunity for me to note different practices participants were engaging in while defining their terms, such as storytelling, critiquing, laughing, theorizing, etc.

Memo writing, Charting and Cross-Data Comparisons

As suggested by Charmaz, throughout data collection and analysis, I engaged in *memo writing*, a method of using writing to catch one's thoughts, converse with oneself about data, make comparisons across data, make discoveries about data, and begin the process of developing categories for further inquiry. My memo writing often came in the form of long drafts of ideas, as well as charts where I could visually account for initial codes and additional information. Through charting, specifically, I was able to make comparisons across data sets and participant responses. For example, as a follow-up to my line-by-line coding of transcripts I developed charts to display information essential to answering my research questions. This included a chart that combined each participant's word responses to pre-interview questionnaires, the definitions and/or meanings they applied to these words within their follow-up interviews, revised codes of these terms, and notes on what practices participants were using to define and theorize terms (See Appendix for Table 3, which provides an example of my follow-up charting of each participants' interview responses).

One major benefit of charting data was that it allowed me to make comparisons across pre-interview and interview data sets, and locate themes and deviations within and across participant responses. After completing initial and revised coding of pre-interview questionnaires and interview transcripts, I created a master chart that combined all participant responses, which allowed me to locate and visually represent categories and popular themes within the data (See

Appendix for Table 4, an excerpt of this master word list created after coding all participants' pre-interview questionnaire and interview responses).

Data Findings

For the purpose of this dissertation, I chose to further interpret the most popular participant responses provided in Lists #1-3. What I mean by popular are categories that offered the most participant responses with either multiple participants choosing to use the same or similar words, or a category that offered a range of different word responses that were categorized similarly. If the same word was used by at least two different participants, I marked it as a potential pattern, or common term. Below I discuss popular terms used within each List according to both pre-interview questionnaire and interview responses.

List #1

Within pre-interview questionnaire responses for List #1 (Identify 4-5 words that you would use to name, define, and/or describe yourself as a Black woman), a total of 59 individual word responses were recorded from 12 participants. To locate patterns within responses, I identified words that were repeated across participant responses. If the same word was used by at least two different participants, I marked it as a potential pattern, or common term, for List #1 responses. From initial coding, I identified 5 words that occurred at least twice within List #1 responses to describe influential Black women, including: delicious (2x), unique (2x), worthy (2x), beautiful/pretty (4x), and strong/powerful/badass/unbreakable/resilient (9x).

Given the popularity of words referring to participants' strength and power, I chose to interrogate this category further within interview responses. Nine out of the 10 participants who participated in follow-up interviews referred to their personal strength and power within their

interviews. I further interrogate participants' responses to List #1, particularly their use of the term "strong" in the next chapter.

List #2

Within pre-interview questionnaire responses for List #2 (Identify 4-5 words that you would use to name, define, and/or describe influential Black women your life), a total of 53 individual word responses were recorded from 12 participants. To locate patterns within responses, I identified words that were repeated across participant responses. If the same word was used by at least two different participants, I marked it as a potential pattern, or common term, for List #2 responses. From initial coding, I identified 5 words that occurred at least twice within List #2 responses to describe influential Black women, including: strong (2x), passionate (2x), independent (2x), loving/lover (3x), and caring/carrier (5x). Given the popularity of the terms 'caring' and 'loving,' I chose to further interrogate individual and collective meanings of these terms within participant follow-up interviews. It is also important to note that there were two participants— Kanini and Willow—who did not use any of these "common" terms to name and describe influential women in their lives. Instead of describing influential Black women in their lives as 'caring' or 'loving,' they specifically named their mothers ('my mother') within their List #2 pre-interview questionnaire responses. Their use of "mother" was similar to how other participants defined their use of the terms 'caring' and 'loving.'

From follow-up interviews, I found that all participants who used the words 'loving' and/or 'caring' in their pre-interview questionnaires also referred to their mothers when asked to define what these terms meant to them. Through interviews, I was also able to better understand participants' meanings of these terms and how and for what reasons participants related these

terms to their mothers. Other popular List #2 words like ‘strong,’ ‘powerful,’ ‘independent,’ ‘crucial’ were also used by participants within interviews to describe their mothers’ influences in their lives. Given the connections participants made between care, love, and their mothers, I used a Black feminist standpoint on motherhood as a framework for my analysis. Responses from List #2 will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

List #3

For List #3 responses, no terms were repeated more than once. Since the purpose of List #3 was to provide additional space for participants to exceed the 4-5 word min-max limits for the other lists, by looking solely at pre-interview questionnaire responses I was unable to determine whether the words provided in List #3 were additions to either List # 1 or 2, or were completely separate terms related to Black female identity. Out of the 12 participants who completed the pre-interview questionnaire, 9 participants wrote at least 1 additional word or phrase in List #3.

Since there were no common themes across List #3 pre-interview questionnaire responses and no way to determine within the pre-interview questionnaire whether the responses available were additions to, or separate from, List #1 and/or 2 responses, I chose to look for additional patterns that existed across all data sets. When considering data collected in Lists #1-3 in pre-interview questionnaires, interview responses, and data collected from my pilot study focus group, I identified the word “sister” as a common theme across all data sets. In particular, participants who were a part of both the pilot study focus group and this study all used the word sister. Five out of the 10 women who participated in interviews named the word sister to refer to themselves or other Black women, and within the collective word board created in the pilot study 4 variations of the word sister were identified and explained amongst the group. Given both the

popularity of the term and the role that practices of sisterhood played in all phases of this study (e.g., recruitment of participants, commitment to the study, collection of data, and future verification of findings), I decided to further consider the meanings of sisterhood that developed within and from of this study.[6] I discuss participants' self-definitions and self-valuations on sisterhood in more detail in Chapter 5.

In the chapters that follow, I provide further analysis and interpretation of participants' most popular terms and common responses with Lists #1-3. For instance, in the next chapter, I discuss my findings from participant responses to List #1 where the term "strong" was used by a majority of participants to name, define, and describe their own identities as Black women.

[6] My method for locating common themes for List #3 responses within my study is different from how I located themes in Lists #1 and 2. Since there were no common words in List #3 responses, I could have chosen to leave this analysis of the use of the word "sister" out completely. Even with this option, I could not ignore the popularity of the word sister across participant responses within various data sets, including pre-interview questionnaires, interviews, and my pilot study focus group. Although not a theme within List #3 responses, "sister" was a popular term used by participants when looking at all of my data collectively and holistically, which is why I (as researcher) made the decision to interpret this data further in Chapter 5.

Chapter 3 'What I Mean By Strong Is…': Black Women Defining and Claiming their Daily Practices of Strength Through 'Strong Black Woman' Counter-Narratives

To Whom It May Concern:

For reasons of emotional health and overall sanity, I've retired from being a STRONGBLACKWOMAN. Since I've been acting like a SBW for most of my life, I've taken the liberty of drafting a re-orientation memo.

To the white folks I work with—the fake "Fine" and compulsory smile? Gone. Deaded. Don't look for it. From now on, when asked "How are you?" I'm going to tell you the truth—so if you really don't give a shit, do yourself a favor and don't ask […]

To the folks in my life who are used to calling me at all hours of the A.M. or P.M. and repeatedly dumping their emotional refuse—start looking for a therapist. I apologize for not telling you before that I'm not the "strongest sista" you know, that my shit is not "always so damn together" […]

To the brothers trying to kick it. Stop. Let me save you some time. If my financial independence, education, ambition, looks, or basic determination to survive makes you question whether or not you'd have anything to give such a STRONGBLACKWOMAN, don't bother […]

And while I'm at it, mad love for my peeps who didn't need anything of this, who knew I was never a STRONGBLACKWOMAN—just fronting. Thanks for sticking around while I was tripping. Y'all know shit goes. We get there in the by and by […]

Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-hop Feminist Breaks It Down*, 85-86

I want to begin by thanking Joan Morgan for putting into words what I have often felt as a Black woman, that is, that I am just so sick and so tired of prioritizing the feelings, problems, and needs of others—especially those who do not care about me—over my own. I thank her for being bold enough to call out those who have forced her into retiring from this SBW model, and providing young, Black women still-tryin-to-figure-things-out a model for how to re-orient, not only others, but ourselves towards more realistic, honest, and healthy practices and relationships. I would also like to thank all the many other Black feminist scholars, artists, and mothers that have warned Black women about the SBW and attempted to destroy her with their words and actions within their works and everyday lives (see bell hooks, Michelle Wallace, Patricia Collins, Laini Mataka, Marcia Gillespie and others). Yet, even with all these denouncements, retirements, and assassinations of the SBW for some reason ol' girl just won't take a hint and go away.

Like Morgan, many Black women have spent a majority of their lives believing themselves to be SBW's, and many Black women are taught and socialized by society and their own communities to be STRONG (physically and emotionally), RESILIENT (through all troubles, pains, burdens and harm), INDEPENDENT (i.e., enduring hardship alone without needing the assistance of others), CARING (especially willing to take on the problems of others), and GOOD (silent and happy) Black women. I do not believe the idea of being a "strong Black woman" needs to be wholly discarded, but I do believe all Black women must pause and reflect on what we actually mean by STRONG in relation to our identities. In her essay titled "The Myth of the Strong Black Woman," Marcia Ann Gillespie says that Black women need to take

control of the images of Black womanhood, and this control includes creating and sharing our own images of Black womanhood and our own definitions of strength (36). For example, Morgan follows her announcement of her SBW retirement with the following statement:

> This is not to be confused with being strong, black, and woman. I'm still alla that. I draw strength daily from the history of struggle and survival that is a black woman's spiritual legacy. What I kicked to the curb was the years of social conditioning that told me it was my destiny to live my life as BLACKSUPERWOMAN Emeritus. (Morgan 87)

In other words, there is a difference between being an STRONGBLACKWOMAN and a Black woman who is strong. The first is pushed upon Black women's bodies and lives for the benefit of others who do not care about their overall health and wellbeing, and the latter is claimed by Black women as a way to honor our histories, while surviving and thriving within our present struggles and future successes. Although in theory the divisions between the two viewpoints on Black women's strength seem clear, in practice—within the everyday lives of real Black women—things can quickly become muddled and complicated as the daily realities Black women face within various social and cultural contexts come in contact with mis-representations of Black female identity. Tangled within the webs of realities and perceptions, it can be difficult for some Black women to engage in practices of self-definition and self-valuation, but these practices are important to avoid internalization of stereotypical images of our identities and over-simplification of our truths. This is especially important when considering Black women's definitions and explanations of their strength, and the looming image of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN.

This chapter focuses on participants' List #1 pre-interview questionnaire and interview responses, which asked participants to: Identify 4-5 words you would use to name, describe, and define your identity as a Black woman. From my analysis of responses, I found that the most popular term used across participant responses was the word 'strong,' and other related terms like 'powerful,' 'independent,' 'magic,' and 'badass.' In my analysis of these terms, I will begin by discussing the mythologies of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN, including its many origin stories. The purpose of this mythological background is to provide historical contexts for SBW and situate a dialogue between these preconceived notions of Black women's strength and real Black women's interpretations of the term "strong" in relation to their own identities and lives. Next, I present and interpret multiple Black women participants' theorizing of strength in relation to their identities, personal stories, and lived experiences. I end this chapter with a discussion about the power of language within Black women's rhetorical tradition and how individual and collective concepts of strength need to be further interrogated, particularly because our self-definitions and self-valuations are key to breaking harmful cycles of perpetuating myths about Black women's strength, and are also essential to inspiring and promoting new and healthy images that celebrate Black feminine power and achievement.

The Strong Black Woman: Origins, Functions, and Dark Feminine Power

The SBW myth is intertwined with other stereotypical and controlling images of Black womanhood like Jezebel, Mammy, and Matriarch. Scholars often link the creation and indoctrination of the SBW image in U.S. society and culture to at least one of these controlling images and particular historical moments in time, prior to discussing SBW as its own archetype. What is interesting is that most stereotypes of Black women—positive and negative—emphasize Black women's strength. By depicting Black women's strength in ways that are excessive and

abnormal, oppressors are able to justify their horrific treatment of Black women by equating them with animals (less than human) on one extreme and superhuman on the other. In either case, it is about sending the message that whatever pain, hardship, labor, or abuse forced upon Black women "they can take it."

For example, as discussed by bell hooks in *Ain't I a Woman* and Angela Davis in *Women, Race & Class*, terrorization was a primary method for stripping enslaved Africans and their descendants of their humanity, dignity, and freedom (hooks 19). Although White slavers did not discriminate between enslaved men and women in terms of distribution of labor and physical punishment, Black women had the added threat of sexual torment and rape. Davis says, "If the most violent punishments of men consisted of floggings and mutilations, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped" (7). Davis describes rape of Black female slaves as an "un-camouflaged expression of the slaveholder's economic mastery and the overseer's control over Black women workers" (7), as well as an encouraged practice for "[putting] Black women in their place" (24). In other words, because Black women were perceived as being so strong, they needed to be physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually broken so that they could be controlled by slave-owners, and rape was a method for demonstrating White male dominance and power over Black women.

At the same time, the physical abuse and sexual exploitation of Black women during enslavement was linked to ideals about womanhood. According to hooks, economic prosperity during the 19th century moved White Americans away from fundamentalist Christian beliefs that perpetuated patriarchal and sexist views that women were evil sexual temptresses of men (31). In place of this old image of woman, a new image was created where the White woman—or true woman—was "depicted as goddess rather than sinner; she was virtuous, pure, innocent, not

sexual and worldly" (31). At the same time as White women became elevated to the status of "ladies," Black women were further characterized as overly sexual heathens and jezebels (33). Under the label of Jezebel, Black women were denied all forms protection against rape, forced into practices of breeding and prostitution because essentially, according to propaganda, being hypersexual was a part of Black women's nature.

In her own re-telling of the SBW myth in *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, Joan Morgan situates this division of White and Black women's sexuality as a pivotal moment in understanding how Black women received this label of "strong" during the antebellum era. She describes the myth of the White women (virtuous, pure, and chase SOUTHERNDBELLES) and the myth of the Black women (STRONGBLACKWOMEN) as stepsisters who both were the "bastard children of racism, sexism, and the white male Myth-makers need for absolute dominance" (95). As White women's sexuality was restricted by and reserved for White males, enslaved Black women became the target of male sexual exploitation because unlike their stepsisters they were lascivious jezebels who were strong enough to take the abuse (97). Ultimately, this mythologizing of Black women as different from—i.e., stronger than—White women became a means for justifying sexual assaults against Black women (98).

Along with her ability to endure sexual trauma, physical brutality, and excessive labor, the SBW is also associated with care and independence that when combined with her strength essentially makes her inhuman. Michelle Wallace in *Black Macho & the Myth of the Superwoman* says the following about SBW, or what she refers to as superwoman:

> From the intricate web of mythology which surrounds the black woman, a fundamental creature emerges. It is of a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an

> unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men. Less of a woman in that she is less "feminine" and helpless, she is really *more* of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman. (Wallace 107)

Beliefs that Black women's abilities to endure excessive amounts of pain, their sexual desires and abnormal reproductive abilities, their care and nurturing of others, and their abilities to be all of these things without the assistance of others became the definition of a SBW, aka a superwoman. As a product of White supremacy, patriarchy, and sexism, oppressors have used the SBW to control Black women's bodies and minds, legitimize their mistreatment of Black women, while also being used to blame Black women for their own victimization.

On the other hand, Black people—men and women—have re-adapted the SBW image in ways to promote more positive images of Black female identity, including the "super-strong Black mother," the "Black lady," and the "professional/independent Black woman." Although positive, these images are still stereotypical and, therefore, harmful to real Black women who are trying to (or are expected to) live up to unrealistic ideals and perceptions of Black women's strength. In her own re-telling of the SBW myth, Chanequa Walker-Barnes in *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* identifies the SBW myth as a new "descriptive and prescriptive model of Black women's identities that was deliberately disseminated via the work of Black women's clubs and missionary societies that were founded at the turn of the twentieth century" (97). According to Walker-Barnes, this new more positive propaganda on Black

womanhood was a result of middle-class Black women's attempts to disprove the Jezebel, Mammy, and Matriarch myths that had casted them as "fallen women" and denied them the status of "ladies," or true women during previous time periods (like slavery), while also allowing Black women to claim their own versions of Black genius. Proliferating during the era of racial uplift, being, as Walker-Barnes writes it, a "StrongBlackWoman" entailed Black women assuming a role that uplifted the status of both their racial and gendered identities. She describes this "StrongBlackWoman" identity in the following way:

> As Blacks, StrongBlackWomen were to be spiritually and emotionally strong, financially and emotionally independent, and committed to the uplift of Black families and communities. As, women, they were to be consummate caregivers, morally upright, selflessly devoted to the needs of others, and capable of enduring struggle without complaint. (Walker-Barnes 96-97).

Walker-Barnes argues that this role of the StrongBlackWoman created an inescapable web for Black women that, although encompassed elements of both submissiveness and resistance, perpetuated a theme of Black women's suffering. Although the image of the bad Black mother, or Matriarch, (particularly after the publishing of the Moynihan Report in 1965) would later nearly dismantle this attempted image of respectability promoted by Black club and churchwomen, this idea that Black women are meant to suffer and "bear the yoke of strength" still persists within U.S. culture today (107).

Even with her traumatic and complicated past, many Black women cannot seem to shake entirely the SBW myth from their minds and daily practices, and perhaps there is a deeper reason

why. In her forward to *Fierce Angels: The Strong Black Woman in American Life and Culture*, Maria Ann Gillespie says the following about the SBW:

> No matter whether we consciously seek to emulate her or not, Strong Black Woman is there. We've been schooled by the stories about her, seen her in action, witnesses her in our sisters. Sometimes we see her looking back at us in the mirror and smile; other times we shudder. Sometimes we call her forth, other times she rises up when we least expect her. Those times when we say exactly what we think. Times when the only somebody willing to do it—take a stand, stare the devil down, challenge the status quo, raise hell, love mightily, be generous of spirit, break new ground, be a fierce angel—is us.

What Gillespie describes is an SBW image that is difficult for many Black women to retire or kill off completely because she is, more often than not, useful and needed. This is an SBW that is not separate from Black women's agency, instead this SBW functions in ways deemed necessary by/for Black women. In the way that Gillespie describes the Strong Black Woman, it may seem for some Black women that she just shows up in the most appropriate, or kairotic, moment to take action, say what needs to be said, and do what needs to be done. From this perspective, it would be understandable why SBW may seem like a superwoman, but from another vantage point, perhaps the SBW that Black women witness being there in our lives—in us—is an understanding of a dark feminine power that has always existed not only in us but in everything.

In her book *Fierce Angels: The Strong Black Woman in American Life and Culture*, Sheri Parks traces a connection between Black women and someone whom she refers to as the Sacred Dark Feminine image. Park describes the Sacred Dark Feminine as an historic archetype and

reoccurring image of a powerful and fierce woman of color, usually depicted in a diverse range of religions as a Black woman (xxi), who was most concerned with "the business of everyday life, the living, ripening, dying, renewal, and rebirth" (5). Parks states that the SBW that Black women know personally, acknowledge, and at times call upon in our lives is often situated as separate from the Sacred Dark Feminine that other people and cultures seem to know very intimately, as well (xxi-xxii). She says that the SBW and the Sacred Dark Feminine are two separate paths that have run along each other, but rarely cross (xxii).

Through her tracing of mythologies of the Sacred Dark Feminine, particularly mythologies from Western cultures and religions that influence American dominant culture, she provides a unique perspective about ancient connections between darkness, femininity, and power. Her mythological tracing included Sumerian and Greek dark, Mother Gods, Roman's borrowing of these figures and introducing them across Europe (England, Ireland Scotland, Wales, etc.), and Hebrew writings on the black feminine entity Hokhmah, or Wisdom, and how these representations were carried into early Christianity. Parks does not explain when the shift from dark feminine and androgynous figures happened within Western religion but she does suggest that patriarchal views, that is, "the people who were least like the Sacred Dark Feminine" (11) found ways to suppress this image, change it, hide it, or omit it from official Church doctrine (11). Parks discusses the reverence of Black Madonnas and the African goddesses enslaved Africans brought with them to the Americas that exist across the Diaspora such as versions of Nana Buruku from West Africa and Yoruba goddesses Oya and Oshun. Whether those that worship Her tie the Sacred Dark Feminine to particular cultural communities or races, or not, Park argues that it is important to think about how mythologies of the Sacred

Dark Feminine affect how people perceive actual Black women. I quote Parks extensively here for clarity about her position:

> Black women automatically inherit the ancient myths of the Sacred Dark Feminine; the image touches their lives every day. The stories and the images set up assumptions that lead to expectations of how black women are. People see in in black women what they expect to see. Many of the images in the stories have been boiled down to stereotype, oversimplified into a code of social shorthand. Black women came to represent strong mother love, and it is easy to see its appeal. It is everything you need—gentle and giving enough to calm your deepest fears, to feed your soul and make you safe at the same time, because the one who loves you is also the one who is strong and fierce enough to destroy your enemies. She is able to repel armies and turn back epidemics, to face and fix the most terrible aspects of life. And yet she is intensely interested in you and your problems. For millennia, that is how people have imagined the love of the Sacred Dark Feminine—the dark goddess, angels, spirits, and oracles and the dark-god women who work for God, through God, and as God. And it is how many have seen the black women who look most like her. When American colonists forcibly imported African women and brought them into their homes as midwives, nurses, cooks, confidants, they also co-opted the archetypal image of the Sacred Dark Feminine and used it to romanticize human slavery in the land of the free. (Parks 33)

What I believe Parks' perspective adds to our understandings of the SBW myth and her many origin stories is this understanding that the Strong Black Woman did not come out of thin air.

She is an adaptation of an archetype that existed long before Europeans actually saw African people for the first time. These images of powerful, strong, and fierce brown and black feminine images exist in cultures, communities, and religions across the world. Although Black women and other women of color may resemble the Sacred Dark Feminine, and others may have co-opted her image and identified mortal Black women as fitting Her description, it is important to note that although She may be in us—in everything—we are not Her. Black women are not superwomen, or ancient Gods, but human-beings.

