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**BLACK WOMEN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING: AN EXISTENTIAL
PORTRAITURE STUDY ON HOW BLACK WOMEN EXPERIENCE THE
4 EXISTENTIAL GIVENS**

By

TAMIKO L. LEMBERGER-TRUELOVE

B.A., Criminology, University of Maryland, 1998
Masters of Social Work., Washington University, St. Louis, MO, 2008

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy
Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

December, 2016

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Dedication

Unbroken Possibility

The chaos and darkness that besieges us

The sweltering insignificance of our existence

The finiteness. Oh the finiteness that pursues

Every stagnant and rousing instant of breath

May we endure eternally stranded in love

Succumbing to diaphanous ether whilst gasping for crumbling air

We are nothing but unbroken possibility

Merely thwarted by withering time (Tamiko Lemberger-Truelove)

Such a journey into the deepest alcoves of one's mind, and intellectual aptitude does not occur singularly. As we plunge into the abyss of knowing and find ourselves drowning in the nameless unknown, there must exist something or someone to pull us back. As T. S. Eliot so poignantly stated in his poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, "human voices wake us" ...they snatch us from the cataleptic slumber that threatens to steal us from the present. My love, and partner Matthew Lemberger-Truelove, you are the voice that gently nudges me from the clutches of the existential vacuum, while tenderly urging me to be unafraid of the darkness, as we all emerge from the beginning of the beginning of the void; we are all native to cavernous nothingness. The shadows that we run from can give life to those stouthearted enough to trek through dimness in order to reach the beyond. Thank you for always reminding me of my intrinsic capacity to evoke this affirming trait, for always knowing and revering the muddled exquisiteness within me. It is because of you, Dearest

One, that I truly believe we are capable of surpassing facticity to experience unconditional love, and transcendence. You are the river that satiates my parched canals with water, you are the ground that yields and nurtures my seeds, you are the steady lighthouse sagely guiding me across the rugged coast through the darkness onto gentler shore. With you I am unafraid of the darkness, I am unafraid of the light. Thank you for the astonishing gift of absolute love. *In aeternum te amabo.*

To my greatest gift, my greatest treasure, and reason for “being,” my precious Naarah Serene. You are living proof of transcendence itself! Your smiles, your cuddles, your laughter, your presence, your zest for life, your adoring love kept my reservoirs full and thrust me forward when I was too weary to journey on. For these reasons, and so many others, Precious Little One, this dissertation is dedicated to you. Always remember, *Amor animi arbitrio sumitur, non ponitur*, My Most Beloved Child. Mommy will forever be at your side, even in death, which is inevitable, I shall never forsake you. *Etiam in morte, superset amor.* You and I shall be always... We are forever, My Beloved, forever.

Acknowledgements

“I think we ripple on into others, just like a stone puts its ripples into a brook. That, for me, too, is a source of comfort. It kind of, in a sense, negates the sense of total oblivion. Some piece of ourselves, not necessarily our consciousness, but some piece of ourselves gets passed on and on and on.” Irvin D. Yalom, interview, *Wise Counsel*

First and foremost thank you to the two greatest loves of my life, my daughter, Naarah Serene and husband, Matthew. You two have provided me with endless support and unconditional love throughout this tenuous and chaotic time. You, my two divine ones, were, have been and always will be the magnificent beauty amongst the chaos. May we continue to ripple into each other as the best pieces of us are passed on and on and on. In this existential nothingness, you, WE are everything. We are made immortal, my beloveds, in our infinite affection and dedication for one another. My love for the two of you is immeasurable, boundless, and eternal.

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Thank you to the beautiful kindred souls who participated in my study and trusted me with their stories. The world is better because of each of you, may the world be better to each of you.

To my brother, Markesa (Mark), I am grateful for your encouragement, acceptance, understanding and reliability throughout my life from the time you entered into it. I love you little brother now and always, and I am glad that we have traveled this voyage as siblings together. I am looking forward to all of the wonderful long years ahead of us as we embark on new adventures with our growing families. May there always be love between us.

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most grateful to you for instilling in me one of the greatest life lessons that I live by to this day: I always have a choice, and I am never a helpless victim of anything or anyone.

Without the two of you I literally would not exist, and I would not be the successful human being that I am today, if it were not for your endless love, ceaseless support, and unwavering faith. I love you both and pieces of you will forever ripple on in Mark, in Naarah, in me, and the generations of Trueloves to come. Thank you for giving me life over and over again. It is because of the two of you that I can safely dream and believe in my own greatness and power to manifest such aspirations.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the phenomenological, qualitative study was to explore how select Black women experience the four ultimate concerns of existence, including freedom, isolation, meaninglessness, and death. Existential psychology, from which the four existential givens emerge, is deeply grounded in existential philosophy, which rarely connects key principles and tenets of existentialism to the experiences of Black women. The existential givens have been posited as a universal framework and yet because Black women are faced with multiple forms of marginalization the current study operates from the assumption that universal experiences are filtered through patently Black experiences. To explore how the existential givens might pertain to Black women's experiences, the author used a type of qualitative design approach called portraiture to interview, analyze, and report the experiences of seven Black women. Generally speaking, results from the study illustrated that each of the existential givens are pertinent to the lives of Black women, and yet the manner in which they are experienced and expressed are nuanced based on racial assignment

and related prejudice. For example, the existential given of freedom for Black women was mitigated by experiences of racial and gender marginalization. For the existential given of isolation, the Black women interviewed reported that their race and gender preordained distance from other ethnic groups, but also social class divide resulted in feelings of isolation within the larger Black community. On the other hand, certain respondents suggested that friendships with other Black women can reduce feelings of isolation. The third existential given of meaninglessness elicited participants' conflicting feelings of subjugation within white hegemonic mores as contrasting to their need to express strength and resiliency as Black women. Finally, the existential given of death was discussed in a very distinct manner from more universalist conceptions of existential philosophy, especially given Black women's awareness of possible death due to physical violence motivated by racism. Drawing from these results, suggestions for human service practice and teacher education are offered, especially the requirement to establish authentic and socially aware relationships with Black female clients.

Keywords: Black women, existentialism, meaning in life, existential givens, racism

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Dum inter homines sumus, colamus humanitatem - Seneca

"As long as we are among humans, let us be humane."

Efforts to disinter human existence have been pursued in primitive and contemporary societies, with numerous surveyors from manifold disciplines as diverse as philosophy (e.g., Jaspers, 1971), education (e.g., Dewey, 1938), and the natural sciences (e.g., Kuhn, 1962). The relationship between the self and the milieu that surrounds that self has largely marked the foundation for all known western philosophies, be it the speculative or ethical sorts. In many of these philosophic systems, especially in modern systems (e.g., constructivism [Gergen, 2001], pragmatism [Rorty, 1982]), the characterization of the individual self has been largely considered within social structures. In these systems, elements of the self are filtered through the search for meaning, purpose, and other assumptions about identity. In one such contemporary system of thought, that is the existential psychological movement that matured in parts of the 19th and 20th centuries, the self is situated within various tensions of the human predicament, especially those related assumptions about the freedom and responsibility of the individual self. Existential concepts such as *umwelt* (physical dimension), *mitwelt* (social dimension), *eigenwelt* (personal dimension) and *uberwelt* (spiritual dimension) emerge between the individual and society. However, the primary belief for most humanistic existentialists is that if the individual can confront and accept her or his anxiety and fear of certain overwhelming and formidable universal aspects of human existence that embody the finitude of human life, and corresponding corollaries, he or she will be able to more fully embrace the present, and create a meaningful, fulfilling life. In this way, within the finitude of the individual human life, the self is able to fully embrace the

present, and create a meaningful, fulfilling life (Frankl, 1985; May, 1953; Vontress, 1988; Yalom, 1980).

Friedrich Nietzsche (1886) and Soren Kierkegaard (1843/2013) are regarded as the forefathers of existentialism. Hence, many of the core beliefs and ideas of existential psychology emerged from their philosophies on the human experience. Kierkegaard (1843/2013) known for coining the phrase, "I exist, therefore I am," (p. 42) in contrast to Rene Descartes' (1637/1968) "I think, therefore I am," (p. 133) theorized that the primary focus of understanding the human being was to attempt to understand human experience (i.e., how the individual existed, comprehended, and interacted with the world he or she was situated in [a concept philosopher Heidegger would later term *dasein* or being in the world]). Kierkegaard conjectured that individual unhappiness could only be surmounted through internal insight of self. Afterwards, Nietzsche extended Kierkegaard's theory of existentialism by integrating concepts of free will and individual responsibility. Shortly thereafter, in the 1900s, philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre further expanded the theory to include the assessment of human interpretation and exploration and interpretation in the therapeutic process. Gradually, future generations began to recognize the significance of individual phenomenology (human experience) with regard to understanding and attaining psychological well being and meaning in life, hence broadening the theory of existentialism into multiple disciplines, such as psychology.

One of the earliest psychotherapists to delve into the field was Otto Rank (1950), followed by Paul Tillich (1980/2000), Rollo May (1953), Victor Frankl (1985), and Irvin Yalom (1980). Existential psychology, broadly defined, is a series of philosophical schemes examining free will, choice, and personal responsibility. Because individuals make choices

grounded in their experiences, beliefs, and biases, those choices are unique to them, and formulated without an objective or independent form of truth. Thus, existential theory centers on inquiry into the exploration of individual existence in an enigmatic cosmos, and the dilemma of the individual who must undertake and accept absolute accountability and responsibility for acts of free will. Emphasis is placed on the importance of subjective experience and responsibility and the anxieties that choice creates for the individual, who operates as a free agent in a deterministic and ostensibly meaningless world, wherein the only certainty is death. For the existentialist, the human being is born, therefore immediately exists and then chooses her or his direction in life, and creates meaning from her or his experiences (i.e., life, love, death, and meaning). Self-determination is derived through choice. However, within this paradigm there are nuanced and flagrant differences, and limitations in how individuals can exercise and experience existential principles. Moreover, not all people are afforded the same freedom and privilege to self-determine, due to their unique social circumstances (i.e., marginalization via race, gender, class). Black women, both as individuals and as a collective, are a prime example of potentially limited agency, due to their social positionality within a white heteropatriarchal society.

Statement of the Problem

Black women's story is a saga filled with adversity and accomplishment, coxswained by spirituality and hardiness (Collins, 1998; hooks, 1989; Phillips, 2006). Central to Black women's narrative has been a predominant theme of freedom to determine one's own life and way of being in the world. This recurring leitmotif for Black women is rife with significant features of existential psychology. However, existential psychology presages a self that maintains agency and remains reflexive despite potentially detrimental characteristics of her

or his environment. Divergently, due to cavernous inequalities existing among individuals in society, such as racial and gender injustice, a merely universal view of psychology is not appropriate or germane for all individuals. Specifically, while particular existential philosophies espouse an I-thou relationship of the self in the world, the existence of the I-it relationship that can exist for marginalized populations is often overlooked in this analysis (Buber, 1958). The I-Thou relationship is a direct relation of subject to subject, in which genuine human connection is present among other goals or objectives in the interaction. The I-It relationship is the opposite of the I-Thou, meaning only one party is a subject acting upon another. Specifically, the in betweenness of the I-it relationship (Buber, 1958) that Black women have had with society where they have been the object (it) thrust into and thwarted in a relationship in which they have had very little power or freedom, has trapped them in inequitable relationships lacking mutuality, choice, and grounded upon exploitation and dehumanization.

Hence, the basic premises of existential psychology, while well-intended, with seemingly favorable outcomes for the people they intend to describe, fail to consider the total influence of social constructions, especially race and gender, on the individual's construction of self, others, and the social environment, especially as these pertain to Black women. The supposition that individual self-determination and that personal power are evenly obtainable to anyone reveals a problematic oversight in existentialism itself. This oversight limits existential psychology as a philosophical system that might otherwise be applicable to diverse groups of people, especially those who might lack power and social positionality (see Foucault, 1980).

The alternative, that is a philosophic system that genuinely engages humanistic existential nature for all people, must include considerations germane to all while apprehending the unique characteristics of certain groups. For instance, Black women have always been faced with their own existential isolation as a consequence of slavery. Slavery separated them from an autonomous sense of self, and severely restrained their relations with others. All interpersonal and familial relationships were always in jeopardy of being abruptly severed whether through the selling of family members to other plantations, murder and death at the hands of slave owners and white citizens. Such a violent beginning alienated them from their own humanity and ability to self-care. This alienation continues today manifested in the racialization and genderedness of Black women, which, in turn, isolates them as an undesirable “other” (Collins, 1998; Said, 1978) in American society. Their racialized status as an other creates an additional burden of vulnerability as their underprivileged social positionality strengthens the probability they will frequently confront what Irvin Yalom (1980) deems as the four existential givens of freedom, isolation, meaninglessness, and death. These are the primary/ultimate concerns that every human being will confront during her or his lifetime, in an attempt to understand and find meaning in life. For example, Black women may encounter death more frequently (whether their own or family members and friends who share their marginalized status) through coded and biased interactions with law enforcement and/or white or non-Black citizens who deem them as a threat solely based on their skin color. More difficulty meeting basic needs, like shelter, food, income, compounded and influenced by contending with micro aggressions, and blatantly racist ideologies supported by structural racism, can impact one’s freedom, and

sense of purpose, along with severely impact physical and mental health which have been shown to directly correlate with overall well-being.

There is a dearth of empirical research in humanistic existential literature that describes how existential humanistic premises, including the four givens, are applied to Black women. Similarly, there is little empirical research to describe how the highly racialized and hegemonic American society affects the lived experiences of Black women and their “striving to be”, self-actualization, and meaning in life. The study was designed to connect these related, but unexplored, modes of thought. Specifically, applying knowledge about racialization and gender, I asked participants about their experiences of the existential four givens (freedom, isolation, meaninglessness, death) as relatable to the implications it might have on their quest for ultimate meaning in life.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black women experience the four existential givens related to ultimate meaning in life (see Yalom, 1980). In particular, I explored certain lived experiences of Black women, given their social complexities and how they might find meaning in light of conceptions of freedom, isolation, meaninglessness, and death. Findings from this study might inform educators and helping professionals (e.g., social workers, counselors, psychologists) about the significance of the complex and layered existence of Black women’s lives, and better inform humanistic principles and theories, along with professional practices and strategies in working with Black women.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the consequent questions: Given the intersectionality of Black women's lives, how do Black women experience the four existential givens and the search for meaning in life:

- 1) How do Black women describe their experiences of personal freedom?
- 2) How do Black women describe their experiences of isolation?
- 3) How do Black women describe their experiences of meaninglessness?
- 4) How do Black women describe their experiences of death?

Significance of the Study

The manner in which one self-identifies or makes meaning of their personal and collective identity, is vital to one's existence, yet is often mitigated by social circumstances. For Black women, such mitigating forces are especially profound, as socially constructed influencers such as race and gender threaten any potential for an absolute and unmitigated self-identity. The numerous roles and responsibilities that a Black woman engages in, including but not limited to women, People of Color, mothers, wives, friends, co-workers, etc., are important qualities of self-identity, as well as fundamental in marking one's personal meaning, and the total of one's beingness. In other words, are these the roles we exist within the world or are they defining attributes? Certainly there is a reflexivity, and in turn there is no absolute way to distinguish if there is a primary influencer in the meaning-making process for Black women, either by means of self-identification or the social roles of Black women. Nevertheless, the consequences of reflexivity are internalized and, then, expressed in the world which in turn affects each aspect of life for Black women.

It is important that how Black women experience the ultimate universal concerns is explored, due to the aforementioned reasons, compounded by the fact that they do not have the privilege of white skin, which affords those with it the luxury to be unaware and unconscious of multiple elements of the four givens. An exploration of Black women's accounts of these existential tenets will not only enrich the existing literature in existential psychology and existentialism as a whole, it also providing a space for them to be the masters, inventors, and creators of their own narratives and stories. Lastly, because of their raced and gendered status, Black women are essentially forced to experience the four givens in light of these social constructions which create an existential deviation (Fanon, 1965) away from attempting to find meaning in life and the world as a human being, to attempting to do so as a Black and female individual.

For at least these reasons, it is vital that we consider the manner in which Black women self-identify and make meaning of their existence. Hence, in the face of persistent dehumanization, the conception of existence for Black women must be considered uniquely and with certain sensitivity. Humanistic existential psychology has a long history of advocating for self-actualization and ultimate fulfillment and meaning for the human individual (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1961). However, not much thought has been given to the potential impact of pervasive social constructions, and standpoints, and the lived experience of Black women from an existential perspective, particularly since such perspectives and ideologies present themselves relatively early on in life (i.e., childhood) and can influence the ways in which Black women are educated, tracked, and steered in school, employment, housing, and many other areas which then may impact their overall quality of life and well-being (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Feinberg & Soltis, 2004; Gillborn, 2008). In this way, the

current study can shed further light on Black women's experiences, humanize Black women and encourage others to experience them as they were born to be – human beings rather than “othered” beings. Findings might also be utilized to inform multiple disciplines, including that of humanistic psychology and education, and uncover how profoundly social constructions and social realities might thwart or impact their fundamental teachings and philosophies.

Definition of Terms

***Existence**-Mere act of being (possessing life)

***Essence**-characteristics/attributes of a thing

***Facticity**- ascribed social factors and conditions we are born into and must accept as part of our individual and collective reality such as our race, gender, class, citizenship, etc.

***Transcendence** –Rising above facticity (using awareness, self-agency and choice)

***Racialization**-Perceived way of being based on phenotype;

-Individual and group identity based on perceived cultural groupings and mores;

-Separation from groups perceived to be physically and/or culturally different

***Social construction**- socially created identifiers, labels, and prescribed/predefined ways of being by an entity other than the individual, for example: race, gender)

***Human agency**- the concept that each human individual has the ability to act and the capacity to determine and choose by free will her/his actions, beliefs, etc.

***Self-Determination**- the capacity to choose and to have those choices, rather than reinforcement contingencies, drives, or any other forces or pressures, to be the determinants of one's actions.

***Meaning in life-** “cognizance of order, coherence and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment”

(Reker & Wong, 1988).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction: The Intersectionality of Black Women's Lives

Human beings exist in such precarious circumstances. They are dependent on elements of the world, and aspects of nature that they do not understand or have the capacity to wholly comprehend. The very air they breathe sustains them beyond their deepest perception, it gives them life, yet the interpersonal and social relationships are the very essence of human being, for it is the emotion of love and connectedness which pervades such dynamics and contributes to the demarche of the quest to find meaning in life. It is the regard people have for themselves and for others as human creatures that motivate them to awaken to take that essential life-giving breath. It is this transcendent connection with others, self, and the world that enables such actions.

This very connectedness is crucial and central to what has sustained Black women during the vicissitudes in their lives throughout their evolving history in American society. However, miniscule attention has been given to these very basic and human aspects of Black women's existence, rather the focus has been on the dehumanization of their very being. Depictions and representations of Black women in American society historically, and currently, portray pervasive stereotypes that erode and supersede their humanness (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1989; Johnson & Staples, 2005; Wallace, 1979). Black feminist theorists have made efforts to address such harmful, and erroneous depictions of Black women by placing the voices and experiences of Black women in the center, rather than in the margins. However, there is limited empirical research that focuses on how Black women experience very human aspects of their lives, while also negotiating ascribed social realities. As outlined in chapter one, existential psychology's objective is to understand the human being in the

context of beingness, not as an object. However, because of its universal application, cultural diversity in how many of the fundamental tenets are applied or expressed by those not part of the universal dominant culture. This study explores the life meaning and self-actualizing processes of Black women through their experience of the existential four givens and meaning in life.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section revisits the history of Black women and their social positionality. The second section delineates the foundational framework of existential psychology and how it applies to Black women. The final section examines meaning in life, and the conclusion reiterates how these themes are relevant to the lived experiences of Black women as multi-dimensional human beings.

The Black Female Experience

Socially constructed interpretations of unique elements of personhood, such as gender, view individuals from an essentialist perspective. Such understandings of what it means to be human lack reflexivity, and due to the unique quandaries that women find themselves submerged in, other modes of understanding the numerous ways of existing, and differing social realities for men and women. Confrontations with racism, sexism, colonialism, classism and various other inequities that are highly exploitative of female social positionality need to be exposed. Thus, feminism emerged as an oppositional tool to disrupt not only the oppression of women, but also the oppression of all people (hooks, 1989). Stated otherwise, feminism is a tradition firmly rooted in the experiences of women, thus placing their voices at the forefront rather than on the margins (Collins, 1998; hooks, 1989). Feminism is about freedom from oppression for all not just freedom from patriarchy and sexism. Consequently, feminism should center upon liberating every human being from

exploitative, capitalist, hegemonic society, and it should not simply be reduced to conflicts related to equal rights or wages.

However, as women from various backgrounds coalesced to demand equality, divergent agendas, along with racism within the feminist movement arose. The unwillingness of white feminists to confront or acknowledge their white privilege, and how they used hegemony to subjugate Women of Color in order to advance, created an element of tremendous dissatisfaction and disappointment among Women of Color. This unwillingness derived from the stance that those who were themselves oppressed could not oppress others. Because White men sexually dominated White women, they believed they were incapable of assuming the hegemonic position of the continuation of white racism. Consequently, they learned, reinforced and promoted racist ideology and acted independently and collectively as oppressors of People of Color, particularly Women of Color. For example, conventionally, women's circle of influence has resided within the home space and childrearing. Historically, Women of Color worked as employees and servants of White women in their homes. However, white feminists still tended to view men as adversaries rather than looking at themselves as part of the patriarchal, racist, hegemonic society.

These issues, coupled with Black women's disinterest in the White feminist agenda of equality with men, and viewing men as their adversaries, motivated Black women to begin the Black Feminist movement, as they did not have an interest in being separate from the men in their community, as they recognized that Black men were racially oppressed as were they, yet also acknowledged the ways in which Black men marginalized them. The two were not mutually exclusive for Black women. In other words, there is more to the struggles of Black women than wanting to be equal to men.

Black Feminist Movement/Black Feminist Thought

Social and political activism among Black women in the United States has a deep-rooted history. From ordinary African-American women demonstrating sustained resistance against their own victimization within an interlocking system of oppression consisting of racism, sexism, and classism, to more prominent leaders in the community like Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Wells Barnett, and Fannie Lou Hamer, establishing more organized movements to counteract the depreciation, and maltreatment of Black women, the liberation of Black women has always been paramount for them, even if it was peripheral to others. While the actions, and mobilization of Black women around these issues was not called feminism, their feats created powerful groundwork for what would later become known as the Black feminist movement. The Black feminist movement is largely based upon Black feminist epistemology, which as a framework is a powerful tool for analyzing and understanding the lived experiences of Black women. Collins (1998) asserts that every Black woman is an agent of knowledge, capable of mean-making, based on the hidden discourse she is privy to as an outsider-within, given they maintain two marginalized statuses (as women and as Black peoples) but yet are able to navigate between various communities and identities. Collins (1994) refers to the multiplicities of such identities as *Motherwork*, the awareness that race, gender, and class are intertwining facets of Black women's individuality, meaning making, and mothering. Throughout this study the women interviewed clearly elucidated Collins' theory of the interconnectedness of the various identities they inhabited and the manner in which those intersections solidified in forming their individual, collective, and social identity.

One of the participant's Artemis illustrated this concept best when she stated, "I think all of those are really integral to my Black womanhood to where it's hard to talk about them separately because I see how they intersect so much with my humanity." This is the center of the Black feminist position, which gives the person the capacity to resist present and past social and political circumstances. Knowledge production is also legitimated through subjective experience, giving voice to Black women, and elucidating the intersectionality of compounded factors and influences that function together to subjugate and empower them (hooks, 1989; Collins, 1998). Hence, positioning Black women and other marginalized and excluded groups in the center of analysis unlocks potential for an innovative theoretical standpoint, one in which they are creators, surveyors of knowledge, penalty, and privilege. Moreover, Black women, like all individuals, can and do exist as members of an oppressed group, while concurrently being participants in the oppression of others.

Gender alone does not explain feelings of oppression, as the social status of Black women and white women in America differ even if they affect the other. Granted, both were vulnerable to gender victimization, as victims of both sexism and racism, Black women were subjected to subjugations white women did not have to tolerate (Phillips, 2006). Furthermore, white hegemony allowed all white women, regardless of their own gendered exploitation and oppression, the permission to assume a privileged position over Black people, therein exercising power and domination over both Black women and Black men (hooks, 1989).

Additionally, Black women's actuality as racialized, female beings is used to debase them. The objectification of Black women results in their mistreatment, exploitation, and a blatant disregard for their humanity. This dehumanization is manifested in various ways, through the use of language, social structures, institutional practices and laws,

characterizations, violence, images represented in the media, etc. Historically, Black women have been portrayed globally in ways that continue to perpetuate stereotypes of them as overly promiscuous, prone to criminality, unintelligent, lazy, or strong enough to endure harsh realities and treatment. Essentially, their “Blackness” is used to further dehumanize them and place them in conditions wherein their exploitation is justified, and morally explicable (Crenshaw, 2013). The construction of Black women as others, from the perspective of Black men (as Black women’s ambitions and concerns were largely excluded from the Black nationalist movement) and White feminists, further politicized and sculpted the Black feminist movement, as their needs and voices were placed on the very edges of feminist and Black nationalist agendas.

A major and essential tenet of Black feminism is self-determination, and redefining Black womanhood in such a way that empowers Black women to erect positive, self-derived images of themselves, rather than the denigrated images and messages they receive about themselves from the larger hegemonic white, and smaller hegemonic Black male community. Progressing from viewing themselves as an other human being to viewing themselves as another human being, in doing so, Black women move from persecuted persons to reclaiming and positioning themselves as subjects, rather than objects. They begin determining their own reality, shaping inimitable identities over ascribed collective identities, along with naming and narrating their own story (Collins, 2013; hooks, 1989). Therefore, Black feminist thought embodies nonfigurative and conjectural interpretations of Black women's actuality by those who inhabit it, Black women. Ultimately, Black feminism can be thought of as a course of action that positions Black women in the center, yet that involves engaging both men and women, and the whole of society to engage in a struggle for self-awareness and

liberation toward an authentic humanist vision of a free world, in which every individual can unreservedly employ her or his agency to self-define and actualize her or his greatest potential.

In bell hooks' (1989) seminal work, *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking Black*, she explores the intersection of the public and private sphere of Black women, and investigates the meaning of feminist consciousness. hooks (1989) focuses on the concept of self-recovery in overcoming white, racist, and male hegemonic milieu. Resistance is also a main theme of bell hooks' work, as she urges the use of voice as a tool and weapon against the objectification of the oppressed, moving them toward subject status. She also discusses obstacles to finding voice and talking back as systems of racial, gender based, and class domination. Other crucial elements in the opening chapters are the various areas that Black adults (male and female) and the Black community (including churches, etc.) dominate and silence girl children, while boys are supported and encouraged to speak up. Girls are ostracized and viewed negatively for speaking up, while boys are praised. bell hooks references numerous variances between the handling of boys and girls in regard to speech, she also writes about the necessity to "protect the spirit from forces that would break it" (p. 7). Breaking of spirit and finding ones voice is a "true speaking" and "an act of resistance, a political gesture" (p. 8) given that anything which challenges hegemony is a hazard that must be eradicated. Self-recovery, reclaiming parts of the individual self that have been essentialized and defined by a collective is a major theme in the first section, given this reclaiming is how oppressed individuals find voice and are empowered to *talk back*.

Black feminists like hooks (1989), Collins (1998), Davis (1981), and others each emphasize the importance of including Men of Color as allies in the feminist movement, and

address perspective of the exclusion of men altogether within the feminist moment, and how impossible and undesirable such an act would be. These scholars also examine domestic violence and how both men and women are harmed by such an abusive way to gain dominance over another. Similar to Freire's (1970) oppressor/oppressed theory, whereas the oppressor is also too deeply wounded due to his/her need to oppress another, all genders experience and capitulate the harm of social interaction. Because of the economic and societal abuse Men of Color endure, the powerlessness felt in those realms infiltrate the home, creating circumstances where the frustration and powerlessness feelings are ignited in the home and community against women and other men. This standpoint that regards the importance of supportive female and male relationships as a key component to Black women's rights is known as womanism, and is a respected perspective among Black feminists.

Patricia Hill Collins' Feminist Epistemology

Collins' (1995; 1998; 2013) work pertains to Black feminist knowledge as distinct from Eurocentric, positivistic knowledge. First, her epistemology is based off of the lived experience of "connected" people (as opposed to an objectified position). Second, Collins' epistemology relies on the use of dialogue to highlight the emergence of multiple subjects (i.e., an I to a we). Third, her epistemology is openly value-laden, while remaining situated in the collective. This relates to her fourth epistemological point of personal accountability, which reflects how one's personal beliefs (as a form of knowing) can more likely contribute to social justice. This epistemological posture reflects her concept of intersectionality, or how the individual and the social negotiate belief (knowledge, particularly through words) into social action.

Collins (1998) is primarily concerned with knowledge and epistemology, but especially how each are influenced by the politics of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc., and how these influences affect social systems. To this end, in this text her primary thesis is to illustrate that ideas and knowledge are intrinsically connected to power. In this way, for example, she posited that education systems and curricular content are used to promulgate power systems of the elite onto those without such social status. For her, then, education, like the social theory she espouses, has an emancipatory capacity through struggle and towards justice.

The structure of Collins' scholarly dossier as a whole takes on a unique complexion, at least for typical academic audiences. While much of her scholarship pertains to themes that are characteristic of social and critical theory, her tact in addressing these issues includes intentionally neglecting reference to many of the so-called big names in theory, as to remain consistent with her critique of how power is proffered in education and related epistemology, (Collins, 1998). Her tone is subject focused in a self-dialectic form, and her general use of language was intended to include variegated and diverse readers rather than exclude. To this end, her work extends how Black feminist thought can be employed as a provocative form of critical social theory.

Collins (1998) posits her "outsider-within," or capacity of an individual to maintain multiple identity positions within a community and its power structures. This includes people native to a community who are no longer singularly affixed to that community, and also it refers to people not originally affixed to that community who were able to gain access to the knowledge of the community that they now inhabit or visit. Collins believes that Black women embody the outsider-within role, given they maintain dual identities (as

women and as Black people) but yet are able to navigate between various communities and roles. For her, this is the center of the Black feminist posture that affords the person the capacity to challenge current and historic social and political conditions. Collins points to three themes related to Black women's activism including racial solidarity, structural analyses of Black economic disadvantage, and the centrality of moral and ethical principles to Black political struggles. She asserts that there is collateral damage that is not limited to sacrifices in Black women's identity as women and as individuals. These damages are further masked by a political ethos whereby the Black woman gets consumed in the public versus private identity struggle.

Although Collins' epistemology is grounded in shared multiplicitous identity structures (particularly for Black women), she suggests that Black women in a political collectivity develop oppositional knowledge through self-definition and self-determination. She further suggests that this is done in stages starting with "breaking silence" whereby an individual is to speak out against some kind of institutional knowledge, with a view to advancing the cause of a collective group. Interestingly, Collins asserts that the consequence of breaking the silence might reveal contradictory ideas in the womanist movement, including a moral and epistemological superiority of Black women derived from Black nationalism.

Collins (1998) examines Black feminism with three specific discourses (sociology, postmodernism, and Afrocentrism) to ascertain how Black feminism can preserve its oppositional/resistance quality in various scholarly and political contexts. Collins poses the question, "what is the actual and potential utility of each discourse for Black feminist praxis?"(p. 89) and is posed with the dilemma of how to shape the limits of each discourse;

what brands of discourse analysis to employ; how each discourse contributes to current power relationships; the complications that arise from striving to maintain an oppositional character; and ultimately, how to effectively utilize particular components of each discourse, in such a way that the questionable aspects of that discourse is acknowledged, yet not absorbed.