I understand Black women's current practices of claiming of their strength, abilities to care and love, be fierce, and when necessary, spit fire has a connection to all of these mythologized images and pivotal moments within Black women's herstories. It is the complexities of the SBW and her role in the lives of real Black women that I seek to interrogate further. It is not my intentions to use these myths of the SBW as a framework for analyzing the choices real Black women make in identifying themselves as strong Black women, nor is it my intentions to determine whether the women in my study are embodying, internalizing, or evoking any of the versions of the SBW myths presented here.

Instead, in the next section, I present multiple Black women's explanations, descriptions, self-definitions, and self-valuations of what it means to them to be "strong." Like Joan Morgan, many participants saw themselves as "Black, strong, and woman" and claimed "alla that" (87). Because of the deep-rooted connections SBW has to Black women's identities, at times it can be difficult to interpret real Black women's responses about their strength without having SBW in all her mythological variations and complexities creep into the conversation or make a special appearance. This SBW overview is about acknowledging the history and continued presence of the SBW myth, and instead of erasing, omitting, and pretending that it is not there, I say, "I see

you. I hear you. I understand you, but it's our time as Black women to share our perspectives on our strength."

This study is about Black women's voices—what we say about ourselves. If self-definition and self-valuation is about putting into question who has the right to name our identities, refuting that which is not true about us, and claiming and replacing this false content with images that best represent us, then at some point Black women's naming of ourselves will have to come in contact with misrepresentations and myths like SBW. I consider participant responses in this study a place of contact—a place where paths cross—and an opportunity for dialogue between real Black women's individual and collective lived experiences on being Black women who are strong and the SBW myths described above. These women's naming and definitions offer counter-narratives to SBW myths, while demonstrating the complexities embedded within being strong, Black, and woman.

Data Analysis: Interpreting Meanings of Black Women's Strength

As discussed in the methods and methodology chapter, 'strong' was the most popular response for words from List #1: Identify 4-5words to name, define, and describe your identity as a Black woman. In this section, I present 5 of 9 participants' who used 'strong' and their self-definitions and self-valuations of what it means to them to be strong, Black, and a woman. All five participants used strong, or some variation of the term strong, in both their pre-interview questionnaire and interview responses.

Brianna's Definition of Strong: Self-Motivation ('I Have It')

During the time of the interview, Brianna identified herself as a Black woman in her mid-20s, pursing a degree in political science. Along with her studies, she also worked while raising a three-year-old son as a single mother. When asked to provide some words that best described her identity as a Black woman, she used the following words: 'strong,' 'beautiful,' 'independent,' and 'unique.' The following interview excerpts are her self-definitions and self-valuations of a Black woman who is 'strong':

> Brianna Line 1: I feel like I'm strong because, right now, I'm currently you know—
>
> L2: I'm going—well—I'm at the final stages of my divorce…and then on top of that you know—
>
> L3: losing my brother and just life itself like, where I'm at right now in my life […]
>
> L4: It's a lot of people that I know and they ask me, "How—how can I be so strong? Or, how can you know—can I continue to live my life like nothing has happened?"
>
> L5: Even though, I mean, I have my moments as well, but I feel like I'm *strong* because I just keep pushing forward.
>
> L6: Like every time something happens like motivation, motivation not to stop because I'm not the only one going through something in life.

Brianna also referred to herself as 'independent,' which ties into her understanding of her own strength, particularly as a working single mother. She said:

> L7: I feel like independent. Um, cause like I said you know—

L8: I'm a single mom. My son does have a Dad, but family, he doesn't help me with my son so I feel like I'm independent for taking care of him and holding my own down which is why I'm finishing up school and I work. You know?

L9: I work. I go to school. I take care of my child on my own, and, I feel like that alone just stands for a lot because I'm not running down to the courthouse and like trying to demand help.

L10: I feel like I just have it. I don't need, I don't need it. I mean to remind a grown person of something that they helped create.

L11: I don't feel like it's necessary, so I don't even worry about it.

Brianna's naming and theorizing of the word 'strong' begins with her first contemplating the moment during which she is speaking, that is, identifying the context in which she was defining these terms. In Lines 1-3, she shares some insight into the things she was dealing with in her life, including finalizing her divorce and still mourning her brother who passed away. Along with these emotional circumstances, she also describes her roles and responsibilities as a single mother trying to care for herself and her child without the support of her soon to be ex-husband and father of her child. As she continues her discussion of strong, Brianna moves beyond herself to consider other people's perceptions of her. She notices how others who know her and are aware of what she is going through in her life are astonished by her abilities to "continue to live as if nothing has happened." She is aware of how people believe that her ability to cope with simultaneous losses and her multiple responsibilities is a demonstration of a unique kind of strength.

Within the SBW myths, Black women are recognized as having sub-human and superwoman powers that allow them to endure inordinate amounts of pain and willingly accept labor that others are unwilling to do (bell hooks, Michelle Wallace, Marcia Gillespie, Patricia Collins, and others). This stereotypical casting of Black women as 'superwomen' was used to explain why enslaved Black women were able to endure the physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual trauma of slavery, as well as the subsequent systemic oppression that continues to affect the daily lives of Black women today.

In the above excerpts, we see Brianna negotiating between others perceptions of her strength, her own understandings of her acts of strength, as well as her resisting the myth or notions that her experiences are unique or exceptional in some way. For example, after referring to how others ask her how she is able to continue living in spite of her circumstances, she follows by saying "I have my moments as well, but I feel like I'm *strong* because I just keep pushing forward" (Line 5). Although it is brief, here, Brianna both disrupts the idea that she is a superwoman by acknowledging her moments of weakness, yet still claims 'strong' as part of her identity because in spite of these moments she is able to motivate herself to keep moving, keep going, and keep living. She situates her strength as a product of her own efforts to work and motivate herself ("every time something happens like motivation, motivation not to stop"), and her understandings that her hardships are not unique to her but a general part of life ("I'm not the only one going through something in life").

Similarly, her discussion of being independent is interesting because it provides deeper explanation for why Brianna has willingly taken on the responsibility of caring for her child without the physical and financial support of her child's father. In Lines 9-11, she provides reasoning for why she believes that using the legal system to demand child support is

unnecessary for her. From her viewpoint, she sees this as her reminding her child's father to take responsibility for "something [he] helped to create" is a task she would rather not worry about doing on top of her other labor (mothering, being a student, and working). Although she may change her mind about this decision in the future, it is important to acknowledge her agency in making this decision to be independent financially as a parent in this particular moment. Brianna's definition of strength is about managing multiple responsibilities, while motivating herself to continue living through and learning from the losses in her life. Although these responses seem to suggest she is doing these things alone, in other parts of her interview included in other chapters, Brianna discusses how the women in her life, including her mother, grandmother, and friends are there for her and provide her the emotional care and love that she needs to be strong, Black, and woman.

Kanini's Definition of Strong: Quiet vs. Loud Strength

At the time of the interview, Kanini was in her mid-30s, and introduced herself as a Kenyan, mother of two, a wife, and a graduate student. In her pre-interview questionnaire, she used words like 'strong,' 'non-conformist,' and 'misunderstood' to describe herself as a Black woman. Throughout her interview, she discussed her own resistance against unequal treatment of women, and traditional gender norms that attempt to define what it means to be and act like a woman. These values and beliefs informed how and why she described herself as a mother and wife, as well as a breadwinner and provider for her family. While interpreting the word "strong," Kanini inserted the word "resilient" into her self-definition adding it (literally handwriting it) into her list of words during the time of the interview. She said the following:

Kanini Line 1: [laughing] Resilient. Like I feel like as much as I feel like I'm really strong and I'm non-conformist. I also feel like I have—I have suffered so many things, like emotional, physical stuff—[overlapping]

Interviewer (I): Mmhmm—

L2: but then, I feel like I'm just willing to fight—[overlapping]

I: Mmhmm—

L3: and just like I have to. I'm resilient in the way like I have to deal with that pain and still—because I'm—like you see one word I'm saying I'm family/community oriented? But, I just feel like I have to work hard towards making sure like things *work*.

L4: If it's like family, cause I care so much about family—so uh—so whatever I'm going through I have to kind of try to be resilient so that I keep this family thing together—[overlapping]

I: Mmhmm.

L5: So that like ability to deal with a lot of pain, be it physical, emotional, psychological, whatever. I think, I would say that I—that's a word I can describe—I can use to describe who I am.

In this excerpt, Kanini's inclusion of the word resilient speaks to her understanding of herself as strong, non-conformist, and a family and community-oriented person. Here, she discusses the extent to which she is "willing to fight" for her family, which includes working hard and enduring whatever pain necessary to keep her family together and functioning (See Lines 3-5). According to psychologist Regina Romero, the SBW stereotypical image consists of two parts: strength and independence, and the role of the caretaker. In their article "The Price of Strength:

Black College Women's Perspectives on the Strong Black Woman Stereotype," Lindsey West, Roxanne Donovan, and Amanda Daniel summarize Romero's two part description of the SBW myth as follows:

> Of no surprise, the first part is strength and independence. This strength and independence are seen in SBW's ability to handle all types of stressors without complaint, in her resilience, emotional containment, and self-reliance. The second part is SBW's role as caretaker of others. This caretaking role is seen in SBW's willingness to put everyone's needs before her own, including those of her immediate and extended family and community members. (West et. al. 392)

Although Kanini's resilience and caretaking may be perceived as aligning with the SBW myth, it is important to understand how Black women have needed to cultivate identities of strength to survive the daily traumas and experiences of oppression (West et. al. 393), the same types of "physical, emotional, and psychological pain" that Kanini alludes to multiple times above (Lines 3 and 5). As a mother, wife, family and community-oriented person, she recognizes her actions—her work—as a significant contribution to the wellbeing of her loved ones. Therefore, naming herself as resilient is not a validation of a distorted image of Black womanhood, but Kanini's own self-affirmation of her personal and daily laboring (Line 3 "I have to work hard towards making sure like things work"). It also speaks to how she sees herself as a person (Line 5 "who I am"), and what she values about herself.

In a follow-up question, I asked Kanini to speak more specifically about her use of the word 'strong' in her pre-interview questionnaire. This led to her using personal stories to make a

distinction between different kinds of strength, which she called: “quiet strong” and “loud strong.”

Interviewer: Okay. You wanna say any—I think all of that describes you as being *strong*—[overlapping]

L6: [laughing]—[overlapping]

I: Honestly. [laughing]

L7: Yeah! You know sometimes when I look at myself, or the way people look at me sometimes, people—I’ve heard people describe me as naive. Like I act like uh, I’m not like enlightened, like I don’t know much, or I’m just quiet, or like I’m timid and stuff like that. But I—I know I know a lot [laughing]—[overlapping]

I: Mmhmm.

L8: I know a lot, and uh I also know like you can’t play around with me like uh, if I need to stand up for myself I will do that and you are going to run because I’ll come on you, and I’ll come on you hard [laughing].

I: [laughing]

L9: So it’s like, I’m naive from a fa—outside people look at me like that but I know that I am very strong. I have like yeah—that’s a word I would say, I’m like really strong inside. And also if I need to show it like—like I’m that quite strong—[overlapping]

I: Mmhmm.

L10: but if I need to be like loud strong, you’ll get it.

Similar to Brianna’s theorizing above, Kanini also refers to others’ perceptions of her as she theorizes her own understanding of her strength. Unlike Brianna, Kanini does not describe

outsiders as perceiving her to be super-strong; instead, they see and treat her like she is naïve, unenlightened, and timid (See Line 7). In this excerpt, she refutes others' misunderstandings of her by explaining how what others recognize as her being silent and weak is actually her displaying her 'quiet strength.' For instance, in Lines 7-8, Kanini talks about knowing that she "knows a lot" despite what others may think about her, and that she is capable of accomplishing many things, including not allowing anyone to disrespect her. Kanini's knowledge and understanding of herself is a part of her internal strength, or her 'quiet strong.'

On the other hand, she also has another strength—'loud strong'—that she describes as hard, loud, and capable of causing those who have misperceived her as naïve, timid, and quiet to run away in disbelief. Throughout other parts of her interview, Kanini spoke of influential Black women in her life who embodied this type of "loud strong," including her mother, grandmother, and activists she admired like Wangari Maathai and Winnie Mandela. She described all these influential women as strong, resistant women who refused to conform to gender-norms or expectations for women within their respective cultural communities. Kanini shared how she was inspired by these women's outward, assertive, and loud expressions of what they believed in, and their willingness to fight in spite of potentially severe punishments, including imprisonment, public ridicule, and threats/acts of physical violence. Although Kanini describes herself as typically using her inner/quiet strength, she recognizes that she also has a 'loud strong' that she employs when necessary. This 'loud strong' is so fierce that it will cause those who try to play with her to run away.

For my analysis of Kanini's strength, it is also important to pay attention to the laughter occurring between Kanini and I throughout her interview, particularly because we are laughing together through Kanini's personal experiences of pain. This was also an observation that Kanini

made about her interview while reviewing her transcript. Since my research relied on pre-established relationships of trust between participants and myself, I understand our laughter as an indication of our intimate bond as Black women and sisters. We are open and comfortable with talking to each other about our pains, while our laughter functions as a method for addressing (calling on) pain and responding to (critiquing) the causes of it.

In her scholarship, Marcyliena Morgan asks us to consider the "black woman's laugh" as a part of Black women's language, discourse, and communication. In *Language, Discourse, and Power in African American Culture*, Morgan describes the black woman's laugh as a type of signifying laughter that is a response to and critique on the irony and hypocrisy of daily Black life (84). Morgan says that at times the 'black woman laugh' "locates the fool—but mostly it locates the truth, even if for one quick second. When you hear 'the black woman laugh,' it's never about anything funny" (85). Similarly, Daryl Cumber Dance in her introduction to *Honey, hush!: An Anthology of African American Women's Humor* described Black women's humor in the following way:

> Humor for us has rather been a means of surviving as we struggled. *We haven't been laughing so much because things tickle us*. We laugh, as the old blues line declares, to keep from crying. We laugh to keep from dying. We laugh to keep from killing. *We laugh to hide our pain, to walk gently around the wound too painful to actually touch.* We laugh to shield our shame. We use our humor to *speak the unspeakable*, to mask the attack to get a tricky subject on the table, to warn of lines not to be crossed, to strike out at enemies and the hateful acts of friends and family, to camouflage sensitivity, to tease,

> to compliment, to berate, to brag, to flirt, to speculate, to gossip, to educate, *to correct the lies people tell on us, to bring about change*. (Dance xxii) *(my emphasis)*

In this case, the paralanguage experienced within Kanini's discussion of strength is crucial and critical for both Kanini and me because it allows us a way to respond to the very serious circumstances that Kanini is enduring to protect herself and support her family. We are not two cackling, carefree, delusional Black women, but two girlfriends responding to the truths of Kanini's life experiences. The laughter captured in the above excerpt occur when Kanini is describing what she knows to be true about herself, that is, she is a well-informed person (Line 7: "I know I know a lot"), she will not allow herself to be disrespected by others "(Line 8: "I also know like you can't play around with me"), and when necessary, she is willing to use her 'loud strong' to let someone know the truth about her (Line 10: "but if I need to be like loud strong, you'll get it").

Darlene's Definition of Strong: Carrying the Weight/Doing What I Have to Do

During the time of her interview, Darlene identified herself as in her late 50s, a wife, mother, and grandmother. She introduced herself as being a good person, a hard worker, and good listener. Using the same reflective move as Brianna and Kanini, Darlene recognized that, at times, others might identify her as having an outspoken and opinionated personality. She used the words 'worthy,' 'pretty,' 'different,' and 'confident' to describe herself, while also using the word 'strong' to describe both herself and influential Black women in her life. In her interview, she theorized 'strong' in the following way:

Darlene Line 1: Yeah. Yeah. When I look at it as if—when I see—when talk about me as being a Black woman as, again, as having the ability to help others.

L2: Even if it means, you know, carrying *a lot of weight*. You know? And that means carrying some other people besides just me.

L3: And—and that means also, being able to um, to speak, you know, to someone in a way that, you know, could, you know, could *help them*.

L4: And I've always been, in those type of situations where regardless of whether it was friends, or family, or co-workers, or some—someone like that—was that they always looked at me as—as having, you know, being a strong type of a person.

L5: And um, that's why I look at myself as also being a strong person because I, you know, have been in those situations where I've had to [clears throat] to—to help someone and—it was um—you know, could be difficult at times, but at the same time I, you know, you know, did what I had to do, so.

In her explanation of the term strong, Darlene relied on her personal experiences with having to be strong for herself and others. In Line 1, Darlene relates the idea of strong to her Black woman identity and "ability to help others" within her family and community, including "friends, or family, or co-workers" (Line 4). What is unique about Darlene's definition of strong is how she refers to the physical labor involved in ensuring her own survival and the survival of others. This emphasis on physical labor occurs in Line 2 when she says, "Even if [helping others] means, you know, carrying *a lot of weight*. You know? And that means carrying some other people besides just me." In her essay "The Myth of the Strong Black Woman," Marcia Gillespie says that the SBW myth is this belief "that we have to give up our softness in order to be strong, that we're

required to be female Atlases" (32). Cursed to an eternity of holding up the world on their shoulders and backs, mythical female Atlases must carry everything and everybody. Similarly, in her novel *Their Eyes Are Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston's character Nanny uses imagery to illustrate the historical exploitation of Black women when she says:

> Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. *De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see*. (Hurston 14) *(my emphasis)*

These texts reflect systemic oppression that has forced Black women to labor and carry burdens that are excessive and beyond what others may have to deal with in their everyday lives. Although Darlene's statement "*carry a lot of weight*" is reminiscent of Atlas and Black women being marked as "de mule uh de world" (Hurston 14), it is important to consider what exactly Darlene means by this phrasing in relation to her identity as a Black woman who identifies as strong. For her, strength represents the physical, emotional, and mental carrying of others burdens through stressful situations. People in her life see Darlene as someone that they can turn to during difficult situations. Although Darlene does not fully disclose the affects these additional burdens have had on her emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually, she does attribute these experiences to helping her see herself as strong (Line 5: "that's why I look at myself as also being a strong person"). Just as other participants claimed their strength and

weaknesses as Black women, Darlene also briefly addresses the fact that carrying others is not always easy, but actually "difficult at times." Despite the circumstances, she "did what [she] had to do" to help others. Her emotional labor should not, and cannot, be reduced to internalization of the SBW myth. It is an honest admission to her realities and the sacrifices that she has made in her own life to help others. More attention needs to be given to how we can listen to Darlene's truth and create a society, culture, and community that acknowledges and honors Darlene for her visible and invisible labor. I personally believe her when she says that she *had* to do this work, but I look forward to the day when Darlene (and women like her) can focus on simply carrying her own weight and world, which is more than enough for any person.

In later parts of her interview, Darlene speaks about how her labor and strength has led to one of her greatest accomplishments—her daughter. Because of her life experiences and sacrifices, she was able to build a bond of understanding about strength, values, and care that she says, "kind of rubbed off on her [daughter] in some way." Given my own personal relationship with Darlene, I can say that the sacrifices she has made for me have greatly affected my life, and through her example, I have learned how to be strong in the fiercest sense of the word, while also understanding my own abilities to care for others as a demonstration of strength.

Moné's Definition of Strong: Can't Be A Black Woman and Be Weak

Moné identified herself as a Haitian American woman and graduate student from Florida in her late 20s. When asked to describe herself as a Black woman she used the following terms: 'spiritual,' 'optimistic,' 'strong,' and 'stubborn.' In explaining her use of the word strong in relation to her identity, she simply stated, "Strong. Can't be a Black woman and be weak." In a follow-up question where I asked her to elaborate on this statement, she said:

Moné Line 1: It's just kind of. It's just this nature. It's just built in you as a Black woman because things are never handed to you. You always gotta work for it, and then in that process of working for it whatever it may be it's never easy.

L2: And then, with the—having a weak mind you won't ever get to where you need to be so sometimes you have to find that strength to get to where you need to be. And sometimes you don't have that support that you need to be strong.

L3: So it's just this kind of strong—this sense of strong-ness that just develops over time, you know, through failure through obstacles…[I]t could be just things generally about being a Black woman. It could be about race. It could be about gender. It could be just about this space, you know…going into these spaces that were not originally made for us as Black women and you know, this idea that you get in there and it's not welcoming to you so you gotta force yourself to like fit into that like space.

L4: And this all is just—it's just this sense of being strong just develops over time. And then, even looking at back at our parents and kind of hearing their stories and what they went through, and you're like, "Damn. If my parents can go through this…" And kind of—like looking at my Mom like if she can go through this as a woman for me to be where I am today.

L5: So it's like this strength passes down for us to like push through so you can't be a Black woman and be weak.

In her discussion of strong, Moné describes two different perspectives on strength. The first is presented in Line 1 where she seems to describe Black women as having an innate kind of strength. Although her comments about this strength being a part of Black women's "nature" and

“built in [us]” could be read as reproducing images of the SBW myth, it seems that Moné is discussing how this enactment of strength is required for some Black women because she feels that Black women must work hard for everything. In this sense, Black women’s strength is not inborn, but a product of many of their circumstances, social contexts, and situations that deny them access to the same opportunities afforded others.

The second strength Moné alludes to is a strength that has developed over time in spite of these circumstances, oppression, and obstacles. In Line 3, she begins to talk about how intersecting identities including race and gender are factors that can both deny Black women access to spaces originally not intended for them (e.g., academia), while also creating hostile environments that Black women must survive daily when they are granted entrance to these spaces. Like Joan Morgan who “[draws] strength daily from the history of struggle and survival that is a black woman’s spiritual legacy” (87), Moné also sees herself as a Black woman who is strong and has developed a spiritually-inspired and stubborn demeanor that allows her to enter these spaces, stay in these spaces, and fight for what she already knows to be hers—success. Unlike the first strength she describes, this other strength has developed over time and gets stronger through each obstacle. In other words, she was not born with this strength, but Moné has learned about this strength over time and from her mother, a woman she watched make sacrifices in her own life so that Moné and her siblings could be in the position that they are in today. Ultimately, Moné describes strength as a state of mind, a determination to fight for what she wants because she knows from life experience that what she wants will not be simply handed to her.

Willow's Definition of Strong: I'm Still a Badass

During the time of the interview, Willow identified herself as a Black woman and lesbian in her 30s from a working class background. When asked to describe herself within her interview, she referred to herself as an 'open person,' 'powerful,' 'smart,' and 'loyal' to others. Although Willow did not specifically use the word 'strong' to describe herself in neither her pre-interview questionnaire nor her interview responses, she did use the word 'badass,' which from her description, I categorized as being very similar to how other participants described their personal strength. Willow said the following about her word 'badass':

Willow Line 1: Yes! Badass! [Laughing]

Interviewer: What does that mean to you? What does that mean?

L2: Well you know, as Black women, you know all people have to perform right, um and Black women unfortunately have been traumatized in ways that we can articulate, and in ways that we can't. We've been traumatized as a collective, and we've been traumatized as individuals.

L3: Um, and so this badass is to uh, speak back and say that throughout *all that trauma* I still remain, a badass person…It's hard for a traumatized body to still feel great about who they are in spite of all that trauma, and *to me,* that's badass.

L4: To be able to do that—I think for any traumatized body and don't get me wrong I think all bodies are traumatized…but I think for any historically traumatized body to be able to still rise in those moments and say that I am still a badass, um I think it's—I think it's a way for Black women to re-cultivate their identity […]

L5: I think it's a way for them, for Black women, to reinsert their *own* sense of independence and strength. Because we have always been independent and strong, um no matter what has been said about us or our people either in Africa or over here or in—throughout the entire diaspora.

L6: Black women as a whole have always been strong women and they have always had pride in that. And so we find ways to re-inscribe that pride on our bodies when it's been taken away from us, or when people have *attempted* to take it away from us.

According to Willow, being a badass is about having a sense of awareness about the historical trauma that has been placed on Black women and other historically oppressed people's bodies. I find it interesting that Willow begins with Black women's trauma. She begins at a place where I think many people would like to forget about and pretend never existed. Along with labels that depict Black women as mythical creatures, real Black women were kidnapped, killed, brutally beaten, raped, forced to perform demeaning labor, including being breeders and prostitutes. Real Black women were tortured daily, separated from their families, denied the rights to mother their own children, denied protection, and even when supposedly liberated, they were denied basic human and civil rights. In contemporary society, Black women are still being traumatized—still being raped, still being killed, still being imprisoned, still living in poverty, still being silenced, still being denied human dignity and rights—STILL. So, in Line 3 when Willow says, "It's hard for a traumatized body to still feel great about who they are in spite of all that trauma, and *to me*, that's badass," she is speaking to Black women's resilience and resistance, but also many Black women's unwillingness to give up their sense of self—their humanity—even when being treated like animals.

In her chapter titled "The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood" in *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Davis says the following about enslaved Black women:

> If Black women bore the terrible burden of equality in oppression, if they enjoyed equality with their men in their domestic environment, then they also asserted their equality aggressively in challenging the inhuman institution of slavery. They resisted the sexual assaults of white men, defended their families, and participated in work stoppages and revolts…From the numerous accounts of the violent repression overseers inflicted on women, it must be inferred that she who passively accepted her lot as a slave was the exception rather than the rule. (Davis 19-20)

In her definition of 'badass' Willow is referring to this legacy of Black women who refused to "passively accept her lot as a slave," (Davis 20). Willow names Black women's strength, independence, and pride in a way that is not mythical, but calls on practices of Black women re-cultivating and re-inscribing their identities for themselves in spite of the torture, trauma, and myths placed upon them. In other words, Willow sees this ability to resist and refusal to relinquish one's pride and humanity as 'badass,' and she claims this identity for herself and other Black women. Her claiming of Black women's strength and independence does not erase the historical and contemporary trauma, but accepts it—all of it—as a part of her self-definition.

No Myths Allowed: Understanding What It Means to be Strong, Black, and Woman

In her poem "Bein a Strong Black Woman Can Get U Killed," Laini Mataka begins her poem with the following lines:

on April 25, 1997, at 11:55pm

while struggling with the reality of bein a human

instead of a myth, the strong blk woman passed away,

w/out the slightest bit of hoopla

medical sources say: she died from naturally oppressive causes

but those who knew her & used her/ know that she died from:

bein silent when she shldve been **screamin**

smilin when she shldve been ragin.

she died from bein sick & not wantin anyone

to kno/becuz her pain might inconvenience them.

she died from an overdose of otha people

clingin on to her when she didn't even have energy for herself. (Mataka, 1)

Mataka's poem speaks to the greatest consequence of internalizing the myth that Black women are naturally, physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually stronger than other beings—that is DEATH by "naturally oppressive causes." Being "infinitely maternal and the quintessential caretaker" (Wallace 107) is the most recognized characteristics of a SBW. This represents the woman who is willing to put the needs of others before her own. This represents the woman who carries the burdens, stresses, and pains of others without requiring the same relief afforded others. This represents the many women who die daily without "the slightest bit of hoopla" (Mataka 1).

Within the fields of psychology and sociology there is a growing body of literature that considers the affects the SBW myth can have on everyday Black women's lives, particularly

concerning their physical and mental health. A majority of this research examines the "strong Black woman" scheme by asking Black women to define and explain their understandings of the SBW scheme directly (Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant; Dawn Marie Dow; Ellen Harrington, Janis Crowther, and Jillian Shipherd; Natalie Watson and Carla Hunter, and Lindsey West, Roxanne Donovan, and Amanda Daniel). For these studies, by asking Black women to provide their own definitions of the SBW scheme, researchers were able to consider Black women's relationship with, endorsement, and ranges of internalization of the myth, and the potential affects the SBW myth may have on Black women's mental and physical health, including eating disorders, depression, and binge eating (leading to obesity). For example, in *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance*, Tamara Beuoboef-Lafontant interviewed 58 Black women about the SBW myth. Her research considered the ways these women resist and internalize the myth, while also situating "strength" as a means for maintaining a stratified social order that obscures Black women's feelings of suffering and anger. Beauboeuf-Lafontant's findings have tied being a "strong Black woman" to unrecognized signs of depression in Black women.

Similarly, in "The Price of Strength: Black College Women's Perspectives on the Strong Black Woman Stereotype" West et al. used open-ended questions to interview 90 Black college women about their definition of SBW, their relation to the SBW ideal, and whether they thought SBW negatively affected their health. The authors found that although many of the women situated SBW as positive and many saw themselves as aligning with SBW, they also recognized the negative affects it had on their health. West et al. described these contradictions as a part of what they call the SBW paradox, which "may be a positive form of coping and a protective factor for optimal mental health; on the other hand, it may be a negative form of coping and a

predicative factor for poor mental health" (403).Other studies use Black women's definitions of the SBW and their perspectives on their health to better understand how different levels and kinds of internalization of SBW affect Black women's practices of self-care and willingness to seek help, particularly therapy when it comes to their mental health (Watson and Hunter; West et. al., and Donovan and West).

According to Ellen Harrington, Janis Crowther, and Jillian Shipherd's research, Black women who have internalized the SBW scheme may also adopt poor self-care habits, as well as unhealthy methods for coping with stress and pain, including binge eating as a form of self-medicating. In her own psychological and pastoral theological research on the SBW in *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength*, Chanequa Walker-Barnes provides a statistical profile on the physical and mental health of Black women in the United States, which included examining Black women's health issues like obesity and physical activity, diabetes and circulatory diseases, cancer, HIV/AIDS, chronic pain and functional impairment, stress and distress, depression, and anxiety disorders. Referencing the 2005 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), Walker-Barnes says, "Black women have the highest rates of hypertension and stroke of any racial-gender group within the United States" (46) with 34 percent of adult Black women having hypertension (46). Also, stigmas about depression mental illness (as a sign of weakness) within Black communities still prevent Black women from seeking help despite "evidence that Black women experience depression at similar or higher levels than other racial-gender groups" (55).

Although we cannot deny the very serious mental, physical, and emotional risks of internalizing the SBW myth, we also should not omit many Black women's conscious efforts to do what they need to do to ensure the survival of themselves, their children, family members,

and community, in spite of the consequences. Participants within my study were not asked to speak directly about SBW myth. They were asked to name, describe, and identify words that best represented themselves, and engaging in these practices of self-definition and self-valuation they identified 'strong' as an important word for describing their identities. All five women discussed in this chapter refer to themselves as being strong as part of their daily roles as mothers, wives, daughters, and everyday Black women. For example, Kanini talks about having to be resilient for the sake of her family. Although her fight might mean that she must endure physical, emotional, and psychological pain, her sacrifice has allowed her to keep her family together and functioning. As a family and community oriented person, Kanini's family is a major priority in her life, and she does what she must do as a mother, wife, and provider to make sure her family unit works. Similarly, Darlene says that being strong often means having to "carry a lot of weight," which includes having to help and inspire people (family, friends, co-workers, etc.) other than just herself. She admits that being in these situations was at times difficult, but she did what she had to do to stay strong because she understood how vital her efforts were to ensure that these people made it through their situations.

In both of these cases, and others, I think it is important to recognize these women's awareness of the decisions that they chose to make as caretakers. In their theorizing of their word choices and definitions of 'strong', they prioritize survival over pain, labor, and burdens. I believe the SBW scheme/myth creates a framework that often prevents us from acknowledging many Black women's agency, awareness, and critical engagement with their choices. My intentions for asking Black women to define their unique meanings and experiences of strength is an attempt to recognize the value some Black women attach to the word "strong" and how being strong functions strategically and rhetorically within the everyday lives of some Black

women. I believe that there is much more of a negotiation between mythical assumptions about Black women as strong, and actual practices of Black women's strength that needs further consideration and investigation.

Overall, the SBW myth and being a strong, Black woman on a surface level may seem like the same thing, but I believe the life experiences and perspectives of actual Black women who claim their identity as "strong" should be prioritized over any myth. Furthermore, this claiming of such a complex, and at times controversial identification, should be accompanied with dialogue with Black women individually and collectively to gain better understanding of "strong" in all of its variations and complexities. Without these moments of talk-back, we risk moments of further misunderstanding and misrepresentations of our identities and naming practices by others and each other.

For example, in her article "Here's Why I Have Problem with #BlackGirlMagic," Linda Chavers offered her perspective on the increasingly popular hashtag and phrase #BlackGirlsAreMagic coined by CaShawn Thompson in 2013. Chavers understood the term "Black girl magic" as too closely resembling the SBW archetype, and therefore, suggesting that there are some inhuman, magical powers that Black women can tap into to overcome anything. She argues that by calling Black women and girls "magic," we suggest Black women are inhuman, and that any Black woman who does not overcome pain, trauma, disease, oppression, murder, are somehow not magical enough.

Chavers comments sparked a lot of controversy about her misunderstanding of #BlackGirlMagic, particularly responses from Black women. For example, in direct response to Chavers article, Ashley Ford in "There is Nothing Wrong with Black Girl Magic" offered a counter-argument. Ford's view was that "Black girl magic" is "not about tapping into something

supernatural, it's about claiming or reclaiming what others have refused to see." Ford claimed that too often Black women find themselves having to celebrate themselves because their achievements are oftentimes ignored by others; this happens so often that when a Black woman's accomplishments are finally noticed it "seems like" magic, although we (as in Black women who have been putting in the work all along) know the inside joke, that is, there's nothing magical about it.

In a similar way that Ford (and others) provides and shares her meaning of #BlackGirlMagic, I also argue that Black women must define the terms that we claim for ourselves, particularly when it comes to terms that can easily be skewed to resemble mythical and stereotypical images that we do not necessarily want to perpetuate. As seen in this chapter, not all of our definitions do, or should, look the same, but it is in the act of defining and sharing that we make these words our own. Ultimately, Black women's practices of self-definition and self-valuation offer opportunities for Black women to theorize and give meaning to their identities in private and public spaces, while also refuting attempts to silence their voices, distort their images, and undermined their authority. In *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, Melissa Harris-Perry compared Black women's daily negotiations of their identities and actions within a society that continuously projects distortions of Black womanhood to psychology research on field dependence, which considers "how individuals locate the upright in a space" (29). Within this psychological research, participants are placed in tilted and crooked rooms and asked to align themselves vertically. As one can imagine, this was a difficult task for most participants. Harris-Perry says the following about Black women's relationships with imaginary crooked rooms within U.S. society:

> When they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with the warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortions […] To understand why black women's public actions and political strategies sometimes seem tilted in ways that accommodate the degrading stereotypes about them, it is important to appreciate the structural constraints that influence their behavior. It can be difficult to stand up straight in a crooked room. (Harris-Perry 29)

Practices of self-definition and self-valuation offer opportunities for Black women to theorize their identities and acknowledge "structural constraints" that influence their behaviors, interactions with others, and perceptions of themselves. By critically interrogating our meanings of strength and how the "strong, Black woman" functions within the everyday lives of individual Black women, as well as how it is utilized within communal spaces like social media or friendship relationships, Black women offer counter-narratives to historical stereotypes of their identities, while claiming and enacting revised versions of being "strong" as a daily practice of resistance and reaffirmation within contemporary society and culture.

In the next chapter, I discuss participants' responses for identifying, naming, and describing influential women in their lives. Many of the discussions of the SBW myth in this chapter can be applied to the next the chapter, especially since stereotypical images of Black motherhood—Mammy and Matriarch—often emphasize the three primary characteristics of an SBW: emotional strength, caregiving, and independence (Walkers-Barnes). Using Patricia Hill Collins' themes of an Afrocentric feminist standpoint on Black women's mothering as a

framework, I interrogate participants' definitions of 'care' and 'loving,' which were terms many participants used to describe their mothers and othermothers.

Chapter 4 Influence and the Importance of Care and Love: Black Women's Self-Valuations of Motherhood

> I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty.
>
> Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for possibilities—and the will to grasp them.
>
> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, 241-242

In this chapter, I interpret participants' List #2 responses, which focus on their word choices for identifying, naming, and describing influential Black women in their lives. To understand Black women's practices for defining and theorizing their own identities, I believe that it is important to allow space to reflect, honor, and acknowledge those persons whom have deeply informed Black women's understandings of themselves. For myself, and many of the women in this study, mothers, female family members, and friends played a significant role in my development and survival as a Black girl and my understandings of what it meant to become and be a Black woman. As Alice Walker discusses above, many Black woman see their mothers as having particular legacies that they share with the world, and pass along to their daughters. This chapter is about honoring these Black women Creators and their gifts.

Participant responses to the question on identifying words that name and describe "influential Black women in their lives" resulted in several themes, including participants using

the words ‘caring’ and ‘loving’ to specifically describe roles and actions of their biological mothers, othermothers, community mothers, and other unrelated women, yet uniquely influential “another mothers,” that they have encountered through education, media, or popular culture. These mothers represent examples of women participants recognize as playing a role in how they understand themselves.

Although the women in my study were not specifically asked to share their viewpoints on Black motherhood, given the important roles of Black mothers within historical and contemporary Black communities it makes sense to me why notions of motherhood and practices of mothering were prevalent within participant responses during this portion of my study. According to Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought*, until recently scholarship on Black mothering has been dominated by the perspectives of males (White and Black) and White women. Collins argues that there is a need for a Black/Afrocentric feminist standpoint and analysis of motherhood. Ultimately, through her own analysis of Black motherhood within pre-World War II contexts, Collins identifies five themes, or what she calls “enduring lifelines” of Black motherhood. Given the connections participants in my study made between concepts of care, love, and their mothers, these themes provide a useful framework for my analysis, while also creating an opportunity to put Collins ideological themes into conversation with contemporary Black women.

In this chapter, I will begin with an overview of Collins five enduring themes of an Afrocentric feminist view of motherhood. Next, I provide a brief discussion of the data from participants’ responses in pre-interview questionnaires and interviews. Then, using Collins’ themes as a framework, I interpret multiple participants’ responses to the question of influence and consider how they defined the popular terms ‘caring’ and ‘loving’ by referring to the various

mothers in their lives. I end with a discussion on how Black women's responses to questions of influence could provide further insight into Black women's practices of self-definition and self-valuation. I consider how the practices participants used to define 'caring' and 'loving' often resulted in participants' weaving an extended Black women-centered network of support for themselves and others that included Black women public figures, Black female fictional characters in popular culture, and Black female affirming images/texts/clothing/music/etc.

Five Enduring Themes of Black Motherhood: An Analytical Framework

In her article "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/Daughter Relationships," Collins identifies three competing perspectives of motherhood that inform her Afrocentric ideological perspective on Black motherhood. These perspectives include: 1) dominant perspectives of (White) motherhood, 2) Eurocentric perspectives of Black motherhood, and 3) African perspectives of Black motherhood. This first perspective relates to feminist views on womanhood, particularly how the 'cult of true womanhood' situated women within the private domestic sphere where motherhood, which included taking care of one's children, husband, and household, was deemed a woman's primary and most precious occupation (3). Although feminist analysis of motherhood in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in various deviations from this dominant ideology, Collins argues in *Black Feminist Thought* that a majority of this work failed to acknowledge how race, class, sexuality, and citizenship affected ideals and practices of motherhood for non-White, middle-classed women (188).

On the other hand, according to Collins in "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture," Eurocentric views of Black motherhood address Black women's roles in both White and Black families (3). These views often represent White-male perspectives of Black mothers, and inform two competing and controlling images of Black womanhood. On one side, Black

women are perceived within their White families as the ideal "good" Black mother, or Mammy. Collins describes Mammy as "the faithful, devoted domestic servant" (4) who accepts her inferior status while willfully and cheerfully caring for her White children and family (4). At the same time, within the context of her own home this same "good" Black mother is perceived as "the too strong matriarch" (4) who is emasculating, aggressive, unfeminine, and the primary cause of her children's inadequacies and failures (4). Caught between these two competing perspectives of Black motherhood, Black women have limited space for negotiating Black motherhood without either upholding an institution of Black motherhood meant to legitimize Black women's intersecting oppressions, or internalizing damaging images of their own identities (4).

The final perspective on Black motherhood that informs Collins' themes of Black motherhood is an African perspective. Collins refers to research by Barbara Christian and Christine Oppong on West African traditions where divisions of family life were not divided into two separate gender spheres that restricted women's work to the household (4). Collins says, "Mothering was not a privatized nurturing 'occupation' reserved for biological mothers, and the economic support of children was not the exclusive responsibility of men. Instead, for African women, emotional care for children and providing for their physical survival were interwoven as interdependent, complementary dimensions of motherhood" (4). It is suggested in Africanist research that many Black people across the Diaspora retained many African beliefs and practices despite the traumatic experiences of slavery (4). In her own discussions of the impact African philosophies and practices had on 19th century African American women's ancestral voice and cultural memory, Jacqueline Royster in *Traces of A Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women* says that "when African women and girls set foot in North America,

they did not come as blank slates. Instead, they brought with them sensibilities that had been fired in African cauldrons, the communities they left behind" (90). In this sense, practices of womanhood, including Afrocentric practices of mothering, more than likely were passed down through generations of Black women as a part of Black women's cultural memory.

In her later works on motherhood, Collins discusses how Black males often dominate this African perspective on Black motherhood. In her essay "Black Women and Motherhood" in *Motherhood Space: Configurations of the Maternal Through Politics, Home, and the Body*, she suggests that Black male scholars' often glorify Black mothers in ways that foster a controlling image of Black women as "super-strong Black mothers" (150). In this sense, the ideal Black mother shows her children unconditional love and lives a life of sacrifice (especially for her sons) (150). Collins says that although critiques of White female and male perspectives of Black motherhood have been made, perhaps beliefs in showing racial solidarity and previous experiences of backlash felt by Black feminists who dared to go against Black male perspectives, prevent Black women from challenging this Black male view of Black motherhood (151). In any case, she understands, as do I, that "externally defined definitions of Black womanhood…are bound to come with their own set of problems" (151).

Because of these potential "problems," Collins uses an Afrocentric feminist perspective to bring all these competing and contradicting viewpoints of Black motherhood together, and identifies what she refers to as five enduring themes of Black motherhood. In her discussion of these themes within *Black Feminist Thought*, she notes how these themes represent shared patterns across many Black women's experiences, although heterogeneity has always existed amongst Black women (191). The context in which these themes emerged was out of her

analysis of Black motherhood during the pre-World War II era in the United States. Collins says the following about this particular context in relation to her five themes:

> The five enduring themes described below emerged in the context of and were sustained by specific social conditions associated with slavery, Southern rural life, and class-stratified, racially segregated neighborhoods of earlier periods of urban Black migration. These conditions fostered the appearance of a distinctive Black women's standpoint on mothering and gave clear reasons for its continuation. In contrast, because African-American family organization and Black civil society have both been markedly reorganized since World War II, one must question in what form and even whether these themes endure. (191)

Since the context in which contemporary Black women in the U.S. live today is different from the lived experiences of U.S. Black women pre-World War II, Collins suggests that these themes be understood and used as "culturally specific, resilient lifelines that can be continually refashioned in response to changing contexts" (191). It is expected that these themes will continue to change as Black women's social conditions change.

Within the context of my study, participants are suggesting a Black woman's standpoint on motherhood that seems to be in alignment with Collins' five themes, although individual variations and additions did occur. As a part of my analysis of participants' defining and theorizing of the terms 'caring' and 'loving,' I use the Black motherhood themes described below as a tool for creating dialogue between these enduring themes rooted in a history of U.S.