Concurrently, Collins (1998) advances the “visionary pragmatism” model for Black feminist activism, that states critical social theorists must remain conscious of the content and process of activism, but moreover how this activism relates to power. Collins places standpoint theory and the notion of intersectionality together in such a way to provide a useful template for Black feminist theory to be used as an emancipatory vision and practical action plan. In this manner, Collins provides a system for analysis, which is different than others that suppress the complexities of Black women's experiences as both individuals and members of a group. Also, similar to bell hooks idea of “talking back,” Collins writes of naming/testifying, in which Black women come to voice-a political act of testifying and affirmation of self, as well as an act of participating in dialogue about their own personhood. The portraits of the participants in this study exemplify the concept of “talking back” as all seven are deeply humanizing and holistic recreations and representations of the unique, complex and fluid phenomenological lives of seven women engaged in “being” in the world and striving to find meaning in their lives. Finally, similar to bell hooks, again, Collins conjectures that Black feminism must be situated within the experiences of Black women; however the movement must utilize various knowledge foundations and theories in order to remain relevant to the lives of Black women. The next section addresses relevant research related to the intersectionality of Black women.

Empirical Research on Black Women

Pyant and Yanico (1991) found that Black women may be more susceptible and report experiencing mental health issues more consistently due to chronic stressors over time like discrimination, partner life stress issues, gender and race micro aggressions and discrimination, compared to white males, Black males, or white women. However, one's attitude about being Black and being female (along with other factors such as internal locus of control, self-esteem, resilience, coping skills) and one's perception and interpretation of potentially stressful events impact their psychological well-being as well. Hence, those who have strong and positive self-concepts of their racial identity experience less mental health issues and are better able to deal with stressors related to race. Thus, developing positive Black identity is vital (Cross, 1971; Helms, 1990).

Links between gender roles and psychological well-being have also been discovered through various research (Baruch & Barnett, 1975; Maracek & Kravetz, 1977). Black women who had less traditional gender attitudes and roles (nontraditional) reported less psychological issues or stress compared to those with more traditional roles and attitudes, (Black feminists reported higher levels of self-acceptance and self-esteem than non feminists, etc.) (Brattesani & Silverthorne, 1978; Cherniss, 1972; Roznafsky & Hendel, 1977; Slane & Morrow, 1981).

Additionally, studies have shown a relationship between racial identity and psychological well-being, based on Cross' (1971) stages of Black identity development (Cokley, 2002; Parham & Helms, 1981; Vandiver, Cross, Worrell, & Fhagen-Smith, 2002). From these studies, some researchers found that the stronger and more positive one's perception of her or his racial identity, the higher their self-esteem and less reporting of

psychological or physical problems. However, the more a woman identified and embraced pro-White/anti-Black attitudes (pre-encounter stage) and beliefs the lower her self-esteem and higher reporting of more psychological and physical issues (Boisnier, 2003). Such findings indicate that Black women must explore and come to terms with what it means to be a Black individual in the world, and make peace with their Blackness in order to thrive and counter the psychological and physical harm that pro-White/anti-Black ideologies can create. The results in this study supported this indication, given that an important piece of developing positive perceptions and feelings about their racial identity for all seven participants was embracing their Blackness, and constructing pro-Black, pro-female ideologies that countered the negative anti-Black, anti-female messages they received in society, and enabled them to feel as though they were capable, competent, and worthy human beings.

Black women also face many challenges in the workplace. The phrase double jeopardy describes the increased and enhanced disadvantage of Black women due to the adverse consequences of the Black and female subordinate identities (Almquist, 1975; Beal, n.d.; Bowleg, 2008; Crenshaw, 1989; Epstein, 1973; Settles, 2006). Studies have shown that Blacks are seen as less effective leaders than whites (Chung-Herrera & Lankau, 2005; Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008), and men are perceived as more effective than women in leadership roles (Brenner, Tomkiewicz, & Schein, 1989; Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989; Nye & Forsyth, 1991; Schein, 1973; Schein, 2001; Scott & Brown, 2006; Willemsen, 2002). Hence, because Black women have dual subordinate identities as both Black and female, Black women are perceived as less effective and competent in roles of leadership than white men, white women, or Black men. A study by Rosette and Livingston

(2012) concluded that when failure occurs in leadership Black women are judged more harshly and negatively than others due to the biases and negative stereotypes attached to their subordinate identities and to their ability to be successful leaders. Concurrently, Black women are far more vulnerable to the micro aggressions related to racism and sexism and must learn to navigate those tensions within their work spaces and milieus.

Dehumanizing and sexually exploitative images of Black women relating back to slavery that depict them as either a jezebel (promiscuous mulatto woman who can't control her sexual desire), a mammie (dark skinned overweight house slave and servant), or a sapphire (woman who emasculates Black men) have persisted in American society along with the new image of the Black woman as super woman (the one who can do and handle all of life's pressures without succumbing to them). Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, and Jackson (2010) performed a study with a sample of 270 African American girls with an average age of 13 who attended Philadelphia middle schools. The modern jezebel scale was adapted to use with the girls to assess their identification with negative stereotypes of Black women/girls, along with other scales to assess other aspects of sexuality and risk behavior. Girls who strongly identified with the modern day jezebel negative images of Black women also embraced colorism and a more European standard of beauty while rejecting traditional Black beauty. Colorism, which is skin color stratification among Black people (Okazawa, Robinson, & Ward, 1987) further increases the sexual and physical objectification of Black women and their bodies, while simultaneously increasing their likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behaviors at early ages, due to the equating their worth with their sexuality and physical appearance. There was also a correlation between strong/positive academic self-concept and avoiding risky behavior due to being focused on school, grades and academics,

even though some girls reported positive academic self-concept and still engaged in risky behavior, due to strong ethnic group identification (Steele, 1997), including negative stereotypes and colorism. Thus, research suggests that it is not enough to foster a strong academic self-concept, Black girls must be taught how to think critically about the messages and images they receive and see about their Black femaleness so they aren't susceptible to colorism and other harmful ideologies. Bolstering Steele's (1997) research findings about the potential harmful psychological effects of negative stereotypes and controlling images of Black femalehood, in this study five of the seven women disclosed experiences of dealing with negative perceptions of themselves as children, which generally manifested as a lack of expectations in their academic achievement, and personal goals. A participant Gaia shared how the expectations and opinions about her abilities as a child or her lack thereof based solely on her race and gender, pushed her to defy those negative stereotypes, and challenged her to do the opposite of what people expected her to do. For example, instead of trying out for the step team (which was what was expected of Black girls) she tried out for the Shakespearean club, and debate team. Instead of trying out for the sprinting contests, she tried out for the cross country team to show people that she could not only run fast but slow as well, and that her talent was not tied to her being Black, it was tied to her abilities and effort as a person. Hence, this example and others highlight that from as early as childhood, Black women are subjected to controlling images and stereotypes about their personhood, even within the community and must learn to navigate issues of sexism, racism, colorism or fall prey to the detrimental consequences and effects such ideologies and beliefs have on their self-esteem, educational outcomes, and general well-being. Black women's ability to exercise human agency in a productive and positive way, and shift in focus toward their

humanization rather than their racialization, sexualization, and social exploitation are crucial in their pursuit for life meaning and personal significance. Findings in this study suggest that crucial elements in Black women's efforts to counter such dehumanizing narratives and humanize themselves, is through the social support networks they develop and enact with other Black women, and the Black community (i.e., othermothering, kinship relationships) along with meaning making processes that foster pride and resilience in their Black female identity.

Existential Psychology

History. The discovery of meaning and truth is the central focus of existential psychology. Existential psychologists are concerned with the being-ness of human beings. This is an appropriate framework for Black women, given the purpose of this study is to investigate, illuminate, and bear witness to the various existences, including the physical being of Black women. Existential psychology emerged in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s, after a growing segment of psychologists became dissatisfied and began to question the applicability and praxis of deterministic, and pathologizing theories in regard to the individual human being. Leading European and American existential psychologists include, Binswanger (1958, 1963), Boss (1963), Frankl (1985), Jaspers (1956), Kuhn (1958), R. D. Laing (1960); Bugental (1965, 1976), May (1958, 1961, 1983), Krug (2010), Moustakas (1956), Rogers (1961), Wheelis (1958, 1966), Craig (2008), Vontress (1988), Jenkins (1967), Schneider (2012), and Yalom (1980).

Karl Jaspers, Ludwig Binswanger, Eugene Minkowski, and Erwin Strauss, who are often referred to as the first existential psychologists, were extremely critical of such analytical and rigid theoretical foundations of assessment, which they believed failed to

provide a holistic understanding of human nature. Thus, they set out to create a form of psychological analysis that considered the phenomenological nature of the human being (i.e., the lived experience). However, a distinct phenomenologically based method was not officially developed until Binswanger (1958) and Boss (1963). Binswanger's work on the phenomenology of love (1958) was heavily influenced by existential philosophers like Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Martin Buber. Binswanger created a method that he referred to as "a phenomenological hermeneutic exegesis on an ontic-anthropological level" (Binswanger, 1958, p. 269-270). Boss (1963) soon after developed *daseinsanalysis*, which combined psychoanalysis and hermeneutics creating an existential phenomenological approach to investigating what it means to be human. In America, humanistic psychologists and psychiatrists embraced such theories, given that the human potential movement was underway by that time. Rollo May, Carl Rogers, and R.D. Laing are considered the fore leaders in the American existentialist movement. Differing from the European form, American existential psychology was more accessible to a larger audience, making some of the more complex and abstract concepts of existentialism feasible.

Existential psychology can be seen as an extension of depth, merging the two traditions of psychoanalysis and continental philosophy (particularly that sector which focuses on the phenomenology of being and of what it means to be human). Erik Craig (2012) describes existential psychology in the following way:

Existential psychology is most essentially an approach to investigating and understanding the human as human, not as a category, object, or entity like other sorts of things we encounter in the world, but as that kind of being who is concerned with and understands being, including its own being. In other words, existential

psychologists eschew any view of human beings as passive entities that can be acted upon or manipulated like mere objects, the meaning and destiny of which are determined extrinsically. Rather, existential psychology emphasizes that human beings exist as free agents of their own existence, agents who not only understand other human beings but also that they are understood by these others who are likewise free proprietors of their own existence (p.2).

Existential psychology is grounded on the suppositions that in order to understand the whole person, one must know those elements that enable her or him to construct her or his world, such as interpersonal relationships, the multiple layers of self-awareness one possesses, the role of free will and active participation in one's life circumstances, and the desire for purpose and meaning in individuals. Hence, the whole of one's existence is considered.

Because the existence of an individual is always unique, the problem and complexities of existence are the primary issues (e.g., the meaning of being). The journey to derive meaning and purpose to one's life is marred in endless outcomes, wherein the individual is faced with numerous choices. The weight of the overwhelming responsibility of freedom in a world where no meaning exists outside of what the individual creates for herself or himself.

Human beings are imperil of loneliness, meaninglessness, emptiness, guilt, and isolation, thus, this produces anxiety (angst) that the individual must traverse. Failure to deal with the anxiety may lead to various neuroses. Also linked to the concept of anxiety is the idea of absurdity.

Yalom's Four Existential Givens/Ultimate Concerns

Irvin Yalom is recognized as one of the modern pioneers of existential psychology, as he made many of the concepts accessible to the general public, particularly through his

philosophies on the existential givens and ultimate concerns. Irvin Yalom (1980) asserts that there are certain immutable truths to human existence that every individual must confront and reconcile within her- or himself. He refers to these tenets as ultimate concerns or givens of existence. There are four givens, freedom/responsibility, isolation, meaninglessness, and death. These ultimate concerns are deeply tied to the search for meaning in life as they provide foundation and context in which significance is sought and attained. While these givens are intrinsically woven into the psyche of the human being, because they exist on the subconscious level of awareness, most people are not fully conscious of them until events occur which push them to the forefront of consciousness, such as a life threatening illness, death of a child, the end of a marriage, etc. Thomas Greening (1992) added that to each ultimate concern there are 3 potential responses: 1) Simplistic over-emphasis on the positive aspect of the paradox. False triumph over the difficulties presented by the challenge. 2) Simplistic over-emphasis on the negative aspect of the paradox. Fatalistic surrender to the difficulties presented by the challenge. 3) Confrontation, creative response, and transcendence of the challenge. (1992, p. 1). The four givens are fluid; always changing as at any given point in time one may thrust to the surface and take precedence over the others.

Death. Death is the dominating existential given, as on some level it is the underpinning of all human interactions. One is always moving toward death with each breath, each day that passes. “The fear of death plays a major role in our internal experience; it haunts as nothing else does; it rumbles continuously under the surface; it is a dark, unsettling presence at the rim of consciousness” (Yalom, 1980, p. 27). Despite the anxiety it provokes “death is the condition that makes it possible for us to live life in an authentic fashion” (p. 31). Yalom asserts that “although the physicality of death destroys man, the idea

of death saves him"(p. 30). In order to shield oneself from death anxiety, Yalom claims that the individual creates two interconnected defense schemas. "Most individuals defend against death anxiety through both a delusional belief in their own inviolability [specialness] and a belief in the ultimate rescuer" (1980, p. 141). Cultural belief in a personal god, and childhood experiences reinforce one's acceptance of specialness and an ultimate rescuer. Data from this study corroborates Yalom's (1980) posit of specialness and the ultimate rescuer as mechanisms to combat existential and death anxiety, as each participant adopted cultural specialness constructs and/or a belief in a god or something greater than themselves that was ultimately in control and responsible for their lives.

Specialness. The belief that human beings are somehow different from each other and everything around them, and that the natural progression of the human life cycle and natural law will change or make exceptions for specific people is a concept known as specialness. "The belief in personal specialness is extraordinarily adaptive and permits us to emerge from nature and to tolerate the accompanying dysphasia: the isolation; the awareness of our smallness and the awesomeness of the external world " (p. 121). This idea is strongly connected with deeper dimensions of death as such a belief in one's own uniqueness and exemptions from human nature acts as both a barrier, and motivator in ones attitude about her or his own death and life. Specialness functions as a protective mechanism against the anxiety and ensuing despair that may arise in the human being who is confronted with her or his own physical end. It can also be a strong motivator for one to fully engage in life, imbuing the individual with courage to confront difficult life circumstances, and also to take risks in life. However, it is through the embracement of the finite and randomness of existence, and the acceptance of ordinariness that one is able to move beyond the need to

exalt herself or himself above others and the normal human experience. Yalom (1980) stresses that

Accepting ones personal death means facing a number of other unpalatable truths, each of which has its own force-field of anxiety: one that is finite; that ones life really comes to an end; that the world will persist nonetheless; that one is one of many-no more, no less; that the universe does not acknowledge ones specialness; that all our lives we have carried counterfeit vouchers; and finally, certain stark immutable dimensions of existence are beyond one's influence (p.120).

Elaborating on Yalom's concept of the ultimate rescuer, Ernesto Spinelli (2006) states, "this ultimate rescuer may be perceived as a supernatural entity or force which guides, watches over and protects us at all times, which is omnipresent, and which often bestows 'ultimate' reward or punishment upon us. Most importantly, this version of the ultimate rescuer minimizes the power of death, reducing its finality to a mere turning point, or step, into another realm of experience (p. 311).

Freedom. Yalom (1980) contends that freedom is the antithesis of death, and is replete with uncertainty and anxiety, due to the limitless opportunities and responsibility inherent in freedom. From an existential perspective freedom is unbound, lacking any type of structure, given that "the universe is contingent; everything that is, could have been created differently, and that the human being is not only free, but is doomed to freedom" (p. 220).

An important feature of freedom is responsibility. Yalom (1980) defines responsibility as authorship "to be aware of responsibility is to be aware of creating ones own self, destiny, life predicament, feelings and, if such be the case, ones own suffering" (p. 218). When considering freedom and responsibility Black women are in an interesting quandary as

Yalom states, "unless the individual is free to constitute the world in a number of ways, then the concept of responsibility has no meaning"(p. 220). Given historical oppression and various social delimiters that Black women have endured, which grossly restricted their power to have authorship over their own lives, is the responsibility Yalom describes that is intricately attached to freedom different for Black women? Or despite these social and historical impositions, are they still also held to the same level of personal responsibility as those who were not subjected to such restrictions, since Yalom states, "one is also entirely responsible for one's life, not only for one's actions but for one's failures to act" (p. 220). To insist that one is always responsible negates collective social responsibility of social injustice in such circumstances as slavery and structural racism. Clarification is needed that one may not always be responsible for what happens in her or his life, but is responsible for how specific situations are handled and then allowed to persist in one's life.

Another aspect of freedom is groundlessness. It is defined as the "subjective experience of responsibility awareness" (p. 221), meaning one comprehends that there is no meaning in life and to life except what the he or she the author creates. The world one lives in is a continual co-construction, in which everyone is erecting her or his own myths and cognitive belief systems to satisfy the human need for significance. This level of realization is rarely achieved as it is buried deeper within the subconscious than that of death, and while death anxiety can ultimately be quelled, the anxiety of groundlessness is so unsettling that it often remains beyond individual awareness, as it challenges the notion of any real meaning.

Isolation. Human beings are always searching for ways to fill the ever growing, and mutating voids of existence. At the core of the need for connection is the ultimate concern of isolation. Yalom (1980) mentions three forms of isolation: interpersonal- separation from

others; intrapersonal-separation from oneself; and existential-separation from the world. Existential isolation is the central focus for Yalom who proclaims that no “matter how close each of us becomes to another there remains a final unbridgeable gap; each of us enters existence alone and must depart from it alone. “The existential conflict is thus the tension between our awareness of our absolute isolation and our wish to be part of a larger whole, ‘(Yalom, 1980, p. 9). Yalom further describes existential isolation as a vale of loneliness, which is intimately bound to death and freedom, as one’s struggles and clash with those particular ultimate concerns inescapably leads her or him into this vale, as he or she apprehends that he or she is ultimately alone, must die alone, and must define her or his own life and meaning, alone.

Individuals try to defend themselves against existential isolation in many ways. The creation and belief in the ultimate rescuer is one method, as there is comfort taken in believing that through it all, and in the end, there is a god there who will walk with and remain by one’s side unto death. Dependency on others, finding value only in the eyes of another, sexual compulsion, and altruism are all manners in which individuals try to shield themselves from aloneness. Yalom believes, consistent with Erich Fromm (1969), that human beings are so afraid to be alone that they are willing to endure untenable circumstances and relationships, in order to feel a sense of belongingness and security. They are, in essence, willing to sacrifice themselves, their agency, and opportunity to construct their own lives in order to avoid existential isolation. Hence, they attempt to fill the void at all cost.

Consequently, Black women have always faced their own existential isolation in an historical and societal sense. Slavery, racism, and other social ills have forced a

consciousness of physical, mental, and spiritual separation, as the aforementioned factors did not allow for grand illusions of stable familial, parent/child, or friendly relationships. Jenkins (1982) contends that "racism does put an added burden on the psychological adaptation of Blacks by presenting direct assaults on the sense of self and the self-activity of Afro Americans. Since the earliest days of slavery, racist practices and ideology, extending beyond the individual behavior of white persons into the institutional structure and cultural mores of the United States, have had as their goal the dehumanization of Black people" (p. 145). How does a constant and deep awareness of one's own isolation shape the lives of those whom such a consciousness is forced upon? This very question was answered in this study accordingly, the participants' deep awareness of their isolation and otherness in society, which increased their feelings of physical and emotional vulnerability incited them to forge meaningful and supportive relationships.

Meaninglessness. While the query of why human beings live can be disregarded, how human beings live cannot, as it is the how that provides meaning (Yalom, 1980). Yalom poses the question, "Perhaps we can forgo the question, why do we live? But it is not easy to postpone the question, how shall we live?" (p. 427). The individual is beset by the haphazardness of existence, meaning the pull between seeking meaning yet acknowledging that one's own insignificance in the vastness of life, for the universe is meaninglessness, aside from what the human being herself or himself creates. Because the universe is indifferent toward humanity, the comprehension and awareness of both freedom and the absurdity in life liberates the individual to live in the present moment, and enjoy her or his existence now. For Yalom, meaning in life relates to one's ability to ascertain coherence and patterns in everyday interactions. There is an order to the individual's world that provides a

sense of stability and significance. Ironically, the individual is situated within a world where no such order exists except that he or she conjures; yet without this subjective reality the individual is lost. Human beings need meaning more than they need air, for without meaning what purpose does one have to breathe air?

Yalom's resolution for meaninglessness is engagement, for "wholehearted engagement in any of the infinite array of life's activities not only disarms the galactic view but enhances the possibility of one's competing the patterning of events of one's life in some coherent fashion. (1980, p. 482). There are myriad ways a person can provide meaning to her or his life. Some choose to create a framework from religion, while others use creativity, altruism, hedonism, commitment to causes, etc., (Yalom, 1980). Regardless of the methods chosen, it is one's commitment to her or his life that safeguards against the existential vacuum of meaninglessness.

Application of the Givens to Black Women

When applying Yalom's existential givens to Black women, it can be argued that Black women are more aware and conscious of the givens due to their social positionality. As an "other" vulnerable to the power and authority of a dominant, hegemonic white culture, the confrontation of death, meaninglessness, isolation and freedom are heavily and tightly coiled within their everyday experience of trying to negotiate, navigate and find meaning in a hostile society, and in light of an indiscriminate universe. However, as Jenkins (1982) states, "even in the presence of unpleasant givens Blacks have been able (dialectically) to conceptualize alternative views of themselves and other possibilities open to them. In many instances they have struggled to actualize these alternatives and they have had varying degrees of success historically" (p. 9).

Jenkins (1982) further suggests that “slavery poverty, and racism have been and are dehumanizing to the extent that they lead one to give in to being continually preoccupied with the miseries of the present, but many Afro Americans have managed to use their creative human capacities in modest or striking and socially contributor ways to resist being dehumanized" (p. 20). It is precisely these ingenious strategies and coping mechanisms that Black women have developed and demonstrated over time that foster resiliency, and guide them in creating meaning and significance in oftentimes hostile and demeaning milieus.

Meaning in Life

The value of deriving meaning in life has underscored human history, as early as the Greek philosopher Aristotle, and his concept of eudaimonia in which he asserted that one’s life only thrives when it is full of continual meaning and purpose (1998). Maddi (1970) adds that without meaning in life an inescapable meaninglessness develops which increases the likelihood of a multitude of maladies and afflictions on the individual, in which all hope and reason for life is challenged.

Frankl (1985) considers meaning in life to be one of the most essential elements for life. For Frankl, based on his own experiences as a survivor of the Holocaust, survival in even the direst circumstances required the ability to derive meaning from suffering. He further asserted that maintaining a tragic optimism in the face of the tragic triad (pain, guilt, and death). Tragic optimism is “an optimism in the face of tragedy and in view of the human potential which at its best allows for 1). turning suffering into a human achievement and accomplishment; 2) deriving from guilt the opportunity to change oneself for the better; and 3) deriving from life’s transitoriness an incentive to take responsible action” (Frankl, 1959; p. 138).

Maslow (1968) considers meaning an essential privation as it embodies all that is significant and that which provides purpose for one's life. Such elements in one's life express importance, worth, goodwill, and dignity (Flanagan, 1996). Hence, the act of seeking meaning is a prevailing impetus, conveying the most cavernous yet fundamental elements of human existence (Frankl, 1959; Wong, 1998). Meaning is also a necessary feature for optimal functioning as a human being (Ryff & Singer, 1998). Meaning in life is considered an individual construct (Wong, 1989). Meaning in life is unique to each individual, given that there is no universal understanding of meaning that can be applied nor would be adequate for everyone, nor is there one way to acquire a sense of meaningfulness.

Yalom (1980) declares that there are two forms of meaning: terrestrial meaning and cosmic meaning. Terrestrial meaning (the meaning of my life) "embraces purpose: one who possesses a sense of meaning experiences life as having some purpose or function to be fulfilled, some overriding goal or goals to which to apply oneself" (Yalom, 1980; p. 423). Cosmic meaning "implies some design existing outside of and superior to the person and invariably refers to some magical or spiritual ordering of the universe" (Yalom, 1980; p. 423). Becker (1992) stresses the attention paid to selecting and pursuing behaviors, and activities that are meaningful, adding depth to one's life. Hence, through aligning beliefs, values, with behaviors and actions, the individual creates a value-based cognitive system that can increase one's satisfaction and worth (Wong, 1989) causing the individual to feel as though her or his life is fulfilling and worthwhile (Ryff & Singer, 1998).

Consequently, philosophers and academics approach the study of life meaning quite differently. Philosophers are mainly interested in the meaning of life, while academics are generally interested in meaning in life (Wong, 1989). Reker & Wong (1988) contend that

both approaches are relevant in evaluating life meaning. Wong (1989) utilizes each style within his analysis of the three components of life meaning (cognitive, affective, and motivational factors). The cognitive factor entails the cognitive belief system, which is the creation of a framework for meaning through which life events, and activities are filtered. The affective component details the feelings of worthiness and satisfaction with one's life. The motivational component focuses on factors that increase or limit the achievement one's goals and pursuits. Possessing a framework for life meaning is important as the framework is the starting point/foundation from which subjective significance is experienced and explored.

Research on Life Meaning

People are assumed to be driven by the search for meaning and the attainment of meaning in life (Frankl, 1959; Wong, 1998; Yalom, 1980). However, they differ in how consistently, intentionally, or intensely they seek meaning. Some theories view the search for meaning in life a robust emblem of well being (Frankl, 1963; Maddi, 1970), while other theories view the search for meaning in life as an indication of dysfunction. Baumeister (1991) and Linger (1998) posit that one only seeks meaning when she or he has experienced trauma or when her or his needs are not being fulfilled. An alternative perspective is the combination of both seeking meaning representing healthy psychological disposition, yet also capable of stemming from unhealthy motivation (Reker, 2000).

The construct of meaning in life has been demarcated in many ways. Reker (2000) theorized life meaning as “the cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment” (p. 41). Yalom (1980) described meaning as maintaining order, stability and purpose in life. While Frankl (1984) asserted that the fundamental drive for the individual

was the search for meaning in life, which he described as the will to meaning. Meaning has also been defined through the use of specific behaviors to assist in shaping one's experience, and helping derive meaning and purpose through a specific cognitive lens (Reker, Peacock, & Wong, 1987; Yalom, 1980).

Consequently, social relationships are strongly associated with a deep sense of meaning in life, and isolation is strongly associated with a lack of meaning and increased feelings of meaninglessness (Debats, 1995; Yalom 1980). Research has shown that meaning is a central theme in the individual's life, especially as one moves through her or his lifespan (Helminiak, 1995). Although research has been done on meaning in life (Debats, 1999), Harris and Standard (2001), and Krause (2004) assert that there still remains a dearth of research and attention in the psychological field in regard to meaning in life.

There are multiple dimensions to one's sense of meaning in life. Such dimensions include the spiritual (Waisberg & Porter, 1994), cognitive, affective, and behavioral (Debats, 1990; Maddi, 1967; Wong, 1998). Acceptance of self and others, engaging in spiritual activities, setting and achieving goals, and developing strong interpersonal relationships, and social connections are the primary ways that life meaning is created. Areas that are strong bases of life meaning are meaningful relationships, love, marriage, work, parenting, hobbies, etc. (Baum & Stewart, 1990; Josselson, 2000).

Research on meaning in life has indicated that the life meaning construct is positively correlated with hope, as those with meaning experience fewer depressive symptoms (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005), increased levels of self esteem, and life satisfaction (Halama, 2007), and score higher in happiness (Bhogle & Prakash, 1993). Studies on meaning in life also reveal strong associations between meaning in life, contentment, and spiritual well-being

(Debats, 1996; 1998; Harris & Standard, 2001; Park, Peterson, & Ruch, 2009; Scannell, Allen & Burton, 2002).

Studies have also shown solid links in relation to life satisfaction and unemployed mothers (Chamberlain & Zika, 1998) and college students (Debats, 1990; Pan, Wong, Joubert, & Chan, 2008) once again suggesting that one's ability to create and find ways to add meaning to her or his life is vital to one's overall subjective wellbeing. Research done on mixed gender adult populations illustrates self-efficacy and meaning in life as strongly correlated (Skrabski, Kopp, Rozsa, Rethelyi & Rahe, 2005), as well as overall physical and mental health outcomes for older adult populations, and college students (Krause, 2004; Lindeman & Verkasalo, 1996; Moore, 1997; Parquart, 2002; Reker, 1997). Additionally, empirical studies have indicated that those who possess meaning in life are less likely to experience apathy, meaninglessness, ennui (Frankl, 1966), or anxiety, depression, and despair, or other forms of psychological suffering (Debats, 1990; Harris & Standard, 2001; Hong, 2006; Mascaro, 2007).

Also, research has found that gender has a causal influence on meaning in life and psychological and physical health, suggesting that women experience the meaning in life construct in a unique manner (Debats, 1996; Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; McAdams, 1996; Reker & Chamberlain, 2000). Meaning in life is an essential developmental component for women. For instance, researchers concluded that among female college students, meaning or a lack thereof was related to more depressive symptoms (Mascaro, 2007). Studies have described women's attempts at creating meaning in life as a constant, life-long progression shaped by various life stages (McAdams, 1996; Reker & Chamberlain, 2000). A study on an underprivileged, female rural population found that meaning, internal motivation,

connectedness, and spirituality were all significant factors in determining individual wellness (Gill, Minton & Myers, 2005). Accordingly, in a study that used a sample of single, heterosexual women without children, in their mid 40s, strong social and familial relationships, independence, and lifestyle choices were significant factors for those women in developing a sense of meaning in life (Robinson-Rowe, 2002). Furthermore, the older a woman becomes, the more likely she is to experience an existential crisis or crisis of meaning (Ryff & Singer, 1996).

While the concept that searching for meaning in life is positive and increases well-being, it has primarily been done in the context of studying those who seek meaning and then create meaningful narratives about a specific traumatic event or experience, not populations who continually experience stressful and traumatic events on a daily or fairly consistent day, such as African-American women. In other words, stressful events are an exception in the individuals' lives, rather than the individuals having challenging lives. A study by Sales, Merrill and Fivush (2013) found that seeking to derive meaning in particular circumstances (meaning making narratives) could actually reduce psychological well-being and that personal characteristics like optimism, hardiness, and resilience may override the need for meaning making narratives. Further supporting the above finding, in this study a specific meaning making narrative that arose among many of the women and functioned as a tool to increase psychological well-being while providing meaning and purpose was the Strong Black Woman archetype. This paradigm represented strength, resilience and cultural pride, and was a counter narrative to prevalent debased depictions of Black womanhood. Consequently, all of the aforementioned factors and influences provide strong support for why it is imperative that more existential yet deeply personal and reflexive epistemologies,

analyses, methodologies, and praxis are considered and applied to reflect the multi-dimensional, rich, and textured lives of Black women inhabiting their own bodies and spaces, within a society that continually threatens to erase their very essence both as individuals and human beings. While there are some studies that examine meaning in life in both mixed gender samples, and some that also investigate meaning specifically directed at women, there is a dearth of information and literature in research that investigates Black women and meaning in life. The main objective of this study was to fill the gap in empirical research and literature on the existential experiences of Black women.

Religion & Spirituality

Religion and spirituality are central aspects in the lives of many African American women, including those of this study (Ajibade, Hook, Utsey, Davis, & Van Tongeren, 2016; Higginbotham, 1997). Within the Black community religious institutions, such as churches, have operated as very important spaces for African American women to practice various elements of faith and spirituality, but also have served as places in which they could explore and discuss social and political issues impacting them, as well as fellowship and organize with others to access community resources (Jang, Borenstein, Chiriboga, Phillips, & Mortimer, 2006). Furthermore, another key aspect that religious institutions provided Black women was a viable and safe space to express, navigate, and make meaning of their existence as women and as Black individuals and the challenges they faced living in a hegemonic, patriarchal society (Mattis & Watson, 2008; Taylor & Chatters, 1995). Rhea, one of the first women that I interviewed expressed from the very beginning of our interview and throughout that her faith and strong belief in a higher power was what allowed her to endure the oftentimes challenging racial inequities she faced in her life. She stated

repeatedly, “I don’t know where I would be if it weren’t for my faith in God because it’s hard in this world. We as Black people have so much to bare that sometimes it’s too much.”

Conversely, while using these spaces as safe havens, there were also elements of sexism that Black women had to negotiate their roles within these religious institutions, as males primarily dominated church leadership. Despite this, religion and spirituality were vital components to how Black women coped with various life stressors, particularly discrimination, racism, sexism, and utilized these institutions as a source of social support and advocacy for political and social issues important to them, both within and outside of the church (Reed & Neville, 2014).

Spirituality can be obscure and challenging to characterize. It can mean the connectedness an individual feels with the self, the environment, and others, or it can represent one’s relationship with and acceptance of a Higher Being (Mattis, 2002). Conventionally, spirituality is frequently identified as a fundamental or intrinsic attribute extant in every human being that encompasses a belief in something or someone superior to the self that sustains life. On the other hand the term religiosity, an interrelated idea, denotes affiliation with an organized religion and practices. Primarily, Black women identify as Christians and practice a form of Christian spirituality that revolves around a belief in transcendence, accountability, judgment, and justice in relation to God (Mattis, 2002). Common institutional religious activities such as prayer, reading the Bible, and support of pastors and others in the church community are ways in which Black women use religion as a coping strategies in their daily life. A growing body of research and literature has found a strong association between both spirituality and religiosity and the overall health and well-being of Black women ((Braxton, Lang, Sales, Wingood, & DiClemente, 2007; Koenig,

2001; Levin, Chatters, & Taylor, 2005; Watlington & Murphy, 2006). Hence, both function as an important framework to assist Black women in meaning making and coping strategies dealing with life and creating meaning in life (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004).

Summary

In attempting to understand the various roles that Black women undertake, Black feminist epistemology provides a relevant framework to understand how and why the experiences of Black women differ from those of White men and women, and Black men. Filtered through the lens of existential psychology as a guiding source, this study connected these unexplored modalities. The existential experiences of Black women have largely been overlooked in both research and literature. While their existence as Black people has been explored on multiple levels, a holistic perspective of Black women's lives, particularly their lived experiences as human beings, rather than solely raced and/or gendered people has not been studied. Including the application of universal themes and truths to a group of people who have repeatedly been dehumanized and exploited historically (both by society and the academy) certainly will internalize and express such themes differently. This study explicitly sought to include the voices of Black women within humanistic existentialism, explore the innumerable ways in which universal aspects of human existence are experienced by Black women, and to encourage inclusion of culturally diverse perspectives within philosophies that espouse universality (as often the universal paradigm is based upon the perspectives of dominant white culture). Furthermore, my goal throughout this study was three-fold: the empowerment, education, and affirmation of a shared commonality of humanness between Black women and those who are part of the world they demarche.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Purpose of Study

As stated in Chapter 1, the purpose of this study was to explore how Black women experience the four existential givens and ultimate meaning (see Yalom, 1980). In particular, I explored certain lived experiences of Black women, given their social complexities, and how they found meaning in light of conceptions of freedom, isolation, meaninglessness, and death. I utilized qualitative research for this study, since qualitative research is “open to epistemological perspectives, particularly those that are “multiply informed and multiply jeopardized” by race, class, gender, sexuality, and other aspects of difference (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 273). I used a phenomenological qualitative approach known as portraiture (see Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This approach was identified because the focus of the study was to consider personal and social experiences of participants related to the participants’ perceptions of race, gender, and ultimate life meaning. Numerous qualitative researchers have endorsed the value of participants’ views, understandings, and experiences in the world (e.g., Blumer, 1999; Taylor & Bodgan, 2015; Denizen, & Lincoln, 2005; Dixson, Chapman, & Hill, 2005; Patton, 2002). Such perspectives might provide invaluable insight related to diverse ways of being, including the social, structural, environmental, educational and psychological experiences of racialization. It is important to note that in no way should one assume that this study is suggesting that Black women are:

burdened by their race, class, gender, sexuality, and so forth but rather, that these positionalities provide a perspective on both the margin and the center that can serve to reveal the ways that the dominant perspectives distort the realities of the other in an

effort to maintain power relations that continue to disadvantage those who are locked out of the mainstream (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 263)

Using a deeply reflective methodology such as portraiture, allowed me to appropriately co-create humanizing representations of Black women in a way that illuminated their essence as multi-layered individuals and human beings, rather than erase it.

Research Questions

I sought to answer the following primary research question: Given the intersectionality of Black women's lives, how do Black women experience the 4 existential givens and the search for meaning in life? This primary question will be further reduced into the following detailed study questions that will serve to elicit participants' experiences of Yalom's existential givens:

- 1) How do Black women describe their experiences of personal freedom?
- 2) How do Black women describe their experiences of personal isolation?
- 3) How do Black women describe their experiences of meaninglessness?
- 4) How do Black women describe their experiences of death?

Portraiture Methodology

Portraiture is a methodology that has qualitative and phenomenological roots, very similar to narrative inquiry yet differing. A research portrait is a composed narrative that endeavors to portray the lush, intricate, and dimensional facets of human experience, within a social and cultural context (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) further clarify that the portrait is "at once complex, provocative, and inviting, that attempts to be holistic, revealing the dynamic interaction of values, personality, structure, and history...document[ing] human behavior and experience in context" (p. 11).

Unlike most narrative inquiries which use stories as a way to represent experiences among participants, and is more focused on capturing the essence of experiences, portraiture seeks to preserve the diversity and individuality of the participants referred to as “actors” involved by creating separate portraits for each actor. While themes may overlap and be shared among actors, the goal is not to reduce one’s individual experience or try to generalize the population sample in such a way that the portraitist is engaging in essentialism. The objective is to re-represent the experiences and re-tell the story of both portraitist and actor in a way that is respectful of individual differences and perspectives yet open to similarities and shared dynamics amongst the actors. Portraiture allows for specification. “The portraiture method rejects flat, stereotypical explanations for ... success or failure and depicts the multiple layers of contexts between events and people” (Chapman, 2005, p. 33).

Moreover, contrasting portraiture from narrative inquiry and other qualitative, and phenomenological methods which consider the narratives merely as data, and is used as a tool/vehicle to later be analyzed and extracted of “essence” for the final result, in portraiture the narrative itself is the final result. The use of metaphor in portraiture is intended to illuminate the variances within the phenomenological data; for example, envision each of the three methods as a cake (narrative-a one layer cake, phenomenological a two layer cake, and portraiture-a multiple layered cake). Each cake consists of the same basic ingredients, all relying on qualitative measures in creating the foundation (i.e., interviews, coding, etc.). Where they differ is in the finished presentation. For instance, the multi-layered portraiture cake is covered with frosting to stage a striking final presentation; whereas the other two cakes aren’t glazed at all since they ultimately end up used in other recipes (dissected specifically for data about the larger phenomenon). Concurrently, the role of the researcher

is also different in portraiture versus other narrative methods. While most narrative research seeks to underscore and suppress the researcher's influence and presence in the study, in portraiture the researcher is omnipresent. "The voice of the researcher is everywhere: in the assumptions, preoccupations, and framework she brings to the inquiry; in the questions she asks; in the data she gathers; in the choice of stories she tells; in the language, cadence, and rhythm of her narrative" (p.85). At the same time "the portraitist's work is deeply empirical, grounded in systematically collected data, skeptical questions (of self and actors), and rigorous examination of biases-always open to disconfirming evidence...restrained, disciplined, and carefully controlled...[and] never overshadows the actor's voice" (p. 85).

Components of the Portraiture Design

My construction of the individual portraits of the participants was guided by the five components of portraiture methodology. The first component of the portraiture approach pertains to the total environment of the study, analyses, and dissemination. Context is the physical environment (setting) in which the individuals, organizations are situated. Richly illustrating the context in which lived experiences take place provides the audience with a way to connect and perhaps empathize with the participants in the story. Contextual setting includes the "physical, geographic, temporal, historical, cultural, aesthetic-within which the action takes place" (p. 41), and becomes the frame of reference for the reader. Context is important in portraiture because the milieu in which the story occurs can provide key knowledge into environmental subtleties occurring between participants and their personal and social space, enabling the researcher to further interpret and translate the stories she or he is a witness to (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

The second component of portraiture that Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe is voice. Voice is attended to and expressed in six ways: voice as witness, voice as preoccupation, voice as autobiography, voice in conversation, listening for voice, and voice as interpretation. Given the centrality and importance that voice has had in both the scholarship, epistemology and daily lives of Black women through various narrative forms, portraiture's attention to the many aspects of voice, including that of the researcher, makes it an appealing and strong contender for this study which attempts to explore multiple voices of Black women's experiences as human being in the world. *Voice as interpretation* refers to the portraitist deciphering and evaluating the events and stories she is privy to. It is her process of finding and making meaning of shared and individual life experiences. Portraiture is about searching for meaning (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), as is existentialism, and this study focused on Black women searching for meaning in life as they confront the 4 ultimate human concerns. *Listening for voice and Voice in conversation* are subthemes of voice as interpretation. *Voice as witness* entails the researcher's role as a bystander, outsider and stranger. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' concept of the researcher's perch (the prominent yet marginal position the researcher inhabits within the context of the narrative) is closely connected to Patricia Hill Collins' (1995) conception of insider/outsider status, relating to the ways in which an individual, particularly Black women are privy to intimate knowledge on certain dynamics given their economic roles in the lives of dominant groups, yet outsiders due to their lack of group membership. *Voice as preoccupation and autobiography* refer to the framework (familial, cultural, developmental, and educational) of the researcher, which are embedded within the portrait.

Third, relationships are the cornerstones of portraiture. Not only is relationship building what makes portraiture distinct from conventional research, as in the former the researcher is seen as the detached and neutral authority figure investigating the subject. Empathic regard, goodness, reciprocity, boundaries, and rapport are all part of building fruitful, and nonthreatening relationships in which all parties involved benefit. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) based this particular element of portraiture on the philosophy of Martin Buber (1958), a renowned existential philosopher who described a “I-thou” relationship theory. Buber (1958) posits that only through authentic connection with other human beings can the individual self flourish. It is through attention, empathy, trust, and intimacy that wholeness and a sense of belongingness can occur. Through these shared mechanisms, the self recognizes that it is part of a collective, it too is the “thou” of others, thus ceasing separatism and tribal thinking.

Fourth, emergent themes are derived from the data and help shape the data, and give it substance. This is a “discipline, empirical process-of description, interpretation, analysis, and synthesis-and an aesthetic process of narrative development” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, p. 185).

The final component is that of the aesthetic whole which is the final outcome of the researcher’s interpretation and attempt at making meaning out of the data and story – it is in essence the painted portrait. Conception, structure, form and cohesion are the four parts of the aesthetic whole. Conception is the predominant vision and theme in the narrative that supplies a framework for the portrait. The structure denotes the foundation of the portrait and serves as a springboard for the narrative. It is “the strength and stability of the portrait, and is reflected in headings in the paper, supporting the portrait as it is described and built”

(Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 252). Elements that provide the portrait texture and depth, such as emotions, perspectives, and metaphors, thick and thin description, are vital at this stage, and help create authentic and textured portraits. Essentially, the aesthetic whole is putting together and recognizing the "weight of empirical evidence, the infusion of emotional meaning and the aesthetic of narrative development" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 248).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) also emphasize the concept of cohesion which is the arrangement and framing of events, sequences, articulations, and other pieces of the story that the portraitists blends to create narrative coherence, unity, and significance. In constructing the portraits I was mindful of the way I arranged pieces of the participant's narrative and sought to create humanizing and lyrical works that captured the moods, feelings, and personality of each woman, while making meaning of her story.

The impetus and strength of portraiture is the masterful way three voices (that of the storytellers, narrators, and audience) merge in order to expand human connection, understanding, and promote social change (Featherstone, 1989). Through using an eclectic and multidisciplinary structure with a focus on narrative, metaphor, and symbols rather than the traditional research question, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and implications, which Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) conjecture "inform, not inspire" (p. 10), portraiture seeks to "move beyond the academy's inner circle, to speak in a language that is not coded or exclusive" (p. 10).

As many scholars have been critical of the use of research in Communities of Color, and with marginalized populations because of the tendency of the academy to objectify, scapegoat, and exclude these groups from the conversation, portraiture is regarded positively

by those scholars and individuals who tend to be more socially conscious of the far reaching effect and implications of research within society. Featherstone (1989) refers to portraiture as “the people’s scholarship”-a scholarship in which scientific facts gathered in the field give voice to a people’s experience...we hear the sound of a human voice making sense of other voices, especially those not often heard, voices of women and people of color.” (p.375-376).

Portraiture on empathy. The elements of goodness and empathy make portraiture an appropriate method of analysis for this particular study given the humanistic and psychological basis for their inclusion into the portraitist’s toolbox. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’ (1997) concept of empathic regard is based on the theories of both Rollo May and Carl Rogers, who were prominent humanistic psychologists and regarded empathy as a necessary, natural emotion useful and key to social connection and relationship building, and understanding and acceptance among human beings (Featherstone, 1989). To further this idea, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) state,

portraitists view empathy as central to relationship building in research. They share May’s notion of identification, Rogers’s view of empathy as impulse for insight, Gillian’s perspective on intimacy as critical for honoring multiple perspectives and Marshall and Tossman’s understanding of empathy as respect and open acceptance of the actor’s views. None of these authors confuse empathy with sympathy; all of them recognize the quality of attention, the connection of life experiences, and the deep understanding that are key to its expression in research relationships (p.148).

A portraitist is not only a researcher but also a student who must be "mindful of the power of her intrusion and the limits of her participation" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, p. 160).

Portraiture can be considered a political act in that its intention is one of universal

accessibility and motivation. In other words, searching solely for commonality and themes is not the primary goal.... giving voice to the experiences of another, as a participant and liaison between the academy and those existing beyond the academy, who do not have access to scholarly venues is the ultimate goal of the portraitist.

Accordingly, portraiture seeks to reveal and portray subtle nuances and profound dynamics of the lived experience, while circumventing the adverse moral and power corollaries of undertaking the kind of authoritative voice that negates the possibility of multiple realities. One must be attentive to the fact that portraiture is meant to re-present, not re-create experiences, perceptions and feelings.

Looking for goodness. Looking for goodness is similar to a concept in psychotherapy called strength based approach in which the clinician chooses to assess and view the individual from a positive stance, meaning their positive traits are focused on and incorporated into treatment solutions rather than approaching the client from a deficit approach. This does not mean that unpleasant social truths, vulnerabilities, and human weaknesses cannot be revealed or broached, as they still are. However, they do not engulf other aspects of the total story. How the individual then deals with such realities or subjects, and how she or he copes with issues within life take center stage over the problem itself. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) assert that “in fact, the counterpoint and contradictions of strength and vulnerability, virtue and evil (and how people, cultures, and organizations negotiate those extremes in an effort to establish the precarious balance between them) are central to the expression of goodness” (p. 9).

Interweaving all of the aforementioned elements of portraiture presented me with the opportunity to allow profound empathetic connection, acknowledgement of the dissonance

and solidity of the participants' lives and human existence, forging a delicate bond between the reader/audience and the narrative portrait.

Participant Selection

A local metropolitan area in the Southwestern United States was used as the site for this study in order to provide me with access to potential participants with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, given the intent of portraiture is not to stereotype specific data, rather to represent variety in voice and experience. Because the target population of Black women sought for this study was limited, due to Blacks only comprising 2 to 3 percent of the total population in the State, I expanded my site to include urban areas where public universities with African-American student groups and employee associations, community colleges, and local Black churches, increased my potential applicant pool. Potential participants were selected using purposeful convenience sampling. Purposive sampling is used in qualitative research to focus on the perspectives of those who are known to experience a particular phenomenon. An in-depth exploration of an individual's experience is the goal rather than being concerned with the ability to generalize their experiences to a larger population (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Potential participants were sought from African or Black Studies departments in local universities, and spiritual, political, and artistic organizations that have an African-centered focus. I contacted members of organizations within or surrounding an urban metropolitan city in the southwestern United States. I informed members of these organizations that I was a graduate student seeking participants for my dissertation study that met the following criteria: 1) Self-identify as African-American/Black females; and 2) 26 years of age and older.

Selected respondents who wished to participate were eligible given their full consent. Participants were recruited using anonymous emails (i.e., blind copied to recipients) sent to identified leaders, Department Chairs, and faculty of the selected programs and organizations, asking if they would be willing to pass along information about the study to students, and my contact information for interested parties. Potential participants were provided a brief description of the study, the consent document, and my contact information. Participants were asked to contact me to disclose interest within a week of receipt of the email invitation.

Sample size. The sample size for this study consisted of seven participants. The small sample size was appropriate and consistent with portraiture and narrative analysis, as creating and painting portraits are time consuming, consisting of rich, in-depth interviews, and deep interactions, requiring the researcher to immerse herself or himself in the research. This is representative of most qualitative frameworks using interviews that “seek to penetrate social life beyond appearance and manifest meanings. This requires the researcher to be immersed in the research field, to establish continuing, fruitful relationships with respondents and through theoretical contemplation to address the research problem in depth” (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 483).

Procedures

Data collection. Prior to data collection I completed all institutional requirements and approvals needed to begin the data collection process. The main sources of data collection were interviews and observations, which is consistent with portraiture methods for collecting data which consist primarily of in-depth interviews. In efforts to remain aligned with portraiture methodology, I used unstructured interviews with open-ended questions to

capture respondents' perceptions, took field notes to capture my observations of the surroundings, the participants' physical appearance, certain gestures or words they repeatedly used, and the overall feelings and themes I noticed from the interview. In portraiture, the researcher unsheathes and extracts emerging themes utilizing five methods of conversion and contrast: resonant metaphors and symbolism, cultural and institutional ritualistic themes, erect themes and expose patterns and experiences of participants, and triangulation to interweave data (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The use of triangulation, which is interwoven and explained throughout this chapter, is key in portraiture and other qualitative methods as it has become an "important methodological issue in naturalistic and qualitative approaches to evaluation [in order to] control bias and establishing valid propositions because traditional scientific techniques are incompatible with this alternate epistemology (Mathison, 1988, p. 14). Using these methods of analysis, I focused on being present in the shared space, dialogue and discourse with participants, in order to bear witness to and actively hear and be attentive to both their stories, and the meanings, actions, and relationships existing within them.

Interviews. The interviewing process began in the spring of 2016 (more specifically, the months of February through March). I used a phenomenological interview protocol to guide me in effectively accessing data, for using phenomenological methods enables researchers to explore, investigate, and understand the meaning, significance, and implications of particular occurrences and phenomena in relation to human relations and events. Additionally, context and background is essential in interpreting and analyzing data. Ultimately, the phenomenological interview approach equips the researcher with strategies and methods of evaluation that enable her or him to ascertain and evaluate meaning making

processes and outcomes of the lived experiences of others (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006), as the primary goal of phenomenological interviewing is to encourage the participant to reconstruct experience. Finally, Clark Moustakas (1994) and Amedeo Giorgi (2009) were both prominent humanistic psychologists and eminent scholars in the development of the various phenomenological methods, including those now used in research based interviewing. To this end, portraiture (which uses a phenomenological qualitative framework) and a phenomenological based interview protocol were an appropriate fusion in enabling me to retrieve the collection and analyses of data related to the research questions of interest for the present study.

The phenomenological interview protocol, which is part of triangulation in this study, was based on one interview (See Appendix A). Participants were asked to reflect on specific events or moments in their lives, on specific experiences, and on how those experiences may have contributed to their perceptions on meaning in life. Interviews began with unstructured questions such as the following: "Have you experienced isolation due to being a Black woman, if so how?" "In what ways if any do you think awareness of your racial and gender identity has shaped your perspectives on meaning in life?" However, as estimated I knew that the participants would speak on an assortment of topics and matters during the interview.

I conducted seven interviews for this study. The in-depth interviews took place within a 2 month time span. The interviews were held in mutually agreed upon spaces and times, in which both the participants and I felt comfortable. I used the interview protocol as a guide to promote conversation rather than as a strict set of questions. The objective was to listen to the women in such a way that included "trying to document the words, the gestures,

and the tone, witnessing the voices in context, and seeking to understand the actors' interpretations of their talk" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 99).

All interviews were digitally recorded and lasted anywhere from 1.5- 4 hours. I spent a large portion of the day with the participants, spanning anywhere from one hour to four hours, during which I spent that time establishing rapport and empathetic regard with each participant, before and/or after the formal, recorded interviews by engaging in normal conversation that consisted of me getting to know them as individuals outside of the research study, and provided them with an opportunity to learn about me as well (known as reciprocity in portraiture) so that the manner to which I approached this study was not one sided. The process of relationship building through empathetic regard is a vital piece of portraiture as it allows the researcher to relate to others in a very humanizing manner in which both researcher and participant are able to witness the other's humanity and recognize parallels in existence and being (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Building rapport before and after the interview encouraged more openness and ease between me and the participants during the interview, which positively influenced the flow of conversation, and the type of information and experiences the women shared with me. Notes and memos were taken while listening to recorded interviews. I informed each participant that they would receive a copy of their portrait in order to provide them with an opportunity to offer feedback and reflect on their portrait, which Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) deems as an important feature to portraiture methodology. I received positive feedback from six of the seven women, each pleased with the manner in which she was portrayed. I was not able to contact the one of the participant because the contact information she provided me with before the interview was no longer functioning, and she did not have an email address. The overall feedback from the

participants regarding their portraits was positive. I also asked for permission to contact them if I needed to ask more questions or ask for clarity on something pertaining to the interview. Each participant received a small thank you gift consisting of herbal tea and lip balm after the interviews were finished.

Data Analysis

After all seven interviews were completed, I transcribed five of the seven interviews, and had the two longest interviews (each about four hours) transcribed by a professional transcription company. I then reviewed my notes, research questions, and transcriptions looking for preliminary themes and concepts. In portraiture, data analysis is conducted by identifying emergent themes using five methods of “synthesis, convergence, and contrast” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 193). These five methods are 1). repetitive refrains, 2). resonant metaphors, 3). symbolic expressions, themes expressed through cultural and institutional rituals, 4). triangulation to interweave data, and 5). creating themes to reveal contrast and connect similarities among participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Guided by these five methods, during the data analysis process I focused on listening for, listening to, bearing witness to the stories I was reconstructing and co-constructing, along with listening for the convergence of themes, patterns and meaning. As I listened to the interviews I took notes, and I went through each interview transcript and color-coded with highlighter makers key statements and words based on which existential givens they seemed to address. Coding is a crucial yet complex segment of portraiture, given there is a “tension between organization and classification on one hand and maintaining the rich complexity of human experience on the other-the tension between developing discrete codes and searching for meaning, and the tension between the researcher’s desire for control and coherence and

the actors; reality of incoherence and instability” (p. 192). Correlation and links between metaphors, symbolism, and ideas were used to increase and expand my understanding of the participants’ social world and to mold the organization and structure of the data for representation in the final document, the portrait, which I did on the transcripts by marking the metaphors, symbolism, etc., on colored sticky notes and placing them on the transcripts next to the appropriate section and passage.

Next, I re-listened to the interviews and read through the transcripts again in order to do emotive/values coding where I searched for core values, beliefs, and emotions present in the narratives. Second, I reviewed the transcripts again and did axial coding, this time looking for connections among codes, and breaking down codes into larger categories. Third, I open coded and searched for emergent themes. It is important to note that I used a unit of analysis context meaning that the data was not coded by each sentence or paragraph; rather it was coded for meaning and themes. Fourth, I created a document which included key statements and segments of narratives for a each participant, assembled by major life themes and core values/beliefs that dominated the participant’s narrative. Fifth, I used a Microsoft program that scanned each participant’s transcript to find reoccurring words and phrases used the most by the participant. I then made a note of the words that appeared the most, and also made a note of which givens appeared the most throughout the transcripts and narrative based on those words and my hand written notes on the transcripts. After I compiled similar documents for each participant, I then went through all seven documents and found connecting themes that were present in all seven of the women’s narratives, and made a master list containing this data for all participants in one large document. I triangulated my data again, reviewing my written notes, themes/subthemes, along with the master list once

more looking for convergence, and to tighten and clarify major themes and subthemes. I then used this final document to construct the seven portraits, along with following the five main components of portraiture, paying attention to context, voice, while looking for goodness and empathic regard throughout the process. I also used the aforementioned final document to inform my findings and discussion section (See Appendix C).

Another key piece of my data analysis process was self-reflection. In portraiture since the “voice of the researcher is everywhere: in the assumptions, preoccupations, and framework” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 85) I wanted to ensure that my own self did not dominate “the actors’ voices (though it sometimes is heard in duet, in harmony and counterpoint)” (p. 85) and remained “a premeditated one, restrained, disciplined and carefully controlled” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 85). I kept a journal to record my own feelings and responses to the interviews, which allowed me to critically self-reflect upon those feelings and responses. I also did emotive coding on my narrative and myself during the interviews (to gain awareness of where I may have had biases or strong responses during my interactions and conversations with the participants).

Data protection. I designed Microsoft Word files for the interviews, observations, and other documents associated with the study. I established a password for the files protected all files. All files were saved and stored on my laptop computer for which I only had access to. Additionally, I used Microsoft Word software for data management and analysis. Ongoing data analysis took place throughout the study. A system of numbers and letters was used to specify major categories and subcategories. I made hard copies of all computer files, in order to code data with colored pens with numbers and letters as needed.

Confidentiality. The records of this study were kept confidential. I did not include the name of any participant involved in the research in the study. Research records were kept in a locked file on a security encrypted laptop. I was the only person who will have access to these records.

Provisions to protect the privacy interests of participants. I informed the participants, both before and during the interviews that the interviews would be digitally recorded with their permission to ensure accurate transcription of the interview. I explained to participants that all identifying information would be removed during the process of transcription, and that the digital recording would be secured in a password protected computer file as soon as an accurate transcription had been made. I also made sure to reiterate that their participation in the interviews was completely voluntary, that they could end the interview at any time that they could refuse to answer any question or could refuse to discuss any topic that made them uncomfortable.

Only the participant and I had a copy of the consent form. The signed consent forms were locked in a file cabinet drawer, one to which only I had access to, and would remain so for a period of three year (as required by the Institutional Review Board). At the end of the three-year period, measured from the date of the interview, the consent form will be destroyed in a paper shredder. Further, since the interviews were digitally recorded in order to have an accurate transcription of the interview, there are other precautions that I took to safeguard the confidentiality and privacy of the participants. First, before the transcription of the tape was completed, the audio file was kept in another locked computer file (separate from the signed consent forms) to which only I had access. Second, while transcribing the interview I eliminated any references to the names of specific individuals or identifying

physical descriptions of the individual and/or where they live. Participants were made aware of all of these procedures by way of an informed consent contract before the start of interviews.

Credibility & Trustworthiness

The term authenticity is used in portraiture over validity as portraiture is not concerned with generalizing experience, rather representing specific interactions and experiences. When considering credibility and validity in a portraiture study, Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) refer to the views of Maxwell:

Maxwell (1996) refers to this standard of credibility, this effort to construct a trustworthy narrative, as “validity.” Objectivity is not the standard for validity as it is in quantitative research. . . . Maxwell speaks of it holistically as “the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account. . . . Nor are you required to attain some ultimate truth in order for your study to be useful and believable.” (p. 245).

In order to increase credibility and authenticity of the narrative portraits I made the following provisions throughout the study.

Debriefing sessions. During the data analysis stage and throughout the research study investigation, I engaged in debriefing sessions with my dissertation committee chair. These sessions worked as sounding boards to test, and critique my interpretations of the data and of emergent themes, and also provided supervisory support for the research project and feedback about the design, structure and methods used in the study.

Peer scrutiny of the research project. Furthermore, I shared data codes and themes with colleagues and peers as their observations and questions enabled me to confirm my

interpretations, and/or refine themes to more accurately reflect the data provided by the interviews. In this step, I took the utmost initiatives to protect the anonymity of the participants, including the use of aliases and masking any potentially identifying content.

Triangulation. I triangulated data through the use of different methods in the analysis, which consisted of observations, interviews, and field notes. Another form of triangulation that I used was verifying viewpoints of individuals against other individuals in comparable positions. For instance, I investigated perceptions on more positive identity concepts among those who grew up in all Black communities during the civil rights era by asking individuals who grew up during the same era about their experiences with identity development. This method of triangulation is helpful because “here individual viewpoints and experiences can be verified against others and, ultimately, a rich picture of the attitudes, needs or behavior of those under scrutiny may be constructed based on the contributions of a range of people,” (Shenton, 2004, p. 65).

Member checks. After data analysis was completed, results were shared with participants in the form of written transcripts to ensure accuracy in reflecting the participants’ experiences. Guba & Lincoln (1994) assert that this technique known as member checking is of the utmost importance in establishing credibility to verify results and interpretations utilizing the original data or the participants from which the information originated. As stated previously, the feedback provided by six of the seven women was positive with no recommended changes. I was not able to contact one of the participants for feedback as her telephone number was no longer in service, and she did not have an email address. Given I shared the status of Black women with the participants, this commonality enabled me to

provide credibility to the study as I could relate to many of the issues and experiences they discussed.

Self-reflection. As directed by portraiture methodology, and as stated previously, as a checkpoint to increase credibility I engaged in a process of deep critical self-reflection to include journaling (both written and through digital recording) in order to remain aware of my own active ideologies and biases that may have shaped how I interpreted and made sense of the women, their narratives, and ultimately their portraits. I also included a researcher positionality essay below where my qualifications, theoretical framework and personal ideologies were revealed for the sake of transparency.

Ethical considerations. All of the participants were treated in accordance to the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the University of New Mexico Institutional Review Board (IRB). Although there were identifiable risks for participating in this study, a couple of considerations were kept in mind during the study. There was the possibility that participants might feel uncomfortable discussing their experiences or talking about personal information in regard to their families. Thirdly, there was the potential that participants may have felt pressured to answer all the questions designed for the interview given that I could have been perceived as holding a position of power. All these considerations were incorporated during the research design stage. Every caution was taken to ensure that the participants felt safe, comfortable, and had the freedom to withdraw from the study if they felt they needed to.

Researcher Positionality

As I reflect on my life, I am cognizant of both my humanness and the otherness that are both integral parts of my identity visibly represented in my own narrative. Either taught

to ignore or suppress one aspect of my personhood like my racial identity or gender, it is rare that I have found myself within spaces and among kindred folk who honor these aspects of my being equally or respectfully. Often, I have had to pick and choose between the two in settings where issues of race seemed to surpass all else in regard to advocacy and group interest, or defend my womanhood as something valuable and significant yet marginalizing as well in a room full of men. However, even transcending this is the element of experience that supersedes all else, the human experience as it is the area in which social constructions do not usurp or control, as life doesn't discriminate. The universe shows no partiality toward our social positionality and plights. In other words life begets life regardless of who we are.

Now embarking on another stage in my academic career and development as a scholar and researcher, I am keenly aware and acknowledge how my lived experiences as a Black woman, along with prominent and hidden ideologies have influenced my research interests and processes (Creswell, 1998). Most salient are those identities that have directly and indirectly facilitated and shaped my understanding of the phenomenon of racialization, gender essentialism, and structural inequalities designed around the construction of race, gender, class, and myriad other markers of difference as a tool for power and domination. Though this is evolving, my beliefs chiefly have been explicitly informed by Black Feminist theory (Collins, 1998) and Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) particularly the assumption that race and gender are social constructs that exist “within the highly racialized and white-dominated institutional context that the [individuals], both white and not white, operate and come to their racial attitudes, [and] their racialized [and gendered] views of the social world” (Feagin & Van Ausdale, 2001, p. 31). In other words, racism as defined by Beverly Tatum (1997) as a system of advantage based on race is entrenched within

society. Therefore, for Black women, the intersection of race, gender, and class must be positioned at the forefront in critically examining social structures based on the power differential created by race (hooks, 1989; Collins, 1995; Davis, 1981).