Black motherhood and contemporary (diaspora) Black women's perspective on motherhood/mothering. Collins five enduring themes of Black motherhood are as follows:

- *Bloodmothers, Othermothers, and Women-Centered Networks*: This theme recognizes how, historically, practices of motherhood were fluid within many Black communities. Although bloodmothers, or biological mothers, were expected to care for their own children, it was also recognized that childcare was not (and at times could not) be the sole responsibility of a bloodmother. Instead, othermothers, such as grandmothers, aunts, sisters, etc., shared the responsibility of caring for children. Within this women-centered network of care, Black women assisted each other in caring for the community's children, which included caring for children who may not have been biologically related to them. This practice of fictive kin, community childcare, and formal and informal adoption were common practices amongst Black women during and following the enslavement era in the United States.

- *Mothers, Daughters, and Socialization for Survival*: This theme considered the dilemma faced by Black mothers in socializing their daughters to survive and negotiate systems of oppression. On one hand, Black women taught their daughters particular societal expectations of them as Black females, while instilling their daughters with specific values and beliefs about the importance of working and acquiring an education. These lessons were meant to help their daughters physically survive systemic oppression. At the same time, mothers also taught their daughters how to practice self-definition and avoid internalizing misrepresentations of their identity, or conforming to societal expectations.

In teaching their daughters practices of self-definition and resistance, mothers created space for their daughter's survival mentally and emotionally. This balancing between two roles and messages may have resulted in conflict between Black biological mothers and their daughters, which made othermothers' roles as mediators and outlets for Black daughters even more important.

- *Providing as Part of Mothering*: This theme addressed how throughout Black women's history a Black women's standpoint on mothering has included being both a caregiver and financial provider for one's family. Unlike the cult of true womanhood, Black women's mothering was not restricted within the private, domestic sphere; instead, a majority of Black women throughout history (during enslavement to Southern agricultural workers to domestic workers) *had to work*. Their labor and ability to provide for their families as breadwinners was an integral component of Black women's mothering practices.

- *Community Othermothers and Political Activism*: This theme recognized Black women as serving as mothers to not only their biological and fictive kin, but also their entire community. This role as community othermother often included Black women taking responsibility for the care and overall well-being of the community's children, as well as serving as activists within their community by speaking on behalf of the most vulnerable members (e.g., children and the poor). By raising awareness about political issues and social injustices affecting Black communities, Black women demonstrate an ethic of care meant to uplift their community and create opportunities for change and improvement.

- *Motherhood as a Symbol of Power*: This theme situated motherhood within Black communities as a symbol of power acquired by biological mothers, othermothers, and community mothers for their care and service to their families and communities. The purpose of this position (and possession) of power was not meant to dominate others, but to empower and uplift others and create opportunities for community growth. It is also a position of respect that when invoked (especially by older Black women within a community) can allow Black women to share their wisdom within particular spaces that may be off limits to others, and correct the behavior of the communities youth.

In the next section, I use Collins enduring themes of Black motherhood as a framework for analyzing participants' responses on describing influential women in their lives—i.e., their many 'caring,' and 'loving' mothers.

Data Analysis: Interpreting Words and Definitions Using Afrocentric Feminist Themes of Black Motherhood

As discussed in the methods and methodology chapter, 'caring' and 'loving' were the most popular responses for words from List #2: Identify 4-5 words to name, define, and describe influential Black women in your life. In this section, I use Collins' five themes of Black mothering to interpret participants' List #2 responses. In the process of defining and sharing their meanings of 'caring' and 'loving,' participants typically identified their mothers as representations of these terms. Using Collins' themes allows me to interpret responses using a framework that considers motherhood from Black women's perspectives.

Bloodmothers, Othermothers, and Black Women-Centered Networks

The first theme of Black motherhood points to the centrality of women within Black communities; a characteristic of many Black communities that can be traced back to West African traditions and philosophies. Collins situates this theme as a way to understand the fluidity of childcare that exists within Black communities and families, particularly how multiple people—often women—assist a bloodmother/biological mother in the care of her children (192). She says these networks of women provide insight into women's centrality within Black communities (193), a centrality that was emphasized within multiple participant questionnaire and interview responses.

For example, Naomi, a self-identified Black woman in her late 30s from New York, used several words to describe influential women in her life. For the purposes of this chapter, I consider two of her words: 'crucial' and 'carriers.' In her interview, Naomi explained her meaning of her word 'crucial' in the following way:

> Naomi Line 1 (L1): I think 'crucial' was for my grandmother. Because…like I said [earlier in my interview], my mother never worked. So, she was a young mother. She had me at seventeen. So she hung out a lot. Um, I don't think she felt like she was finished growing up. So again she never had a job. She was on uh welfare most of her life. But she also felt like she could do that because my grandmother was there […]—
>
> L2: and so, when I think about the Black women in my life I think about my grandmother, and I think about how crucial it was that she was there to take care of me.

Naomi's definition of her word 'crucial' is directly connected to her lived experiences with and observations of both her biological mother, and her grandmother who served as a kind of

othermother to her. Here, as well as in earlier portions of her interview, Naomi describes her mother as a "young mother" (17 years old) who became pregnant with her prior to finishing high school. According to Naomi's accounts in this excerpt, her mother seemed to lack the maturity and financial means to care for both herself and a child. Naomi uses the word 'crucial' to acknowledge the role of her grandmother who stepped in and assumed the mothering role of caregiver and provider for Naomi when her biological mother could no longer do so. Although a separate term for Naomi, she also used the word 'carrier' to continue her discussion of Black women and their roles as caregivers:

> L3: Um, 'carriers'…I think it's also again sort of this idea of the ones who take care of people […]
>
> L4: My family was a majority of women. Even the men died off a little bit early because a lot of them [the women in my family] were married, um, but the husbands died first. Or like my grandmother, she's married—she's still married to this day but her husband lives in Detroit. They have been separated since I've been maybe…I can remember being eight or nine and him coming from Detroit to visit—to visit us in New York. And they were married before I was born. And I can't remember being alive and them being together in New York. She went to Detroit to be with him. She couldn't—she just couldn't be in Detroit and so she came back.
>
> L5: But I always remember her being strong. I never saw her cry. I never understood how she could be away from her husband and still be married. They never wanted to get a divorce […] Um, so I just see women as carriers of sort of, um, I don't know, whether it be pains, burdens, um—just all of life.

> L6: And even in my family there wasn't that many men, and when there were men it was still the women who always did most of everything…And I think carriers just instinctually because women in general are the givers of life.

Within Naomi's description of carrier, I understand her identifying three different meanings for carrier that speak to the care demonstrated by the Black women in her life. Building on her previous comments on how crucial it was for her grandmother to take care of her, she begins her discussion of 'carrier' by defining carriers as "the ones who take care of people," (Line 3). She follows this definition by identifying the women in her family (especially her grandmother) as examples of this term. While identifying these specific women within her life, she also alludes to a definition of carrier that relates to these women's loss and the "pains, burdens—just all of life" (Line 5) that these women must carry within their bodies daily. For instance, in Line 4 Naomi shares how her family was composed of mostly single women whose husbands had either passed away or left their homes. To explain, she shares a story about her grandmother who has been separated from her husband for nearly all of Naomi's life. Naomi describes her grandmother as "being strong" and never showing emotion about her separation. As noted in the previous chapter, Black women's strength is often embodied in the roles they play within their everyday lives, including being mothers. Being strong for many Black women is about enduring particular burdens not only for the benefit of oneself, but the survival of others. With this in mind, although Naomi could not understand her grandmother's continued commitment to her marriage in spite of years of separation, perhaps her grandmother might have also protected her granddaughter from her true feelings about her marriage.

The final care that Naomi briefly addresses here is more inclusive and relates to all women. This care speaks to women's ability to be carriers of life and "givers of life," (Line 6).

When considering all three versions of ‘carriers’ discussed by Naomi, along with her explanation of her term ‘crucial,’ I better understand how care can speak to not only childcare, but also the circumstances, including financial situations and experiences of loss, that can affect some Black biological mothers’ and othermothers’ roles and actions as caregivers.

Another participant whose responses related to this theme of Black motherhood was Danea. She identified herself as a young, Black woman in her late 20s, a righteous-ratchet sista schola and sawrah, and a single-mother of a two-year old daughter. She was living in Michigan to attend graduate school during the time of this study. In her discussion of influential Black women in her life, Danea spent a majority of her interview discussing what Collins would refer to as her “women-centered network.” According to Collins, a Black women centered network typically consists of biological family members—“grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and cousins”—who assist a biological mother with childcare (193). Although I will return to Danea in other sections of this analysis, here I’d like to focus on her use of the words ‘caring’ and ‘loving’ within her pre-interview questionnaire and follow-up interview responses. While explaining her meanings of these terms, Danea referred to each woman within her Black women centered network (beginning with her mother and grandmother and extending outward) and how these women have supported her personally, while also assisting her in caring for her young daughter. She discusses ‘caring’ and ‘loving’ together in the following way:

> Danea Line 1 (L1): Um, they’re [referring to mother and grandmother] caring and they’re loving, um, and they’ll do anything for you like [Laughter]—[…] My grandparents are um, pretty conservative in terms of like having a child outside of marriage and stuff like that and so like they were not too happy that…I was pregnant, but…my daughter is their

heart now […] So like going from this disappointment to this like "I don't know what I would do if she was not here." [Laughter]

L2: And, doing anything and everything for [their family] and—for her and for me. And thinking about how like, um—look at my grandparents will do anything for their family. And they will—it does not matter what you need. And we're fortunate for, you know, they're able to have the kind of resources that if we need something they could do it, but they really will.

L3: Um, and just how their influences—like one of the things that I think about with my grandmother a lot is like she just has—like her whole presence is just like this—it's almost like regal…She's an older Black woman from the South so she has her matching purse, bag, shoes and [Laughter] and only wears skirts and dresses like sits there prim and proper like, [imitating voice of grandmother] "What? I don't understand why that would be your option." [Laughing]…And they care…When I was getting my masters at [name of school]—my—I talked to my grandmother probably every other day […]

L4: She would send me care-packages. So like since groceries are so expensive she would send me boxes of cereal and like um seasonings to make stuff with and like Ramen Noodles and stuff so she would send me these big care-packages of all this food uh to help out…so that I wasn't starving in New York.

Danea's meaning of the words 'loving' and 'caring' refers to her support system, which consists of her biological family members, and their willingness to do anything for her. She immediately supports this claim by sharing a story about her family's initial disapproving responses to her out of wedlock pregnancy, but Danea explains how after the birth of her daughter her family's

feelings about her daughter changed and they now see her daughter as an invaluable addition to their family ("their heart") that they must care for (Line 2).

In Lines 3-4, Danea pauses to reflect on her experiences of love and care in relation to her grandmother who, like Naomi's grandmother, has played a crucial role in Danea's life as an othermother. Danea's detailed description of her grandmother's appearance, imitation of her voice and mannerisms, as well as storytelling and use of humor and imitation to describe her interactions with her grandmother demonstrate their close relationship as grandmother/othermother and granddaughter. For Danea, it was her grandmother's deeds while she was away at school (e.g., calling every day, sending care-packages with food, worrying for her safety) that exemplified her understanding of 'love' and 'care.' In this sense, when Danea says that her family will "do anything" for her, she is referring to the ways that they are willing to do the small things that may go unnoticed by others, but truly make a difference within her everyday life. Another representation of this theme is located in Danea's discussion of her more extensive women-centered network, including her fictive kin:

> L5: In terms of like, the women in the academy and—and outside of my like immediate family…especially like with me having had my daughter, people have been so like helpful and like loving and caring. Like some of my sista scholars like love my baby and they really genuinely love her—[…]
>
> L6: like, one of my best friends, [says friend's name]…she loves [says daughter's name]. And like one of my other sista scholas sent me a picture yesterday of like when [daughter's name] was just brought home and the first picture she got to take with her—

> […] I was like, "Aww!" They really do care and have been there for me and my daughter in ways that…I just cannot repay.
>
> L7: Or, even like the family that watches my daughter for me…we've known them forever. But like the mother, she loves my daughter like she does her daughter and she has five daughters…She's always just like there's no difference between the way she treats my daughter and she treats her daughters.
>
> L8: And, it's just such a blessing to have all these wonderful, strong, caring women in her [referring to her daughter's] life and in my life, but there for her. Cause she has all these examples of great women around her.

In this excerpt, Danea traces her extended Black-women centered network of sistas and othermothers who are involved in loving and caring for her and her child. During the time of this interview, Danea was a graduate student and teacher. Overtime within this academic setting, she built relationships with other Black women who extended their support of her professionally to her personal life, particularly after the birth of her daughter. In this excerpt, Danea specifically names two different sista-friends who have demonstrated love and care towards her daughter, and although she doesn't share what these women had done specifically for her and her daughter, she explains that her friends' love is undeniable and that they have cared for her in "ways that [she] cannot repay," (Line 6).

According to Collins, othermothers can be women biologically related, or unrelated to Black women and their children. She says, "In many African-American communities these women-centered networks of community-based child care have extended beyond the boundaries of biologically related individuals to include fictive kin" (193). In Line 7, Danea refers to an

othermother who she has known for a long period of time who assists Danea in caring for her daughter while she is at school and work. Similar to how traditionally within Black communities it was typical for neighbors to care for each other's children (Collins 194), this othermother (who already has several daughters of her own) cares for Danea's daughter as if she were another daughter. The combination of Danea's biological support system, along with her fictive kin relationships made up of sistas and othermothers, results in definitions of 'caring' and 'loving' deeply informed by traditions of Black women-centered networks. Although she is a bloodmother, Danea relies on the presence and contributions of the Black women in her life to assist in the care and nurturing of her daughter. For her, their 'love' and 'care' is both a necessity and an opportunity to surround her own daughter with positive women whom all care about her.

Mothers, Daughters, and Socialization for Survival

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins describes this second theme of Black motherhood as a Black mother's dilemma in regards to their roles in socializing their daughters to survive and thrive in a raced, classed, and gendered world. She says the following about Black mothers' socialization of their daughters:

> On one hand, to ensure their daughter's physical survival, mothers must teach them to fit into the sexual politics of Black womanhood…Black daughters learn to expect to work, to strive for an education so they can support themselves, and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities because these skills are essential to their own survival and those for whom they will eventually be responsible […]

> On the other hand, Black daughters with strong self-definitions and self-valuations who offer serious challenges to oppressive situations may not physically survive…Despite the dangers, mothers routinely encourage Black daughters to develop skills to confront oppressive conditions. Learning that they will work and that education is a vehicle for advancement can also be seen as ways of enhancing positive self-definitions and self-valuations in Black girls. Emotional strength is essential, but not at the cost of physical survival. (Collins, 198)

In other words, in their own individual ways, many Black mothers teach their daughters about social conditions, sexual politics, and systems of oppression that impact their lives as Black females, while simultaneously arming their daughters with strategies, tools, and resources to hopefully help their daughters physically survive and mentally, emotionally, and financially thrive within an oppressive society and culture. Several women within this study used the words 'care' and 'love' to speak about their mother-daughter relationships. Some women discussed how their mothers' actions socialized them to (at times) conform in particular ways, while others explained how their mothers empowered and encouraged them to move beyond societal expectations/perceptions of them as Black females. A common phrase used by several participants was "I am my mother," which was often used in reference to how Black women defined their behaviors and actions in response to issues that they faced in their daily lives.

One of the most memorable discussions that I had with a participant about their mother was with Willow. Willow identified herself as a Black, lesbian, working-class woman in her mid-30s from a large metropolitan city in the northeast. She was one of two participants discussed in this section who did not use the word 'caring' or 'loving' to describe influential

women in her life, although she did specifically name her mother as an influential Black woman within her pre-interview questionnaire responses. When asked to provide meaning to her use of the word "mother," Willow said the following:

> Willow Line 1: I think mother is pretty obvious…Obviously I don't have the best relationship with my mother. It's actually really rather unfortunate…that I don't have a good relationship with my mother, but she is my mother and ain't nobody really here without them […]
>
> L2: And so, there's something that my father told me a long time ago and that was that…"I don't care if your mother's a whore. I don't care if your mother's on crack or heroin. She is your mother and if you like living you need to understand and respect those things." Um, and so—and of course mother—you can go with the broader slope of *mother as creator*—[…] *nurturer*. All these things, right?
>
> L3: But, but really it's what mothers are. It's what mothers signify. And they signify strength and independence, and a willingness to do things. My mother was very independent. Um, and I saw the matriarchy work in her when it came to the Black patriarchy.
>
> L5: My father would say some things and she'd be like, [Imitating her mother] "No. That's not how it's gonna work." You know? [Imitating her father] "Well, women shouldn't cut their hair." [Imitating her mother] "Mmm, so I'm gonna cut my hair, and if Willow wants to cut her hair, she will." [Laughter] Right?
>
> L6: So, these little moments—these little disruptions um that she taught me. I've often said to many people I'm very much my mother in the academy. If my mother was sane,

> this is how she would be in the academy. I just know her that well. And so I thank her for that because I wouldn't have been able to get through the academy…Like all my empathy and all my heart is in my writing and what I do with teaching with students and all that, but the way that I navigate this…[academy] is *literally* to be my mother. And so, that's who I am—is I'm my mother.

Willow's definition of 'mother' begins with her fractured relationship with her own mother. She explains that although she does not have a close relationship with her mother, she still respects her mother for giving her life. Similar to Naomi's earlier description of women as 'carriers' and "givers of life," Willow also situates mothers as being the reason why we are all living and, therefore, should be respected because of that ("ain't nobody really here without them"). She then moves into a more general and common depiction of motherhood where mothers are described as creators and nurturers. Although she incorporates this representation of mother within her own definition, Willow chooses to emphasize her own beliefs about what a mother signifies, or means to her. Drawing on her own life experiences with her own mother, Willow claims the traits of "strength, independence, and willingness to do things" as indicating what mothers signify. As she proceeds to give specific examples of her mother's independence, power, and resistance to her father, she theorizes the impact these experiences have had on her own beliefs and practices as a Black woman working within academia. She relates these seemingly mundane interactions (disruptions) between her mother and father, especially her mother's pushback towards her father's beliefs about gender performance, to her own need to, at times, be disruptive within her academic work and learning environments. Given the prominence of Western, male, elitist perspectives and ideologies within academic institutions, and the fact

that, during the time of the study, Willow was pursuing a graduate degree at a predominately-white institution, Willow employed these disruptive strategies in order to survive and succeed within potentially silencing and harmful spaces. I understand Willow's socialization by her mother as a child as including particular "mother tools" (e.g., disruption of power and navigation of systems) that Willow could as an adult use to survive physically and thrive intellectually within academia.

Although several participants expressed how their mother's socialization of them as children impacted who they are now as adults, some women also described how this socialization affected their relationships with their mothers and their abilities to understand their mother's care and love. For example, Solange, a Black woman and undergraduate student in her early 20s from Michigan used the words 'passionate' and 'caring' to describe influential women in her life. Solange said the following about her use of the term 'passionate':

> Solange Line 1: Passionate…I would say passionate came from the women that I came in contact with in college. And the only reason why I would say that cause like my Mom, not trying to down play her like she's not a good mom cause she is, but she lacked that growing up so she didn't know how to really give it to us. So, it's like I didn't see the whole giving the hugs and "love you" growing up.
>
> L2: So like coming here one of my advisors tried to like—she tried to touch my hand cause I was in her office and she tried to touch me. I did like [demonstrating how she pulled back from the woman]. Like, "What are you doing? Like, don't touch me."
>
> L3: And like through my four years of being here I learned that it's okay for a woman to be passionate. Like, I didn't even know what passionate was until I got here.

Solange then gave the following explanation for her use of the word ‘caring’:

> L4: Last but not least is caring which is new. Um, I chose caring because the barrier that my Mom and I broke…Um, I went through counseling and through counseling I learned how to deal with my Mom and talk to her. And once I learned how to talk to her we sat down and talked and I learned that she’s—she’s really caring. She just has a hard time of showing it, but she’s trying. And so just having that right now is what I really need. When I wrote this…that really made me tear up because it’s like really good to finally have my Mom.
>
> L5: To have—to actually have the feeling of my Mom really caring. I’m not going to say she didn’t care before, but she didn’t know how to express it. And now that she’s expressing it, it makes me happy. It’s just something to me but it’s like—I feel like that’s something that was missing in my life and to have it is like things are starting to feel more and more complete.

Both Solange’s comments about ‘passionate’ and ‘caring’ speak to her relationships with very different types of motherly figures within her life, including mentors, counselors, and her own biological mother. This network of women contributed to her understanding of what it means for women to openly show affection towards one another. In Line 1, Solange briefly explains how being passionate and showing compassion was not something that she experienced as a child from her mother. She theorizes that the reasons for why her mother did not give her “hugs” or tell her “[I] love you” had to do with her mother’s own upbringing and childhood environment.

Through Solange's experiences at college, she met female advisors who often showed her affection, which represented examples of passion and care that was new to her but needed.

In her discussion of the word 'care,' Solange explains how this contact with advisors and counselors who cared for her gave her the tools she needed to express her new experiences with, and understandings of, care to her biological mother. Through dialogue with her mother, she has been able to start the process of mending her relationship with her mother and now can better understand her mother's daily practices of care. Collins says the following about misunderstandings of maternal love that may occur between mothers of Black daughters:

> Black daughters raised by mothers grappling with hostile environments have to come to terms with their feelings about the difference between the idealized versions of maternal love extant in popular culture…For a daughter, growing up means developing a better understanding that even though she may desire more affection and greater freedom, her mother's physical care and protection are acts of maternal love. (Collins, 203)

In Lines 4-5, Solange describes how she is beginning to understand her mother's perspectives and accept that her mother has always cared for her, despite not being affectionate towards her. At the same time, because of Solange's ability to communicate to her mother her need for verbal (love you) and physical (hugs) demonstrations of her care, her mother is now trying to give her what she needs to be happy and whole. For Solange, her understanding of care is still evolving, but it seems to be linked to her still-developing relationship and understanding of her biological mother.