My own understanding of the intersection of race, gender, and class arose through a personal phenomenology of trials and encounters with other individuals engaging in various actions and micro aggressions that sought to exclude, marginalize, and/or disenfranchise me, other women, and People of Color solely based on a lack of racial identification and membership with dominant white culture. I chose to counter such acts by adopting a principle of excellence, believing that through diligence and intelligence I could quell the impact of racism on my own life through academic and professional achievement. I naively and uncritically accepted the normative discourse as truth, embracing dominant ideologies like that of meritocracy. My early beliefs were grounded in a philosophy that personal and social agencies of individuals require socially just and equitable conditions such that potentials can flourish, and that this was a feat easily achieved by dedicated and self-aware individuals, essentially making the social construction of race as simply a social construction that was imagined and therefore illusory, a figment of one's mind that could be transcended if she or he applied herself or himself. However, despite the accomplishments I achieved and boundless concessions I made, the slight dishonors so flippantly and stealthily fashioned by whites pertaining to my feats reminded me that I was an interloper in their world who would never quite belong. Over and over again what I ascertained and witnessed was that even if race and gender were not a biological verity, they were a social actuality possessing a reality of their own that was very real, oppressive, and anti-agentic for those faces at the very bottom of the well (Bell, 1992). This concept however did not truly culminate in my

consciousness until I began academic and professional preparation to become a social worker.

Due to my experiences, I was dedicated to social change and equity for those who were disenfranchised. This interest led me to pursue a master's degree in social work, driven by a belief that grassroots exertions could augment the life-circumstances of marginalized individuals and groups that would then ensue in a transformation of the total social system. While I was not naive about my abilities or the capacity of any such change-effort, I operated from the posture that systemic change must be enacted from within those populations most affected by social structures. Also, I believed that such change is more organic, germane, and sustainable to all populations involved.

As a social work practitioner, I witnessed the dogged and momentous influence of the countless injustices present in the lives of oppressed and crestfallen individuals and groups marginalized by a social infrastructure created by those with more power and agency that devalues their existence and infringes upon their liberties as human beings in order to provide an advantage to others (Freire, 1970). I watched this vicious cycle of white hegemony repeat itself in *Communities of Color*, as *People of Color* embraced the defective and rancorous ideologies and practices of white dominant culture. Accordingly, I began to distrust and interrogate the doctrines and philosophies of my childhood and early adulthood of meritocracy, and the principle that if one applied herself or himself and worked hard enough, she or he would be successful in accomplishing her or his professional, academic, and personal goals, along with attaining social mobility. As I examined my life, that of those around me and that of the larger society I began to see flaws, contradictions and inconsistencies. How did meritocracy account for the Paris Hiltons, and other socialites who

inherited enormous wealth without working hard or at all for it? What about those people who were at the very bottom, did this mean that the janitors, the taxi drivers, garbage men did not work hard? Was their professional and personal ethics somehow deficient and wanting which in turn rendered them unworthy of success? What about People of Color such as myself who despite their achievements were always perceived and treated like interlopers who were exceptions to the rules due to their race? In fact all of these circumstances suggested quite the opposite of meritocratic and colorblind society (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Countries are and have always been built on the backs, blood, and sweat of the poor who are often also individuals of Color and women.

These reflections left me deeply lodged between two formidable beasts of ontology and epistemology, as I cogitated on what it meant to be human, and how my own identity and that of every other person had been strategically and furtively manufactured in such a way that I was confounded as to where the truth of the society ended and the truth of an authentic self began. Was there an absolute truth in relation to a human being or was there simply no escaping the relics of structuralism and social construction for the human body. As such, I have sought out theories that preserved the sagacity of the humanist theories, which seek to maximize the capacity and agency of the individual within social structures with schools of thought such as Black Feminist epistemologies, and Black existentialism which attempt to pierce and infiltrate the inequitable social circumstances of disenfranchised individuals.

Consequently, for the first time I began to ruminate upon my gender, and what it means to be a woman and a person of Color. Reflecting upon this period in my life, in relation to where and how I exist now, I find it astonishing and disturbing that I had not been critical-rather critical enough-of gender and the inequity that occurs through this social

construct, and the ways in which gender has constructed me as a woman/female rather than as a human being. As I pondered this reality, it occurred to me that I could not be alone in this inadvertent disregard of myself. Surely, other Women of Color must be cognizant of the dearth of connectedness and discourse around our gendered bodies, and the dual existence we live, both as People of Color and as Women of Color. For one reason or another, it seems that race, especially within Communities of Color, trumps and outmaneuvers gender, which manages to place Women of Color in extremely precarious circumstances where they must choose between their racial community and their gendered community, thus becoming a traitor to one part of their nature. Very rarely do Men of Color speak out against hegemony, violence, and misconduct against Women of Color; however, there is the expectation that all People of Color coalesce and are vocal in supporting the continued genocide and mistreatment of Men of Color, thus elevating the transgressions of one group against another, ignoring the datum that Women of Color are often victimized by both white society, Communities of Color, and Men of Color. How and in what ways are Women of Color trained to be indifferent toward themselves and each other, their bodies, and their personhood? As it is manifest that we must be in a cavernous slumber for there to continue to be enduring discussions and activism around the maltreatment of Men of Color, yet little to no dialogue on the exploitation and brutality against Women of Color, particularly Black women. Even in my growing career as an academic and researcher I feel the tension and dissent within myself, my community, and dominant society as to what and who I am, and whom and what I should pledge allegiance to: race, gender, or social class. This profound and disquieting disinterred cognizance has generated additional queries, and demands a unique interpretation of human experience which does not mechanically possess a white

facade, rather a penetratingly ambiguous countenance fraudulently manipulating the individual by swaying her or him to believe and trust her or his eyes, those imperfect and partial eyes, which habitually neglect that truth is always deeper and greater than what one sees.

Hence, I am not thoroughly persuaded anymore that there is a correct riposte or a staunch approach and method to engage immeasurable ways of being and of existing in the world; the human composition is far too intricate and exquisite to be reduced to such insufficient and arbitrary means and modes of analysis. In each of our lives, mine as researcher, that of the subject, the human being, etc., there is no one lens but multiple lenses that we must peruse and amass in our consciousness on our quest for understanding. Maybe there is truly an intersection of all of these phenomenon and constructions therein at any assumed moment any one can emerge in the center with the rest informing that which has risen as center. Perhaps what we cannot know, we will not know, and that which we can, maybe we will as long as we are open to experiencing the fragility and mercurial nature of knowledge and the arcane obscurity of truth. The most we as human beings, and researchers can hope for is the creation and advancement of those experimental mechanisms that somehow contribute to the overall human experience, allowing for diversity of voices, experiences, and multiple ways of being. Possibly a final outcome from such radical acceptance and inclusion will enable us to comprehend and embrace the interconnectedness of our lives and existence, rather than mull on separation. After all, we are all humans as “being.”

Chapter 4: Portraits

In this chapter, I present the portraits of seven Black women, framed within themes that emerged from our conversations. Each portrait represents distinctive manifestations of the life stories of these women, capturing the intricacies and complexities innate in Black women's standpoint. It was very important for me to construct the life experiences of these women in such a way that their humanity was ensconced within the multiple dualities they inhabited such as their race, class, and gender identities to reveal how their particular understanding, epistemologies and agency were utilized and shaped how they existed and traversed in the world.

Every human being must live, and every human being must die. On this journey called life we each possess a unique story, a narrative that we carry with us about who we are and why we are who and what we are. I travel lightly in this world, carrying nothing but my own story, wounds and scars. The alternative truth is that I tread more heavily in the world than I realize, carrying the stories, scars, wounds, sorrows, hopes, dreams, anger and love of many. I am a shifting collage of both the triumph and the catastrophe of the human race. My story is steeped in Blackness, femaleness, and humanness, while scented with myriad flavors and spices. Thus, my voice as the portraitist is interwoven throughout each portrait, my hand softly and at times heavily composing the frames, images, and colors of the these chromatic written sketches, in the hope of illuminating the humanness of the women who own these stories, along with my own humanness...the omnipresent portraitist, researcher, and storyteller. In sculpting this study, I found portraiture to be extremely empowering yet provocative in the sense that I often could not tell where the space for my own voice began and ended while presenting the multiple voices of each of the women participating in the

study, as in every portrait and story I found myself subtlety and sometimes firmly existing within the lines, words, and memories of the Black women I interviewed. As I listened to and for the stories within the conversations, silence, and laughs that we shared I was stirred to reflect on the similarities and dissonance in my own experience. We all possessed an aura of grit and resilience in repeatedly ambivalent and impervious social environments. As one of the women Gaia said it best, we were and are all “a part of an amazing history of endurance and success, fierce determination, talent, intelligence, ingenuity, despite ... Or in spite of.” In essence, it is my hope that these portraits are perceived as deeply humanizing of myself as the researcher, of the women as participants, and are viewed as lyrical, written snapshots in time of the moments me and the women spent together bearing witness to each other’s stories, and dialoguing with one another about our lived experiences.

Rhea

“There are times when we are all together and it feels like I have small pieces of heaven. I just love them so much. You know what motherhood to me has been the pinnacle of happiness. I just love my kids.”

I met Rhea a few years ago when we had a class together. Rhea is a 44-year-old elementary school teacher. She has been teaching at a local elementary school for over 20 years. She has been married for 22 years and has three sons, ages 9, 13, and 18. She has a master’s degree in education and is currently in her third year of a Ph.D. program in curriculum and instruction. She has light brown skin, heavily speckled with freckles, and round shaped brown eyes that warmly peer from behind her red-framed glasses. She has dark brown hair, which comes down to her neck, and wears her hair in a neatly cut bob. She loves makeup, which is evident by the rich, bright cherry red lipstick perfectly applied to her lips,

and red nail polish on her fingernails that offset the blue eye shadow she adorns her eyes with. She is 5'1 with a plump figure, and dresses very femininely. Rhea is a very gregarious and friendly person.

Rhea grew up in an economically challenged predominately Black neighborhood in the Midwest. She was raised by a single mother and has a younger brother and older half sister. Her mother was very religious and raised her in the church (attending almost every day). Religion and her faith are still very integral in her life now, as she is raising her children with a strong belief in God and a deep connection to the Black church.

Rhea was my very first interview. Rhea and I decided to meet for breakfast around 10 am one weekend at a popular local diner before our interview. As usual, I arrived about 15 minutes early to ensure parking and a place for us to sit. Rhea arrived 15 minutes later and we each ordered a southwestern style omelet. As we sat and caught up on what was happening in our personal and professional lives, our conversation revolved mostly around dealing with loss. Rhea's father recently died and she was dealing with feelings of sadness and guilt that their relationship was not in a better place before he died. She had always believed there would be time to work out their differences and for her to forgive his abandonment of her as a child. While she did experience some reconciliation before he died, and she spoke to him a week before he passed away, the years lost were heavily on her mind. I could relate because my husband's father had recently died and he too was grappling with feelings of the loss of a potential relationship that never was, questioning his own actions and behavior toward a parent who failed him. It's interesting how death has the power to reshape our narrative, and alter our memories of the absolute present now transformed into a surreal past. How the slipping away of life catapults what we believe to be the truth into an

uncertainty that we forever intensely interrogate and gently prod for clarity. We begin searching for truth, hoping that an unveiling of adequate reason/s will extricate us from the pain of the loss, though it is even often uncertain what it is that we believe we are losing (other than life, or a way of life) and the occupation of space.

Death is powerful, it is unyielding, and touches every human being in incontrovertible and irreversible ways. As I listened to Rhea talk about her loss, I felt my own eyes begin to burn a bit, for I thought about my own parents and how unbearable the day would be when I would have to say a final goodbye to the physical spaces they occupied in my life through shape and form. Who I am, how I exist is so intricately connected to who they are, just as I realize that who I am is intricately connected to who my daughter is and will be. The foreboding threat, and ominous aroma of death hung in the air and space between Rhea and I as we played hockey with our half eaten omelets, our forks moving and repositioning pieces of torn eggs around on our plates as distraction to the weight of the words in the conversation.

After breakfast, we walked over to a room I reserved at a local university library to start our interview. Rhea reapplies her red lipstick, pulling out her mirror to ensure evenness and begins talking about how she loves going to the MAC makeup store, and the happiness she feels when she orders a product online and it arrives. Watching and listening to her, I am reminded of the ladies in the department stores cosmetic section who advise and give makeovers to women. I imagine that she would love doing something like that and would be very good at it, given her friendly and positive attitude and demeanor. Shortly after we started our conversation, Rhea's phone began ringing over and over. She stopped the interview briefly to answer it, as it was her eldest son who was calling to ask if he could have

her leftovers from the restaurant last night. Rhea chuckled and rolled her eyes in irritation and disbelief as she told him no. “You see what a handful these kids are... I love them to death but they do bug me sometimes,” she muttered as she hung up and looked at me saying, “get ready for that, never having a moment to yourself girl.” The nature of this brief interruption was fitting as the primary theme that knotted Rhea’s narrative together was that of motherhood. Rhea derived her identity and sense of meaning in life from being a mother. She referred to motherhood as “the pinnacle of happiness” and reveled in both the joys and agonies of motherhood. Rhea and her husband Steven experienced unfortunate miscarriages a few years into their marriage, and believed they would never be able to have children of their own. They were presented with an opportunity to adopt a young infant whose mother could not care for him, and did so. Rhea refers to her son Charlie as her blessing because he healed so much pain that she and her husband were experiencing over the loss of their own babies and fulfilled their desires of parenthood. Four years later Rhea became pregnant with her first biological child, and four years after that her youngest. Thus, due to her early struggles and heartbreak in trying to achieve motherhood, Rhea holds this role of parent and mother as the most important one in her life.

Positive Black self image. Rhea lived in an impoverished, predominately Black community in which she and her family had few resources. She developed a healthy racial identity image due to the influence of her mother who was constantly reinforcing and telling her and her siblings what a wonderful blessing it was to have Black skin. Rhea attributes her mother’s attention to helping her cultivate a positive self-image to Rhea’s mother’s own struggles with her racial identity. Rhea’s mother was very fair skinned to the point that most people mistook her for being white, yet Rhea’s mother always made a point to claim her

Blackness as she was proud to be Black. Rhea talks below about her mother's influence and experiences growing up in the following passages:

There was always a contrast in our house because my mom was so fair that people mistook her for being white and I think maybe that's how race came out so much, that she would let us know that she indeed was Black, but not her skin was white but she was Black and her being Black was a good thing. So I think those conversations came out a lot because, like I said there were few whites in our environment and people thought she was one of them, so it was like White was a negative thing. And so I think probably just so much came from our home that I have my mom like not been so fair, I don't know how it would have come about. But I think that was one of the issues and some other things she is going to set straight and she always wanted us to have like a really good racial identity. So I think she was always just focused on that from the beginning.

She added:

I just always felt special. My mom just like, you know, she educated us and told us we went through a lot as a race, we persevered, we were beautiful, and I always felt privileged to be Black, so I never really had any, I don't think any bad feelings about being Black, and it hurts me so bad about what we go through and still continue to go through, but I have always felt like I will never change it if I could. It's a privilege to be Black.

In fact, in Rhea's neighborhood as she states above being white was a negative thing. Rhea shares why whiteness was frowned upon:

I think they view White people as their enemy. They think White people are their enemy and we have had tons of instances where even when she [my mother] comes to visit me now, I will get nasty looks from people who think that like she is white and I am bi-racial. I have people do that kind of stuff all the time and people assume that she was not my mother because they thought, she was White and you know why would I want to be with her as a Black daughter or whatever. So there were some people who were jealous because she was so fair because you know we have a competitive atmosphere and a lot of people already recognized what privileges she had, whether she could have passed or why has she chosen to be Black, so I think that, I don't know how her life would have been if she had just been like brown skin and it's visible that she is Black, maybe wouldn't discuss this so much. But it was such an issue that it was brought up like a lot.

Rhea spoke of the discrimination she and her family experienced in her community because of her mother's light skin, due to people making assumptions that her mother thought she was better because she looked white, or received better treatment from others due to her light complexion. "We would get singled out and picked on by other kids in the neighborhood...they would tease us and tell us our mom was white," Rhea said as she pulled out her mirror and began reapplying her red lipstick. "It was really hard." Rhea's tone was very matter of fact, signaling she had made peace with this part of her childhood a long time ago given the lack of emotion attached to the memories. She then looked at me and asked, "Is my lipstick smeared?" "No, it's perfect," I answered back. "What's your next question, girl?" she asked folding her arms on the table. I told her to simply keep telling me about her

childhood, allowing the conversation to flow as she reminisced and disinterred the bones of memories buried in her past.

Social class. Rhea talked quite a bit about the challenges she faced growing up in poverty. She described being poor as the greatest issue she dealt with especially when she began attending and matriculating through predominantly white spaces and schools as she aged:

Pretty much everybody was Black in my elementary school. If there was an occasional a White kid, they were the ones who were different. So I think it wasn't that bigger deal because of that I wasn't that different. The biggest issue was probably that we were poor. We all got free lunch, you know, none of us had really nice things and I think that might have been a more bigger issue. Outside of our community there was also a class difference. Class played a huge, huge part and probably maybe more than being Black because like I said, I was surrounded by Blacks, but we all had nothing and so a lot of the conflict and stuff came from the lack of resources and lack of opportunity. And then, you know, kind of that can lead to a kind of combative environment you know, but so what I was, I remember just feeling very different, not just like because I am Black but also because I am poor. So I just remember just really feeling like I have to be *smart*, I have to really pay attention. I have to, you know, probably not behave in a stereotypical manner. I have to show that I am as good as them, if not better, academically.

Her social class status was not as palpable until she went to high school, and was suddenly surrounded by White people who perceived her as an other which illuminated both Rhea's

race and social class (which were considered undesirable). Rhea talks about how she dealt with this new reality:

Being around Whites and Whites who had money, middle class, or upper middle class or whatever, and you know it wasn't always a pleasant feeling. But one thing I had so many you know resilience factors, I mean I had the best family, the most supportive and loving family. So I always had that to turn to. If I had to go back to a home where there was dysfunction and I wasn't loved I am not sure how I would have survived, so whenever I was in a situation that was uncomfortable then I knew that I would be back in my loving environment at some point.

The support systems in place in Rhea's life helped her navigate challenging situations, and provided stability for her. Also, because Rhea was raised by a single mom who did not have a spouse to balance some of the responsibilities of child rearing, she depended heavily on Rhea and her younger brother to help her maintain their home life. Rhea mentions the looseness of gender roles types of responsibilities she had growing up below:

I don't think there were any expected gender roles really, I just think once again we didn't have a lot of resources, so we didn't have a car. Probably half the time I was running errands and so like I just had to help and I just had to help my mom in anyway, so if like once she needed medicine and I needed to walk to the store to get it for and a snowstorm was coming, I had to hurry up and get it and come back because she needed it and my younger brother couldn't do it. So it was more like I will do things out of necessity, but it wasn't always like that. If her health was okay, you know my mom did a lot of the cooking. She expected us like to keep our room clean and stuff like that. But it wasn't like I was a girl, I did all the cooking. I think a lot of

things that was older and out of necessity, which I think, happens a lot of times with families living in poverty in an absentee parent. She didn't have a mother. She didn't have her spouse to depend on. So you know, it was just like well we need groceries, we need our clothes dried, and there was a neighborhood laundry mat. We had a washing machine that I just put the clothes in and we had to come and dry it and had to get it done. I mean I was old enough, it wasn't like it was going to kill me or anything, it was embarrassing, but you do what you got to do.

Academic achievement. Most of Rhea's friends dealt with similar home circumstances of single motherhood and a lack of resources coupled with extra responsibilities for children. I was curious how she and her friends were able to still do well in school and what the expectations were in relation to educational pursuits after high school, etc. Rhea explains the normal trajectory for kids in her neighborhood at the time:

Most of them in my neighborhood didn't know, I just always knew I want to go to college. I have always loved school. I always get excited about my school supplies... There is no surprise there, I love to be a teacher, I just always liked it, and reading was my passion. Reading was my skill. So I don't know it was just intrinsic, but I've always loved school. I would learn new stuff and get motivated by it. I think if other kids had it they probably hated it because that was real important to be cool and I definitely wasn't cool. And I have a few other friends who like went to college and got their degrees. Most of them did it later and nontraditional roles like they worked and did it or there were some other ones, but the majority of the people, I say maybe a fifth of them, maybe a quarter of us and I'm being generous and usually most of those were female. I know one male that I am good friends with him, but

they were athletics on a basketball scholarship. And the guys who went off and they couldn't make it, they came home and then those guys who are selling drugs so...

Rhea continued:

Well a lot of them were parents before we left high school even. It was not uncommon for girls to have babies and it's like probably just getting a job and getting out of that environment, moving out of there would be you know good. I remember one girl who wanted to go to the military and we lost touch – I don't know she has said that people who had made negative comments disparaging things about her-- who do you think you are but I think probably the majority of them are doing good, get out and you know get a good job. Actually saw them like gone to junior college, stuff like that. You know at that time, the expectations, I don't think were very high.

For Rhea, education was an escape from the isolation and meaninglessness she experienced growing up in poverty. The resources that school provided, along with praise and encouragement from teachers enabled Rhea to develop confidence in her intellectual abilities, and pursue her academic goals. Rhea not only obtained a bachelor's degree, she went on to pursue a master's degree in teaching, and is now a part-time student in a doctoral program in education. Though Rhea's social status has changed, she still largely considers herself to be an inner city girl who happened to make it out of the ghetto, though her ability to excel in school and her upward social mobility increased access to various social resources, which in turn reduced the level of restrictions she felt on her freedom (due to lack of opportunity and deficient economic and community resources in her impoverished neighborhood). Despite her success, aside from Rhea's mother early on family members or friends did not laud her achievements. Because the community did not encourage children to further their education,

and procuring a job with benefits was considered a huge achievement as this was the trajectory their parents followed, attending college and attaining a degree was not celebrated, it was actually a point of contention of difference among community members. Rhea shares why in the following paragraph:

I think initially it was like do you think you're better, you know, but I think now that we have gotten older, I mean my 40s and late 40s mid to late 40s or early 50s, now that we are all older, I think some of them have kids that might be in college or they want to go or whatever so they see definitely the positive, and they are not intimidated or they see your life is, just a regular life. I think back then, it was, because it was something they thought like they couldn't have and maybe, I think there is lot of intimidation in that when you don't know how to go about something and that endurance it brings fear, you know, so I think now that I am older though I communicate with a lot of people in a group on Facebook. They actually seem to be like kind of proud of me, my accomplishments or whatever.

Rhea is a first generation college student and spoke about the difficulties she had adjusting and learning to navigate life outside of her neighborhood at a major university:

You know, so many women now, not only women they got a chance and that's hard, you know, it's just hard. You have to -- some people crumble under it, I mean you have to have, I feel the family is in place, positive educational experience, I mean it's just hard. I feel like so many people I have dealt with, they didn't have a lot of the things that I had that probably led to me being more successful in school. They didn't have maybe the family life, or they didn't have outside influences, like I was in a program for first generation college students to really help me out. I didn't know how

to go about the -- planning for college or whatever. If it wasn't for this program like college students who were our tutor counselors who were in their 20s, it was my first real life example of like Black kids in college really doing it and letting you know what it was like and building a relationship with them. So I had -- I was privy to some things that some other kids might not have had that made it hard for them to be successful I think. A lot of them took forays into drugs, a lot of women. It took a lot longer for them to get their lives together, and it probably could have accomplished more with a different lifestyle and environment. I was lucky but it was still really hard.

Challenges of Black motherhood. As Rhea and I conversed the dominant givens that seemed to clout her narrative was that of death, isolation, and freedom. As the mother of three Black sons, Rhea was constantly fearful of her children experiencing either physical violence at the hands of police or ordinary citizens, or psychological harm from racism. She stated "being a Black mother you know and then I am just the mother of three Black males -- bi-racial and two Black and one of them is very ethnic. It's very scary. I am constantly worried about where they are and what they are doing and how they are being perceived." The sentiments of helplessness frequented our discussion as Rhea felt that as a mother she was not able to protect her children from some of the difficult and unpleasant social realities they would experience in the world, and struggled with how to educate them about how they might be perceived by others:

And I am so scared that they are going to end up being, you know, Mike Brown or someone like that because all it takes is one interaction with an authority figure to go wrong. and you know I feel like I have put my heart and soul into them and all my

love and they could be taken away so much easier than what a white mother would ever experience and that's the hard part.

And I see mothers, DJ Henry's mom, you know, I don't know if you know how many young men have been shot and killed. He played football in an upstate New York School and he was just shot and killed. He was leaving a bar, told him move out of the lane and when he moved the cops said he was coming towards them and they shot and killed him and this was a good middle class kid of educated parents. I don't think justice was ever served in that.

Rhea relied greatly on religion to relieve some of her concerns around this fear and used prayer as a coping tool:

I just pray. And I feel like there is no bigger gift than prayer. I shouldn't just have to, you know, but it's unfair how White mothers can go through life without the worries that we have. But I just pray that none of that falls on my children. And just try and get them to understand without crashing their self-esteem, the society that we live and how to handle it, that's really hard. Cronos, my middle son, he is very, very dark, ethnic looking. He is very confident in himself and all of that scares white men, I'm scared some white man in a position of power may see him as a threat and harm him. So there is constant worry and that's the hard part. We talk about it, you know, we talk about it, but there's still, they still think that they are invincible and I have talked about you know, you don't have to have your music blaring driving down the street. They don't think it's going to happen again because just like any other kid, they think they are invincible, you know, and I also hate that I have to tell them to curtail who they are. There are times when I drive with my music bumping but they don't know

let me turn it off. I don't know what to do and it's just trying to train them to understand you know and how to behave and I depend on my husband so much because he is a Black male. You know, to tell them, it's just, it's not easy. It's not easy and I guess every day I feel like with every moment of my life, just more dependency on God because I worry myself to death. I am doing the best I can and I have to have some trust and faith.

Bonds/support of other women. As Rhea expressed the constant worry and fear she grappled with as a mother, I began thinking about my own daughter, and how I too was constantly worried about her well being and safety. "Get used to not being able to sleep honey, because it gets worse as they get older. You're lucky right now because your child is still a baby, young enough to pick up and carry, and cuddle, protect her. But when she becomes a teenager and gets older, it's hard," Rhea said slouching over the table, using her palms to support her face. In order to deal with the complexities of motherhood and womanhood, Rhea relies heavily on the support and social relationships she builds with other women. She shares how other mothering has pulled her through difficult times in her life, particularly in relation to motherhood and marriage:

Well, I guess, even if they know there were difficult things that we go through, I mean, I just felt like it was, it's been such a privilege to be a mother. And I was a mother in two different ways, you know, through via adoption and via the birthing process. And just to do that I think has been the best experience for me. It was something that I didn't really know what I wanted, but now, you know, later my life it is like I definitely need it. I don't think every woman wants it necessarily or needs it, but I did. I think you know probably being like kind of the stereotypical woman, I

look forward to all of those things that we females do like shopping and makeup, all those kind of things that you know, they're fulfilling for me to actually be a woman and I think that being a man, I would not be able to do this or that, but you know we have to deal with society backlash whether you are trans or bi or whether metrosexual. So camaraderie between women has really helped me. I feel like men don't have a lot of those open discussions like we do. I mean, I am talking close friendships, you know, it's like let's get a drink, and talk and stuff, but I think women would get down and intimate. We support each other. You know, sometimes I think other women we are our biggest cheerleaders you know. If you find the right group, if you find the right person you know, it's wonderful to have other women in your corner. They have helped me so much when it comes to raising my children. It saved my education, it saved my marriage, you know, I love these things about women the way we communicate and the way we are able to support each other.

Rhea spoke of the contrasts in her relationships with Women of Color and White women, but believed that the common bond of femaleness enabled her to connect regardless of varied life experiences due to racial identity:

You know, I have friends who are not African-American and who are just there for me. But most women of color also get that extra part of what it means to be a Woman of Color. So probably my African-Americans, but there are times when I would call one of my good African-American friends over my white or Hispanic friends if it's an issue dealing with specifically maybe a racial thing that I have encountered that they have encountered that they can understand firsthand. But I also have the kind of White friends who are Hispanic that would do their best to

understand too, you know what I mean? So I'll say yes, but maybe having a friendship with a Woman of Color is like an extra layer because they might have gone through this same exact experience, that a woman who is an African-American would maybe understand. But I won't value their friendship any less, my friends who don't happen to be African-American. It's just the level of experience they don't have and most of them are respectful of that. They recognize that. And I think they support me having my Black friends and also I'm in a sorority, and my one girlfriend knows that that's important for me to be around other Women of Color and stuff.

Black female pride. I asked Rhea how she felt about being a Black woman and as with many women after her, she spoke of the pride and beauty and connectedness she felt about her identity, but also expressed dismay and the difficulties that arose from other people's perceptions about what her Black femaleness represented:

Oh my gosh, how much time do we have. It's a blessing and it's a burden. The good, the positive things as I think that it needs that I was chosen to carry on a tradition you know I was thinking of a slave. And I am the one who actually gets to get my education, that gets to work to get out there and so, I had this responsibility to all these people whose shoulders I stand on.

Racism. Rhea then discussed the negative aspects of how her blackness is portrayed within society:

And so that's a beautiful thing, but it also sometimes can be heavy you know whereas I feel like why we make it par, just go out and screw and mess around, the society wouldn't look at me different, you know. I have no ambition whatever. I think the hard part is throughout your whole lifetime, you have to be better. You have to deal

with people's stupidity, there are assumptions about you. It gets tiresome you know it's just like, at some point in your life, I get tired of teaching everybody the shit they should already know, you know.

Rhea delved deeper into some of the assumptions and stereotypes she deals with regularly from Whites:

You know, there were things that, there is always, I mean it comes up in everything, just a lack of expectations people have with me. They look at me, so many times I can see and don't even consider that anything or just a surprise when they found out that yeah, I am married and I have been married for a long time and now I've had kids in wedlock or I have an education or you know I don't have a criminal background. I don't use slang all the time or you know whatever. So, you know, I think in my job, so many times I have been to places and people just assume you know get their pair volunteers, teacher, or because I have a child who is biracial and people don't think oh, you know, they think it's okay to ask me, do my kids have different fathers or whatever and they just assume, so there's a lot you are dealing with being women of Color.

Rhea ended our interview talking once more about motherhood and how fulfilled having children has made her:

There are times when we are all together and it feels like I have small pieces of heaven. I just love them so much. So I mean, not to say once again that everybody needs motherhood or wants it, but for me, it's been a very special present.

After we wrapped up the interview, Rhea and I sat and chatted for another hour. Most of our conversation focused on current events and the Black Lives Matter Movement, which

she followed very closely because she was the mother of three Black males. For Rhea the existential givens of death and freedom were intricately bound in her life. Rhea could not afford to ignore the responsibility she had in relation to raising her sons in a way that protected them both psychologically and physically from the consequences of racism, and the real threat of death. However, this responsibility as a mother infringed upon her own freedom, as did the weight of certain social realities. As was evident during our interview, the anxiety and fear Rhea felt for her sons reemerged as she spoke. “The world is so horrible sometimes that you just feel defeated, but you can’t let them see that, you have to put on a good front for your kids,” Rhea said sighing. I asked her if the fear and anxiety lessened as her children aged, and she said it intensified, because people tend to fear and discriminate against Black males more as they become adults. I had a family obligation to attend at 1 pm, and Rhea set aside time at a library to study and write a paper that was due in a few weeks. She always found time to engage in her studies away from home, as once again returning to her childhood she had a passion for learning so much so it was the only reason she was willing to spend time away from her sons. Learning, broadening her interests held meaning and purpose for Rhea. We hugged, I thanked her for her participation and time, and we went back to our individual lives, separate yet intertwined by intricate social realities and cultural commonalities.