Providing as Part of Mothering

This theme considers Black mothers financial contributions to their families. Unlike myths of true womanhood where (White) women's work is confined to the household, "work for Black women has been an important and valued dimension of Afrocentric definitions of Black motherhood" (Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood," 5). From pre-colonial Africa where women worked and economically contributed to their families, to how the institution of slavery forced Black women to labor alongside Black men, to southern Black women's agricultural labor during the reconstruction era, the financial contributions of Black women domestic workers employed by White families, and how it continues to be common for Black women to work within various professions outside the home despite changes in Black civil society—Black women's work is an integrated (and often necessary) part of Black mothering.

One participant who claimed for her own mother and herself the titles of both 'mother' and 'breadwinner' was Kanini. She identified herself as a Kenyan woman, a mother of two, wife, and a graduate student. Similar to Willow, Kanini did not use the terms 'caring' or 'loving' to describe influential women in her life, although she did specifically name her mother and aunts as influential Black women in her life within her pre-interview questionnaire. In her interview, Kanini said the following about the mothering roles and practices of these influential Black women:

> Kanini Line 1: And then, my aunts—one thing about my aunts and Mom was also like the resilience I saw in them like b*eing* like both mothers and also like breadwinners—
> […]

L2: The husbands were not there. The husbands would be like, "I'm going to the city to find a job." And when they get there they find a job and they get a mistress. Or they get married and forget…the wives in the village.

L3: And so, these women would just be doing like multiple roles, like taking care of the family and also like working…in the farms, like…manual labor like everyday to support the family.

L4: So, I'd just watched that like—these women doing these multiple roles, being breadwinners, and I—their resilience to also keep their families together. That was like so admirable for me.

In this excerpt, Kanini described the context of her upbringing as a women-centered environment where, because of the absence of men, her mother and aunts had to assume multiple roles as caretakers and providers for their families. She begins by discussing these women's resilience in their ability to balance both roles as mothers and financial providers, particularly given how this latter responsibility was presumably the responsibility of husbands who had left to find work. Given the possibility that men would not return to their families for several reasons that Kanini identifies, women back in her village were left to "take care of the family and also work," (Line 3). As a child, she witnessed the kinds of work that her mother and aunts' did everyday, which entailed manual labor on a farm. Her mother and othermothers' labor more than likely helped to feed and financially provide for her family, and these women engaged in this hard labor while also caring for their children and keeping their families together.

Kanini's admiration for her mother and aunts' work translates into how she now sees herself as a Black woman. Throughout her interview Kanini used terms like 'resilient,' 'mother,'

and ‘breadwinner’ to describe herself. She uses self-definition and self-valuation to honor the work of her mothers, while also claiming these terms to empower herself as mother and provider within her own family.

Community Othermothers and Political Activism and *Motherhood as a Symbol of Power*

The final two themes Collins identifies in *Black Feminist Thought* as part of a Black woman’s stance on motherhood include Black women’s roles as community othermothers and activists for political change within their communities, and the idea that motherhood symbolizes power and is a position of authority within Black families and communities. The identity of community othermother comes out of Black women’s service to their biological families and extended families, and how this service develops into a general ethic of care for the well-being of all of their community, especially the community’s children (205). Collins describes community othermothers’ activism as demonstrating “clear rejection of separateness and individual interest as the basis of either community organization or individual self-actualization” (207). By using a different value system where finding commonalities and practicing solidarity are emphasized, community othermothers show how “ethics of caring and personal accountability move communities forward” (207). The community work and service of community othermothers, as well as biological mothers and othermothers, contributes to an understanding of motherhood as a symbol of power (207). Through their community work, Black women invoke a type of power that is:

> […] transformative in that Black women’s relationships with children and other vulnerable community members are not intended to dominate or control. Rather, their

> purpose is to bring people along, to—in the words of late-nineteenth-century Black feminists—"uplift the race" so that vulnerable member of the community will be able to attain the self-reliance and independence essential for resistance. (Collins 208)

This role of power is often associated with the "strong Black woman," as well as older Black women who invoke their power to claim their space within the community, voice their opinions and share their wisdom about issues affecting their communities, and indirectly correct the behaviors of children or young adults. In all these cases, 'mother' refers to a type of power and level of respect that has been earned by Black women through their ongoing service to their biological families, fictive kin, and greater communities.

Unfortunately, as noted by Collins, individual community othermothers are often well known and recognized by their local communities, but a majority of these mothers' names and deeds often are not acknowledged beyond these spaces (208). Only a few women within my study discussed their mothers' work as extending beyond their immediate families. In these brief moments, participants described their mothers as vocal members of their community who oftentimes had to challenge sexism and racism in order to be heard. For example, Darlene, a Black woman and mother in her late 50s from Florida said the following about her mother whom she described using the words 'caring' and 'strong':

> Darlene Line 1: Cause she was the type of person that was raised…during a very difficult time. And…[did] things that predominately people would say, "It's not a woman's place. A woman's place is such and such." […]And in regardless of having the husband…I looked at her as—in reference to how she was able to make the home and to be able to

say, “Okay. Well, I don’t have much, but whatever I have is yours.” And, she would always try to help her children, and you know, family members, or whatever it was and…she didn’t think twice about it. She just knew that she had to do it. And because it wasn’t a matter of my father just [lying] back and letting her take the lead. It was certain things that she just did, and because she did it, you know, he…respected her. […]

L2: You know because I can remember…as a young girl coming up…certain things that came up, you know, whether it was um something in the community—and that’s including voting or um some type of…race relations, or whatever it was, you know—she’d pick up the phone. And even if that meant calling into the radio station to voice her opinion, she would do that.

L3: And because she did…a lot of people knew that…how she felt about something. And it wasn’t meaning that…she didn’t take what they had to say, but she just valued herself enough to be able to say, you know, back in those days that…“Okay, well I have something that I need to—to say.”

Darlene begins by discussing her mother’s demonstration of care. Although not included in the above excerpt, earlier in her interview, Darlene describes her mother, similar to Solange, as someone who did not vocally express her love for her but “was able to show [her love] by the things that she did.” In Line 1 Darlene explains how her mother’s care was extended across her family and how she gave to others without “thinking twice about it” because she felt a sense of responsibility to do so. Her mother’s strength and leadership within her family earned her mother the respect of her father who appreciated how she handled different situations.

Darlene's observations of her mother's role as a leader and her power within her immediate family caused Darlene to also recall her mother's active role as a leader within her community. Growing-up in the 1960s and 1970s, Darlene alludes to the struggles for civil rights (e.g., voting and race issues) that were major concerns within her household and community. She recalls how vocal her mother was about these issues, using the mediums most available to her (e.g., phone and radio) to let her position be known about these issues affecting her, her children, and her community. As Darlene notes in her reflection, "back in those days" a Black woman publically speaking on social injustices went against a "woman's place" and was potentially dangerous for her and her loved ones, but Darlene's mother "valued herself enough" to say what she had to say for herself (and perhaps for those who could not, or dared not, speak), despite the consequences.

Along with being mothers and breadwinners, Kanini also described her mother as being politically active within her community, and demonstrating her concern for political issues. She said the following about how her mother navigated between conforming and resisting gender norms within her culture and community:

> Kanini Line 1: As much as my Mom wanted to conform to things, I would observe her and see like she was also very rebellious and non-conformist, as well…You'll find her like in meetings where men—men only—she'll just find a way to be there [Laughter].
> L2: Or, like getting involved like in political things, which back home [in Kenya] is like reserved for men. And I actually heard she would like face a lot of like insults, like insults from men like, "Why does she have to do this?" […]

> L3: So I'd watch her like being strong and being…able to navigate those things. I'd be like, "Oh yeah. My Mom is doing it. Like she's strong. She's not conforming to these gender roles and expectations."

Similar to Darlene's mother, Kanini describes her mother as finding ways to get involved and let her voice be heard on political issues concerning her community. Although within her community it was common that politics were reserved for men, Kanini's mom found a way to be present for meetings, despite the disapproval she received from men. Both Darlene and Kanini express how seeing their mothers' participation in political spaces, practices of speaking out, and non-conformity influenced their self-definitions and self-valuations of Black womanhood and motherhood. Their mothers assumed positions of power within their households and local communities that earned them the respect and admiration of their daughters.

Additional Influential Black Women Themes and Potential Re-adaptations of Enduring Themes of Black Motherhood

Not all participant responses to the question of naming, defining, and describing influential Black women in their lives easily aligned with Collins themes of Black womanhood. Also, not all participants explicitly used 'care' and 'love' to describe influential women in their lives, although the women that they did name seemed to perform acts of care and love often by serving as role models and positive examples of Black womanhood within participants lives. For instance, some participants identified Black women who possessed qualities or life experiences that reminded participants of their mothers and othermothers, but had no biological, or personal relationships with participants.

For example, along with discussing her mother's political involvement in her community, Kanini also specifically named African women political leaders that she admired within her list of influential Black women. These women included Kenyan human rights activist and environmental conservationist Wangari Maathai and South African activist Winnie Mandela. Although Kanini explains in detail the influences these women activists had on her life, including the ways she admired their willingness to fight for justice in spite of public punishment and ridicule, I found it most interesting how Kanini connected the life experiences of these very public community mothers and activists to the life experiences of her own grandmother. For example, towards the end of her discussion of Maathai and Mandela, Kanini said the following:

> Kanini Line 1: So I used to admire [Maathai] for that kind of like spirit to fight and just refusing to bow. Actually, the—[picking up copy of Maathia's memoir] *Unbowed*. Like she wouldn't bow to anyone. She'd just be like, "I'm going to do my thing. What I believe is right." And she ended up winning the Nobel Peace Prize…and she was like the first African—actually East African to get a PhD—the first woman. And so these women—oh her. She used to remind me so much of my grandmother.
>
> L2: And then I had like Winnie Mandela who that was like Oh! I read a book—her memoir, too uh writing about—the title of the memoir was like *Part of My Soul*…I think it was like *Part of My Soul Went With Him in Jail* [*Part of My Soul Went With Him*]—Nelson Mandela. But I, her story…She participated in uh fighting for you know end of apartheid in South Africa. And also like her stories are so similar to Wangari Maathai and also my grandmother.

Although she does not know them personally, Kanini identifies Wangari Maathai and Winnie Mandela as influential women in her life, and in some ways, claims these women as a part of her extended women-centered network as community othermothers. In other parts of her interview, she explains how as a girl she would watch Maathai on television protesting and often being publically punished (e.g., jailed and beaten) for her activism. Throughout her interview, Kanini described her grandmother as what some may perceive as a "crazy woman" who did what she wanted in life, refused to conform to societal gender norms, and was constantly being punished for her resistance. Even though her grandmother is not well known by others, Kanini's awareness of similar life experiences of her grandmother, Maathai, and Mandela allows her to draw a connection between these women within her life in different ways—personally and politically. I consider this extension of her Black women's network to include her mother, othermother, and these public figure "another mothers" a potential re-adaptation of Collins' first theme of Black mothering on bloodmothers, othermothers, and Black female centered networks.

Other participants, like Naomi, who did not describe themselves as having an extensive Black women-centered network made up of a range of mothers (biological, othermothers, community othermothers, fictive kin, etc.) found other ways to talk about influential women in their lives. For example, throughout her interview, Naomi referred to the ways Black women characters and images that she saw in popular culture, including social media, film, and television impacted her life. For example, she shares the following story about who motivated her to continue her education:

> Naomi Line 1: I can also remember who influenced me if you talk about pop culture and Black people, again *Different World*—that television show…that character

Jalessa…because she was the tradition—non-traditional student. She was 26 years old going back to school…and that was when I decided I could go back to school at 29.

L2: And so that was something that specifically encouraged me. I had watched it [the show] years ago when I was in high school, but then you know they put the reruns on, you know? I was at a point where I wasn't doing anything. I was like, "[Naomi], you're not happy. School is the only thing you can do. But what you gonna do? Do you want to go back and be an engineer?" So I felt stuck.

L3: And then I'm like, "I'm 29, and you're gonna be—." And I didn't like—I didn't like community college. I didn't like schools that were at home, where you went home every day and went back and forth. I really like, sort of, the campus environment…And I had to decide could I do this…at 29?

L4: And I remember watching *Different World* and seeing Jaleesa at 26, 27. I was like, "It's whatevea. I don't have any kids. I'm not happy here. I might as well go do what I'm doing."

In this excerpt, Naomi explains how the fictional character Jaleesa Vinson (played by actress Dawnn Lewis) from the American sitcom *A Different World* that ran from the late 1980s to early 1990s inspired her to look past her reservations about her age and return to college. In her article, "In Praise of Jaleesa Vinson, the Unsung Hero of *A Different World*," Shamira Ibrahim, like Naomi, found herself one-day passing time by watching re-runs of *A Different World*. Ibrahim, too, gravitated towards Jaleesa's character who Ibrahim describes as an attractive, intelligent, talented "all-around bad-bitch" who was "damn near 30, dealing with the whims of 20 year-olds on a daily basis" (para. 4-5). She continues, "Jaleesa pressed reset on her life after a failed marriage and a miscarriage, and never apologized or provided qualification for who she was or

how she got there" (para. 7). Although Naomi does not specifically note Jaleesa's "all-around bad bitch-ness" in the same way that Ibrahim does, Naomi was clearly inspired by this character to the point where she began to consider her own happiness and potential. Instead of allowing her age to be an issue in her education, she allowed Jaleesa (although a fictional Black woman character) be an example of who she *could* be. Naomi also could, as Ibrahim says, "press reset on her life" and pursue the things in her life that could make her happy once again.

I note this moment within Naomi's interview because as described within Collin's themes mothers, as a part of their socialization of their daughters, would encourage their daughters to work and acquire quality educations. Even though Naomi did speak about her relationship with her grandmother—the crucial carrier who raised her, when it came to naming someone who influenced her to go back to school and pursue her degree it was not a mother or othermother she named as inspiring her, but a fictional Black woman character on television.

Other participants, such as Danea, Willow, Jasmine, and Solange also incorporated discussions about Black women entertainers and public figures like Beyoncé, Janelle Monaé, Oprah, and former First Lady Michelle Obama into their discussions about Black women who influenced them. For example, in her own discussion of influential Black female figures, Danea identified Disney cartoon character Doc McStuffins as a positive representation of Black female identity targeted towards Black girls like her daughter. Danea described this children's show as exposing her daughter to positive images of Black women as doctors and within STEM-related fields, and addressing Black girl issues like learning to love our natural hair. Although as a mother Danea already tries to affirm her daughter and surround her with real life positive role models, Danea also appreciates the fact that her daughter can turn on the television and see an

image of a little Black girl who is smart, who cares for others, who is a 'docta,' and who discusses issues related to her identity as a little Black girl.

Overall, I see participants inclusions of Black women whom they do not share any personal relationship with (political figures, pop icons, entertainers, etc.), as well as Black female fictional characters from sitcoms to cartoons, as interesting additions to their responses about influential Black women in their lives. Given the popularity of participants' specifically naming and discussing the care and love of their biological mothers, othermothers, and community othermothers, and the ways that participants traced connections between these non-related Black women and images of Black female identity to women in their lives and themselves, I do not interpret these two perspectives on "influence" as separate but interrelated. I think this combination of responses furthers Collins' claims that Black women's self-definitions and understandings of themselves often take place within the company of other Black women (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 112). The context (an open-ended response), time period (year 2016), and perhaps the age of participants (early 20s-mid 30s) led them to think of care, love, and influence as much more extensive than Black women within their immediate and extended family.

It would be useful to conduct more research that considers how Black women understand "care" and "love" functioning outside of more traditional Black-women centered networks. For a majority of the women within my study, their mothers were highly influential in their lives and inspired their self-definitions, explanations, and understandings of care and love. But, for some participants, there was a need to name alternative women, spaces, and images that did not necessarily align with Collins' enduring themes of Black motherhood, although they suggest that care, love, and mothering are somehow still involved.

In any case, this chapter suggests that Collins' enduring themes still provide an adequate ideological framework for analyzing Black women's discussions of mothering. At the same time, because Collins' themes primarily focus on mothering as nurturing and childcare, and either caring for one's own children or for the community's children, it did not easily account for other types of care, love, and influence that occurs within women's lives. In other words, for many of my participants' they wanted to include the mothering that existed within their adult lives, too. Instead of care, love, and influence primarily coming from their mothers and othermothers, they found other women in their everyday lives to provide additional support to them as mentors, friends, fictive kin, partners, etc., now that they are adults. Some participants even saw themselves as enacting these "mothering roles" to others as their own demonstrations of care and love. In the future, it would be useful to continue to re-adapt Collins' enduring themes in ways that account for how Black women continue to engage their many mothers, seek mothering beyond their youth, and situate/use mothering as an everyday rhetorical practice and means for theorizing their worlds.

In the next chapter, I discuss another group within Black women's extended network—their sisters. Whether biological or fictive, many Black women see their relationships with other Black women as important when it comes to their self-definitions and self-valuations. By interrogating the various uses and meanings of 'sister,' I consider how sisterhood functions within the everyday lives of participants.

Chapter 5 Sister Sista: Meanings and Functions of Black Female Solidarity

> Quiet as it's kept, being a sister is not just something you are, it's something that you do. Sisters can be biological, chosen, or a combination thereof. Sisters have bonds that transcend labels.
>
> Sisterhood is deliberate love and solidarity in action.
>
> Brittany Cooper, Susana Morris, and Robin Boylorn, *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, 269-270

As discussed in the previous chapter, Black women's relationships with other Black women, whether it is women whom they have deep personal relationships with, or admire from afar, contribute to their understandings of their own identities and affect their daily lives with their demonstrations of love and care. Although Patricia Collins' discussions of Black women-centered networks primarily focused on mothers and motherly figures who serve as caregivers, providers, and nurturers to their children, she also discusses the importance of Black women friendships when considering practices of self-definition and self-valuation. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins says, "In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversation and humor, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist" (113). In the excerpt above, Brittany Cooper, Susana Morris, and Robin Boylorn in *The Crunk Feminist Collection* describe this bond between Black women (as well as other women) in a rhetorical way. Sisterhood is a deliberate kind of love that is more about doing, than just being. Sisters share commonalities, but also embrace and love each other

for their differences, which allows sisters to "transcend labels" (270), protect each other, learn from and grow with each other.

This chapter will focus on participants' use of the term "sister" to name themselves (List #1), describe influential women in their lives (List #2), and was also included as an additional term to generally identify Black female identities (List #3). Similar to Cooper et al.'s discussion above, participants in this study described their sisterly relationships in a variety of ways, identifying and describing their biological and chosen sisters, while also using their language, self-definitions, and self-valuations to articulate a bond that many believe exists between a majority of Black women and is necessary for their survival within oppressive, marginalizing, and silencing spaces. I will begin this chapter by providing a brief overview of Black women's legacy of sisterhood. Next, I present my analysis of participants' various usages of the word sister. I conclude this chapter with a discussion on the power of sisterhood and the need for further theorizing this aspect of Black womanhood.

Rhetorical Functions of Sisterhood: A Black Woman Legacy

In the previous chapter, I used Collins' Afrocentric feminist themes of Black mothering to discuss how Black women participants in this study relied on influential Black women in their lives to care and nurture them throughout their childhood development, and how some women still rely on their mothers and othermothers to assist them in caring for their own children. Although mothering is a key function of Black women-centered networks, sisterhood is also a practice that exists within these spaces. Given that a majority of the participants within this study discussed their practices of sisterhood within the context of education institutions and work environments, I believe it is important to trace some of the history of sisterhood as it pertains to Black women within different social, political, and educational arenas.

For nineteenth century Black church and clubwomen, sisterhood was a means for fighting against oppression, discrimination, and social and political injustices. In her overview of 19th century Black women speaker's political platforms, Shirley Wilson Logan in *We Are Coming: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women* identifies four overlapping issues that shaped the context during which these women were publically speaking: the abolition of slavery, women's rights, anti-lynching campaigns and movements against mob violence, and racial uplift (3). Although Logan identifies the political activism and rhetorical speeches of individual women, including Sarah Redmund, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, Maria W. Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and others, she describes how Black women collectively used their political and public platforms and involvement in black women's organizations like the National League of Colored Women and the National Association of Colored Women to advance Black women and Black women's issues that involved fighting for human dignity and equality for all people.

In their article, "The Harvest is Plentiful but the Laborers are Few: An Interdisciplinary Examination of Career Choice and African American Sororities," Marcia Hernandez and Harriet Arnold discuss how the creation of Black sororities during the Jim Crow era came out of the black women's club movement (661). The authors say, "Black sororities have a history of social activism that extends not only to racial injustice and challenging class inequalities but also encouraging community leaders to recognize the need for women's rights" (661-662). As African American women's attendance in colleges grew, so did Black sororities, which created a safe space within academic institutions for Black women to build camaraderie, network, and continue to be active within their home communities (662). In her own study on African American college women's practices of sisterhood within Black sororities, Felicia Harris says

that Black Greek-letter organizations created "intellectual and social outlets for African American students," (284) as well as a way for Black students to "deal with de facto and de jure racism surrounding their college campuses, student involvement in their own education, and racial uplift and self-empowerment in the African American community support networks" (284). From her study on African American college women's membership in a Black sorority and practices of sisterhood, Harris developed the following definition of African American sisterhood:

> […] African American sisterhood is understood to mean a supportive feeling of loyalty and attachment to other women. African American women have bonded throughout the years for self-improvement, spiritual growth, idea sharing, uplifting the race, relationship bonding, and educational services. African American sisterhood provided the women in this study with opportunities to enhance their general education experience and to share their experiences, knowledge, love, and caring in order to enhance all aspects of their college life. More important, sisterhood provided them with many opportunities to *serve* their community. (Harris 287)

Practices of sisterhood within Greek-letter organizations and similar Black women-centered organizations are just as much about the community as it is about the individual women involved within those sisterly bonds. These spaces act as "safe spaces," or what bell hooks in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* refers to as "homeplace," a site created by Black people but especially Black women to resist racist and sexist oppression, while also serving as a site for restoring, affirming, and uplifting ourselves in the company of each other. According to hooks,

throughout history "African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut or the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension" (384). She argues that these spaces of resistance can and should be remembered and called upon as a means for liberating Black people. In her own study of contemporary Black women's friendship groups, Marnel Niles Goins uses the concept of homeplace to describe the functions of Black women friendships, which Goins describes as spaces for Black women "to relax, tell stories, gain strength, empower themselves, and maintain harmony in their lives" (531). Goins study suggests that within friendship spaces Black women have the freedom to be themselves while conceptualizing the dynamics of their friendship (531).