Athena

“No one is going to look better than me.

No one is going to be smarter than me if I could help it.”

I was connected with Athena through a mutual friend who knew of my qualitative study and thought that she would be interested as well as a great person to speak with about

her life experiences, as a Black woman having lived in the southwest for over 30 years. I was very excited to interview Athena, given she was in her 70s, and was an ideal candidate as she seemingly had lived long enough to have lived and experienced life. I remember calling Athena to set up a day and time for us to spend some time together, and was immediately struck by the warmth, friendliness, and youth in her voice. We decided to meet at a library near her home mid-afternoon.

Athena was my second interview. I arrived about 30 minutes early to ensure that I procured a space that allowed us some privacy. Athena arrived right on time, and given there were very few Black women in the library I recognized her immediately from the description provided to me by our mutual acquaintance. Athena did not look as though she was 74 years old, she looked around 60. She was thin, and wore a beautiful tan and multi-colored shirt, pants, and her silvery Black hair was curled in a short bob that seemed to bounce whenever she turned her head or walked. “You must be Tamiko” she smiled as she walked over to shake my hand, her brown eyes shining beneath her glasses. Well, lets go and find someplace to sit and chat she said, looking over the spot I had chosen, and suggesting that we probably had better move since the teen-agers arrive from school soon and tend to frequent this particular area.

We walked around and on the other end of the library found a carrel with two seats. I allowed Athena to choose where and how she wanted to sit for the interview. “Why don’t we sit right next to each other” she smiled pulling her chair over to mine. Athena was very interested in who I was, what I was doing with my life, and how I ended up in the southwest. “So, tell me about yourself, dear?” she said as I settled into my seat and placed my purse on the table. I gave her a short summary of where I was from, what I was getting a Ph.D. in,

etc., and she attentively and warmly listened, exclaiming how wonderful all of it was. When I mentioned that I was from Maryland, she shared that quite a bit of her family lives in Maryland, and has for years, but that she hadn't seen them in over 30 years since coming to the southwest. "I don't really know them anymore as it has been years...my family is really here in the southwest...I've made such good friends who are like family here," she said.

Athena has been married to Carl, a retired professor of mathematics for over 40 years:

By that time I was 30 years old. I had dated so many ... There isn't a good word for that. Frogs? I pretty much knew what I could deal with and what I couldn't. The main thing in the back of my mind was, "The way I love this person or even like this person I have to live them with them for the rest of my life" because I was determined, "You only get married once." 43 years we've been married now. Yeah, married in '72. 43 years. Yeah.

I was curious and struck at how Athena was able to build a supportive and strong social network in a place where there were so few people who looked like her, or understood her identity as a Black woman. I couldn't wait for her to delve more into this particular area in her life. I brought Athena a bottle of water just in case she would like some, as I knew our interview would be at least 1 hour, but she came equipped with her own.

After I sufficiently satisfied her curiosity and interest in me, Athena was ready to start the interview. "So what questions do you have for me" she said smiling as she looked at me. I started off asking her to tell me a bit of background information, like where she was from, how old she was, etc., and as Athena spoke she used her hands to elaborate on her points. She had long, slender fingers, and neatly manicured nails with clear polish on them. She was so

graceful in her movements, mannerisms, and speech. Athena was a lady in every way, a value that was instilled in her by her mother:

My mother always said, "You act like a lady wherever you go. You do not want anybody ever turning around and saying to you 'Ew, she's this, she's that.' You don't want any regrets. Remember that you don't want any regrets for the rest of my life." My mother was very ladylike. "Ladies don't do this." That was always in the back ... "Ladies don't do this. You're a young lady. You don't do this. You don't participate in that. You don't come home with your clothes dirty and torn and ripped from playing whatever you're playing." ... Then when I went to high school with all girls that was pointed out again to us.

There was a fragile elegance about her that fashionably hid her vulnerability and her strength. Perhaps it was my own perceptions of aging and assumed weakness that I was casting upon her. Listening to Athena share her life story and experiences with me, I was moved by the strength and determination she demonstrated through so much of it.

Black pride. Athena grew up in the 1940s, in an all Black neighborhood in New York (Harlem). It was a time when Blacks lived in enclaves onto themselves, only emerging from the protective barriers of their neighborhoods to procure and work. The Black communities that Athena describes were not the Black communities that one thinks of or sees depicted today. The overarching theme was not one of poverty and violence, but of pride, support, and plentiful in resources.

I always knew I was Black and I was proud of it because we had so many great people in Harlem. That was the place to be. My grandfather, my step-grandfather, was pretty big in the community. He had a great job. My father had a good job. It was

never, "I can't do this because I'm Black." Our Black community there, at the time, was very functional. We were told a lot we didn't need White folks. Except maybe for a job. I'd see White people but they weren't better than my friends and my mother's friends. They had houses too.

Below Athena describes her childhood neighborhood:

Queens my area was Black. Everybody had their house. They had their little dogs and cats and their cars and restaurants and in Queens we went to any restaurant we wanted to go to. There was not a problem. We didn't try to live in any neighborhoods we didn't need to. We had our own neighborhood. It didn't affect me in Queens either. Same thing with Harlem. Black folks lived in brownstones. They owned the brownstones. God bless them. They've lost most of them now. I just wish I had money so I could go buy one. Anyway, they're finer here. I think that because we related to our community there was not a problem. We had good, bad, and indifferent. We didn't need white people for anything. We had our own doctors, teachers, grocery stores, churches....the only time we really blended or were around whites was when work was scarce and the grown ups had to venture outside of the community for employment at times.

Athena grew up at a time when civil rights for Blacks were escalating and at its height, a time where Black people were openly and actively being disenfranchised, dehumanized, and humiliated by Jim Crow laws and other government sanctioned segregation efforts. However, living during the time of segregation did not have a negative impact on how she viewed her racial identity or existence in the world. In fact, she expressed that it was being in an all Black environment that was very uplifting and instilled a strong

sense of racial pride in her at being Black, since being Black was always lauded and affirmed by both her community and her family. She had such a strong sense of pride in her identity that even when she ended up going to an all white catholic school, not too far from her home, she did not feel as if she were inferior or less than, and was never treated as such. She describes her family life in the quote below:

I lived in a Black community, yes. My mother's friends weren't necessarily from that community. They were from the Bronx, they were all over. They were all groups and couples. They liked to party. That's what I know. My parents were always laughing and having a good time. My dad worked two full-time jobs for 20 years so that we could move out of Harlem. I lived in Harlem. My grandmother and grandfather lived in Harlem and so when my mother remarried she and my stepdad, who I consider my dad because he was a great guy, we moved in with them. I was always comfortable. I had my grandmother around me and my mother. When I came home there was always somebody at the door. My grandmother would open, she could tell from my face, "Okay, what happened today?"

She acknowledged that growing up in the north rather than the south probably contributed to her strong sense of a positive Black self, as she did not witness or have to deal with the deep and overt racism that was occurring in the south, and describes her shock and naivety when she attended college at Howard University in the south:

I went to Howard. Its kind of like standing around wondering, "What's going on? I really don't know anything." I just came from this Catholic school, all these kids from all over the place and they know all this Black stuff. I just don't know. In the Northern states you just don't do that. The people in the Southern states had to band together

and they knew history and background of Black folks. My parents they never bothered with that. I don't quite know why. My parents were from Maryland. My family's from Maryland. They knew about segregation, and at the time when I was young we couldn't go onto white beaches but as a kid that doesn't register with you. "I've got my own beach. I'll go there. I don't care." I was never into the Black history thing and so when I went to Howard I just was ... It was a tremendous eye-opener. I stayed there for 2 years, had all sorts of friends, had a good time. My mother said it was the most expensive party she ever threw.

You know, I'll have to talk about that. I grew up in Harlem. 141st Street, Lennox Avenue. Because we were all there you didn't have to think about being Black. My parents, my dad he was working. My mom worked off and on. All your friends were Black. Everything was Black. You lived in a Black neighborhood with professionals, non-professionals. You didn't have to think about that.

Athena transitions to describe a differing experience from her relatively tranquil upbringing in New York, when she attended a college in the south where she received direct exposure to the civil unrest and racism occurring in society at the time:

Then when I got to Howard I thought, "What is this other experience people are having in the South?" I can't say we've never been discriminated against in New York and we have. As a child I probably didn't even recognize it. My grandmother she was hellfire. She just didn't take any foolishness. I can't even imagine her ... Well, yet, we were on the bus in New York once and my grandmother said ... She had me all dressed up. We were going down to Macy's, I think. We lived in Harlem, as I said. We had to take a bus down to Macy's, 34th Street, we lived on 141st. My

grandmother had me all dressed up. She said, "Looking beautiful." This White lady got on the bus and said, "Oh, what a cute little nigger." My grandmother had a mouth on her too. She said when she finished cussing that lady out that lady went and get off the bus. I didn't recognize that because I don't even remember it. Evidently it was there. I was made aware of it at Howard and there I was in the early '50s, early '60s when things were just beginning to fester. We had people at Howard, Stokely, I think was from Howard, and some of the people were taking buses and doing the riot thing and all the riots and such. I was barred from that. Both my mother and father said, "If you get in that, I'm going to yank you out of college. I don't want you to get in that because you have no idea what it's like." They evidently knew. I didn't. It was there that I would talk to other Black kids and they would tell me what their place in their towns and the things that were happening and going on.

Despite the social upheaval and violent climate that many Blacks found themselves emerged in during the early and mid 1900s, I was intrigued and befuddled by the idea that the generation of people back then could rise from such vitriolic and damaging experiences with a strong and positive sense of racial identity. My own parents who grew up near the end of segregation would often speak about how Black communities were productive, and resourceful places to live back then and helped contribute to their strong sense of pride and worth in their heritage. Once again these depictions of strong Black, functional, healthy communities as the norm were so vastly different from the narrative around the dangerous Black inner city and communities the media portrays today, yet these vibrant Black communities still exist today particularly in the east, they simply aren't the focus of the media. As Athena spoke about her community and the differences she witnessed in the south

I conveyed my own thoughts about segregation and desegregation. I mainly mentioned how surprised I was that Blacks who grew up during segregation had such high levels of self-esteem and racial pride, as I personally could not imagine emerging from such dehumanizing circumstances with my worth and value intact. I shared that my mother grew up during the 1950s and was so self-assured and assertive regardless of where she went or who she was around. She contributed her positive sense of self-worth to growing up in an all Black community where the doctors, nurses, teachers, farmers, etc., all looked like her which meant she could be and do and be whatever she decided to be. Whereas for me and many in my generation who grew up in largely mixed school and neighborhood settings struggled more with finding our way. It was and is more of a negotiation trying to understand what it means to be a person, yet also Black in predominately White settings.

Racism. Racism and discrimination were also a huge piece of Athena's narrative, given the era she grew up in. I sat and listened in disbelief and awe as she recounted some of her experiences, particularly her stories about her employment with the airlines:

I think I've had meaningful things in my life. Starting from working for the airlines and being the only one that got called everything but a child of God while I was on that flight. You would not believe. "You're a token. You're a token. You!" They called me this, they called me that. They called me the other thing. I thought. You don't talk back then at the airline. Now the airline people will cuss your butt out, even if they work for the airline. Black or White, you didn't do that. I was young enough to be able to take that. It was my 20s. They could call me anything, I wouldn't care. I wouldn't care until I left ... I'd go home sometimes fussing. I'd be walking to my car

fussing. I'd say, "These people are going to send me crazy. You need to stop that." I couldn't respond to them properly.

Me: What would you say? How would you deal with that?

Athena: You smile and let them go on about their business. ... I can say there was only one incident and I had a work partner who was very Irish. She didn't take no crap. A short little thing. She liked everybody. She was not a bigot. She was a dynamite. This man, he was sitting at the desk, they come to you, and you take all their paperwork, their tickets and stuff, and you get them ... You call down to the gate and you get them the best seats, and make sure their tickets are okay. This guy came up to her and he said, "Would you get me my seat, please?" She looked at him and she knew something was wrong because I knew how to do my job and do it well. She said, "Miss Wanders didn't get your seat for you?" He said, "I didn't want her to get my seat." She did not tell me this until he got on the plane and left. You know where he was from? El Paso. I'll never forget that. He worked for El Paso Natural Gas or something like that. Little nobody. She said, "Come here, I have to tell you something." Wonder she didn't cuss him out because she surely had a mouth.

Anyway, she said, "I have to tell you something." She told me. I said, "Why didn't you tell me?" She said, "I didn't want to tell you until he left the gate and the plane took him. I was afraid you were going to snatch him." That was the only incident I had amongst so-called rich people. Some of them became good friends. "If you ever need a job, just call me." Stuff like that. I was happy with what I was doing because I got to travel.

Athena further elaborates on how she handled such situations and did not let the racism and prejudice of others impact her too much:

I've gone on the main floor when I was working in passenger service. I've been called token, I've been called nigger. I've been called you name it. I always felt it's just a bunch of ignorant folks. They're just ignorant. I can't let them get on my nerves. I worked 10 years successfully. I had all sorts of commendations and letters and so forth. I'm glad that I had that experience because I knew what other people had gone through before me. Not necessarily with the airlines but in any situation. I kept it in my mind and I said, "God will take care of it." He will. He certainly will. Just to know, I knew people that did that were ignorant. When they go to another airline person and say, "Why you got that nigger standing out there?" Blah, blah, blah. Most of the ladies and guys on the counter, we all partied together. They'd ignore them, go about their business. There was no response to their questions. It was not easy. I will tell you that.

Athena also described her participation in political activism, joining sit ins of businesses and organizations that discriminated against Blacks:

I've been called names because I did participate in a lot of, no sit-ins, but a lot of the marches around Washington. For example, when Woolworth ... Do you remember Woolworth 5 and 10 cent store?

Me: Yes, yes!

Athena: They hired no Blacks. We picketed them. We picketed the Capitol. We picketed the White House. Done all of that. Thank God, I wasn't in a situation where I had to sit down on a counter and get my head knocked off. I'm sure my parents would

not have allowed me to do that. I have met, through my husband, many of the men and women that did that. I highly respect them. I really do. I was not a fighter by any means. I don't know. Maybe the Harlem would have come out in me if you know they had said something or done something wrong to me. I never had that experience. Never. My grandmother in New York, she used to take me everywhere she thought she could take me. They didn't know who she was because when she was younger she was, very fair. Maybe they thought that she was babysitting some Black woman's child or something like that. I don't know. That experience I've never had. I hope if there was such a thing that I could have handled it. I don't know. These people were from these Southern cities. They knew. I didn't know that kind of thing. Oh my Lord, have mercy. My husband would tell me some stuff that happened to him. I tell you.

Another interesting thing Athena spoke about was public transportation in the 60s, and Blacks not being allowed to fully utilize the amenities onboard:

They wouldn't let the Black folks eat in the same car with the white folks. That's why Black folks carried their food on the train. Everybody, "Why'd they bring all their food on the train?" Because years ago they couldn't eat in the dining cars.

Me: Where did they eat if they could not eat on the train?

Athena: They carried their food. When people got on the train they had chicken, they had all kinds of foodstuff, and you're never on the train more than a couple of days or so. They carried all their food with them. I'm sure it was better than eating in the dining car probably. It's amazing how things were many, many years ago. Now, we're train buffs. We get on the train, you have to sit with other people, and you talk to interesting people. Some people got it, some people don't. Some people that don't

have it, they hide it. You know when people really like you and others they're comfortable and they can't quite get their seat to get the right way. We pay no attention to that. They're just ignorant. Ignorant. You look at the people you can tell they aren't comfortable with you... they're just so ignorant. A whole other generation needs to die before ... I think the younger kids are a little bit better. I say that tongue in cheek. I'm not sure.

As I listened to Athena recount her encounters with racist policies and people, and often times procuring employment where she was the first and only Black person in the organization, I imagined what that must have been like (though such circumstances still are my reality being an educated Black woman in academia). Taking on these challenges and opportunities when there really were not laws in place to protect Black people from discrimination, retaliation, at a time when desegregation was a new phenomenon and many white Americans were not used to working or living with Blacks, the uncertainty, the apprehension, the pressure to do well and represent one's community well must have been stupendous. At least today, there is some legal recourse to be taken for inequitable treatment (though one could argue it is not as effective as it should be for people of color).

Racial socialization. When I asked Athena what she thought about the current events, particularly the Black Lives Matter Movement, and some of challenges that Blacks still face in America she referred to the way her generation handled it, and believed this generation (my generation) needed to focus on getting educated in order to fight racism and violence:

I think the experience for young Blacks ... I have a feeling they need to change the way they approach things. I think they need to get on about their lives and ignore

them for the most part. They need to get on about their lives, make sure that they're not dependent on these people, and make sure that they're entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurs, especially. That they're doing something that does not have to depend on a white person. I'm not saying all white people are bad. There's some of them that will give the whole world. For the most part they can't expect these ignorant people to treat them properly. Why do they expect that? They know they're bad people. It's so obvious to me. They have no mental capacity to know how to treat people. Why are you going to get up in their face? You're going to get hurt. If they don't kill you, then one of their brothers or sisters is going to do it.... You just do the best you can, live in the biggest house you can, and show that one day they'll have to come and do your garden. That's my belief. Fighting it turns out worse.

As Athena conversed about the recent killings of young Black men, children, and women her voice rose as anger slipped into her words and she expressed her feelings about White people who committed such crimes:

What's happening now? Kids are getting killed. They've got some of the White people now have the feeling that they can express that. They can shoot them. Just like they did in Charleston. These are still ignorant nobodies shooting Black people that are worth 100% more. He's nothing. I know the Lord doesn't want me to feel that way. The Lord made him, but he truly ... That's the way that I feel. They know nothing. They're not fit to walk under our feet. They've done nothing with their lives and they will never do anything with their lives. Why do I want this person even around? I don't want to talk to them. I don't want to be in their party. I don't want to sit next to them. They may not want to sit next to me but they don't know how I don't want to sit

next to them either. They're nothing. Why God put them on Earth here? For that? They'll pay for it, though. They'll really pay for it. I am sure I didn't feel that way when I was younger but now I just see such stupidity out of there. My God. Open your eyes. Read something. When I worked at African-American student services I would get calls from various white people, "What do you have African-American student services?" They were asking me all sorts of dumb questions. I'd say, "Sir, if I were you I would get a library card and go to the library and read some books." Bam. Hang the phone up. They were ignorant people. I don't have time for that. They should not have even a minute of my time. Nor anyone else's time. I look at them and I say, "Lord have mercy."

Athena went on to emphasize again how Blacks still need to get an education and learn how to use legal resources to their advantage, again reflecting her middle class values on advancing oneself through education and social status :

These Black kids they've got a lot to learn. I think the ones on the campuses are doing wonderful. Especially with Kansas or somewhere where they went out to picket and they pulled the courts on them. People that were heading up the programs, the President and so forth. I respect that. No violence. You want to get your head beat but we didn't accomplish what we accomplished by being violent because they are more than we know. They better get themselves well educated. I know that! If you're not educated you can't do anything. You've got to know their minds. You've got to be around them. Listen to what they're saying. Be around a person for about an hour and you already know them. That is what they need to do. Better stop worrying about fighting. You won't get anything from fighting but you get dead. You get dead. Very

dead. What good are you dead to us? That don't help us. It doesn't help us do a thing. We want your brain. We want you. Just to educate themselves. You don't know what people are doing to you if you're not educated. You think that's the way it's supposed to be. It is not.

Death. It was fascinating to hear Athena talk about herself in relation to others, as being Black and female almost seemed inseparable from her humanness, meaning that she did not think of herself in terms of being a human being, she thought of herself in terms of being a Black woman and the Black and femaleness is what made her human. The only time when this way of identifying was not present was when she spoke about the existential given of death, specifically the death of her mother when she was in her 30s. Athena's mother died unexpectedly from a tumor, and by the time she was made aware that her mother was sick, she had collapsed and was in a coma in the hospital. Athena's mother did not want to worry her with her illness so she kept it from her, despite their very close relationship.

My mother died at age 53 which was the hardest thing and will always be the hardest thing ... It's just recently that I could even talk about it. It was unexpected. I was exactly 20 years younger than her. She was 53. I was 33. I just moved out here.

Another reason why I didn't like the southwest? Because I was here, my mother was there, she got sick. She was always kind of sickly. She got sick and they didn't tell me how bad it was. I was going back to school to be a stenographer, which I accomplished, because when I came down here American Airlines did not fly here so I had no job. I'm not one that can sit in the house all day. I was in school. They didn't want to disturb the school thing. I was so angry about that. I had no one to be angry with. I was just angry. Low and behold, my mother went into a coma and then it was

like that's when they called me to tell me I should come home. When they called me and told me that I fell out in the apartment. My husband was there. He had to call up the neighbors. I got on the plane that day or the next day. I don't remember. My mother was already in a coma. At that time there wasn't the belief that if you talk to people in a coma they will hear you. All I could do was sit there and act stupid. My grandmother was more than upset. She and I were just devastated really. You just don't expect anyone to die at 53. She moved back to Maryland where her family was, my grandmother, but she was never the same because she kept saying, "You never see your daughters die. You just never see your daughter die. You're the one that dies before them."

As Athena relived the death of her mother, her voice dropped and she clasped her hand to her chin as if to provide her body with support I listened compassionately and attentively as Athena averted her eyes, and continued to conjure up the spirit of her mother through memory and absence fueled by connectedness and love.

My mother was a really neat lady too. I think that had a great effect on my life. I'm almost welling up now because for a long time I couldn't even talk about it. People would ask me about it and I would say, "I don't want to talk about it." I got so angry. I got angry with God too. I was away from the church for at least 2 or 3 years because God took my mom. The nerve of Him. Like I'm the only one whose mom has been taken, you know? You don't think about that when you're young. I stayed out of the church for a long time. Nobody could tell me anything. Then somebody said, "Athena, He left her long enough for her to raise you properly, to give you a good foundation, she did her job." Then I realized, "Okay." I still miss her. People talk

about their moms and I think, "My God. My mother would be 95 now." Maybe I don't want to see her being 95. Anyway, my mother was very dear and being an only child that means a whole lot. No brothers, no sisters.

Listening to Athena speak of death caused me to reflect on what it might be like for my own young child who has no siblings. "I think about that with my only child. I'm 40 now and she's just 2 years old. When she's 30 I'll be in my 70s. I worry about," I told Athena who quickly smiled and told me, "70s is the new 40 ... Don't even worry about it, don't even worry about that." But I did worry about my own mortality just as I worried about the mortality of my mother. As I placed myself in Athena's shoes, I could not fathom losing my mother at 35 let alone at 40. Given that I hadn't truly experienced the death of an immediate family member other than close acquaintances; I was reminded of the death of my paternal grandmother when I was 10 years old.

My grandmother had breast cancer, and by the time the doctors evaluated her it was so malignant and far along that there was nothing they could do, but start chemo to make her more comfortable. After a few chemotherapy session my grandmother decided she was done fighting, that is was too painful to live in such a manner and told the doctors she no longer wanted chemotherapy, and was ready to die. We were visiting for the summer and I remember my grandmother, Evie Mae, sitting me and my younger brother down on the porch swing, giving us hugs, and telling us she wouldn't be around anymore and that she loved us. I asked why and she responded that she was sick and ready to go home to the Lord in heaven. I don't know if I fully comprehended that when we drove away from the green brick house with apple, pear trees, and a small well in the front yard that I would never see her again.

One month later after we returned to Georgia, the phone rang around 4pm. My father answered and sat down in the brown recliner chair. He began to cry and my mother went to put her arms around him. “What’s wrong with dad,” my brother and I asked confused and scared as we’d never seen our father cry before. “Maw Maw died,” my mother told us solemnly. We stood there as if we were caught in concrete, not knowing what to say or do, but cry as well. My MawMaw was only 57 years old, and the sweetest, kindest woman I knew. At 10 years old for me her loss meant there would be no more homemade buttermilk biscuits, cream of wheat, secret sips of coffee, or perfectly seasoned black eyed peas cooked with slabs of bacon. There would be no more summers in the small town of Detroit Alabama, a place that time seemed to transfix in the 1960s. There would be no more evening of her sitting on the porch watching my brother and I catch fire flies, so plentiful in the backwoods of the rural community that the night sky was illuminated fluorescent green. There would be no more imagining what was beyond the thick cornhusks and densely packed trees surrounding my grandparent’s house. I would have to live the rest of my childhood without her. Death steals the future, and present leaving us with the past to relive and rewrite like unstructured dreams. It turns those that we lose into ghosts that frequent our minds like irrepressible weeds. Athena’s recollections provoked reminiscences and aides-mémoires on what had already befallen me and what inevitably awaited me, demise and bereavement. Oh, how death is the great equalizer of life, no human being is too superior or inferior for it, the greatest and least of us succumb to its touch, and must learn to welcome its embrace.

The death of Athena’s mother seemed to be the most significant experience in her life, and the ways and words she chose to express her deep sorrow over the loss of someone so close to her could only be described as life altering yet very, very human. This loss was so

substantial that it created a rupture in her religious life as she her interpretation and way of finding meaning of her mother's death was to place her mother's life in the hands of an omnipotent God who chose to bring her home to heaven. She never once referred to her Blackness, or her femaleness, when speaking about experiencing death; she spoke of it simply as a human being who happens to be Black and female rather than from the place solely of a Black female.

Education and achievement value. The dominant givens present in Athena's story were meaninglessness and freedom. Athena's prevailing core value was one of accomplishment, education and perseverance as illustrated in the following quotes:

When I graduated with my undergraduate degree I was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa and the other sorority was you must have a 3.84 Phi Kappa Phi. Then I went on to get my graduate degree and I did very, very well there. There I kept my 3.8. I was determined.

Athena elaborated on this value of education:

I think my thing was, like my mother, when I was around white folks I made sure that I was the best and the brightest and the best dressed. That's the way I grew up. "No one is going to look better than me. No one is going to be smarter than me if I could help it. I have manners." If you say something stupid that's on you, not me. I kind of grew up with that.

Given that Athena's background is largely middle class, her core values of education and achievement are reflective of this, as from my experiences growing up in and around middle class Blacks education and achievement were pertinent in showing one's worth and in differentiating oneself from poor Blacks. It was an ugly reality but a real reality that quietly

simmered beneath the surface of Black society, within the community there was division, there was resentment, there was superiority that reared its head in subtle and overt ways, through the way one talked, dressed, how educated one was, where they lived, etc. However, we didn't air our laundry in front of White people, or reveal these issues to them for fear they would be used against us as ammunition. Everybody knew that you did not talk about Black people's business or issues in front of Whites.

As Athena and I began wrapping up our interview, I remember thinking that if Athena could live through a time when her freedom was literally restricted by laws due to the color of her skin, and not internalize all of the negative messages and hegemonic ideologies prevalent in society at that time (and still) when she and those like her faced the reality of state sanctioned violence and socially sanctioned violence just due to their Blackness, and still possess such a strong positive Black identity, then how could I not? Athena was willing to challenge and step out into situations and positions where she was the first Black woman to do so, in order to pave the way for others like myself. During that time it was considerably more difficult to do so (not to say that today there aren't great challenges still in regard to acceptance in society and jobs) but nothing near what she experienced. I don't have to worry too much about a passenger calling me a nigger and refusing my service as a flight attendant, without there being some sort of recourse I can take legally. There weren't those options for her, and yet she thrived and did not internalize those experiences as reflections on who she was or was not in the world. It did not determine the quality or nature of her existence, she was still able to transcend those issues to find meaning and self-determine. Agency was always present and always available for her to exercise. As our interview concluded, Athena cordially hugged me, and told me she enjoyed herself. She told me that if I needed more

participants she could help me get some, just let her know, and that she would be happy to help me in any way she could in the future. She suggested that I look into joining her sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, as it was a good way to connect with other Black women, and she would love to have me as a member. I walked away from my 4 hour meeting with Athena feeling uplifted and proud to be able to identify with a woman such as herself (her story full of such wisdom and courage).

Gaia

“I think Black women are superheroes.

I think we've had to be. Our superpower is being alive and surviving.”

From the moment I first laid eyes on Gaia I was curious and fascinated by the thought of the stories and secrets she seemed to carry so smoothly and stylishly within herself. I would pass by her occasionally on my way to work at the university, and she would intentionally look my way, make eye contact and graciously offer me a warm smile and energetic hello. Cool sophistication oozed from Gaia's pores, the garments that clothed her were always a perfect expression of spritely, blithe spirit, from the abstract, colorful head wraps she wore, to her flowing pants and shirts. Gaia's statuesque figure almost floated through the air as she walked, as though she were perpetually waltzing wherever she went. Her short brown, fine curly hair outlined her face like a proud frame. Her eyes were shaped liked almonds, always ready to yield life and crack open new ideas and thoughts. Her skin was the color of Madagascar cinnamon sticks. There was an indescribable beauty, grace and poise about her. Gaia was 45 years old, recently married with a 10-year-old son, and in her 3rd year of a PhD program in Education, while simultaneously working full time at the

University. From the little I discerned about Gaia I thought she would be the ideal candidate to interview on existential matters.

I emailed Gaia about being in my study and she immediately emailed back with a, “yes, yes, yes,” after viewing the flyer I attached. She invited me to do the interview in her home, about 45 minutes away from the city. I was recovering from a rib injury and could not drive myself, so my spouse, Matthew volunteered to drop me off at Gaia’s house, and go watch a movie while I conducted the interview. On our way to Gaia’s house, we stopped by a well-known doughnut shop to pick up a few treats for Gaia’s family, particularly her 10 year old son Isaiah who loved Boston cream doughnuts (though ironically they had just sold out of the very last Boston cream). I hoped Isaiah’s disappointment would not be too great, and that the other lavish doughnut flavors (some adorned with fruit loops, others with fruity pebbles and marshmallows) would suffice. Matthew assured me that to a ten year old, any of these would make him happy. Since Matthew and I had heard so many wonderful things about this bakery, we decided to try some of the delectable. I ordered myself a lavender and rosemary glazed doughnut and he ordered the Chile glazed doughnut. Both were good, but small and overpriced at almost \$4 a doughnut. With an assortment of fancy flavors and beautifully decorated treats, we headed to our destination.

Matthew dropped me off a few blocks from Gaia’s residence, as to ensure confidentiality. When I arrived, Gaia was outside with her boxer Chewy waiting for me. Chewy ran over to greet me, sniffing my purple shoes and quickly licking my hand. “Chewy, stop that,” Gaia scolded him briskly striding over to grab his collar and force him to sit. “Oh that’s okay, I have really big dogs too,” I smiled rubbing his head. “It’s so good to see you, Lady,” I smiled as Gaia hugged me saying, “Welcome, come in, come in!” As we walked

into the quaint little adobe home, I spotted three bikes outside in the driveway, one with a white wicker basket and flowers strung across it. I thought how appropriately apt for Gaia to stroll across the artsy small town on this idyllic symbol. Her bicycle was the equivalent and extension to the white picket fence, and slow ease of flawed perfection in one's life.

Everything about Gaia was so intentional and an extension/expression of her inner essence.