With this in mind, I think it is important to note that there are different dynamics within any friendship. Many scholars who discuss the role of sisterhood identify the myths about women relationships, which are rooted in patriarchal ideologies. For example, in her chapter on political solidarity between women, hooks in *Feminist Theory from the Margins to the Center*, says the following about the myth of sisterhood:

> Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men. We are taught that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience. We are taught that women are "natural" enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well. We must unlearn them if we are to build a sustained feminist movement. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood. (hooks 43)

Although hooks is discussing sisterhood in relation to feminist movements and the need for honorable solidarity amongst all women, her statements hold true for more specific interrogations of sisterhood amongst individual cultural groups of women, too. Black women's practices of sisterhood are rooted in a history of Black women's communal labor, shared childcare, community activism, and creating safe spaces for personal and collective survival and uplift, but that does not mean that Black women's practices of sisterhood are immune from the impacts of the same dominant ideologies that hooks calls out above. Some women—including Black women (and women in general)—do not want to, need to, and simply just do not know how to, be sisters. As noted in both Roxane Gay's thirteen points in "How to Be Friends with Another Woman" in *Bad Feminist* and Brittany Cooper's essay in *The Crunk Feminist Collection* titled "Is It Ever Okay to Tell a Sister to Go Kick Rocks? Black Women and Friendship," mythical beliefs about women's friendships affect the daily interactions women have with each other. One way to continue to challenge this myth about women's friendships is to recognize the meanings and functions of friendships within the everyday lives of women.

In the section that follows, I discuss Black women participants' use of the term sister within their focus group, questionnaire, and interview responses. The variations of sister that they used, including 'sister,' 'sis,' 'sista,' and 'Sissy,' point to a range of friendship relationships amongst these women, and how each bond is unique and significant.

Data Analysis: Interpreting Meanings of Sisterhood

Although there were no common words and patterns across List #3 responses, the word 'sister' was a popular term used across all data collected from participant responses in the pilot study focus group, pre-interview questionnaires, and interviews. In Chapter 2, I explain in detail

how my interpretation of the data in this chapter differs from previous findings chapters. In this section, I present some of participants' various self-definitions and self-valuation of sister. The ways in which participants used the word sister ranged from how they specifically named their biological siblings, as well as their close female friends and fictive kin, to a more general naming of Black women collectively.

Individual and Collaborative Definitions: Layla, Willow, Moné, and Ronisha (Interviewer) on Sisterhood

Layla: One thing I was thinking about was like the words will have like different [meanings]. So, I put like 'sis,' and like 'sister' and 'sista'—

Group: Mmhmm […]

Interviewer: That's fine.

Layla: but I wasn't sure if they all like belong on the same—[overlapping]

Interviewer: I think they all—

Layla: Do they all mean the same thing?

Interviewer: What do you think?

Group: Uh-uh.

Layla & Ronisha: Not really.

Layla: Yeah.

Moné: 'Sister' and 'sista'…is not the same to me.

Layla: Yeah. Yeah. So we'll put them separate […]

Three women—Layla, Willow, and Moné —participated in my pilot study focus groups and also continued to be a part of this current research project (see Chapter 2 for more details about pilot study). Since the pilot study used focus groups instead of questionnaires and interviews, it encouraged more opportunities for communal deliberation and collaborative construction of self-definitions and self-valuations of Black female identity. As demonstrated in the excerpt above, as a group, we agreed that the word 'sister' was important in naming Black female identities. During our focus group, multiple participants introduced variations of the word "sister" into our conversation and we each added our terms and meanings to our collaborative dictionary word board.

During their pre-interview questionnaires and interviews, all three women who participated in this focus group also identified "sister" as an important term for naming, defining, and describing Black womanhood. In the sections that follow, I use excerpts from our focus group discussion and Layla, Willow, and Moné's pre-interview questionnaires and interviews to interpret their individual and our collective self-definitions and self-valuations of sister. To organize this analysis, I consider participants' identification and descriptions of three different, yet equally important, kinds of sisterhoods represented within their lives: 'sister,' 'sis/sissy,' and 'sista.'

Sister/Sissy: Willow's Perspectives

Within the focus group, although we all used the word 'sister' in some variation to identify or describe Black women (generally and/or specifically), we all recognized how we defined and used these words differently depending on context. Willow in particular was very vocal about the differences between the terms 'sister,' 'sissy,' and 'sista.' In the excerpt from our

focus group, she was instrumental in helping our group define and differentiate between each term collectively, but Willow also incorporated her own unique perspectives on 'sister.' For example, she shared with our group her personal meaning and use of the word 'Sissy' to refer to her biological sister:

Line 1 Willow: Just like the sis, sister, sista.

All: Mmhmm.

Line 2 Willow: Right. Like I agree with Moné. They not the same, but then again they can be.

Line 3 Layla: Yeah they *can* be. That's how I feel about 'babe,' 'baby,' 'bae' […]

Line 4 Willow: But 'sis'—and because my sister hates her name and therefore has always been known as 'Sissy.'

All: Mmhmm.

Line 5 Willow: So for me to be like 'Sis' or 'Sissy'—I mean like for me "Sis" is just like me shortening "Sissy."

Interviewer: Ok.

Line 6 Willow: Even though I hate 'sis.'

Layla: I feel like 'sis' is what I say when I'm trying to be like bitchy. Like, "Come on sis."

Willow: [Laughter]

Moné: So like content changes it too.

All: Right. Right […]

Line 7 Willow: But I will never use 'sissy' for like calling someone a sissy.

All: Right. Mmhmm.

Willow: Like I would never—[overlapping]

Interviewer: See that's what I'm trying to get at—

Line 8 Willow: The reason I never done that is because my sister for me, well my sister her nickname has always been Sissy so I would never like degrade someone else by being like, because I happen to have a profound respect and adoration for my sister, so I'm not going to—I'm not going to use that name that I call her to degrade someone else and be like "You're a sissy."

All: Mmhhmm […]

In Lines 1-3, as a group, we agreed with Willow that there was a difference between the three terms we identified for sisterhood: 'sis,' 'sister,' and 'sista.' To identify these differences, Willow shared her own personal experiences with using the word "Sissy." In Line 5, Willow explains that she has a sister who she has nicknamed "Sissy." The reasoning for the use of Sissy in place of her sister's given name is because her sister does not like her actual name. Although 'sissy' is a common name of affection used amongst female siblings, Willow provides her own experience of using this term as more than a casual affectionate term but also a proper noun—an actual replacement for her sister's name.

In Lines 7-8, Willow explains that because she associates S/sissy with her sister she has rules about how she will use this term to refer to other people. Willow is aware of derogatory connotations associated with the word 'sissy'; for example, how 'sissy' can be used as a way to name and demean males that are behaving in ways that are deemed by societal norms as unmanly or effeminate, as well as how 'sissy' can be used in a critical and degrading manner to refer to a

man who identifies himself as, or is perceived to be, gay. In her own life, Willow refuses to use sissy in these ways because she has "profound respect and adoration for [her] sister" and would not want to degrade another person, or her sister's name, by using "Sissy/sissy" in a way that is hateful and hurtful to others. In her interview, Willow further explains her relationship with Sissy, while extending her definition of 'sister' to a more general connection she feels with other Black women:

Line 1 Interviewer: Alright, so I think we're on 'sister' now.

Willow: Yeah. Well, clearly right?

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Line 2 Willow: We can go large…with Black language—"You my brotha my sista." Naw, I mean I have a sister [Laughter]—who who's twelve years older than me. Um, she's also a lesbian. We also grew up in the same home…and so, and the thing—what's interesting is sister isn't as close as you would think it would be in that sense. I'm *very* close to my sister I've just never talked to her about shit. And when I mean shit I mean personal shit. She's twelve years older than me. When you get that kind of space and time you tend to think adults. You tend to think I can't talk to you like, cause you're going to give me advice because you *know* things.

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Willow: And I have respect for the fact that you know things and that's why I hate you cause I'm a child right, and you know things…that I don't know.

Line 3 Willow: But in terms of what sisters do—in terms of a bond you know of ally-ship. And I think of, I saw this really awesome [Laughter] meme that basically said it all. I wish I could find the damn meme but it's a meme of like Celie, right?

Interviewer: Mmhmm.

Willow: And it's Celie when she holding hands with her sister, and its Celie when she patting hands [handclapping noises], and then when they, when they touchin the face and then when they hug and it says, "That moment when, you know, you work with five-hundred white people and you just saw the one black person they hired." [Laughter] Right?

Interviewer: [making hand-clapping noises]

Willow: Right! Yeah. Exactly! [Laughter] It's like *that* kind of sister-ship--

Interviewer: [Laughter]

Line 4 Willow: It's like "Oh my God!" […] It's that kind of thing. It's the kinsman-ship is what I mean when I say sister. Not necessarily other things, but there's this certain kinsman-ship when just other Black women are around.

Figure 5 Image of Meme Created by @BlackGuyTweetin

In discussing her use of the word "sister" within her List #2 pre-interview questionnaire responses, Willow explains that there are different ways to interpret the meaning of sister. In Line 2, she briefly explains that sister could be interpreted via the use of Black language and Black communities and spaces (e.g., church) where Black people refer to each other as "brothas and sistas." Although she acknowledges this use of "sista" in a more casual and inclusive way, her use of "sister" is specifically referring to her literal biological sister Sissy. In the remaining portion of Line 2, Willow explains her relationship with her sister whom she grew-up in the same home with, but because of their age differences Willow was unable to build a close and personal relationship with her sister at a young age. In the same way that Willow spoke of respecting her sister during the focus group, in her interview she still expresses her respect for her older sister, but here she explains that her respect came out of her seeing her sister as an adult figure, and therefore, someone she should respect for being an elder and having more knowledge and experience than she does.

In Lines 3-4, Willow transitions into a definition of what "sisters" actually do. Similar to Cooper et al. in *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, Willow sees being a "sister as doing" (270). For her, sisterhood is a bond where Black women see each other as allies either because of their biological connection (as with her and Sissy), or between Black women who may not even know each other. To explain this latter understanding of what sisters do, Willow refers to a meme she saw with images from the film adaptation of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. This meme incorporated iconic images of the film that depict the close bond, love, and "sister-ship" of the main character Celie played by actress Whoopi Goldberg and her sister Nettie played by actress Akosua Busia. As explained by Willow, the meme is used to illustrate a deep bond, connection, "kinsman-ship" that many Black women feel with each other, especially within predominately

white and marginalizing spaces. In my interpretation I understand this bond Willow speaks about as a sense of feeling at home, or at least not alone, within a space where she is clearly an outsider or different from everyone else. In my own life, this may be a brief feeling of belonging, but also feeling energized and empowered by being in the presence of another Black woman (whether I know her or not).

Sister/Sis: Moné, Layla, and Ronisha's Perspectives

Although Willow included her unique perspective of "sister" and "sis/Sissy" within the focus group, other participants within that space also shared their perspectives on these terms, including Moné, Layla, and myself (as researcher-participant). Moné, Layla, and I shared similar experiences and views about sisterhood meant to us. In our collaborative discussion about "sister" within the focus group, Moné, Layla and I dialogued with each other to form the following definitions of 'sister' and 'sis':

Line 1 Layla: So how is [a] Black woman talking about Black women 'sis'?

Interviewer: It's short for family.

Layla: It's just short for sister.

Interviewer: So I think just put the—[overlapping]

Line 2 Moné: No, but its family. Cause 'sister' is just your sister, but when you put just 'sis' it becomes more personal, more—[overlapping]

Interviewer: Yeah—

Moné: like a personal feeling to it—[overlapping]

Interviewer: And I use 'sis' when I'm like—[overlapping]

Layla: Yeah.

Line 3 Interviewer: cause I don't have any sisters but if we are close—

Moné: Yeah.

Interviewer: I'll say that's my sis—

Moné: We're family.

Interviewer: Yeah […]

Line 4 Interviewer: But "sis" I think "sister"—

Moné: Like a bond—

Interviewer: it's a bond—

Moné: an intimate bond.

Interviewer: It's like kinship, but even like fictive kinship like where we don't have to be blood—

Moné: its created. Yeah something that—

Interviewer: but we close. We're *really* close, like blood couldn't make us closer.

Line 5 Moné: and like when I use sissy is like when I'm trying to get my sister, like on her good side. Like "Sissy!" I be like "Sissy! We're *Sister Sister*!" [Laughter] And she be like, "Shut up!" […]

In the process of coming to a consensus about our use of the word "sis," Layla and I were initially willing to simply define "sis" as a shortened version of sister that referred to one's family member, but in Line 2 Moné interrupts this logic and inserts her own perspectives about sister. To Moné, sister may be used to refer to one's sibling, but for her, when sister is abbreviated to "sis", it gains a different meaning. It acquires a more personal distinction. In Line

3, as the interviewer but also a participant within this research, I build on Moné's comments by incorporating my own personal experiences with the words 'sister' and 'sis.' Since I do not have any female siblings, I have never used the word 'sister' to refer to a family member, but to refer to women in my life whom I share—like Moné says—deep and personal bonds with. Both Moné and I agree that a "sis" bond is a friendship that moves into the realm of family, or fictive kinship. Together, we form a definition of "sis" that refers to an intimate bond between women who may not be biologically related, but because their bond was created *by* them, instead of created *for* them, it makes them closer than some sibling relationships.

Moné ends this excerpt from the focus group by providing her own use of the word "sissy," which, similar to Willow, she uses to refer to her biological sister in a playful manner often in attempt to "get on her good side" (Line 5). In her interview, Moné further explained the distinctions she makes between her use of "sister" in relation to her biological sister and sister-friends. Using the word 'sister' to refer to influential women in her life (List #2), Moné explained her personal meaning of the term in the following way:

Line 1 Interviewer: Do you mean sister in the biological sense like "you're someone's sister"? Or do you mean sister on a different level? What do you mean by that?

Moné: Not the biological sense. Sister as in like this bond…beyond friendship…beyond acquaintance. Like you build this trust. Somebody you can talk to. Somebody, you know, that's there for you. Like you Roni. You're a sister.

Interviewer: Oh. I'm a sister?

Moné: Yes!

Interviewer: Oh God we're sisters. Yeah I think so. [Laughter]

Line 2 Moné: [Laughter] Because even with the biological sister, you don't—well speaking for me—you know it may not be true for everybody, but like, you have a family bond. Like your family is there—they're there but sometimes when you meet somebody and you're able to connect through stories, through different things, you build this bond that you can't have with the family.

Line 3 Moné: So, even though me and my sister, we're a year a part, you know, we hung out, you know, sometimes together, but it was just like you know—personally, I didn't really tell her my life until now. So, in my teenage years we—we bonded, we hung out, we had inside jokes, you know, the sibling bonding, but kind of like, me personally like, just personal things—like even when it came to guys, when it came to like making decisions, I didn't really talk to her.

Line 4 Moné: And then over time, so for some reason now that bond is there where I can like talk to her about anything, but I was able to find that bond with other Black women you know more so my age where we used to hang out, we can talk about things. Kind of just like with you Roni, like there's things that we can talk about and we'll understand each other because—because right now the space does that too. Like right now we're in this academic space, we're going through the same things, trying to graduate, trying to get through, get a job but we can relate and talk about this and kind of these issues that we facing here and this brings a bond.

Line 5 Moné: So, kind of like sister support when we're here for each other, and like this idea that we don't always have to talk about school. I can just hit you up and be like, "Girl let me tell you..." and I can just be myself. I don't have to perform. So, a sister is somebody that like I can be around and not perform.

Since there was a difference between Moné's use of "sis" in the focus group and "sister" in her pre-interview questionnaire and interview responses, I thought it was important to clarify whether her use of the word "sister" spoke specifically to her sibling, or if she was using "sister" to refer to other relationships. She clarified for me that her use of "sister" was to acknowledge her personal relationships with women in her life whom she shares a bond with, and these relationships exceed typical friendships. As an example, Moné points to her relationship with me as an example of this type of "sister" friendship. Similar to Moné and her relationship with her biological sister, in Lines 2-3, Moné explains how it took time for her to develop a personal relationship with her younger sister, in spite of them being only one year apart in age. She says that prior to building a more close connection with her sister, she formed sister-like relationships with other Black women, which formed out of shared experiences and a desire to support one another. Ultimately, for Moné, a major part of forming a sisterhood is creating a space where sisters can feel open and comfortable with each other, a space where sisters can be themselves, discuss a range of topics, and not have to perform in the same ways that they may have to do in other spaces.

In addition, Layla's pre-interview questionnaire and interview responses where she uses the words "sis" and "sister" also speaks specifically to Black female friendships and camaraderie. Instead of focusing on describing a mutual bond, Layla used her interview to give examples of how this term is used within the context of her Black female groups:

> Line 1 Layla: [Laughter] Yeah. I don't really know where sis came from…but my friends and me just started calling each other 'sis' at some point. Uh, but it's usually like being like cheeky. I don't know it's like being like, [changes tone of voice] "Okay sis," you

know? When someone's like—you don't just say, "Hey sis" but it's like [changes tone of voice] *sis*. It has a certain like emotion behind it that I don't even really know.

Line 2 Layla: I guess it's just like when we're playing around or something. Um, but yeah. So me and my friends call—only like other Black women that […]

Line 3 Interviewer: Does it have any connection to sister?

Layla: Oh yeah! Yeah definitely. I think it's like um, a shortened version of sister. And so I guess that is—yeah of course why it's only a Black women thing. Mmhmm…or women of color thing. I guess.

Interviewer: So it has nothing to do with like, biology or kinship—like with like actual biological like you're *actually* my sister?

Layla: Oh no! [Laughter] I don't have any sisters.

Layla describes her use of "sis" as a naming practice that she engages in with her friends, but she is uncertain about when and why it started occurring. In her explanation in Line 1, Layla provides examples of how her and her friends use "sis" in a cheeky and playful way to tease, and in some ways critique each other as in "Come on sis" (used by Layla in previous focus group excerpt). In my own experiences with using 'sis' in this way, including within my friendship with Layla, 'sis' is a way to gently and playfully highlight, critique, disagree, or even challenge, what a friend has said or done without judging them or shutting them down. A "come on now sis" or "really sis" allows for a friend to offer a counter-viewpoint in a caring and often humorous manner, also known as speaking "out of love."

Sista-hoods: Moné and Danea's Perspectives

The final version of sister that was identified by participants within the focus group, as well as pre-interview questionnaires and interviews was 'sista.' The definitions for 'sista' ranged from a general all-inclusive way for naming Black women and other women of color to individual participants referencing specific sista-hood groups they are members of, including Black sororities. The following excerpt comes from the focus group, and represents one collective definition of 'sista':

Line 1 Moné: Sista is like that Black power, you know, like that struggle. Like that's my *sista*—that activist.

Line 2 Willow: That's like all the Black women.

Moné: Yeah…

Willow: That's like all the black women who bout the struggle—[overlapping]

Moné: bout the struggle […]

Interviewer: Okay. So, our original definition of 'sista' is what?

Willow: Sista wit' 'a' or sista—[overlapping]

Layla: Woman in the struggle

Moné: Yeah. Women 'bout the struggle.

Willow: Just like that. Not women that are about the struggle. No.

Interviewer: Women '*bout* the struggle.

ALL: [Laughter]

Early in the focus group, Willow presented this short definition of 'sista' to the group, and Moné immediately agreed with her that sista refers to *all* Black women, but in particular women "who 'bout the struggle," (Line 2). Although this phrase was repeated throughout our discussion of Black women's various sisterhoods, we never entered into a deeper conversation about Black women's shared (or different) struggles. What I interpret from the repetition and consensus of the phrase "women 'bout the struggle" as the definition of 'sista' is that participants believed that most Black women have struggles, barriers, and obstacles that they must encounter daily, and that the struggles they face have to deal with their intersecting racial, gender, and other identities. Sexual politics, systemic oppression, discrimination, racism, sexism, and a history of misrepresentation require many Black women to use whatever resources available to them to resist these obstacles and attempts to mark them as inferior, silence their perspectives, and erase their bodies. These lived experiences are a part of Black women's (and other marginalized groups') "struggle." I assume that participants within this focus group see Black women who willing join in this resistance against oppression individually and collectively are included within the identification of "sistas 'bout the struggle."

Within the focus group, one participant— Moné—was adamant about including an additional sista-hood that she is a member of, that is, her Black sorority. Instead of specifically naming her sorority, she offered two terms that would be recognized by a majority of Black woman who are a part of, or familiar with, Black Greek sororities: LS and sandz. In the following, excerpt Moné presents her definitions to the focus group:

Line 1 Moné: I want [to add] "LS"

Layla: Oh.

Moné: That's your line sister. Another struggle we go through.

Layla: Mmhmm.

Interviewer: L—S…What's that?

Line 2 Moné: Line sister.

Interviewer: L—S?

Moné: Yea. So we don't say like "line sister" we just be like my "LS"

Layla: Mmhhmm.

Moné: But that's what it means but that's a different sisterhood you build

Line 3 Interviewer: So put that with sista?

Moné: Yea. But you can put it…little bracket lines around sister so people can know what that stands for. Cause that's another sisterhood, or bond cause like…you gone through that struggle together.

Interviewer: Is it sista or sister?

Moné: Sista cause it's a black sorority so…It's a black sorority so we, you know, that's a struggle we go through together […]

Line 4 Moné: And then there is sandz. So sandz…so line sister—[overlapping]

Interviewer: Give me line sister first.