The first thing Gaia did was introduce me to her beloved son, Isaiah who was in the den playing video games with his friend. After introductions, Gaia announced that I had brought the family doughnuts, and Isaiah and his friend abruptly jumped up, yelling, "Oh cool," as they whisked by me. "they didn't have Boston creams, so I hope you like these," I added. "Oh these are great, thank you!" Isaiah smiled reaching for a fruit loop topped doughnut and offering his friend one. As they gobbled down their sweets, Gaia reminded them both that they had to get ready for soccer practice, as the father of the visiting friend would be there in a few minutes to pick them up to take them. Isaiah quickly grabbed his cleats and ball, and headed out the door, just as the father arrived. Gaia stepped out to say hello to the parent, as Isaiah ran past her. "Wait, make sure you say goodbye to Ms. Tamiko," she chided. "Bye, nice to meet you," Isaiah muttered with doughnuts stuffed into his mouth. "You have to remind them of manners and being polite," she laughed as she waved goodbye to them. "Now, come on in and let's eat a bit. I prepared us lunch," she said pointing to the table, and heading back to the stove to stir something in a pot. Gaia prepared a feast of Salmon quiche, Ginger carrot soup, delectable cheeses breads and meats and salad. Throughout our visit the ever-faithful boxer lab mix Chewy was by our side, occasionally shamelessly pawing me begging for a few gourmet scraps from the table.

Before our formal interview, Gaia and I spoke for about one hour catching up on what was going on in our lives, and expressing regret that we hadn't gotten together really before now, but happy to finally be doing so. Gaia and I lamented over the lack of hair options particularly braiding in the southwest, and I shared my horrid experience the other day attempting to prepare live Dungeness crab for consumption. YouTube cannot be trusted for all things apparently...reliability! As we ate, and chatted, laughed and affirmed one another, her husband Howard came home for lunch. I was glad to witness the warmth, love, and strong connection between them as Howard praised Gaia for being a wonderful cook, as he enjoyed some of the extra food she prepared. Howard had a 3 pm appointment, so he left after 30 minutes. Gaia and I continued our conversation...we spoke about raising children in a hostile world and wanting them to understand their social reality as Black but to also not let that be limiting. She told me an enlightening story about an experience her son had at school, which made her more conscious of appropriately educating Isaiah about what actual racism really is. Her son was at lunch with friends when the other boys started joking about being various fruits. One boy said he was white rice and that Isaiah was brown rice. Isaiah got upset and told the other boy that he was being racist. A week later the boy's mother approached Gaia about the incident, inquiring into what happened and if everything was okay between them and their children. Gaia hadn't heard about the incident from Isaiah, and when she asked him about it she was reminded that she needed to be clearer with him about what racism is and perhaps is not. I thoroughly enjoyed our pre-interview talk, as warmth exuded from the tiles and ceilings in the cozy Adobe style home. Gaia's voice was a melodic instrument that she played with precision and passion when she spoke (you could feel every word, every syllable).

Defying the odds and smashing stereotypes. Gaia's life theme was defying the odds and smashing stereotypes of Blackness. She was a circus performer, actress, cellist...an avid Shakespearean. All things not normally connected to Blackness. Gaia recollected an early experience she had in school that really shaped her way of being in the world, and her knack for engaging in the unexpected and unusual:

I did have an instant once that really, really shaped my perception of myself as a Black person. You know when you're in school, you got recess, you play these different running games. Who can run fastest to point A to point B. I was a fast runner, so I beat everybody. Definitely all the girls. Sometimes, most of the boys. I remember a White boy telling me that the only reason why I could run so fast was because I was Black. It never occurred to me ... Yes, I would remember, of course, watching the Olympics and track and field. In the sprint races, definitely, predominately Black. It never occurred to me that that was any kind of biological reason. From that moment on ... It's just one of those things that remains crystallized in your mind. From that moment on, I decided that I was going to do things that people would not expect a Black person, a Black girl, to do. These are things that of course I would have to end up ... I would have to like them. These would have to still be my choice. I think that's the reason why I did certain things like ...

Gaia stopped to think and waved her hand in the air when the thought returned to her:

Well heck, a couple years after that, I made sure to try out for the cross-country team. Like "Really, you think I can only run fast? Let me try running these three miles, see what happens." Did pretty well at that.... I know that's the reason why I got involved in a circus, in a real-life circus, and learned to fly trapeze and tight-wire. Folks don't

expect that of ... Of most people, really. How many Black trapeze artists do you see? You know? I've always loved to play cello. I didn't start playing until I turned forty. Part of my enjoyment of cello was the sound of it. I also didn't see a lot of Black cellist. I didn't see any Black female cellists. I always wanted to play the cello. When I turned forty I said "Gosh darn it, I'm going to play the cello." That was a long time coming based on "I'm going to do stuff that no one thinks that I can or should do because what they see is a Black woman. At the time that I made that decision, a Black girl. This Black girl can only do this. This Black girl should only do this. This is a box that a Black girl is supposed to be in. I think ever since that White boy said that to me, I've been punching out that box. For that matter, refusing to get in the box. Gaia referenced the irony in the contradictions of both choosing to define her own identity in such a way that is counter to the ascribed identities of society and the friction this creates for her:

When I turned forty, had a series of just massive crap that happened in my life. Part of me dealing with it, because of my theater background, I wrote a one-woman show, performed this show. Without going into the detail of the structure of the show, a lot of it dealt with being Black, and being a Black female. In the very first section, I recounted that story that I just shared with you. Even though I made this decision for myself, I feel like I'm always counteracting these thoughts of who I'm supposed to be as a Black woman. You have all these different stereotypes. You have either this exotic fetishized look ... Going back to Indiana to go to college, there was more than one time I would hear ... I wasn't even dating a particular White guy, but I would hear some White guy tell me "I've never had a Black girl before." As if that's something to

notch off your belt or something. Make a little mark over your headboard. Or the angry Black woman. In my show, I called it "Shaniqua-tude." It's okay to have "Shaniqua-tude." That's just fine. What I'm getting at is trying to negotiate the extremes of the stereotypes, as well as trying to figure out which stereotype, mine, not to step on is exhausting. It's just much easier just to be myself. Whether or not that bumps up against a stereotype, well, okay, I don't have any control over that. I guess that sometimes, you got to have "Shaniqua-tude."

Black female pride. Throughout her interview, the givens of meaninglessness, freedom, and death heavily dominated her narrative. As I listened to Gaia's remembrances, the richness, cadence, and sheer excitement about life in general were contagious. Gaia possessed a zest for life and simply wanted to be left alone to live her life and enjoy her loved ones. The connectedness and pride Gaia felt about whom she was, her Blackness, her femaleness seemed to seep from her pores as she gushed about how she loved and valued her personal and collective identity as a Black woman. Given that her mother who was a single parent, and an incredibly strong and prideful woman raised Gaia, Gaia's perceptions of both her Blackness and femaleness were molded by her mother's intentional instillation of pride in Black culture. Here Gaia shared some of her thoughts about what being a Black woman meant to her:

Honestly, I think it's just the way that I grew up. I grew up with a very strong Black woman. Rather, single parent. I've taken my cues from her. Being Black and being female, absolutely nothing meaningless about that at all. Matter of fact, it's incredibly meaningful. Yes, I matter. As a Black woman. Being Black and being a woman, there's things that I can bring to the table because of being Black and being a female.

In that context, no. No meaninglessness at all. Not at all. Like I said, it's a good thing. I'm glad. I'm so happy. I'm going to get a t-shirt made. Black woman. Happy, happier, happiest. I totally understand that some folks would hear this and be like "She's really full of herself." I don't even see it like that at all. I really don't. I think for someone to be full of themselves, I think they also have to think that someone is less than. I don't think that anyone is less than if you're not Black, or if you're not female, or if you're not Black and female. I don't believe that at all. I just love being Black and female. It's a real good thing.

As Gaia giggled and raised her hands in the air as if to indicate “hallelujah” I laughed and felt a sense of validation, yet tinge of envy at her assuredness in who she was. For Gaia being Black and female meant the following:

What does it mean to be Black? It means that I am a part of an amazing history of endurance and success, fierce determination, talent, intelligence, ingenuity, despite ... Or in spite of, whatever you want to use. Either one, really.

Gaia continued:

Shoot, you put those two together, Black and female? Woohoo! I'm happy about that. Being a woman? There's some great unique stuff with being a woman that I love. I love the idea of bleeding every month and not dying. That's cool. That's cool. That's scary to folks. It really, truly is. I love the idea of having this body, having this woman body. I like my stuff tucked in as opposed to swinging out there. I like that. I like the idea of being able to bring fourth life. I like that. That being something unique to woman. I love it. I love it.

While I was definitely aware of my identity and embraced it, I don't think I ever expressed or felt sheer joy from being in the skin I was in (for being Black and female). I was reminded in listening to Gaia speak of all of the beauty and strength that inherently resided in me, to which I was not very mindful of. I was more aware of all the ways that my Blackness and femaleness limited me or complicated my life, not the ways in which it benefited me. The joy had escaped me somehow, though my conversations, interviews, and encounters with women like Gaia were connecting me to the joy, to the awesomeness of being a Black woman.

Racism. Given Gaia's sprightly personality and optimistic outlook on life, I was curious how she managed to maintain such sanguinity and passion, particularly when she encountered racism and social inequality. Not one to let the beliefs or behavior of other people heavily pollute her rich internal world and attitude, Gaia largely ignored and when necessary diplomatically dealt with bias and discrimination (though admitted it was arduous to remain positive when such instances occurred). However, Gaia was clear that it was the perception of other people who either misunderstood or refused to understand her and her experiences that infringed upon this happiness and freedom, not her own beliefs about her Black femaleness. Gaia expressed her pride in being Black yet her struggle with what her Blackness meant to other people:

Oh, boy. It's being a member of a really cool, exclusive club. That has its own issues. It is a flag I like to fly. Unapologetically so. I think it's great. I think it's wonderful to be Black. I struggle with the hatred. I don't get it. The hatred that people have for really anybody. Rather, for anyone of another race. I just don't get it. Living in this country with the history that we have, I don't understand the hatred. As I've gotten

older, I understand that it's more fear. I don't understand that either. Why do you fear me so? Why was it such a problem to have a Black president?

Folks that want to kill all that out of you. Literally, kill it out of you. Stop it in some way. That's what I don't understand. That's the hatred, the fear that I don't like. Why? I get the idea of slavery in the sense of "Let's go get some free labor." Obviously, I don't agree with that. I get the concept of it. I even get the concept of "Let's manipulate this so that we always have this free labor force." Which means, "They're born that way. God made it so that these are the laborers, these are the workers." I get the concept of trying to make that work out for you. What does that mean? I don't understand why it has to be that way though.

Gaia then vividly illustrated what it felt like to be Black and constantly targeted by others for your otherness:

You understand the motives of a serial killer. You get why they do what they do. You don't, obviously, agree with it, you don't condone it, and you want to stop it.

Especially if you are the particular target of that serial killer. I'm intentionally using serial killer as this analogy that I'm making. That's what I feel sometimes about being Black. Being Black is to be hunted in so many ways. We see this even more today, I think, with our current political climate.

Gaia continued becoming emotional as she shared the second half of the story:

Sitting at the kitchen counter the other day with my husband, with Howard. We're watching Trump stuff. I will say, after we ended up watching this, I said "I'm done. No more. No more. I can't do this anymore." I started crying because I was scared. I realized, I think we're hitting a new Civil Rights wave. Before, we would see in these

great videos, footage ... When I say great, I mean the fact that we're about to see them, it's great. Footage of Black folks sitting at counters or being hosed or dogs being sacked on them, or pictures of lynching, and what was going on at that time. Then the fight to stop all of this violence. We, meaning this generation right now, we're so removed from that. It's pure documentary footage. Or if we're fortunate and lucky enough to be able to speak to people who were there. We weren't there. I see this period now with Black Lives Matter and similar kinds of organizations and thoughts and memes. Black Girl Magic kind of stuff. The social media that I think we're in the dawn of a new Civil Rights era. Which encompasses more than just Black folks. Specifically, Black folks, as far as Black Lives Matter. That's scary. That's why I started crying. I'm like "Shit, that was hard for all ... I know that was hard." To deal with them "Yay, I'm glad that they did that, and they did that so I didn't have to. Shit, I got to do that now. I know I have to. Why? I don't want to. How long have we been doing this? When did Black folks first step foot on this land? 1619, right?" That's the year that we agree upon. 1619. What year is it now? 2016? Let's make the math easy for me. Let's say it's 2019, okay? That's how many years? That's a lot of years. I think in some ways, the only difference is that we don't physically have a collar around us. We're not chained, we're not literally chained. Dang, those invisible fetters are a bitch. They're there. They're still there.

Hearing the emotionality in Gaia's voice and seeing the visible disturbance on her face moved me, as did her words, and I wanted to reach over and grasp her hand, let her know that it was okay to feel as she did and that it was rational and understandable. But I knew I would be uttering kind and fallacious words, that I would merely be offering

platitudes for I did not know if it would be okay. While I myself was a witness to the ensuing and effervescing social unrest occurring all across the United States in Black communities and American society, I was a witness from a distance, yet considering Gaia's comments I pondered how long any of us would be able to stand idle as spectators, I pondered when the vitriol and violence would finally spill over into all of our lives to such an extent that we could not simply watch and commiserate. In that moment I began to share Gaia's fear and fatigue, I was becoming keenly aware that there would soon come a time when like our ancestors, Gaia and I would have to pick up their armor and artilleries. Once more, we would have to fight, fight for our very lives, the lives of our children and future generations (as some of us were already doing), fight for preservation of our humanity and our freedom. "We're going to have to fight," I thought to myself, "I'm going to have to fight." I looked over at Gaia, curled up on the couch clutching a pillow tightly to her chest. Gaia's words sprinted through my mind again, "Shit, I got to do that now. I know I have to. Why? I don't want to. How long have we been doing this?" The advent of a new Civil rights era was upon us, and we no longer could close our eyes to this emergent reality. Its looming odor scented the air causing the atmosphere to reek of its stench. It was ubiquitous, it was inevitable! It was coming whether we were ready or not.

Freedom value. As Gaia and I sat stiff and anesthetized from crippling contemplations, Gaia raised her head, turned to look at me, smiled and asked if I wanted any coffee or tea. We both opted for tea, as we needed something to warm our spirits again after such a hefty subject. Through sips of herbal tea, I started asking questions again, this time on freedom. One of the most significant givens and values for Gaia was that of personal freedom. Gaia valued freedom above all else, as it allowed her to define who she was and

how she could live her life, and the threat of that freedom being taken away from her whether through death or social inequalities troubled her deeply. Fearing for her freedom, her death and the freedom and the death of her son were the most poignant and emotional themes in Gaia's story. Below Gaia spoke about how her regard for freedom was cultivated (through her mother) and then defines what it is for her:

When I was twelve, I asked my mom what her favorite thing was in the entire world. I'm thinking material. Her answer was "My freedom." "What?" I knew what she said was something really, really powerful, but I didn't understand it until I became an adult. Which I was able to get it. "Freedom is not so much doing whatever you want, whenever you want it, wherever you want to do it." It really is being happy. That's how I really call freedom. It's being happy and more than content. Feeling a sense of being blessed with your life and the choices that you make in your life. Freedom is being able to do all those simple but meaningful things. Waking up next to the person you love. Freedom is being able to hug your child and kiss him goodnight, or good morning, or off to school. Freedom is those mundane kinds of things like making your kid's lunch or taking a walk around the neighborhood. Freedom is living a happy life. Freedom is being able to have resources to deal with whatever funky comes your way. Those resources could be material. They could be an emotional partner Freedom is being able to live a good life. A good, happy life. However you personally define that. It's truly an individual thing. It really, really, really, really is. Howard and I say all the time how blessed we are. How blessed, how blessed, how blessed. It's all little stuff. It's not like "I got a check for a million dollars. Blessed." Yes, that would be a great blessing, but that's not the definition, necessarily, of

freedom. Freedom is being able to wake up on a Sunday morning and being able to make carrot, ginger soup. You know what I'm saying? That's freedom. To me at least. Feeling content and happy in your skin.

When I asked Gaia if she believed that being Black restricted her freedom she responded:

That's a big, heavy question. Yes and no. No, I don't think it restricts my level of happy. Meaning I'm still going to get up and make this carrot, ginger soup, and I'm Black. I'm still going to be able to do the academic work I want to. yes part of restricting my freedom is when I have to run through that script in my head when I see the state trooper behind me. I don't look at it as being Black restricts me. That it's how the larger society wants to deal with Black that restricts that freedom. It's really an external and outside force. It's not me being Black that is a restriction for myself, or something that I have created. It's just a bunch of bullshit I have to deal with that makes it challenging. Like "Man, I was happy. Then I read that. Then I saw that. Then I heard that. I'm not happy anymore. Because you got a problem with Black folks." This country has a problem or this presidential candidate has a problem. Or this whatever. Somebody's got a problem and they are going to make it my problem.

On whether being a woman restricted her freedom:

Surely. I see that in terms of restrictions of my health. I'm fiercely pro-choice. If you don't want to do that, you don't do that. Don't restrict my freedom to do what I want to do with my body. My body in this uniquely female aspect of my body. Where are the laws that are restricting males from doing certain things with their body? With their body as male? Where are those laws? Are there any? Maybe there are. I don't know of any.

Fear of death. As mentioned earlier, the current social climate in America and the Black Lives Matter movement were very much on both of our minds as we had this conversation, and while Gaia and I both celebrated the beauty of being Black women, we were also aware of the dangers ascribed to our raced and gendered bodies. Though the deaths of Black citizens by law enforcement was troubling, there was something even more sinister and pervasive for us about the prominent deaths and killings of several Black women by law enforcement...particularly the Sandra Bland incident. Gaia describes her sadness, fear and understanding of this incident where Sandra Bland was wrongly pulled over by a state trooper and assaulted, then arrested for appearing irritated with the state trooper for stopping her in the first place. She was found hung in her jail cell the next morning. Gaia imagines herself in this situation and grapples with the reality of the existential given of death, realizing that she too could have been Sandra Bland; she too could have ended up dead because she dared to change lanes without properly signaling:

I think in certain situations, yes I do. I used to make that trek up and down I-25 from my town to the southwest and back again. After Sandra Bland, that's when I started to think "Crap, am I going to get stopped" or something by a state police officer or something. That's it. That's it. How would I react in that situation? Watching that Sandra Bland tape over and over and over again. I'm like "Dang, I don't know if I would do this too terribly different." I'm sure she didn't know that the outcome was going to be her death. In some ways, that was a gift. That sounds awful. In some ways, her death was a gift, I think, to many other Black women. To be aware of what could happen ... Again, it's not like a Black woman has never died under police

custody before. This was so played out in front of our faces. We saw her react and we're like "I'd be talking and upset too." Now that we know that we could die ...

Me: For questioning why you were pulled over.

Gaia: For why?

Me: Which is your right.

Gaia: Exactly.

Me: your right.

Gaia: Exactly. When I see a cop car behind me, I begin to rehearse.

Me: Me too.

Gaia: I begin to rehearse.

Me: Sometimes I even change lanes.

As Gaia and I continued to share the heightened awareness we now had while driving, Gaia suddenly went into a soliloquy which I could tell she had rehearsed in her mind countless times, due to the precision and quickness of the thoughts and words that flowed from her mouth, which sadly yet beautifully illuminated the death anxiety that she struggled with due to being a Black female in society:

Gaia: Is my blinker on ... Right, yes. If I should get stopped for whatever ...

Immediately look at the speedometer. "How am I going to handle this? Yes sir, no sir? Do I ask questions? Do I get on the phone and call somebody before the police officer gets to my door? Do I put my hands up? Do I move really, really, really, really slowly so no one can say ... Do I ask this officer's name? Do I say "Do you have a body cam on, and can you please turn it on?" I don't like to have to go through that script in my head. Yes, I do think there are other folks who don't even think about

doing that. They go right to "Get my license and registration." Whereas, I'm thinking "I'm going to get my license and registration when this person asks, and I'm going to say "I am now reaching, very slowly, to get my license and registration. "In that respect, I think, about my mortality. Also, now that I am a mother. I also think "What's going to happen to my kid?" Especially if it's a situation where it's a tragedy like that. As far as those normal things, death coming as a result of age or disease, or tragic accident ... I got to make sure everything stays right so my kids. As a mom. I think we do things differently when we become parents. We think of things differently.

The Sandra Bland case was devastating to both of us because we implicitly understood that we could have been her, we were her, and there was no difference between us and Sandra Bland. It was inconceivable to believe that this woman, a Black woman like ourselves, her life was over because she changed lanes and failed to signal properly. Gaia found herself consumed by the Sandra Bland case. She confessed posting nonstop on social media sites, and watching the news for updates about the latest developments. She referred to herself as an emotional mess, spontaneously bursting into tears at inopportune moments, as Howard tried his best to understand and comfort her in her angry and disappointment at white America. Unlike Gaia, it took me two weeks to muster up the courage and fortitude to watch the Bland arrest, and even then I could only watch it once. A few days later a police officer pulled up behind me as I was driving home, and my heart began to beat faster, my hands gripped the steering wheel as I quickly glanced down to check my speed. Instantly Sandra Bland popped into my mind, and I imagining myself lying on the gravel road, squirming for air, bewildered and pleading, praying that the officer wouldn't break my arm or color the

ground in my blood...what would my mother think, what would happen to my child? All of these thoughts streamed into my mind, and I decided to turn down a street nowhere near my destination to let the cop pass. Fear was the haunting and indiscriminate consequence of legally sanctioned and societal acceptance of Black death.

Stripped of her worth, Sandra Bland was left with the stinging indignation of lingering racism. She was not allowed to awaken or sleep clothed in dignity. She wore the nakedness of America's shame. From the inconceivability of death instigated by a missed turn signal, accusations bubbled on her value and right to life by those who could not see past their own skin (and this was a suicide they say as hidden ropes and torn sheets are folded neatly in their closets). They (white Americans) are all guilty of hanging Sandra Blands every day with their carnivorous incredulousness and adamantly insincere denial of the rancid privilege they live in. With no real answers as to how or why, as if those answers would matter or unknot the noose the Texas trooper slipped around Sandra's neck when he pulled her over, snatched her from her car and threw her to the ground for having fire in her voice, for demanding equality. He took away some man's future, some child's future, and her future, all for a missed signal light. That she could die for asking why! Her death was a gift to the rest of us women bearing brown skin. That she, we, I, could die for talking back, for asking why. For changing lanes too slowly or quickly, for failing to turn a signal light on, for being outraged at the ensuing injustice, for resisting impending death when it is human instinct to preserve and protect one's own life, to attempt to quell and shake the violence of malevolent shadows that arrive like degenerate pedophiles frequenting playgrounds, eager to corrupt innocence. Such a minor infraction, such an insignificant event morphed into tragedy, and became yet another reminder of the fragility of life and the impossibility of

Black skin. We did not look for death, rather death hunted us as though we had stolen life from its crypts. It seemed to escape most of America that we Black women were among the living and simply wanted to breathe freely and deeply.

Racial socialization. The uncertainty and fear Gaia experienced in relation to her own existence as both Black and female, extended and was intensified with her son Isaiah. As a Black mother Gaia also spoke about the complications of Black motherhood in teaching her son how to successfully navigate and negotiate his racial identity:

Motherhood is more complicated as a Black woman. My initial response is "Yes. Yes, it is." But it's still motherhood. All mothers have the same "Oh my gosh. My child. He's coughing. It must be cancer." I tell Isaiah, "We live in a great neighborhood, but I don't want you running around with a little nurf gun. I don't know who else is in this neighborhood that might see you as a Black boy with a gun." Yes, it looks like a fake gun. It looks like a nerf gun. Still. Still. Tamir Rice had a toy gun. I don't care what anybody says "It looked real. Had it had the little orange cap on it. How are they supposed to know?" You don't roll up on him and shoot him before the car stops. That's one way of doing it. I also don't want to polarize my kid too. I don't want him to think that every police officer that he sees is a potential threat. My stepfather, that's his grandfather, who he's closest to, was a police officer. I don't want him to have a any negative views of police. How do I help him to understand that to have a healthy respect and a healthy fear? I don't want him to have fear though? That sounds strange, huh? Oxymoron? Healthy and fear? That doesn't sound right. It shouldn't go together. Hell, I don't know what I'm doing. That's the upshot of it. I don't know what I'm doing.

Here and throughout Gaia juggled concepts of meaning, death and freedom in her relationships and larger society. Ultimately for her meaning and freedom guided her life.

What she found the most meaning in:

Three things. I find meaning in being Black. I find meaning in being female. I find meaning in being Black and female. I find meaning in being a Black female and all of the individual stuff that comes with that. That is influenced by being Black and being female. Not necessarily the only thing. I find meaning in being alive. I enjoy being on this earth, this planet. It's fun. I want to keep doing it. That's why I've always been reluctant to say "Die? I'm not going to die. I'm going to live forever." This mortality.

What is that phrase? I should know that. It's Shakespeare. Shaking off that mortal coil. I don't do that. I don't want to do that at all. I find meaning in being alive.

Experiencing stuff. Hopefully, it's positive stuff.

Gaia was able to make and find meaning in the negative experiences and events that occurred in her life, viewing them as character building (this is representative of her overall optimism and positive outlook on life):

There's meaning in the funky as well. We don't always see it as that when we're in the midst of it. I had a really awful custody battle. I actually had to do my first year of grad school in Indiana because I couldn't come out here to do my work. I had to still deal with all the custody stuff. That was a very, very difficult and trying time for me.

When it got bad, it got bad. There were times where I thought this is not a good place to be. I don't like being in this place at all. This is awful. This is hell. This is bad.

Coming out on the other side of it, it sounds cliché, but I'm glad that I went through it. I learned more about myself, and the certain resilience that I have, but also, I've

learned more about people. I learned more about determination and I learned more about myself. Maybe this is the same thing as resilience. I'm stronger than I thought I was. With the knowledge gained from that really awful, funky experience, I can handle other stuff. Don't want to handle funky, no one wants to. "Okay, if I have to." I can because of that. I had some dark time there for a little bit. I'm better as a result. Totally, totally, totally better. I think I'm a better parent as a result. I'm sure as hell a better person as a result of all that hot mess.

Once again Gaia came back to the metaphor of superheroes as we closed our conversation:

Black women are superheroes because we survive. Superheroes die. There are a number of ... We're all human. We all have our human frailties. We succumb to those human frailties. I still think that Black women are super superheroes and the world our kryptonite!

Black women are superheroes and the world our kryptonite was such an interesting metaphor which almost suggested (heck did suggest) that the environments Black women found themselves in potentially diminished them and severely impacted their agency. Yet, we had to find a way to survive the world, to avoid the life sapping stones all around us. As we ended our conversation, Gaia thanked me for listening to her and told me our conversation was cathartic and allowed her to talk about issues she usually did not get a chance to with people who understood where she was coming from. Later thinking about, reading my notes, and transcribing her interview it really stood out how Gaia was always defying the odds, determined not to be type cast or told what she could or could not do. I remember thinking how wonderful that she had all of these very vast and unique experiences, but also how exhausting it must be to constantly be battling with other people's ideas and perceptions

about who you are and what you are capable of. Gaia's narrative exuded and beautifully illustrated each given, particularly those of freedom and death. Her testimony was shrouded in death anxiety as the relationship between acting upon her individual freedom and the impact being herself in American society could have on her life (actions being misinterpreted resulting in her death) was a tenuous one. The sheer frustration of others' failing to see her fabulousness was evident when she spoke about those who dismissed her due to her skin color. Despite these slights, she maintained her joy, her enthusiasm and optimism about life/her life. I walked away from our conversation happy to be in the same membership group of Black women superheroes, and recognizing how truly existential and human our lives really were.

Persephone

"It's always because you're the other, you have to be strong.

You have to because the world is always trying to break you down in a million different pieces."

Persephone was recommended to me through a mutual acquaintance, due to her interests in existentialism. We decided to meet at a local café on a Friday afternoon and ended up spending six hours together, talking about different aspects of life and existence, even though our actual interview was only about 1.5 hours. As usual I arrived early to secure a quiet and appropriate place for us to sit and chat. As I sat in the café (I chose one of the circular booths), sitting behind me were two women deeply engaged in conversation. The younger of the two, looked like she was in her 30s, and was reading a poem that she to the older Black woman, who had short, wavy, white hair (and reminded me of Patricia Hill Collins). The young poet was quite emotional as she spoke and elaborated about the sadness

of being misunderstood by those around her. The emotion of isolation and aloneness hung thickly in the air (such an existential theme) as the older woman praised her for her courage and asked her what her goals and desire were.

My eavesdropping was interrupted when 32-year-old Persephone strolled in. She wore an all Black dress and cardigan, and her thick, curly hair was pulled into a loose bun on her head. Her lovely brown eyes were enhanced by Black eyeliner, and her bubbly personality was immediately noticeable. As we sat down, Persephone immediately began chatting, asking me about the manuscript I wrote, and how it helped her to begin processing some of her own feelings around being Black in the world and finding meaning.

What struck me most about Persephone was her genuine sense of wonder and curiosity about the world she was emerged in and her own place within it. We spoke at length about existentialism but also what it meant to be a seeker in life, always looking for purpose or meaning. Persephone definitely epitomized the existential given of meaninglessness as whether it was her quest for the perfect soul mate, or the perfect career, it was clear that the lack of meaning was something she grappled heavily with and sought to rectify through intellectual and adventurous life pursuits.

Her bubbly, childlike voice held an element of youth and innocence that brought out a sisterly and protective feeling for me toward Persephone, seeing her really trying to find that one thing that would provide perfect clarity for her about who she was and her path in life was familiar, as I too was always seeking and searching for answers to my identity, in pursuit of my life mission and purpose.

Additionally, Persephone spoke of feeling undesirable and undatable due to her Blackness. In a predominantly white school when all of her friends were dating, she didn't

have as many options as the White boys and Hispanic boys weren't attracted to her. So she submerged herself in her studies and told herself she didn't need that kind of acknowledgement that she wasn't pretty but she was smart. Looking back she said that was really unhealthy as she was lying to herself to make that particular issue okay for her to deal with, but that the lack of desirability was painful. I'd never thought about this aspect before living outside of a mixed or predominantly Black community, but really could understand it when she related this experience to me, as typically Black women are not held up as the American standard of beauty, so for a teenage girl to grapple with this must have been very difficult. It was as if Persephone wanted me to help her figure it out, beseeching me with her wide eyes to tell her the answers, as I must have them or know something she didn't. Truth was I was as lost and searching for answers just as she was. So as we talked we worked and fumbled our way through the question of our lives together.

Isolation and otherness. Persephone grew up in a medium sized southwestern city that did not have a very big Black population. Persephone's entire family, including grandparents and cousins, aunts and uncles, live in this town and were the only Black people she saw or associated with on a regular basis growing up. For Persephone isolation and meaninglessness were present in her narrative from the beginning of our conversation as she talks about her childhood growing up in the southwest, living in predominantly white and Hispanic communities where there were very few Black people:

A huge part of my experience has been the only person that looks like me in any room or school especially. I think I figured it out gradually just from being in school, and also from my parents, just some of the discussions we would have. When I would go to school and we would have Black History week or month. Those are some of the

memories I have, maybe that wasn't the first time, but those are the ones that stand out to me because we'd be reading the American history chapter and there would be a picture of a slave, and everyone would kind of look at me or ... I identified with that person looks more like me; that's my history, but these people around me don't really share that. I'm the only one here who has ancestors who were slaves or including a Civil Rights chapter, people like me were the ones getting sprayed or attacked by dogs; and the people around me were the ones who, the slave owners, or who wanted segregation. I think it was from when school makes race ... It comes up in conversation as a topic, then you kind of realize what side of history am I on?