Moné: Is your sorority sister. You guys are in the same chapter. Y'all was in that struggle togetha to be in that sorority.

Layla: This is a sorority thing.

Moné: Yeah and like sandz is like other—so like another sista y'all crossed the same year but y'all wasn't on the same line. Like "My sandz."

Interviewer: S—A—N—D—S

Moné: With a Z, or I say Z.

Layla: I think they usually put Z…

Line 5 Moné: So sandz would be another sorority sister that we both crossed the same—we both crossed the same year but we weren't in the same chapter. So we kinda like, we on the yard and we doin' that stuff you know like they come to our school we go to their school we work together but LS we're direct.

Moné's definitions of 'LS' and 'sandz' represent a variation of our group definition of 'sista.'They also allow her to claim her Black sorority sista-hoods and the language she uses to refer to her sistas within that particular space. Moné associates both terms—'LS' and 'sandz'—with a unique struggle only experienced by Black women who have gone through the process of joining a Black sorority. Not only are these women bonded via their membership and involvement within their organization, but they are also linked to other Black women within the organization based off the time they become a member and the specific chapter that they are members of. As someone who is not a member of a sorority, I found it interesting how Moné expanded on our group definition of sista to identify and name other specific sista-hoods that are relevant to her (and many other Black women's) life.

Although neither Moné nor any other participant who was a part of this focus group discussed Black sororities within their pre-interview questionnaire or interview, Danea (a participant within my current study), did discuss sista in relation to her membership within a Black sorority and her relationships with other Black women within academic settings. The following excerpt represents Danea's explanation of her use of the terms "sista," "schola," and "sawrah" for describing herself as a Black woman:

Line 1 Danea: Okay. Um, well sista, um you know? As a Black woman you have sisters that are not blood sisters…and especially in academia like a lot of my colleagues—my Black women colleagues in academia like we "sista scholas."

Interviewer: Right.

Line 2 Danea: So, using Black language to reaffirm that aspect of us…but we're also in the academy in different ways. And then like—so then you have—so I have my sista scholas in the academy and then I have my sista scholas sawrahs in the academy [Laughter]—[overlapping]

Interviewer: Okay.

Danea: So, um when we're being a little bit more uh [pause] ratchet, rather than saying you know "soror" it's [changed tone] it's "Sawrah! Hi sawrah!"

Similar to other participants in this study, Danea described primarily the sista-hood relationships that she has established within the academy. In Line 1, she explains that these relationships occur amongst Black women who are not blood-related, and for her it is her Black women colleagues who she refers to as her "sista scholas." Danea notes that she, and her Black women colleagues, intentionally used Black language in their pronunciation, style, and spelling of these terms to "reaffirm" their Blackness. This practice of claiming and using their Black women's language is another means for establishing a "homeplace" within academic settings, especially predominately white institutions. Black women forming friendships and referring to each other as both "sistas" and "scholas" allows Black women within Danea's friendship group to claim their own space within academic settings, remind each other that they do belong in these spaces, and that they are not alone.

In other parts of her interview, Danea says that she is a member of a Black Greek sorority, which explains her use of the word "sawrah." In Line 2, she explains that her sista scholas are present within the academy in different ways, which seems to mean that she has several groups of sista scholas that she associates herself with, including her colleagues and her sawrahs. Similar to her use of "sista schola," Danea uses Black language in her pronunciation and spelling of "soror" and provides a context for when she uses "sawrah," which is when she and her friends are having fun with each other. In the previous chapter on Black mothering, Danea explains how her sistas have greatly affected her life outside the academy, including providing both her and her daughter daily care, love, and support. For her, the Black women within her life are more than friends. Instead, they are her sistas and invaluable contributors to her everyday life—her Black woman network of care.

Sisterhood As Rhetorical Practice: Following Our Legacy

Participants within this study valued their friendships and close bonds with other Black women. During the time of both my pilot study and this current project, all participants included within this chapter were graduate students within a predominately-white institution. Although many of these women were studying within programs with faculty and students from diverse backgrounds, it was still important for them to have Black women relationships within these spaces as support systems, allies, sounding boards, and mentors. Black women often use these relationships as a means of survival, and these spaces are often about doing and getting work done. For example, this study is an example of how sistas "do" for each other, support each other, and offer their resources, stories, experiences, and voices in order to advance the works of their fellow sistas.

As noted by Moné, these relationships between Black women are not given, but created, and each individual relationship often functions in its own way for its own purposes. Historically, Black women have found ways to use their sisterhoods as a means to share labor, including childcare, use their political solidarity to fight for human and civil rights, and advocate for and serve their home communities. Given the ways in which Black women have been excluded from our rhetorical histories, we often can only rescue, recover, and re-inscribe the stories of individual Black women who are often extraordinary and extremely vocal within public spaces. Within feminist rhetorical scholarship, scholars like Jacqueline Royster, Shirley Wilson Logan, Deborah Atwater, and Johnnie Stover, and others have focused on the lives, works, rhetorical and political contributions of individual Black women activists and writers like Ida B. Wells, Mary Bethune, Maria W. Stewart, and others, but I think it is important to consider these women both individually and collectively. If I could use what Jacqueline Royster and Gesa Kirsch in *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* call critical imagination and strategic contemplation, I'd like to consider these extraordinary Black women *and* their sisters. I wonder: With whom did these women talk to? With whom did they write to? Who read their essays? Who listened to their speeches? With whom did they joke with, and vent to? Who were their sisters? It may be impossible to recover specific names of individuals, but I would like to think of these very important Black women within our Black women history as not isolated or alone but in the presence of sisters.

When considering the lives of Black women who are not public figures, it would be useful to seriously interrogate and explicitly claim our sisterhood relationships and word choices for naming these relationships. Given that for many Black women and other women of color, sisterhood is a daily practice for coping and survival within potentially oppressive and silencing

spaces, Black women cannot allow others to misinterpret our meanings and practices of sisterhood. For example, within my own experiences within academic spaces, I have had my sista-hood relationships within the academy labeled as 'separatist' and have been told that when I chose to work with other Black women (that is, the other 2 Black women in a classroom of 20+ people) that I was "segregating myself from the larger group." In other words, my attempts to work within an environment of comfort with other women who share similar viewpoints and experience as my own, that is, to claim briefly a similar luxury that White males enjoy within academia everyday without critique, is often seen as problematic. For women of color, we cannot afford to allow our practices of solidarity to be misinterpreted and used against us in these ways. Our very presence, particularly within predominately-White spaces, is already a threat, and myths about women relationships and labeling of our solidarity as segregation attempt to dismantle our sisterhoods. Through interrogating our word choices, and taking our deviations in language usages, experiences, and definitions seriously, we can continue to empower ourselves and resist attempts to fracture our biological, created, and powerful bonds.

Chapter 6: Reflections on Black Women's Word Power

In the preceding chapters, I used Patricia Collins' concepts of self-definition and self-valuation as a framework for developing a qualitative research project on Black female literacies. In particular, I consider how Black women's word choice for naming, identifying, describing, and defining their identities can provide insight into Black women's everyday practices of theorizing their identities, while also considering diverse individual and collective Black women perspectives on Black womanhood. Through a focus group, pre-interview questionnaires, and interview responses, twelve self-identified Black women from a range of life experiences share their realities/truths. Using grounded theory approaches, I attempted to analyze the data in ways that allowed for common themes and patterns to arise out of and across participant responses. This method allowed me as the researcher to prioritize Black women's word power and viewpoint as they claimed the characteristics that they valued most about their identities, including their 'strength,' 'love and care,' and 'sista-hoods.'

Throughout my analysis, I trace similarities as well as differences in individual Black women's naming and defining practices, while also analyzing what their collective responses may say about these three areas of Black womanhood. I also locate specific practices that Black women are engaging in while employing self-definition and self-valuation, such as storytelling, drawing on lived experience, laughter, reflection, etc.. Ultimately, this research is about prioritizing the language and everyday practices that continue to be under-theorized within rhetorical scholarship, but are clearly significant areas within Black women's everyday lives and rhetorical traditions. Black women's notions of strength, mothering (demonstrations of care and

love), and sisterhood function as places and practices of survival, affirmation, growth and development for many Black women and those whom they care for and protect daily.

In her essay, "Goals for Emancipatory Communication Research on Black Women," Brenda Allen says that the primary goal of Black female-centered communication research is "to liberate Black women from imposed meanings that members of society have set on us and our ways of communicating, and free us from the chains of negative labels such as marginalized and stigmatized" (22-23). In my own research, I situate self-definition and self-valuation as possible means for engaging in the types of Black woman liberation and empowerment that Allen identifies. Within a raced, gendered, classed, and overall 'other-ing' society and culture, people from subordinated groups *must* develop alternative strategies for making and communicating meaning, which I believe includes methods for naming and defining themselves. I believe each Black woman performs this task in their own way based off their unique positionality, their audience, and the context in which they are working/making/living within. I consider this ability to adjust and act within a range of rhetorical situations a Black woman Art that too often goes unnoticed, and when it is acknowledged, it is typically misunderstood.

In this final chapter, I begin with a discussion of the next steps of data collection and the limitations of the current design of this research project. Then I reflect on my own experiences conducting this research, and my intentions for continuing this project in the future.

Verification of Findings and Future Research Design Strategies

Given my research questions and focus for this project, I believe my overall research design was effective in creating opportunities for multiple Black women's literacies and naming practices to be collected without a significant amount of interference from outsiders. Incorporating multiple methods for collecting data, including pre-interview questionnaires and

interviews, created space (time), and multiple opportunities for participants to reflect, share, and theorize their word choices. Although these aspects of the research design were beneficial, outside of my own analysis where I located connections between participants' practices, there were no instances where participants could dialogue with each other and speak back to each other's self-definitions and self-valuations. One important aspect of my pilot study that I hope to reclaim in future studies is the opportunity for participants to engage in communal deliberation about their word choices and definitions.

Specifically, I would be interested in adding focus groups of 4-5 participants per group as a final form of data collection that would be conducted after follow-up interviews. These focus groups could be a space for me, as a researcher, to present the themes and patterns I noticed within pre-interview questionnaires and interviews back to participants for their collaborative feedback, verification of my findings, and additional commentary of the meanings of these concepts and terms. It can also be a space for sharing personal experiences with terms, locating deviations and differences in our self-definitions and self-valuations, and physically engaging in and embodying these practices that we have claimed as important to our identities—strength, love and care, and sisterhood.

Within this current project design, no such space exists, although it is necessary for me to conduct a second round of individual follow-up interviews with participants so that I may personally share my findings with them, verify my interpretations of data, and receive additional feedback on this study. This moment of talk-back and verification of data with participants offers an opportunity to prioritize further the voices and viewpoints of the Black women within this study.

New Understandings of Self-Definition and Self-Valuation: A Reflection

> By persisting in the journey towards self-definition, as individuals, we are changed. When linked to group action, our individual struggles gain new meaning. Because our actions as individuals change the world from one in which we merely exist to one over which we have some control, they enable us to see everyday life as being in process and therefore amendable to change. Perhaps that is why so many African-American women have managed to persist and "make a way out of no way." Perhaps they knew the power of self-definition.
>
> (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 132).

From my perspective the practices of self-definition and self-valuation is about reclaiming Black women's word power starting with our power to name, identify, describe, and define our own individual and collective identities of Black womanhood. It is a demand for respect for our lived experiences and language—our mother tongue—and an explicit act of reclamation of Black women terms and practices in all of their variations, meanings, and forms. As discussed by Collins' above, this project is a "journey toward self-definition" and, for me, it is not yet (and probably never will be) fully complete. This research began with the voices of four Black women and expanded to twelve, and it is my intention to continue to expand this project to include more self-identified Black women from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, nationalities, religions, abilities, socio-economic statuses, sexualities, etc. to gain an even more complex view of Black womanhood. Most importantly for my work, I'd like this view to be constructed by Black women who are not public figures, popular culture icons, famous artists

and writers, but everyday Black women who must affirm themselves, persist, and "make a way out of no way" for themselves and others each and every day.

Thanks to the works of scholars like Geneva Smitherman, and many others, we have a significant body of research on African American/Black language that continues to grow and feed our understanding of Black language. For example in 2015, Sonja Lanehart edited *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language* which combined a broad range of scholarship from history to contemporary settings all focusing on Black language within various Black communities and spaces. The extensive works of Smitherman, along with my privilege to take a course in African American Language with Dr. G, greatly inspired my interest in studying Black women's language in word choice. In particular, her book *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* allowed me to see the importance of individual words and how they function within particular contexts within the lives of Black people. Although there is a considerable amount of AAL scholarship, as noted by scholars like Denise Troutman, Marcyliena Morgan, Marsha Houston, and other African American Women's Language (AAWL) researchers, the perspectives and language practices of Black women are often subsumed by Black men's and White women's use of language. Scholarship like Denise Troutman's "African American Women: Talking that Talk," Sonja Lanehart's *African American Women's Language: Discourse, Education, and Identity* and Marsha Houston and Olga Davis' *Centering Ourselves: African American Feminist and Womanist Studies of Discourse* that focus explicitly on Black women's discourses and communicative practices are too few and far between, and we need more research that theorizes Black women's literacies and language. I consider my own research as adding to scholarship in this area, while using a rhetorical lens for interrogating how Black women's language functions within particular spaces/contexts, situating

our languages (specifically the use of self-definition and self-valuation) as Black woman literacies, and considering the histories associated with these practices.

An important element of my current research and future scholarship is its applicability within both academic and non-academic spaces. When I look at and listen to the world around me, I see and hear Black women and girls who are demanding to be seen and heard. I see and hear Black females who—like those before them—using whatever means available to them to make themselves and their concerns visible. In particular, social media and television have continued to be viable media for launching movements that encourage Black female literacy practices of self-definition and self-valuation along with political action.

For example, in March 2017, during a segment of *Fox and Friends* political commentator Bill O'Reilly made the statement that he was unable to listen to a clip of Congresswoman Maxine Waters speaking from the House floor about voting and patriotism because he was distracted by Waters' "James Brown wig." Instead of Waters' supporters primarily focusing on O'Reilly's blatant attempt to publically humiliate Congresswoman Waters, Black women and others launched into a trending conversation on Twitter under the hashtag #BlackWomenAtWork that centered on Black women's experiences of discrimination, micro-aggressions, and criticism within the workplace. In an interview with NPR's April Shapiro about the hashtag, the organizer of this conversation, Brittany Packnett, said, "It was important that people recognize that what happened to April Ryan and Congresswoman Waters [on Tuesday] is not a rarity…The kind of slights, both big and small, that black women experience at work are happening every single day."

One Black woman participating within this discussion was Congresswoman Waters herself who tweeted: "I am a strong Black woman. I cannot be intimidated, and I'm not going

anywhere. #BlackWomenAtWork." Those participating within the conversation re-tweeted her words and attached affirming videos and images of Waters, including a drawing of the Congresswoman dressed as a superhero with blue uniform, gold belt, red cape, and an "M" embroidered on her chest. Congresswoman Waters' assertion of her identity as a "strong Black woman," particularly in this moment where she was being publically ridiculed and under a watchful eye of diverse audiences, along with the communal support and deliberation that occurred amongst Black women on social media, are examples of how Black women employ everyday practices of self-definition and self-valuation in order to challenge and resist oppression and re-affirm their identities, even when their identities are being attacked.

When I consider my own research, I consider how Congresswoman Water's reclamation of her "strong Black woman" status is very similar to what Black women in my study did by naming and defining their identities, but they did so for their own personal reasons within a less public space. Although the women in my study's words may not be re-tweeted across social media, or inspire a viral hashtag, it does not negate the fact that their words and meanings should be heard and valued. What these women shared within this study can, like the many Black female-created and/or Black female-centered hashtags including #BlackLives Matter, #BlackWomenAtWork, #BlackGirlsAreMagic, #SayHerName, #1000BlackGirlBooks, #BlackGirlsRock and many more, spark a conversation about Black women and girls, our identities, our beliefs and values about ourselves, and our daily practices of self-empowerment and self-affirmation.

In contemporary society, we have platforms like social media where Black women (political figures and everyday women) can share their perspectives and make themselves visible in ways our foremothers could not. Unfortunately, it seems like our visibility and even popularity

does not make us any less susceptible to scrutiny, critique, and erasure. Our words are more readily available to be read and heard, but they are equally open to being taken and refashioned in ways that we did not originally intend. I believe claiming our word power as Black women requires acknowledging our everyday words and actions that at times become so mundane and common that we lose touch of their complexities and importance within our lives.

History has taught us the ways that concepts of Black women's strength, care and love (often in the form of mothering), and sisterhoods can be warped, distorted, and used against us, but our everyday practices of self-definition and self-valuation demonstrate how these same concepts can empower, uplift, and unite us. It is my intentions to use my research to continue to uplift the voices, words, and stories of Black women—particularly everyday Black women—by continuing to study, listen to, and learn from how we blend our words and life experiences to give ourselves and our worlds new meanings.

APPENDIX

Appendix

Table 1. Example of Initial Word-by Word Coding Chart

WORD-BY-WORD CODING FOR LIST #1 QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES [7]	
INITIAL CODE	**PARTICIPANT RESPONSE**
	Layla's Words:
Indicating race and gender	*Black woman*-- race and gender
Indicating race, gender and age	*Black girl*-- race and indicates my relative age
Indicating race and gender Emphasizing difference (between of color and whiteness)	*Woman of color*-- I sometimes *use black and woman of color* interchangeably, mostly just signals non-whiteness, maybe?
Indicating race and gender politics	*Black feminist*-- race and gender politics
Indicating race and gender Emphasizing social construction of gender	*Black woman-identified person*-- signals social construction of gender

[7] This chart represents participant's pre-interview responses for List #1, which consisted of words participants used to name, define, and/or describe themselves.

Table 1 (cont'd)

	Naomi's Words:
In vivo[8]	*Delicious (2)*
In vivo	*Catalytic*
Emphasizing an ability or strength (mental)	*Intelligent*
Describing value of self	*Golden*
Emphasizing an ability or strength (physical)	*Powerful*
Describing one's impact on others Describing one's power and respect Describing one's impact on others	*Formidable*
In vivo	*Eternal*
	Danea's Words:
Suggesting Black-ness and woman-ness (a instead of er)	*Sista*
Suggesting a relationship amongst BW Suggesting Black-ness Identifying a professional role Emphasizing an ability or strength (mental)	*Schola*
In vivo	*Sawrah*
In vivo	*Righteous-Ratchet*
Indicating race and gender politics (worldview)	*Womanist*

[8] *In vivo* means that I could not determine a code for a participants' word responses. If I was unable to identify a potential meaning for a word, I used *in vivo* as the initial code (placeholder) until I conducted an interview with that participant to determine how they were using the word.

Table 1 (cont'd)

	Brianna's Words:
Describing physical appearance	*Beautiful*
Indicating one's individual power	*Strong*
Indicating self-reliance and autonomy	*Independent*
Indicating individuality Emphasizing difference (between self and others)	*Unique*
	Kanini's Words:
Indicating one's individual power	*Strong*
Describing one's resistance to social norms/rules Emphasizing difference (between self and others)	*Non-conformist*
Describing one's resistance to social norms/rules Emphasizing difference (between self and others)	*Rebellious*
Indicating generosity (to others)	*Giver*
Suggesting complexity of identity	*Complicated*
Emphasizing investment in family and community	*Family/community-oriented*
Suggesting complexity of identity Indicating misrecognition by others	*Misunderstood*

Table 1 (cont'd)

	Willow's Words:
In vivo	*BadAss*
Indicating gender identity	*Woman*
In vivo	*Stud*
In vivo	*Soft Dom*
In vivo	*Daddy*
	Gina's Words:
Indicating one's individual power	*Strong*
Suggesting unwillingness to give up/quit Indicating one's individual power Emphasizing an ability or strength (physical, mental, emotional)	*Resilient*
Describing physical appearance	*Beautiful*
Indicating individuality Emphasizing difference (between self and others)	*Unique*
	Moné's Words:
Describing faith and/or relationship to God	*Spiritual*
Indicating familial relationship (sibling) Indicating gender	*Sister*
Suggesting hope and positive outlook	*Optimistic*
Describing one's humor Emphasizing and ability or strength (humor)	*Funny*
Indicating one's individual power	*Strong*
Describing one's resistance to suggestions of others	*Stubborn*

Table 1 (cont'd)

	Darlene's Words:
Describing one's value Suggesting one is qualified to obtain something wanted	*Worthy*
Describing physical appearance	*Pretty*
Indicating individuality Emphasizing difference	*Different*
Describing belief in one's ability	*Confident*
	Solange's Words:
Emphasizing an ability or strength (physical) Describing one's impact on others	*Powerful*
Describing physical appearance	*Beautiful*
Indicating one's individual power	*Strong*
Describing one's unwillingness to give up/quit Suggesting personal power and strength	*Unbreakable*
Describing one's value Suggesting one is qualified to obtain something wanted	*Worthy*
	Alicia's Words:
Describing physical appearance	*Natural*
Indicating self-reliance and autonomy Suggesting one's independence	*Self-sufficient*
Indicating gender identity Indicating physical appearance	*Feminine*
Emphasizing humanity	*Human*

Table 1 (cont'd)

	Monica's Words:
Describing one's unwillingness to give up/quit	*Determined*

Table 2. Example of Line-by Line Coding of Participant Interview Transcript

LINE-BY-LINE CODING OF INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT[9]	
CODE	**TRANSCRIPT**
Interviewer thanking participant	Interviewer (I): Alright. Let's start. [inaudible]--And the back-up. [background noises from speaker]. [pause] Alright. I think we're good. Alright [BW1]. Thank you, again for volunteering to do this with me and going on this journey with me since you've been with me from the beginning when this was just a thought--
[Laughter]	Layla (L): [laughing]
Interviewer thanking participant	I: so thank you.
Interviewee accepting thanks	L: Of course.
Interviewer providing participant with pre-interview responses	I: So, we have your—your answers here cause I didn't want to have to pull them up on the computer--[laughing]
Interviewee reacting to responses [Laughter]	
[Laughter]	L: Oh god--[laughing]
Does not remember her pre-interview responses	I: [laughing]
	L: I don't know what I said.
Interviewer Question #1: If you were introducing yourself to a stranger, what would you say about yourself?	I: So, I asked you um give me 4 or 5 words--wait actually let's start here. If you were um, introducing yourself to a stranger-- B: Mmhmm. I: what would you say about yourself?