Persephone then shared with me an incident that happened in elementary school which really highlighted for her the otherness status she was already feeling in her surroundings and the isolation of being and feeling different from her classmates as the only Black child in the classroom:

I think the first time that I really remember, I think it was in elementary school. This guy, and I don't remember his name, he was a tall red head; I remember that specifically. He called me blackie, and I went home and told my dad and he was furious. He went to the school and you're like please don't go to the school dad, but he went to the school and he had to apologize, and the kids dad was there. Looking back on it, I realize that made me feel ... Something about the way you said about when is the first time you felt Black or you knew you were Black? I guess that was one of those moments too because he was using this word to hurt me that he couldn't of used with anyone else. He was singling me out, and then it made me realize in a way that I hadn't before that "Oh, I'm different". It wasn't something that I thought about all the

time but after that I was like "Oh, I look different". People notice that I'm different in a way that I didn't know before.

As Persephone talked her immense, expressive eyes echoed the vulnerability and pain in her voice still present after all of these years when remembering some of the experiences she has had in life. Not only did she feel like her race isolated her she also felt that being female isolated her as well, but the two were comingled in such a way that she could not decipher which one was the cause, as for her Blackness seemed inseparable from her femaleness:

Thinking about it, it probably sounds crazy, but for me, the experiences where I felt like the person didn't like me or I didn't get this opportunity, it wasn't just because I was a woman. It was because I was a Black woman. That always felt more real to me. It didn't ... if someone treated me a certain way, I couldn't disentangle oh they're okay with Black people but they don't like me because I'm a woman. I couldn't decide which one is it or maybe it's both.

She described her social positionality as a Black woman below once again referring to the feelings of otherness:

I think of it as being ... When I think of it from a historical perspective, and what it means in the eyes of the world, it's something you have to grapple with. It's like being a double other ... It's like being doubly not accepted. I also feel like people ... for me it's beautiful, it's strong, but then there's also this thing of people want some of the characteristics of Black women, but they don't want all of it. When I think about Black women, I think they're the most beautiful women in the world, but then there's this thing of oh okay, these features are fine on other people, but when it comes to you it's not okay. It's always because you're the other, you have to be strong. You

have to because the world is always trying to break you down in a million different peoples.

I shook my head as she spoke wanting to both affirm her and affirm my own experiences as well. Persephone further explained her comment and the confusion and contradiction given through societal messages on Black femaleness:

I think that ... I'm not going to call it double consciousness, but I feel like Black people are trendsetters. We're the people who, people want to be like us, but they don't want to be like us. Ho Money says "everyone wants to be a nigger but nobody wants to be a nigger", and I think that pretty much sums it up. People are fascinated with us, but they don't want all the troubling things that come with that fact.

Dealing with the perceptions, expectations and treatment of white society for Persephone is both trauma inducing yet character building in the sense that learning to define one's own understanding of their personal and collective social identities is freeing and produces confidence and strength:

You have to be confident. You have to be ... Because people ... Once you realize how other people see you, you have to figure out ... I don't know. For me, it's you have confidence. I know who I am so it doesn't matter if somebody thinks I'm less. I know who I am, and you always have to carry that with you. I guess some people would say that's armor, and Black women get criticized for that, it's something they have to have. It's something that might be a little different than what other women experience or have to deal with.

Having to deal with what Persephone saw as a lack of value and worth in society's eyes impacted her immensely, as she shared how she struggled with depression most of her life

yet felt that because she was a Black female her issues were not acknowledged, and made her feel ashamed for not living up to the strong Black woman archetype all the time. She talks about her battle with depression below and the isolation she felt:

Me personally, there have been times I have been very depressed. I've been suicidal, that's a fixation on death, and it was because of feeling isolated, feeling like what are you going to do with your life? What are you going to do? I think that having mental illness, being depressed, those sorts of things are not widely accepted for Black women. I really hate this image of the strong Black woman, just grin and bear it. I hate that because really... It's just this lie that people tell so that they can continue to keep on through it. You're not supposed to feel anything and you can't be vulnerable. I would imagine that Black women ... I mean how could they not feel depression? How could they not be depressed? I'm not saying they have to be clinical, but how could they not feel sad? How could they not think about what does this life really mean? Is my life meaning? Does it have value? People constantly devalue you so ... I don't know. That's something that as an adult, I just come out and say it. Depression, it's a thing, because we're not supposed to ever say that, and we're not supposed to ever feel pain or ... We're just supposed to be carefree and the stereotype of the Black lady; she's so jovial, she's making everybody laugh. She's cracking jokes. She's full of life. She's never sad. I don't like that, because it's not real.

Me: Like a superwoman

Persephone: Superwoman. Yeah!

Me: Where they work 2 or 3 jobs, and take care of the kids and are a single mom.

Persephone: Yeah. I don't need anybody. I don't need a man.

Me: Independence and then be okay with it and not be stressed out by it...

Persephone: And not be upset that that's the role or position that you are in society.

Me: And if you are, you're angry.

Persephone: You're angry (laughs)

At this point Persephone and I were both laughing hard as we were so familiar with this impossible role we as Black women have been cast in as super human, super women who don't feel or hurt. Persephone continued:

It's weird. The people who should feel the saddest and angriest are not allowed. That's a really scary thing. What if people were just pissed off because I'm tired of people devaluing me. That's a dangerous thing for people.

Persephone's feelings of isolation also presented themselves in her dating life as she confessed to feeling disconnected from Black men:

I feel isolated from ... We were talking earlier about dating, and I feel isolated from Black men here because a lot of them... I don't have anything to talk to them about. I was telling my mom the other day, the more education I get, the more isolated I feel. The more I learn and the more interested I am in things, the more isolated I feel. I always felt a little like that. I always felt a little weird. I liked weird music, and I ... Was just weird. I grew up just kind of to myself, and I didn't have a group of Black girlfriends to relate to, so I always grew up kind of on my own. Being around Black men and having conversations where I was dismissed because I was a woman and anything I said was because I was angry. That's crazy, that's how Black women are; they're angry and they won't respect men. I guess in those times it was sexist. We're

all talking, I felt really dismissed because I was a woman or something like "Oh, she's an angry woman" or being called a feminist as an insult.

The weariness of relentless slights tolerated and weathered through coerced strength was a familiar quandary and seemingly inherited onus exclusive to Black women. As Persephone disclosed her struggle with depression and the pervasiveness of limiting stereotypes, the vulnerability in her voice was profound and excruciating to hear.

Isolation from other Black women. Hesitantly Persephone began to share another area in her life where she felt isolated and I immediately affirmed and joined her in this particularly painful place to feel separated from, other Black women:

What's weird is when I go to places like Atlanta, or somewhere where there are more Black people, I almost feel like ... I hate it. I think it's harder for me to maybe even relate to other Black women. I feel really sad about that. I have this self-consciousness that they're judging me or I'm different in some way. I didn't grow up ... I don't know. I'm different and I can't relate to them as well, and I want to; that part is hard. Actually for me it's the opposite because I didn't grow up in that community.

I immediately empathized with Persephone because I could relate to feeling like an outsider because I did not grow up in an all Black community, and feeling the uneasiness and judgment of the differences between myself and the girls in those neighborhoods. Despite these tensions, like Persephone I still wanted acceptance and connection with them because of our shared gender and race. Persephone continued but her voice wavered and her tone wasn't as perky as it usually was:

Persephone: Yes, it's even hard to talk about. I don't like it. I don't like it at all because I know we have a link. When I think about what we've been through, our

shared history, I feel like of course we have those things in common as Black women. We should be able to just ... The thing is where we grow up, how you talk; I always feel it's rejecting. I'll be rejected because I had a different experience. Sometimes I tell my mom why didn't you move us somewhere else this is your fault. I noticed my sister, she moved to Atlanta, and she took on the accent of talking a certain way. Sometimes she'll put a little southern twang and I'll be like what are you doing? You're from the southwest. I noticed that when she talks to people she's trying to fit in. She's kind of picked up these weird things, and that's why she's doing it, and I get it....I feel like the big things we have in common. When we walk around in the world, nobody is like oh well what class are you? Nobody cares. They look at us and they're like Black women. When we're together, those things, they come up

Emotional marginalization. Persephone's desire to connect and her upbringing conflicted with her ability to engage other Black women as she felt like a foreigner in regard to the customs and culture that existed in Black communities, having grown up outside of them (with very little exposure). However, these feelings of isolation did not weaken her identity as a Black woman, nor the psychological heaviness that accompanies being black and female. Persephone spoke about feeling limited in her behaviors and expressions because of her Blackness and femaleness:

I'm not always free. I'm not free to say what's really on my mind all the time. I'm not constantly conscious of I'm Black, I'm a woman walking around, but you are always putting yourself in check. You're conscious of I'm with Black people so I can say this or I'm in mixed company so I'm still going to say what I want, but I'm going to change the vocabulary or I'm going to remain silent because I'm going to pop off

because ... You're constantly moving within these spaces and negotiating how to be and it can be really tiring. I'm tired of thinking about race. I'm tired of talking about it. I'm tired of dealing with it, but I don't have a choice because even if I'm like I'm just me, I'm Persephone. People just look at me and see a Black woman. I don't have a choice and that's not freedom at all; and that's something that other people might take for granted, because they blend in all the time.

This intense feeling of otherness and isolation which haunted Persephone from her early childhood to her adulthood was sad to hear, and the typical ways most people deal with such issues in life through turning to religion was not something that Persephone engaged in, as she questioned the idea of church and Christianity. Below she describes her dilemma with religion:

I think like trying to figure out ... Trying to build or figure out my spiritual life? My mom is very religious where she goes to church regularly. She believes in God, she's a Christian. So is my dad, and that's the way I was raised. I just don't believe in that anymore, but I still believe in something. I think that we need spirituality in our lives to be healthy, and I think that was the something that was missing and why I felt so lost. I don't know what that is yet. I feel like I've always tried to figure out those things mentally and intellectually, and I don't think it's like that. If you're Black and you're leaning more towards the Agnostic side or I'm an Atheist, it's like you're going to hell and people will just straight up tell you, and that's another way that you're separating yourself from your community. A lot of people in my family, even though it's a small community of Black people, that's how they connect. There's Black

churches here, and I don't believe in that. I'm isolating myself even more because I just don't believe in it.

Persephone's struggles left her frequently questioning the meaning in her experiences, particularly when many, like those described above, made her feel such meaninglessness and insignificance. All of Persephone's struggle with identity and belongingness create a unique perspective (which Collins refers to as the outsider within) and a melding of acceptance and awareness of her social positionality in such a way that enables her to build her own worth and personhood, and advocate for others confronting similar issues as her:

I feel as Black people, as a Black woman, I feel like the perspective is when I'm in a class or when people try to erase other people's experiences. Even if they're different from me, you're an Arab or you're a Native American, I feel like I'm someone who can connect to that, because ... And I don't want to see anyone's experience erased because I know what that's like and I feel like that gives new meaning too. I understand what that's like. I understand how it feels to be the other, and I care deeply about those things. Even though everyone's experience is different, there are certain things that run through like oppression and erasure and rewriting history, and all this other stuff that I think I understand. I'm on the lookout for it. I understand it. Yeah, I'm gonna call it out. We don't need to be talking about Black people for me to say "No, that's racist" or that's really sexist. I'm not gonna allow it. As I get older and grouchier, I'm not putting up with it. I'm not gonna listen to somebody say that Trump is correct. No. He's not.

Isolation in education. Persephone went on to talk about how isolating it was to be the only Black person in her graduate classes, and the invisibility she felt along with the

micro aggressions that occurred from her classmates. Her words brought back my own uneasy memories of being a doctoral student in classes, one specifically where a white classmate repeatedly attempted to invalidate and deny the experiences of the people of Color in class regarding racism.

A few semesters ago, the only White classmate aside from the instructor was expressing his opinion on what he believed to be the greatest impediment to humanity, gender. As he spoke, the battle within him escaped through his lips and battered the air, landing strikes on the faces and piercing the minds of the Students of Color, as he unconsciously, and eloquently demonstrated the semantic moves of whites, which we were discussing. Was he even aware of the shame or was it only the guilt that had taste, and proffered defending? We knew, I knew the truth was beyond him, beneath him, and within him, playing possum, but he was not ready, and probably would never be ready to step into that space all People of Color inhabit...the space of nothingness and the space of beyond. In our silence, he possessed power, he alone retained a sovereignty that shaped the milieu and for us fashioned vigilance and seclusion. We were all cognizant of his agency to instigate philological harm upon us. We were aware of him, though he was not truly aware of us, if at all. The pain and pride was palpable in the stained spaces, pages, and screen, masked beneath seething umbrage and fervent articulations of persecution as the People of Color in class contemplated, queried, and disclosed all of the ways in which whiteness and hegemony had tainted and obliterated our quintessence. A peculiar alchemy occupied the rooms we visited, as we became sorcerers conjuring up dormant specters as we watched eyes glaze over and listened as peers disclosed their painful lessons in whiteness; for one, it was the first time a white boy called her nigger, spitting in her hair. The trauma ascended from her throat gently

strangling her as she spoke the words like rhythmic lyrics. *His* invisible hand moved through the air resuscitating and disseminating the saliva that still lingered in her strands 40 years later. For another it was an arbitrary transformation of identity, abruptly recognized by the society as an other. White folks haunted us like ghosts through their reckless, casual and callous deeds. With alacrity, we remembered the loss of our spiritual chastity, our innocence seized so sloppily as we were thrust into a ripe arena reeking of lust, defilement, and exploitation. We awakened that morning as beings that were unmarred, possessing faith in the world, and in people, confident in the knowledge that our parents were omnipotent and could always protect us from harm. The instant of the violent assault on our evolving spirits, we were transformed into racialized individuals, closing our eyes on the same night as altered creatures, forever changed, forever stigmatized and thoroughly traumatized; now effusively conscious of the powerlessness of our family to protect us, cognizant that every day, from that moment on, we would be fondled, mauled, and desecrated in some way. We would never again be safe, and home at best would only be a shelter where we might find a slight reprieve. Abjuration wrestled for a status amid the enunciated and tacit fidelities tarrying in the atmosphere, as those who were severely intertwined in whiteness dissented the consideration that all Whites, on some level, could never wholly perceive them separately from the constructed pigmented fabrications existing in the fictional gorge of the white mind. To construe such candor would be insufferable, truly acknowledging that they know what they do, that it is a deliberate premeditation, for such a reality there is no remedy to always be living and breathing as a riven entity with less worth than plastic. There is a repression of phenomenological experience and of collective knowledge for People of Color of quotidian exchanges, another level of unconsciousness beyond the double consciousness that enable us

to suppress the repeated rape of our souls, and allows us to function in society without being wholly obliterated, and a disassociation of Whites from humanity that permits their cyclical sightlessness. We all live in these United States of discontent, yet another insignia of our dehumanization, and consequently evidence of our existence and humanity. The hauntedness and emptiness this memory brought up for me connected me to Persephone's feelings of isolation and I wondered how she dealt with these feelings, where the resolution came from. How did we recover from the continual stripping of our innocence, humanity, and agency...where was there solace from these types of assaults on us?

Black female pride. When I asked Persephone where the confidence and certainty about who she is comes from now, she laughed and told me that it has been a work in progress, and is mostly due to being fed up with caring about what other people expect from her and of her as a Black woman, and focusing more on what she wants for herself as a human being. Persephone shared these thoughts about the strength and courage that comes with age:

You just get older and you just really stop giving a crap about what other people think. I was telling my sister that it feels really good ... When I did, I would say that I didn't care, but I really don't. (laughs) That's why I'm able to say no that's not true, or put someone in check for saying something crazy because I don't need their validation anymore. I find it elsewhere. I feel more confident and I think that's just something that just comes with being older. You just settle into your identity. You settle into who you are, and I don't need to shout it from the rooftops ... I know who I am. I don't need anyone else to tell me it's okay. That takes a long time and is really rough, and I don't know if it's an age thing, but maybe you just go through so much and you're still

here; you just have a sense of humor. You're still here so you must be doing something right. I'm willing to instead of internalizing it, taking it with me, thinking about it later, and then I let that person know in that moment. I don't really hold grudges, but I will let you know at that time how I feel. Now there's a way to say something, anything, in a way that's respectful. I'm not gonna let someone just say anything and do anything and for me to walk away hurt and sad. I'm ruminating about it and they may not even know what they did. I'm not doing that, and it's not an angry thing, it's just you're not allowed to do whatever you want. I'm gonna tell you, and that comes with just being older and not feeling like ... I always think what are you going to do? I told you what I thought. What will you do? You're not going to do anything. You're going to either listen or dismiss it or feel mad or whatever.

This is a stark contrast to the beginning of our conversation where much of Persephone's narrative centered around feeling invisible and wanting to be seen and accepted, to demanding to be seen and heard. As I listened and talked with Persephone, I wondered what it must have been like for her to grow up in a place that did not have a Black neighborhood, or many Blacks at all. After our interview, Persephone spoke of her desire to leave the southwest as soon as she graduated because she wanted to eventually have a family, and believed her options for marriage (particularly to a Black man) were extremely limited here. She shared with me her dating experiences growing up and the lack of desirability she felt from boys in school because she was Black, and Black was not desirable, not thought to be beautiful in white and Hispanic communities. "Who was there for me to date? No one was interested in me or thought I was pretty really, so I told myself that I didn't need that kind of validation and attention, and decided to be smart and focus on school instead. But looking

back that was just something I told myself to make it okay. It really hurt.” When she spoke about this, I told her I never thought about that aspect of growing up in an all-white and Hispanic community before, and was so saddened for her, as the relationships we begin to develop and practice with the opposite sex are such integral parts of teenage hood, of becoming women, and to be deprived of the opportunity must be very invalidating in our society. Later on in another interview, Demeter would express these same feelings around dating for her three girls growing up in a predominantly White community, and the impact that was having on their self-esteem. Thus, to have that experience and to still develop a deep pride in being Black and female was beautiful as Persephone was still really happy to be a Black woman as expressed below:

I feel like we ... like I said about trendsetters. We've always been beautiful and strong and leaders ... Hooray for Beyoncé. Can I just say that? Everyone get in formation. (laughing) I feel like we're at this really cool moment in history where people are ... They've always seen it but weren't certain to recognize and people will see it in themselves too, and they won't be ashamed.

After our official interview, Persephone and I sat, had tea and talked for another two hours. Persephone was at a crossroads in her personal life in regard to a relationship she was in. As with some of the other Black women in the study, Persephone spoke about the lack of dating options for her, and wanting to leave after she completed her Master's degree to go east to New York or Atlanta (or another Black mecca as she called them). Her reservation was again not fitting in with other Black women because of where she grew up, and her lack of familiarity with Black culture. Despite these concerns she felt she had to leave the southwest and make a fresh start someplace where there was a community of people who looked like

her, appreciated and valued her beauty and deemed her as desirable. Persephone was searching for her life, her happiness and though I was saddened that such a wonderful person would be leaving the city, how could I be anything but happy and hopeful for her. Who was I to begrudge her a shot at a piece of heaven, no matter how small.

Hygeia

*“Freedom is being able to accomplish whatever you set your goal to;
no one blocking your way and if they block your way step over them.”*

Hygeia was my fifth interview. Athena who is a close friend of hers recommended Hygeia to me. She thought that Hygeia would enjoy speaking to me about her life experiences. Thus, based on Athena’s recommendation I contacted Hygeia and she agreed to participate in the study. Hygeia requested that we meet at her place of business on a Tuesday afternoon. I arrived ten minutes early to ensure that I found the location as it was in a part of the city that I had never been before. When I entered the building, I did not see her name anywhere on any of the office buildings, and perused the halls a bit poking my head around corners attempting to locate her by sight. “Who are you looking for,” a woman asked stepping out of her office as I walked toward the front of the office complex. I told her I was looking for someone named Hygeia, and she smiled and pointed her finger toward the room across the hall. “Oh, yes, the cpr/medical training business right there,” she smiled adding “I’m not sure if Hygeia is in there, and I can’t see her from here...why don’t you knock and poke your head in as she might be sitting in the room in the back.” I thanked the helpful person and proceeded to knock. “Hello, come on in,” a voice called from somewhere in a corner. I walked in quickly surveying the room, where a CPR dummy doll lay with a blood pressure cuff and heart monitor. The walls were fairly bare with the exception of a few

posters of the human body and basic CPR steps. I then headed toward the little cubby area where I saw her sitting watching television, and introduced myself. “Oh, I know who you are, I’ve been expecting you” she said sticking out her hand to shake mine. Hygeia had beautiful, smooth skin the color of deep copper, her hair was dyed auburn yet you could see the silver strands peering out from beneath. She had piercing light brown eyes that seemed to peer straight into you, and her stare reminded me of the song “She’s got Betty Davis eyes....she’ll expose you when she knows you.” No one was pulling anything or getting over on her! She looked like she was in her early 60s rather than mid-seventies. I was reminded of the youthfulness of Athena who was also about Hygeia’s age, and recalled Athena saying to me, “70 is the new 40.” I hoped that I was as spry and youthful looking as these women when I entered my 70s.

“Well, let’s get to business...you have some questions you want to ask me?” Hygeia quipped. Before I could answer yes, merely shaking my head she quickly added, pointing to a chair, “Ok, you sit on down right here so we can begin,” Hygeia commanded in a very assertive tone. Hygeia certainly was not as bubbly and outwardly lively as Athena was, but she had an air of poise and confidence about her that made one feel safe and seen in her presence. It was evident that she was a stern, no nonsense type of person which would continually emerge during our conversation and interactions during the interview. As we sat down, Hygeia walked slowly leaning to the side as she did. It appeared as if her body was shaped in the form of a question mark. When she sat down and clasped her fingers together I noticed they were curved. She was suffering from arthritis which she confided later, that was impacting her form and movement.

Hygeia is 74 years old, has been married for 53 years, has two children (a girl and a boy whom she and her husband adopted) and three grandchildren. Hygeia was born and raised in Alabama, and moved to the southwest when she was 20 years old with her husband when he joined the air force. She grew up during the time of legalized discrimination in the form of segregation, and lived in an all-Black community and attended the school in her neighborhood. She moved to the southwest after marrying her husband who was stationed at Kirtland air force base not too long after their wedding.

Passion for Nursing. Hygeia is a semi-retired nurse who owns her own business where she teaches and mentors younger nurses in relation to healthcare standards and CPR certification. I asked Hygeia to tell me more about what she did and she responded:

I train nurses and physicians and paramedics and all to take care of the critical care patients. I do ACLS Advanced Cardiovascular Life Support, Basic Advanced Life Support, Pediatric Advanced Life Support, Basic arrhythmias, IV certification, blood borne pathogens. I do quite a few medical involved education and I did this before I retired and I just took what I was doing and made a business out of it and I wanted to do something, but I didn't want to work, so I started this.

I inquired into why she became a nurse, to which she said:

I did not decide to be a nurse. I just went to college and I wanted to be a school teacher and when I got there and I started taking the class I found out that wasn't what I wanted to do, so my girlfriend at that time, she said why you don't become an LPN. I didn't know there was a difference between a LPN and RN, so I decided to apply and I was accepted, so I just went to LPN school. Then when I found out there

was a difference then I decided to go back to school, because as I was saying, while I was in LPN and I was doing a lot of things that really was RN anyway.

Hygeia clearly was passionate about nursing as she had been a nurse for over 40 years, and retired only to start a business revolving around mentoring and training younger nurses (a value that would continually reemerge in our interview). Hygeia described for me what she enjoyed so much about nursing in the following lines:

I like the fact of meeting people and seeing when their light comes on. I had a nurse who tells me, just like we went to a workshop. She said the one thing that I remember vividly that she told me, treat your patient, not the monitor. There is a patient on the end of that machine and as she says she has always talked that way, because they get so into machinery that they forget the patient. That patient, that machinery is only going to do what you're going to tell it to do, but that patient will die and the machinery is working beautifully and I review that a lot when I am teaching the ACLS course, because they have a monitor up there, ECG up on the monitor, maybe look at the monitor, I said, what are you looking at that for, I said what's your patient doing? Is your patient okay? Does your patient have a pulse? If the patient doesn't have a pulse, it's a totally different story than what you will see in that monitor and I just like to see the nurses and I go to workshops and you wouldn't believe, I went to see My Fair Lady at Pope Joy Sunday and one of the physicians that I knew years ago was in the play, so we met them outside I mean I hadn't seen him in years, but they still know me. The American Association of Critical-Care Nurses gave me a lifetime achievement award. I just love that.

Thus, Hygeia's focus as a nurse was to humanize patients and work alongside other medical professionals as a valued part of the team. Her self-assuredness and confidence translated into her professional career as she carried her belief of self-worth and importance into these domains and her interactions with others. She stressed that she always tried to instill confidence and importance into other nurses, as some felt that physicians were more valuable than the nurses, a belief Hygeia did not share. These characteristics presented themselves in the quote where Hygeia talked about her professional identity and objectives as a nurse:

I've seen, when I've had to come and be what I consider myself an advocate for my patients. There's many a times where I had to leave the patient's room and go out and talk to the doc and ask "when you think about this and have you thought about that;" and I've never had to say the please word to get them to listen to me. This is a physician and I'm a nurse, we work side by side, to make sure this patient leaves here alive and if it wasn't for me, he couldn't be a doc, because he can't be with that patient 24x7, he can't and if he doesn't have a good nurse, he wouldn't have anything. He couldn't even practice and I hate the other nurses saying, I'm just a nurse. No you are not just a nurse. You're more than just a nurse and I had a nurse assistant say to us, oh I am a just a nursing assistant". Go back and get the RN then. Do something with it.

As I listened to Hygeia's story I was struck by her strength and determination. Her confidence in herself was palpable. She had a very assertive and stern presence, but beneath that was also a very generous person who deeply believed in giving back to others. The dominant givens interwoven throughout Hygeia's story were meaninglessness and freedom, as her narrative was centrally and heavily focused on the importance of self-worth and the

resistance of oppression by recognizing one has the ability to create and do the things in life one wanted through determination and hard work.

Black female pride and strength. The repetitive refrains in Hygeia's story were that of the strength of Black women, and self-worth/respect, and hard work to achieve your goals. When I asked her what it meant to her to be a Black woman, she stated, "Never thought of me being anything as but a Black woman and proud of being a Black women and I've always felt that way, still feel that way and don't you ever come again up against me and say that the Blacks are inferior... never." She followed this up by adding, "I just love being the Black woman, love it. Never have regretted it and I wouldn't trade it." Not only was she extremely proud of her racial and gender identity, she also held a strong positive belief/strong sense of self-worth about herself and how she existed in the world instilled by her mother:

My mother was a strong woman and you know if it wasn't for my mother, my dad would not have accomplished things he did, so my mom being as strong as she was, that's all I saw. My grandmother was a strong woman, so that's all I saw, was strong women. My mother kept us out of that ramble of saying things like that. I could do anything that I wanted to do and she never told us that we couldn't do and we never even listened to all this crap that's going on because when I was in Birmingham, Alabama that's where the civil rights really started and then go over to Montgomery and I went to school in Montgomery for a while, my mother taught there and so I didn't see a lot of it and I wasn't associated with a lot of discrimination, but it was real, it was real, but I was never told I could not do anything because of my color, never."

I asked Hygeia how she was able to develop such a positive self-concept particularly given the era she grew up in and she slyly replied staring straight into my eyes:

I think that you have to instill in yourself what you want to ooze out to the people that you come in contact with and you want to see yourself as a proud person, want to see you...you know you matter and if you don't think I matter just ask me and that's how you enter in a room. Get all of the attention that I am a proud woman strolling by."

I continued to question Hygeia about the strength of Black women and why/what she thought made them so strong. She stated:

They had a sense of pride in themselves. My mother had, was three of them, three girls and every one of them were strong women and that's because my grandmother was a strong woman and she instilled it in them. There isn't one of us in our family that's not a strong woman all my cousins, first, second, third cousins, they're all that way.

Hygeia was very close to her mother and family. She described her family as being the only thing she needed in order to have a meaningful life, as she could do without anything else but them. During our interview she would pause for a few minutes and reflect on how and what her mother would think about certain situations or things that were occurring. "Sometimes I think about what momma would say and I chuckle as she would have gotten a kick out of that." Hearing Hygeia remember her mother with such fondness and also admit how much she missed her mother even at 74 years old reminded me of my own close relationship with my mother, and how unbearable it would be not having her in my life. This thought prompted me to ask Hygeia about death and I was curious to know her feelings on it given she was a nurse who saw more death than the average person. Her response surprised me:

You never get used to death. It seems so final and especially if you work with a patient and they are doing okay then suddenly they are gone. It does have an effect on you, because you're supposed to be there and you're supposed to make sure they get better and get up and walk out of this hospital and I don't think I ever and I don't think I never will get used to that. Death seems so final to me. I'll never get used to it.

I sat silently and allowed Hygeia to have a few moments with this thought and waited for her to signal that she was ready to continue on to another question. The responsibility of another's life and recovery must be a heavy onus, and great privilege. Death was a distant acquaintance for me and I wanted to keep it that way, I did not desire more intimacy with such an entity as it meant loss, pain and change. After a few moments she asked me what the next question was. I returned to the subject of Black female pride and strength.

Other-mothering and mentorship. I asked Hygeia where do Black women get their strength and pride, and she responded, "Other women and especially moms and grandmothers, specially their mothers and grandmothers." Hence, mentorship and relationships with other Black women were integral for Hygeia in her own development, and a role she happily took on with others as well. A core value of Hygeia was mentoring others, which she believed was an essential and natural part of Black femaleness. She spoke about its importance and elucidates what mentoring means for her:

To be a Black woman is to help mentor our young girls. Just being a woman I think as a women you still mentoring. Just being a woman you're mentoring, being a strong women, you're mentoring. To me mentoring means you bring them up side-by-side, now I'm here and you're here... it's a side-by-side. Just because they're 14 I

talk to them the same way I would do with you. Really and with my grandson I do the same. I teach them, I talk to them as if they have a brain not like they're 14 and I think that has a lot to do with it, I really do and I have little girls that come in sit down and want to listen to what I have to say. When they are there they always in my bedroom, we would be talking and my granddaughter comes in lie in the bed with me. I said, okay what did you do today and she starts talking to me and we just have a really good relationship and I think mentoring is a good relationship with teenagers or other young ones. So as a strong woman I need to install that in other girls and I do that by bringing them up with me and talking to them and when I talk to them I don't talk down to them I talk to them respectfully. Just because they are 14 they still do have a brain and so I never talk down to them I always elevate them when I talk to them.

Other mothering in the form of mentoring was a vital aspect to this self-confidence which Hygeia herself nurtured even during our interview, telling me she was proud of my accomplishments and of me being in a PhD program, and encouraged me to hang in there as "nothing worth having is easy to get."

Work hard value. Another core value for Hygeia was working hard to get what you want, rather than expecting anything to be given to you without working for it. When she talked about her strength as a Black woman it was tied to her competence and ability to achieve her desires. She continually expressed this value, along with irritation at younger generations and others in hers who did not work for what they wanted. When I asked her if she felt any limitations on her freedom due to her Black female identity, she quickly said no because she believed that she had the power and capability to achieve anything she wanted,

despite what others thought of her or tried to do to hinder her. “You need to get yourself up by your bootstraps and do something. Nothing is going to be given to you. You have to work for it; everybody has to work for it. You are not going to be given anything.” She found meaning in working hard to achieve goals, and felt that it was a disservice to simply provide charity without requiring something in return. Hygeia deeply believed in this concept of working hard and effort equating to success, indicative of meritocratic ideology. I was fascinated by this work hard, pull yourself up by the bootstrap mentality of Hygeia’s because it was a familiar saying of conservative Whites who preached that hard work and commitment was what individuals needed, not government hand outs. I wondered where this mindset came from, was it generational, was it indicative of the internalization of White American middle class values? I was not sure, but what I did know is that it was a guiding principle for Hygeia which she passed on to her children, and grandchildren. During the early part of her nursing career when she was in nursing school, Hygeia shared experiences and frustrations with other nurses who did not have her value of working hard:

When I was in university getting my RN there were three Blacks in the class, me and two others and they would come too late, they wouldn’t do their homework, they did nothing that they were supposed to do. Yet they expect to be given this, but they were kicked out of school, but not because they were Black. They felt that they should be given it, I couldn’t believe it I was absolutely floored and I would talk to them and say, “You know if you don’t do what you need to do here to get your RN you never gonna be one” and I just got to be sitting in the class as they walked in the door 10, 15, 20 minutes late, but they thought that they should have been given that degree. No, you got to do the same thing everybody has to do to get by in this class. I was the

only one that graduated, because I felt that here I am, I want this, the way I'm going to get this is to work for it. It's not going to be given to me. Nothing is given to me without working for it.