[9] This table represents my line-by-line coding of one participant, Layla's, interview transcript.

Table 2 (cont'd)

Begins with her name. Identifies her academic position and field of study Names where she is from	L: Um, "I'm Layla. Uh, I'm a PhD student in [says name of graduate program]. Uh, I'm from [says city and town where she is from]."
Interviewer Question #2: If a friend were describing you to someone else, what would they say about you?	I: If, a friend was introducing you or talking about you to someone else, what would they say about you?
[Laughter] [Pause]	L: [laughing] Um, uh--
Interviewer revises question	I: Or how would they describe you?
Same description Clarifies that description would be different if the friend were White [Laughter]	L: Probably the same, I guess. Um [pause], unless they were White [laughing]-- I: [laughing]
[Laughter] Suggests that I White friend would emphasize her race	L: then they would probably say I'm Black.
[Laughter] Acknowledgment of response	I: [laughing] Okay!
Clarifies a White friend speaking to a White person	L: But, or if they're talking to a White person maybe-- I: Mmhmm.
Connects emphasis on her race to the race of the friends Blackness is assumed amongst Black people	L: or you know, but if it's Black people, I think race would be assumed. I: Okay.
Unsure about her response	L: I don't know [laughing]. Maybe.

Table 2 (cont'd)

Interviewer extending question to push participant	I: You think? So your best friend, how would they--how would they describe you though? L: Um-- I: Like someone that is really close to you?
Participant clarifying the question to mean personal descriptions	L: Oh like personality and stuff? I: Mmhmm. Yeah.
Identifying additional words: *sarcastic*, *funny*, *smart*, *petty*, *introverted*, and '*a thinker*' Hesitant and unsure about certain terms	L: Um, I think they would say she's sarcastic [laughing]. Um, she's funny, uh she's smart probably. I: Mmhmm. L: Um, she's petty, maybe [laughing]. Um, she's more introverted-- I: Mmhmm. L: [pause] Yeah--a thinker. I don't know, yeah.
Interviewer transitioning to next question Interview Question #1 (restated): I asked you to name 4-5 words that you use to identify, or describe yourself as a Black woman. Can you talk each word and what they mean to you?	I: Okay. Alright we can transition into these words-- L: [laughing] I: since we already talking about you [laughing]. So, I asked you--4--name 4 to 5 words that you use identify, or describe yourself as a Black woman-- L: Mmhmm. I: so like can we like go through each word and then you talk a little bit about it and what it means to you?
Interviewee agrees to move into List #1 words	L: Sure, yeah. Sounds good.
Interviewer begins with **black woman**	I: So, "black woman."
Describes Black woman as a default or standard term Points to race and gender	L: Yeah. I think "black woman," um would be kinda the default I guess um pretty standard ways to think about race and gender. Um, I use "Black" not "African American"-

Table 3. Example of Charting of Participant Interview Responses

CHART OF LAYLA'S INTERVIEW RESPONSES [10]				
INTERVIEW QUESTION	**WORD**	**MEANING**	**CODE**	**PRACTICE USED**
Question #1: introduce yourself	Says name (+)[11] PhD student (+)	Terms used to introduce herself to someone new	General terms for introducing oneself	Naming specifics about identity
Question #2: if a friend were introducing you	Sarcastic (+) Funny (+) Smart (+) Petty (+) Introverted (+) 'A thinker' (+)	Personal traits to describe her (from perspective of a friend)	General terms for describing her (from another person's point of view)	Makes distinctions between how different groups of friends would describe her (White versus Black) Laughter Uncertainty

[10] After completing line-by-line coding for each participant's interview transcript, I created a chart that accounted for the words a participant used in the interview to describe themselves, influential Black women in their lives, or Black womanhood generally. I also identified how a participant defined those words in their interview, what that word specifically referred to, and the practices a participant was engaging in while defining a particular word.

[11] A plus symbol (+) next to a word means that the participant used this word to describe themselves or other Black women in their interview, but this word was not included in their pre-interview questionnaire. Many participants added and used new terms within their interview that were not identified in their pre-interview questionnaire responses.

Table 3 (cont'd)

Question #3: Define and discuss terms from List #1	**Black woman**: default or standard way to discuss race and gender. Chooses Black over African-American for political reasons, to speak to diversity within African diaspora (2). Defines woman as standard and meant to refer to a female person (3). **Black girl**: term used amongst friends of a similar age and identity. Black girl is not synonymous with Black woman, but comes after Black woman (3) Also used by older Black woman to call on a younger Black woman (as used by mothers or aunts) (3) Ladies (+): used to describe older Black women addressing younger Black women. Ladies used similarly as girls **Woman of color**: a term used interchangeably with Black woman, especially within the context of writing or talking about Black women in research (as a subject matter). (4) (Others) may use term as code for Black or non-White, which may speak to a White-Black binary. (Others) may use term to suggest skin-color (having melanin)	Describing race and gender Standardized method for naming race and gender Encompassing one's race, gender, and age (contextualized) Distinguishing age differences Less standardized method for naming race and gender Additional term Refers to race, gender, and age Describing race and gender Less standard Diverse meanings dependent on context and perspective Describing a personal and political worldview	Intentionality and purpose for word choice Defining meaning Referencing political and worldviews Referring to controversy behind/within terms Complicating terms/showing complexity Refers to word usage/perspective of others Makes connection between terms Uses examples to explain terms Discussing context where term can be used Providing explanation/reasoning for choices Theorizing meaning (why this may mean what it means) Laughter Struggling to define or name terms Being inclusion and demonstrating diversity

Table 3 (cont'd)

	Black feminist: term used to describe personal identification as a person, particularly her gender politics. Recognized as a 'loaded term' that warrants discomfort from some people. It describes someone who fights for gender equality while simultaneously recognizing and fighting against other systems of oppression including racism, body-shaming, ageism, ableism, nationalism. Using intersectionality as a method for holistically viewing and dismantling systems of oppression (4-5). **Black woman-identified person**: a term that is tied to a political view about gender fluidity. Used to recognize the gender identifications of transgendered people, and recognizing that gender can be read (interpreted) and embodied in different ways (5).	Describing a practice Describing race and gender Less standard Describing a personal and political worldview Challenging standardization of gender/Recognizing fluidity of gender	
Question #4: What has influenced your understanding? (+ follow-up question on education)	Living with a specific identity her whole life *(personal experience)* Influences of what others call her and think about her *(influences of other people)* […] Education: academically—being exposed to different text and education via social activism—being exposed to different people and points of view. She connects her views about gender identity to exposure through activism.	Theorizing her understanding of herself	Referring to personal experience Influences of society Influences of education Influences of politics/activism Connecting herself to others Recognizing difference

Table 3 (cont'd)

Question #5: Define and discuss words from List #2	**Sis**: a term used amongst Black women friends; described as a cheeky way to address a friend, and is tied to emotional intonation and acts of playful critique (e.g., 'Come on now sis, really?'). Although there is a connection between sis and sister, in this case, sis is used informally to call on or identify another Black or woman of color friend. In other words, sis is not the same as sister (6-7).	Refers to a friendship relationship Connects Black women and women of color Demonstrates playfulness Describes gender and age	Uncertainty Using examples/acting out usage Making connection to own personal life experiences Making distinctions between terms
	Girl: (see above) term used amongst young Black women friends	Refers to a friendship relationship	
(follow-up question of colored girls)	[Layla discussed the term 'colored girls' but I have not included the term because she did not bring it up. I asked this question to get her to say more about her use of the words women of color and girl, but not colored girls. She referenced the historical significance tied to "colored" and how the term itself made her uncomfortable, perhaps because of her age. Out of this conversation she made the discovery that although women of color are a common term used there is not an equivalent for men. We say person of color, but not men of color. Why? Because person implies male, while woman has to	Demonstrate respect Identify race, gender, and age Less standard	Referencing historical context Laughter Contextualizing usage (only use this in certain spaces or with certain people) Uncertainty

Table 3 (cont'd)

	be emphasize. Interesting, huh?](7-8) **Ma'am**: term tied to Southern roots and upbringing. Used as a term of respect when addressing an older *Black* woman. Term used sparingly to address a White woman due to personal experiences (see p.9 for explanation about the use of the word *sweetie*). Ma'am is dependent on context, and particularly requires a decision being made about the age of the individual woman being addressed. **Mrs.**: used to address all older women (of all races), and meant to show respect.	Describing race, gender, and age (marital status) Used more standard/formal	Struggling to identify words and meanings
Question #6: Describe and discuss words from List #3	**Mami/ma**: refers to diverse populations within Black woman community, particularly Afro-Latina women. Witnessed by participant as being used amongst Afro-Latinas friends. **Gurl**: represents a male's perspective, particularly how a male might informally address a girl using text message language or slang.	Describing race, gender, and ethnicity Less standard term Referring to friendship relationship Describing male perspective Informal naming	Uncertainty Struggling to identify words and meanings Demonstrating inclusivity and diversity Identifying cultural difference Describing communication/language Theorizing specific context

Table 3 (cont'd)

	Sister: (see above on sis) term used amongst Black communities to refer to Black women whom they don't share any biological relationship with. It may also be used as a form of Afro-centric expression within academic settings to show unity amongst a group of people who share common interests and/or values (e.g., 'As my sister/brother right there just said…'). Even more broadly, it could refer to the notion that all people originated in Africa, therefore, we are all African, i.e., brothers and sisters (11). **Bae**: an informal term described as a cute sign of affection (connects with ma/mami). In this case, it is from the perspective of a male responding to a woman. **Queen**: from an Afro-centric perspective this term shares some similarities with sister when considering how it is used to refer to Black women. Within feminist circles, it may be more controversial because of it can potentially exclude some women. Ultimately, queen is an affirmative and positive term meant to refer to Black women. **Negrita**: (connected to ma/mami) is a culturally specific word tied to Afro-Latina naming practices. Observed as a cute term of affection.	Demonstrating a friendship relationship Showing solidarity and unity amongst people Informal naming Refers to male perspective Sign of affection Show affirmation Identify race and gender Describing race, gender, and ethnicity Less standard term Referring to friendship relationship	Drawing on personal experience Acting out/giving examples of how to use terms Showing connections between terms Incorporating the perspectives of others Referring to political views Theorizing term and making distinctions Drawing connections between terms Using examples Telling stories

Table 3 (cont'd)

Question #7: Any additional things you would like to say? (follow-up question: Why is it important to name ourselves?)	Referred back to the concept of queen and lady to show the similarities between the terms Discussing feminist critiques of the terms, particularly how the exclude some women (who exactly gets to be called a lady?) Provides examples of how lady is used within popular culture (e.g., Single Ladies or Travis Porter's "Ayy ladies!) Referred to the importance of Black women naming ourselves, particularly when thinking about this as a necessary practice for Black women throughout history Refers to similar practices of respectability, dissemblance, and interiority Naming is about being active participants in how we are seen and discussed and creating new meanings when necessary	Clarifying thoughts about terms	Using examples Theorizing ideas

Table 4. Excerpt of Categorized Master List of All Participant Word Responses

KEY FOR MASTER LIST TABLE
• Responses to List #1: Create a list of 4-5 words that you would use to name, define, describe YOUR identity as a Black woman [Written in plain text] • **Responses to List #2: Create a list of 4-5 words that you would use to describe influential Black women in your life [Written in bolded text]** • *Response to List #3: Create a list of any additional/words/phrases/thoughts you may have about Black women [Written in italicized text]*

MASTER LIST OF PARTICIPANT WORD RESPONSE CATEORIES			
CATEGORY	**REVISED CODE**	**WORDS**	**PARTICIPANT**
EMPHASIZING RACE, GENDER, AND/OR SEXUALITY	Describing race and gender	Black woman	Layla
	Describing race and gender	Black woman	Danea
	Describing race and gender	Woman of color	Layla
	Describing race and gender fluidity	Black woman-identified person	Layla
	Emphasizing racial identity; often takes this identification for granted	Black (+)	Naomi
	Part of identity that was always known to her because of her upbringing	Black (+)	Willow

Table 4 (cont'd)

	Refers to identities that are obvious when people look at her	Black/African American (+)	Gina
	Refers to lesbian identity, and is situated as a lens for seeing, navigating, and understanding the world	Woman	Willow
	Connected to lesbian identity, and her soft heart; described as similar to a tomboy	Stud	Willow
	Connected to lesbian identity, represents her performance of femininity within a relationship	Soft dom	Willow
TERMS OF AFFECTION (USED AMONGST BLACK FEMALES)	Describing race, gender, and age (used amongst friends)	Black girl	Layla
	Used to refer to Black women who she is not biologically related but shares common experiences with (e.g., academic, sororities, professional)	Sista	Danea
	Used to refer to Black women who she is not biologically related but shares common experiences with (e.g., academic, sororities, professional)	Sista scholas	Danea

Table 4 (cont'd)

	Used to refer to Black women who she is not biologically related but shares common experiences with (e.g., academic, sororities, professional)	Sawrah	Danea
	Refers to a friendship bond, a close relationship with another Black woman; someone she can be herself with	Sister	Moné
	Connected to lesbian identity, and something she likes to be called during sexual intimacy	Daddy	Willow
	Used to refer to (younger) Black women and women of color friends	**Sis**	**Layla**
	Used to name a family member specifically; also used to refer to a bond and connection she believes exists between Black women when they are in the presence of each other ("sister-ship")	**Sister**	**Willow**
	Used to refer to (younger) Black women and women of color friends [...]	**Girl**	**Layla**

Table 4 (cont'd)

	Necessary people in her life who are there for her, and whom she shares similarities and differences with; they help each other manage and theorize life (aka, road dogs and ride-or-die chicks)	**Friend**	**Willow**
	Related to the term "sister," but specifically speaking about a friend that will be there for you for and through anything	**Rider**	**Moné**
	Term of respect used to refer to older Black women	**Ma'am**	**Layla**
	Term of respect used to refer to older Black women	**Mrs.**	**Layla**
	Used to refer to Black woman friendships, or an Afrocentric way to show unity and/or respect	*Sister*	*Layla*
	Used to refer to Black woman friendships, or an Afrocentric way to show unity and/or respect	*Queen*	*Layla*
	Referring to Black women formal and informal spaces that support Black women and girls' growth and development	*Sisterhood*	*Gina*

Table 4 (cont'd)

PERSONAL PAIN AND INTERNAL POWER	Refers to personal spiritual journey and internal strength	Powerful	Naomi
	Identity associated with Black women's behind the scenes labor that makes things happen; claims this Black woman power as part of her identity	Powerful	Solange
	Describes someone who is strong, difficult to mislead, and comfortable with themselves	Formidable	Naomi
	Awareness of pain and hardship, but motivation to push forward	Strong	Brianna
	Referring to how opportunities are not handed to her, therefore, she must fight for what she wants; generally associates not being weak to Black women	Strong	Moné
	Refers to internal knowledge and power, and outward performance of that power (when necessary)	Strong	Kanini
	Refers to her ability to carry a lot of weight in order to successfully help herself and others	Strong (+)	Darlene

Table 4 (cont'd)

	Refers to her ability to face whatever is being thrown at her; facing adversity and discrimination and putting on her "strong-suit" to overcome	Strong	Solange
	Refers to historical trauma of Black female bodies, and Black women's ability to still remain, have pride, and reassert their strength, and independence	Badass	Willow
	Refers to pain and suffering, but also willingness to fight (work) for self and family	Resilient (+)	Kanini
	Describing enduring stress of life, while still reaching her professional goals	Resilient	Gina
	Refers to her life experiences, especially growing up around violence and circumstances that should have broken her spirit; instead she did not break and moved herself past those pains	Unbreakable	Solange
	Refers to ability to handle multiple responsibilities simultaneously (school, work, childcare)	Independent	Brianna

Table 4 (cont'd)

	Enduring experiences alone without prior role models	Brave	Gina
	Being self-reflective and locating her strengths and weaknesses and finding ways to improve in both areas	Confident	Darlene
	Describing her independence when completing tasks and accomplishing goals	Self-motivating	Darlene
	Describes willingness to speak one's mind and do what is right, but not necessarily having to be in front to be impactful	Leader	Darlene
	Making a personal decision and following through on what she says she will do; tied to personal strength	Stubborn	Moné
	Being determined to get back-up in spite of the many times in her life that she has been knocked down	Persistent	Moné
	Describes Black women's noticeable presence, internal strength, and ability to survive	**Powerful**	**Danea**
	Related to (tied to) Black women's power	**Strong**	**Danea**

Table 4 (cont'd)

	Specifically referring to her mother who made sacrifices in her life and endured significant hardship so that her children could have a better life	**Strong-minded**	**Moné**
	Specifically referring to her mother who made sacrifices in her life and endured significant hardship so that her children could have a better life	**Determined**	**Moné**
	Refers to Black women's ability to get things done in spite of hardships and abilities to find ways to affirm themselves	**Magic**	**Danea**
	Referring to how Black women making things happen on their own	**Independent**	**Moné**
NAMING BLACK WOMEN'S ROLES AS CAREGIVERS	Role to/relationship with daughter and ability to care for others	Mother (+)	Danea
	Describes role within her family	Mother (+)	Kanini
	Describes role within her family	Wife (+)	Kanini
	A genuine care for others and willingness to help those in need	Beautiful	Brianna

Table 4 (cont'd)

	Describes generosity and desire to help those in need	Giver	Kanini
	Describes generosity and desire to help those in need	Generous (+)	Kanini
	Refers to grandmother as an important caregiver	**Crucial**	**Naomi**
	General term for naming women's multiple roles as caregivers and wearer of life's burdens	**Carrier**	**Naomi**
	Refers to mother and grandmother's labor as caretakers; their willingness to give to their family	**Strong**	**Danea**
	Refers to mother and grandmother's labor as caretakers; their willingness to give to their family	**Caring**	**Danea**
	Refers to mother grandmother's ability to nurture, help, and teach life lessons	**Caring**	**Brianna**
	Referring to her mother's (and her own) ability to give to others in need and be there mentally, physically, and spiritually for loved ones	**Caring**	**Darlene**

Table 4 (cont'd)

	Describing her relationship with her mother and how she is still learning to appreciate and understand her mother's love for her	**Caring**	**Solange**
	Refers to personal relationship with mother where mother is caring, but also tough	**Loving**	**Brianna**
	Refers to mother and grandmother's labor as caretakers; their willingness to give to their family	**Loving**	**Danea**
	Refers to women's powerful love within relationships; their ability to be mothering and think of the needs and feelings of their partner within a relationship	**Lover**	**Willow**
	Named as someone you trust with the essence of who you are; more than a friend and a lover	**Confidant**	**Willow**
	Refers specifically to her sister and the phrase "just love"	**Love**	**Moné**
	Refers to women's roles as supporters to each other through hardships	**Passionate**	**Brianna**

Table 4 (cont'd)

	Referring to physical emotional love and support she feels from Black women in her life; this is a love she has not readily received from her mother growing up	**Passionate**	**Solange**
	Refers to women's support that goes too far/becomes invasive	**Nosey**	**Brianna**
	Named as women who raised her, influenced, her and taught her to be strong, non-conformist, and a breadwinner	**Mother**	**Kanini**
	Named as women who raised her, influenced, her and taught her to be strong, non-conformist, and a breadwinner	**Aunts**	**Kanini**
	Names an impactful woman in her life as an example of how to disrupt the status quo specifically, but generally refers to women as nurturers, creators, their strength, independence, and work	**Mother**	**Willow**

Table 4 (cont'd)

	Refers to lessons and a saying taught to her and her cousins by her grandmother about the power of women	**Phenomenal**	**Solange**
	Refers to mother's care for others including her family and local community	**Strong**	**Darlene**
	Describing her communication within her household, particularly when talking to her children	*Loud*	*Kanini*
	A negotiation of her roles professionally and personally; claiming a specific part of her everyday identity	*Housewife*	*Kanini*
DESCRIBING RESISTANCE	Describing unwillingness to change her position/stance once her mind is made up	Opinionated	Kanini
	Describing her not being influenced by others, or following the set norm	Rebellious	Kanini
	Describing her refusal to adhere to gender norms	Non-conformist	Kanini
	Offering others a representation of herself that conflicts with their initial perceptions	Misunderstood	Kanini

Table 4 (cont'd)

	Describing her mother and grandmother's strong personalities and willingness to speak their minds	**Feisty**	**Gina**
	Describing her mother and grandmother's outspokenness	**Bold**	**Gina**
	Named as an example of a rebellious woman who refused to follow societal rules throughout her life	**Grandmother (+)**	**Kanini**
	Named as woman an activist who refused to bow down to others, and were willing to fight and be punished for what they believed in	**Wangari Maathai**	**Kanini**
	Named as woman an activist who refused to bow down to others, and were willing to fight and be punished for what they believed in	**Winnie Mandela**	**Kanini**
	Describing her resistance and refusal to do what others tell her she should do	*Untamable*	*Kanini*

Table 4 (cont'd)

	Describing her own (and other Black women's) happiness and ability to find ways to do/say what she wants in spite of attempts to deny Black women happiness, a voice, and access to opportunities	*Freedom*	*Willow*
EMPHASIZING DIFFERENCE	Being different from common perceptions of Black women	Unique	Brianna
	Referring to the originality of her and having to negotiate her name in everyday spaces	Unique	Gina
	Refers to her identity as a Black woman, respect for herself, and individuality	Different	Darlene

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