Me: Did you feel that you had to work harder because you're Black?

Hygeia: Yes, yes uh huh I really felt that, because there were other Anglos in the class and other people in the class and I would push myself because I was not paying and all of the nurses were students would come to me and ask me questions, but then I said, you know what I am here to get mine just like you are here to get yours, so you better get yours and I would do that because I have been LPN, about 13 years before I went back. So they knew that I knew a lot of it, but no, I was trying to get mine, baby you got to get yours too. I don't know if I was being snotty, but I was going to get mine.

Hygeia also expressed dissatisfaction and disbelief of the mentality that privilege young nurses have today, expecting that their education should replace hard work and experience in the field first. Once again this exemplifies her strong belief in meritocracy, rejecting the notion that nurses or anyone for that matter was owed anything in society unless they earned it. She didn't question or challenge institutionalized racism or structural forms of discrimination that hindered or created barriers for even those Blacks that worked hard and were unable to move up the social ladder.

Hygeia struggled with this working hard value in her relationships with her grandchildren, particularly her 16 year old grandson whom she believed was not very ambitious and expected to receive things without working or contributing at all for them. She shared a story with me about her grandson who expected her to pay him for doing a

chore for her, and the surprise and dismay she felt as she perceived his behavior as disrespect for everything she did for him on a daily basis:

I asked my grandson to wash my car the other day, and he looked at me, the little kid I'm taking care of, and said, "What are you going to pay me?" So he asked me and I said, "what do you mean what I'm going to pay you?" I asked, "Who feed you?" I said, "Who got a roof over your head?" I said "who buying you clothes?" "Okay nana I'll do it." He didn't even think about how much we are doing for him, I don't ask him for nothing, take out the trash clean your bedroom. That's all and he's like "oh my god."

Hygeia then talked about how she needed to reinforce respect and her methods for doing so:

My grandson I thought he knew respect and we taught it to him, but he talks to us like we are one of his pals. I said I'm not your pal and something the other day that he wanted money for, but he didn't say something to me. I said you know what you're not getting my money, you better get at your job and he go and get him a job at McDonalds, but I'm not giving any more money until you know how to respect and when he started making money I'm going to charge him rent. That's how you teach them respect. If everything is given to them they think everybody should give it to them and I had my problems with giving to them, but I finally came to the fact that I'm not teaching him anything if I'm just giving, giving, giving, so he is going to work.

Racial socialization. Part of mentoring for Hygeia was teaching Black children about their history and how to survive racism. Hygeia felt that parents were not properly educating children, particularly young men and talked about the recent incidents with the

Black Lives Matter Movement. She shared her thoughts on what the real issues were in seeing the reemergence of violence against Blacks:

The sad thinking about this, a lot of those boys were not taught, what to do and that's the reason that they did and you know them and you think about this. Look at the children, the boys that's been killed, what were their family, how was the family life? Single mothers. Single mothers, I think that the men of these women and usually their socioeconomic background and that should have nothing to do, with how the boys should take care of themselves and we are the links, I'm a link and we are getting ready to do a program on how our Black boys need to approach or what they should say or what they should do when they are approached by a police man. They get to the place that I'm Black and I'm going no, no they are the authority and those boys they have problem with authorities. The only one that I see didn't have problem with authority was Trayvon Martin, but all the others did and we are trying to do a program that when the police stop you, you don't run you don't talk back, you listen and if you have something to say wait until they say what they gonna say. Then you tell them and when you say it, no roar you know, what I mean be quiet with it, say what you want to say, but you don't have to bark at them. I just think a lot of our Black boys have that problem and if you have that problem with authority guess what is going to happen and a lot of that if you look at those boys, school didn't mean a darn thing to them.

She continued to place a large part of the problem on Black women, who in her opinion are not strong, and are not being responsible with their bodies or with the choices they make in raising children, failing to teach respect and hard work as important values:

I think a lot of our Black women need to stop having babies out of wedlock. They need to stop having all the babies they know they can't take care of. It's too many ways you can prevent having pregnancies and I tell my son and I tell my granddaughter I say you know what you have to think with your brain, but a lot of kids and our Black kids are not the only ones, we just get it up in the media, but there are a lot of our boys that are not Black, they have the same problems and our Black boys aren't alone, but these mothers got to teach them respect. I don't know how to teach respect, but you do have to teach respect. They don't come here knowing it and you can't expect them to know more, and most of the teenagers they feel like the world owe them and it doesn't. You need to get yourself, you need to get yourself up by your bootstraps and do something. Nothing is going to be given to you. You have to work for it everybody has to work for it. You are not going to be given anything.

She also felt that the younger generation has forgotten that we still need to have continuous conversations on racism, as she stated, "You still need to have this conversation it's still alive and well. I didn't get to where I am without a fight."

I must admit that I was a bit bothered and surprised by Hygeia's comments about single Black mothers, as Hygeia's perspective placed the burden of responsibility of child rearing on mothers, and also held them primarily accountable for the deemed failures of their children. I instantly had visions of the Reagan era and his welfare mothers and broken home rhetoric and depiction of the Black home. However, I also knew that Hygeia's thinking was prevalent and acceptable among middle class Blacks who attempted to separate themselves from such derelict images of Black home life by openly expressing their disgust and difference from poor and working class Blacks. Having grown up in a middle class Black

family I frequently heard family friends and acquaintances comment on how badly “those poor, uneducated Blacks” made those who were attempting to do something with their lives look. The class divide among Black Americans was palpable and something few wanted to openly discuss.

Hygeia grew up in a time where Blacks were disenfranchised of many civil rights, including the right to vote, which is a privilege she believed my generation took for granted. Hygeia reacted very strongly to Black people not voting and felt there was a direct connection with one’s history that was not understood if a Black person failed to see the importance of casting a ballot:

When I get a young Black kid they said they don’t want to vote, I give them a lesson you wouldn’t believe. Do you know how you got that right, do you really know. My mother tried to vote in Alabama and every time she would go she would pass the test. They would give them a test that you wouldn’t believe and every time she goes she’d pass, but then they told her she couldn’t register. I never get that. She was angry and she kept going back until they let her vote and then you think I am not going to vote, I love going there. Now they got the darn thing, but I like to push the little buttons, but I don’t miss voting.

I sympathized with Hygeia’s sentiments as my own grandparents grew up in Alabama and fought for the right to vote. I nodded as Hygeia spoke about voting and added, “I don’t either because I understand somebody died for me to pass this right on and so you just can’t take it for granted and throw away because they are actually trying to take it away and some communities are trying to take away the right to vote for poor Black communities.”

Racism. Because Hygeia had such a strong, commanding and confident presence I wondered how she dealt with racism, to which she responded point blank, “I deal with it when it comes up to me and if anyone wants to put me down because I am Black, I am going to let them know that I’m Black, but proud of it and that if you could do such and such so can I... If you can do it, I can do it better. I can do it better.” I asked how it impacted her growing up. Hygeia said that because she lived in an all-Black community that she was largely shielded from some of the harsher realities, as her mother made it a point to keep her and her siblings away from the social upheaval and unrest occurring at the time. However, she remembered one incident that occurred with her father that reminded her that she indeed did live in a society where her Blackness predisposed her to harm:

I never thought of myself as being inferior, never, from a little child and that’s because of my mom and you know during the time of the uprising in Alabama, my dad was beaten almost to death, because he was stopped by police and he wouldn’t resist, because if he had resisted, they would have killed him and he knew that he shouldn’t resist and that’s the only time that I got this little hint that I wasn’t as good, but that’s about it.

Once again tying these beliefs to the influence of her mother growing up who taught her to believe in the innate freedom she possessed to be whatever she wanted regardless of how society chose to categorize and negate her, I asked if she felt her Blackness hindered or impeded upon her freedom. Hygeia was taken aback by my question and emphatically said:

Heck no. Mother didn’t play that. Oh, she would be very upset with us if we told her someone’s going to do this because she’s White and I can’t, oh no, she wouldn’t even allow us to think that way at all, so I never thought I was inferior to them, because I

feel like I was just as good as the next person and I didn't look at them as being White. I looked at them as being people until they did something to me, so I didn't have that problem, I really didn't.

Before I could even ask her how she saw freedom, sensing where I was going next Hygeia smiled and said, "Freedom is being able to accomplish whatever you set your goal to; no one blocking your way and if they block your way step over them, that's what freedom means to me." There was always fire in her words, her tone, and her eyes when she spoke particularly about her racial identity. She was not a wallflower, shrinking violet, or someone that one could easily challenge and not expect a solid confrontation or correction from. Hygeia held her ground wherever she went, along with the ground around her.

At first I didn't see any patterns as Hygeia's strong sense of self and assuredness dominated the scape, but as I listened to her voice and her words, a story of striving to find her place/niche and refusing to be defined by others based on her race began to emerge. Hygeia boldly and defiantly claimed her freedom and will to be at every turn because she believed she was worthy and deserving of such opportunities as a human being. "I think of myself as a strong woman, I don't think of myself as Black, but the lord gave me this color so I will use it." As she said life is a struggle "but nothing worth having is easy to get." Hygeia's life bounced back upon the existential given of meaninglessness as her strength and self-worth/value of working hard to succeed gave her a cushion of meaning rather than emptiness. As with Athena, I was so stricken by the unequivocal and visible self-confidence and worth Hygeia had in herself, and questioned her as to how she was able to develop and maintain such a strong and positive sense of herself and her Black female identity growing up at the height of the civil rights era in Alabama. It was unimaginable to me that anyone

could emerge from that time period unscathed or questioning their worth when literally every aspect of society outside of Black communities was shrouded in inequitable and racist ideologies and action. Once again, Hygeia like Athena, credited her mother, other Black women in the community, and the existence of strong and vibrant Black communities that enabled her to envision and see Black people living meaningful and productive lives (despite the social climate and accompanying difficulties of the era).

During our conversation Hygeia would periodically ask me about my upbringing, particularly what my mother was like, and I expressed similar sentiments about my mother being a fiercely independent, strong-willed woman who instilled a sense of meaning and pride in me. However despite this I still struggled with issues of racial and gender identity because I grew up in a middle class, heterogeneous community in which I was surrounded by White culture and mores. Hence, I had to cultivate for myself a sense of what being Black and female meant and did not mean rather than an unspoken “knowing” derived from the exposure and existence of a Black community with its own culture and mores.

The interesting and conflicting aspects of Hygeia’s story were around her racial identity. She held a very positive and central belief about her Black femaleness and its deep significance to her, as she repeatedly expressed and emphasized how glad she was to be born a Black woman. However, there were instances when she would insist that she did not see color or that her racial identity was not important:

I don’t have an inferiority complex. I think like I said before I think I can do anything I want to do I can comment about any person I don’t care if they’re what denomination they are or what if whether they’re Black, green, grey, Afro-American,

whatever so I don't think of myself as being Black, I think of myself of being a strong woman, but the lord gave me this color so I will use it."

Hence, her construction of her racial identity provided meaning to her personhood and life experience, yet she also did not want to be strictly defined by her racial identity. These contradictions pushed against each other yet both understandings of these as a central and humanizing aspect of her life reappeared throughout our conversation. Her story brought to mind the mythical creature, the phoenix, which was continually reborn from the ashes, symbolizing resurrection and immortality. Hygeia was not afraid to walk into the fire and set herself aflame for she knew she would reemerge stronger than before.

As our hour came to an end, I asked Hygeia if she had any parting words or advice she would like to share for all of the young Black women out there, and a wide smile spread across her smooth, velvety face as she uttered:

Be yourself and never feel like you can't do what you want to do. Look at you, sweetie getting your PhD. I'm proud of you.

Me: But it's not easy!

Hygeia: Nothing worth having is easy to get okay, but I just think that you as an individual have to find your niche and know that you are important. I don't care if you are in a mix of nothing but Anglo women, you are proud and that's all I can say for all the young Black women and hope I can instill it, to the young Black women. I just like to instill to the Black child, a Black woman that they matter and take care of yourself like you matter. You walk into a room, put your shoulders up, look straight ahead walk, mean it. Don't walk slow, My grandmother strutted. She walked into a room and she strutted. You know you matter, and that how you enter a room. You're

a proud woman and you strut on by. You need to make a presence and talk with conviction. And if it's someone you don't want to be bothered with, you walk on by them. I never think about what somebody else thinks about me. I matter!

After I stopped recording, Hygeia and I talked about how important it was to start teaching and telling children from the time they were babies how special and valuable they were. I shared my concerns of wanting my two year old to have confidence and self-worth, yet not knowing quite how to instill those beliefs, or when. The truth was that I was terrified that my love and unconditional regard for my daughter would not be enough to shelter her from the ugliness of the world, and that despite my most gallant efforts she would feel unworthy or less than because of the color of her skin. I worried that she would struggle with believing a simple yet complex truth, that she was worthy because she breathed, because she existed and that was enough, she was enough simply for being. I wondered how I could translate this message to her when I was still struggling to believe it myself. Hygeia's eyes lit up as she offered me advice on how to foster a strong positive self-image in my daughter, stressing that now was the time to begin telling her that she mattered and was special, etc. "It starts at home, you get that at home first, and it starts with you her mother who is a strong Black woman, I can tell," Hygeia smiled as her words and praise flowed like honey. As customary with my other participants, I gave Hygeia a small gift of appreciation (Ginger Orange tea and a small all-purpose shea butter balm). "Oh, you didn't have to do this, how sweet, and I love tea," Hygeia said grinning at me as she took the bag. I thanked her again, we shook hands and parted. I sat outside of her office in my car for about 15 minutes writing and recording notes.

As I drove home I reflected on our conversation and once again was reminded of my own mother who was visiting for a few weeks. I was reminded of her strength, and a few

parallels in her and Hygeia's stories as my mother was also a nurse (An RN who specialized in IV therapy during her early career, and now the Director of Nursing towards the end of her career). I wondered about the hardships and discrimination she might have faced as a young nurse. I recalled the early days of my childhood when she was attending nursing school, and would take my brother and I to campus with her for a few hours until my father (who was also attending college would come pick us up and take us home) picked us up. We would sit in the cafeteria and do homework and eat dinner while she attended class (periodically coming out to check on us). During one of these drop offs, my brother slammed his finger in the car door of the old orange gremlin car my father drove, and had to go to the hospital on campus. I had forgotten about this time in my life, and when I arrived home to find my mother sitting in the sunroom on the computer, as my daughter slept I was inspired to ask my mother about that time in her life. As she began sharing her experiences, I sat and listened attentively, having developed a new appreciation and interest in who my mother was, who she is and who she still wanted to be. My mother closed her computer as she talked, and continued to ask questions genuinely curious about this time in both of our lives, and what it meant for her and to her. I shared some of my memories, including the finger incident with my brother, and we both laughed and giggled as we reminisced and shared our perspectives. We were both reminded of our shared history as women, as mother and daughter and now as mothers both hoping for the best for our daughters, each imbued with related and unique strengths and gifts to pass on, and sustain.

Demeter

“There will always be those people that will remind me that I’m a Black woman and will hold it against me in same way shape or form, so I will never be free because

I can't break out of this skin. You know, I'm in it. I live it. I can't disguise it."

Demeter was my penultimate interview. I first met 37-year-old Demeter when an acquaintance mentioned that there was a Black baker in town who might be a potential participant. So I sent her an email. She responded that she would be interested but we kept missing each other, due to busy schedules. So as I was running an errand one day, and realized I was in the vicinity of her business, I decided to do something uncharacteristic of me, and stop by to see if I could make contact with her.

I pulled into the bakery and I heard a voice from the back call out, "Hello, I'll be with you in a minute." Okay, I yelled back...take your time," and I proceeded to look around at all of the scrumptious goods Demeter had beautifully and strategically arranged on the counters and in the display refrigerator. I almost swooned when I glimpsed the red velvet cupcakes with thick, creamy beige frosting on them. I grabbed the 6 pack of cupcakes just as Demeter was coming from behind the swinging door separating the front of the store from the stove, etc. "Hi, how are you", she greeted me smiling warmly, dressed in a white t-shirt, apron, jeans, and a white baker's hat. She had brown stains on her apron, apparently from the homemade hand made chocolates she was creating earlier in the day. I introduced myself and Demeter immediately recognized my name. "Oh yes, I remember you...I'm so glad you stopped by...I'd love to be interviewed," she said smiling,

We chatted for about 10 minutes, and I asked her how long she had been open, and if she made pound cakes. We decided to meet on a Saturday evening, after her shop closed at 5:30 pm at her bakery. As I was leaving Demeter warmly said she looked forward to our meeting and that she was excited about us being able to spend some time together.

Demeter's shop was small, located in a strip mall with an Indian restaurant, French bakery, tax returns business, and a few other merchants. When I first arrived back at the bakery for our interview, Demeter said that my timing was impeccable as she had been thinking quite a lot about what it meant to be a Black female in the world. She started off by asking me what my interview was for and when I explained the basis for it connected to my dissertation, she said again my timing was impeccable. She then began to talk about her experiences as a Black business owner in the southwest and how disappointed and hurt she was that she had not received support from the Black community like she had hoped or thought she would. She felt that as a Black person that other Blacks should support her, especially in a place where there are so few Blacks. However, having owned her bakery for about 1.5 years, she mentioned that it has been the opposite experience that Black people, including people she knows, go out of their way to not support her, and will go buy cupcakes or cookies at another bakery before they will come to hers. She kept saying that if you wanted to know who your friends were to start a business.

Demeter grew up in New York, and joined the military when she was 18 years old. She has been married for almost 20 years and has three daughters, aged 13, 15 and 18. Demeter describes her upbringing below:

I grew up in the projects, so in the ghetto. Where a lot of tall buildings and I was raised partly by my grandmother and my mother. My mother was in school. She had me very young, so my grandmother raised me very early on and then I would say probably around 5th or 6th grade I started living with my mom

When I asked Demeter about what it was like to grow up in a predominately Black neighborhood, and how she experienced racism outside of her neighborhood and growing up,

she believed that it really wasn't an issue for her until she was older and left her community. In fact, the most prevalent and salient factors for her was that she was poor and living in a economically disadvantaged community where worrying about surviving and getting out alive were the most important issues:

Growing up, I don't think so because I was always around a lot of African-Americans and I mean, I remember, so at one point, my mother is originally from South Carolina, so every summer we would go to South Carolina and visit my family there and then at one point, I ended up moving to South Carolina to finish off my last year of high school and then from there. I did a year of college and I was thinking about joining the Air Force and when I was in Air Force in Georgia. I remember driving and this guy had like this Confederate flag on his car. He was like yelling some stuff at me, whatever, but growing up, I can't think of. I think my mother did a really good job of kind of preparing me for things and so, I'm pretty sure to whatever things that happened, but I just never let it affect me because of where I was living that wasn't a concern for me. The main concern was staying alive because you know; I heard gunshots every night, drug dealers, crack heads in the stairwell, so that to me was the fear, so to speak not the white person, so I think that's probably why, I can't really recall anything because it was, it paled in comparison to what the stuff that was going on in that neighborhood. The reality of it, what things are going on.

There was a heaviness that clung in the air and in the small bakery Demeter owned. The tension and the weight of life being loaded with constant comings and goings was present in her eyes, her face, her body, even the way she cut me a slice of red velvet cake. Demeter was at a crossroad in her life, at least professionally. The dream of being a business owner and

professional baker had finally materialized for her, but the success levels and financial outcomes were not equivalent to her goals. Demeter talks about why she opened a bakery and its significance to her:

So I have been baking forever and I was doing it for friends and family and you know everybody encouraged me to do it and long story, short. I was renting my commercial kitchen space because I wanted to be legit. I was getting custom orders and weddings and so I was renting a commercial kitchen space and just doing it on the side and then in 2013 The southwest Magazine featured my red velvet cheesecake and my cupcake bouquet and... Yeah another friend of mine, they used to have a bath and body business, down in Central and one of the advertising execs came into their store to purchase something and she was talking and she was like yes, my birthday is coming up. I got to figure out where I'm going to get cupcakes and they were like, you need to go see D and then she went on my website, yeah so that's how that happened, so once that, issue hit. Like, it just took off. I got voted top five bakery that year and so I was trying to explain to people, while I rented commercial kitchen space and I deliver and so that was the push to get the store open and to be able to do it, so people can walk in because I was getting people all the time say, you have some place, where I can just walk in and get a slice or get... and now I'm like, yeah, I do.

The most bothersome piece for her was the lack of support she felt from the local small Black community and her friends. Demeter shared with me her disappointment at the lack of support she perceived from other Blacks:

I think it's hard to be in business period. It's definitely hard to be in business as a woman, as a mother, as a wife and definitely as a Black woman, so all those may

come into play at different times, but not all the time, but yeah, it's been like I was explaining to you earlier. I think the most disheartening thing for me has been not getting the support of the African-American community like I was expecting because that's something that I do that I seek out to specifically and so to not have that, is a little it's tough to swallow and I was talking to another Black business owner too and he was saying the same thing. If we have to rely on our own people, we'll starve. We would. I wouldn't even be open right now because they're not the ones that's coming in, so let me think for today, just today alone the people, the customers that I had come in. Not a single Black person came in today, besides you, who's sitting here interviewing me and let's just say for the whole week.

This theme of being disappointed at how others treated her due to her Blackness, and feeling isolated due to that, would come up continually in our conversation (and reflected the existential givens of isolation and freedom). While she seemed to expect Whites and larger society to be critical and not support her, the same type of treatment from the small Black community here in the southwest was deeply wounding, as she sounded quite emotional when she spoke of her disappointment and the lack of community support making her question herself, her business, and her overall life. There was a dependency or a need there that only her community could fill, it is where she hoped to find acceptance and support for her dreams and business, but it was quite the opposite. She even stated that other Blacks know that she's here, but they still won't support her...like she was invisible, didn't really exist, which we conversed about in more detail later in the interview.

We also talked about leaving the southwest, for greener pastures or places with a larger Black community, and less isolation, where it would be easier to connect with other

Black women, as it was a challenge in such an area with limited Black families and individuals. Once again the theme of feeling isolated and unwelcomed or undesirable came up when she spoke of her daughters and them being teen-agers and at an age where dating was becoming important. For her two older daughters, she felt it wasn't an issue, that they were focused on other things like their education, but for her youngest, she worried that she already was feeling like she was less than because she wanted attention from the opposite sex, and saw all of her non-Black friends receiving that attention through dating, or boys noticing or liking them, and not having the same experiences. She was worried and didn't want her daughter's self-esteem or worth affected by what has been described by the lack of desirability for Black women.

What struck me most listening to Demeter's interviews was again this push and pull between Black women and the Black community, the connectedness they felt with each other and other Blacks due to their shared history and experiences in society, but also the isolation they felt if they deviated from the typical conceptions of Blackness. It was a constant negotiation of wanting to be free to just live life on their terms in any way they wanted, and also wanting to feel acceptance and belongingness with other members in the community, sometimes compromising and limiting themselves so as not to isolate the Black community, and other times challenging constraining ideas about what Blackness is among other Blacks.

Gender marginalization. Gender and gender inequality were repetitive refrains throughout Demeter's dialogue. Feeling as though the world treated her differently and at times unfairly because she was female, and placed unhealthy and unrealistic expectations on women was a sore spot and hot topic for Demeter, particularly because she has 3 daughters.

Below Demeter discusses her feelings about the pressures society places on women and how she tries to educate her daughters about such matters to encourage them to be themselves:

(My Daughters) They are 17, 15 and 13 all grown-ups and so, I was thinking recently about how the pressure women feel. When we're young, we get the pressure of, okay you go to school, you finish school and you finish school. Okay, you need to find somebody and you get married. You get married, oh you have to have kids and now we have kids, you got to do this and we have so much on us that we feel like we have to and I've always said that. We as a society we're raising miserable women and spoiled men because we see so many women doing all these things to please their men, to please their family, but who's pleasing them, the thing we as women do, we kind of watch people and research and figure out, what things they like, they don't like to make that person happy, but men, they just assume what makes us happy. They just go on. I come home every day. I pay the bills. That's happiness for her. No and so I'm really trying to make sure that I tell my daughters to have like serious conversations about what they want and what they expect, when it comes to being married, because not only will they get it from themselves and their husband whoever else. Women, we as women we are our own worst enemies, because I've seen people on Facebook all the time, well I make sure that my husband has a hot meal every damn time he comes home, a little love and my hair is fixed and my this and I see like, people liking and agreeing and then it's kind of like this.

Demeter added her frustration with other women who complicate such matters by judging other women's choices:

This thing on the wall. Oh, I cook six days a week, no and I cook and like, all this pressure, but are you happy? It's one thing if you enjoy doing that because there are some people that do. Like, if you enjoy doing that then that's fine, but if you're doing just for a sake of trying to keep a man and trying to keep a, like that to me is craziness and so I don't want my girls to have that pressure. They know how to cook, not because I want them to be good wives and be cooking for their husbands and kids, but because they need to eat. That's why you know how to cook and I mean these women that are raising their sons to teach your son how to cook because maybe my daughter is the CEO and she's the one and who's come home to dinner and you know, but... so the pressure that women feel it's like, I don't know. I mean, it's hard. It's so hard because and everything I feel that we do we're constantly being judged for it. You know, do you breastfeed, not breastfeed. Do you stay at home? Do you go to work? Are you natural? Like all these different things and it's just like you can't, win, can I get a win? Can I just live?

Demeter continued to share her views on sexism and the difficulty of being a woman in society:

It's hard being a woman. It really is. I mean, just from the fact that being a woman we usually walk into any job you're going to get paid less just because you're female regardless. I mean you have to fight through all of these different things, you can't be too emotional, you can't be too bossy because then you're a B. You can't do... you know it's like, it's so much and then when you're out and you're trying to be and God forbid something happens to you and someone sexually assaults you, well what were

you wearing? And what did you say to him? And why don't you just say hi and leave? And why did you do this? And why did you go home with him, and why? These feelings of dissatisfaction with other women is contrasted with Demeter's feelings of connectedness with other women because they share the same gender and have some overlapping universal experiences, particularly motherhood. She communicated this paradox below:

I think, I definitely think I have a strong bond with all women because if you look at my friends and those that are closest to me that I spend a lot of time with. They run the gamut as far as races and everything, but I definitely think that, we as Black women have an extremely stronger bond because we can relate. When it comes to certain things good and bad I don't think, I can relate with my right friends. You know, I go to my closest friends Jenna. We watched the Walking Dead every Sunday together and we alternate each other's houses and she's white and she is like, one of those that's out fighting, fighting everything, but even she tells me all the time, like I just don't see how you do it. I don't see how you put up with some of this stuff, so even she can recognize the difference and so I think, we as Black women, we share that bond of life. We can just look at each other and go oh... Give that a head nod. You know, so yeah, but it's a beautiful thing too. You know, I love that, we have that bond.

It is her bond with other women and motherhood that brings Demeter into direct confrontation with death, whether the death of those close to her or of other mothers' children:

You know, I will say that I had a lot of experience with it growing up because I was I wouldn't say, well I guess because I was Black and living in a projects. It was always around me and that now, probably more so as a woman because of the bonds that we as women form with other people. With other mothers and other family members that men probably don't form quite as strong a bond and so, I think we probably experience it more, because we're just emotional anyway, so I think it affects us. Like I remember, so I have two friends we were all three of us were pregnant the same year my oldest was born and those two, they lost kids and I remember when they lost their kids. I felt like I lost a child. It hurt me to my core and that I love being with my child, so yeah.

When asked how being a Black woman factored into these experiences Demeter responded with a heavy sigh, laughing (which she always did when she was talking about an emotionally charged issue):

Oh, gosh, so now add to it being a Black woman. I guess the biggest thing is, the whole angry Black woman thing and to me, it makes me even more angry, when you try to throw that line at me to shut me up because I've had people we've had discussion and disagreements and then, they know they're losing and say, why are you so angry? As if I'm supposed to be like, well I'm not. No I am angry I have a right to be angry. Why is; that a problem because I'm Black like everybody else in the world can be angry, but when it's me it's a problem like Jesus was angry, have you read the bible? The Bible says be angry, but sin not, so I can be angry. So that to me, it's like don't shut me down because yes, I'm angry and sometime I'm sad and sometimes I'm happy and sometimes I'm depressed and sometimes I'm joyful. Like

I'm all of these things I'm not just that, but don't use that to try to shut me up because now you're really going to take me on you know. Yeah I think, I think I'm now even more so, more aware of the fact that I'm a Black woman because of the way that people interact with me, so positive and negative... Especially with my name, there's no denying I'm Black. I don't have one of those names, where you kind of like, like well maybe you know, like oh, yeah, she Black. I can't disguise it.

Black female pride. Like some of the other women in previous conversations, the emotional restriction that Demeter feels she receives from society with stereotypical messages and images of who she is and who she cannot be or she will be judged as angry and inappropriate is a major frustration for her. However, she still maintains a sense of pride about her Black female identity and said the following about being a Black woman and her ancestral history of surviving and beating the odds:

I think being a Black woman is one step away from being Jesus. Oh, Yeah I really do. I mean, when like what I tell my daughters is when you see yourself, when you see another Black woman. What you're seeing is, someone who defied the odds, because if you look back into our history, you look back into a fact that we were taken from our land. We were brought on these ships so many of them that didn't make that passage, they were tossed overboard, they died and then when got to this country, they were raped, they were beaten, they were ripped, they were lynched, they were hung. The fact that you are here, you have a long history in your DNA of people who are survivors because that's the only reason why you were able to be here because someone survived Someone made it through all of that.

Demeter quickly follows this statement with the reiteration of the difficulty of having Black skin, and questioning the meaning of why and what that means, ultimately finding it meaningful due to divine intervention and divine justice for those who mistreat her due to her Blackness:

I think being a Black woman is awesome. It's hard, I'm not going to lie. Some days I do wish that I could just disappear, but at the same time, God placed me in this body for a reason and all we do in life, you have choices to make. What we were talking about earlier and the people, who discriminate, mistreat or whatever, me differently because of my skin. They're going to have to answer for that, so you have to ask yourself this, when it comes to life. When you stand before God at the end of your life, would you rather have been the oppressed or the oppressor. I'm fine with being oppressed. I am, I'm fine with that because that means that I wasn't stepping on other people. I wasn't putting other people down and I was trying to help my fellow brother and sister in this struggle. So I think a lot of people will be truly shocked, when they stand before God first of all because you're Black, they got to be shocked to death, but the things that they're going to have to answer for and not a lot of things. I think the saddest thing about people is that, they think that if they don't directly do something then they're not at fault. No, you're guilty by association you're guilty by your silence. Your silence is consent and if you stand idly by and see things going and not doing anything with it then you have to answer for that.

Once again ultimately Demeter finds value in her Blackness and femaleness and despite the tribulations does not wish to change this about herself as it is where her strength and resilience resides:

I recently asked myself. If I had a chance to be born a different race would I choose and I wouldn't. I wouldn't change it. I think being Black means strength, it means perseverance, it means love, it means good genes, is good life. This melanin is good girl (laughing and holding her arm out to caress her skin). This is permanent tan, what you're talking about. Yeah, you know I think and because I have the Black experience. I am constantly fighting to help others and I'm not saying that I wouldn't do that if I was white, I don't know, but I know that because I'm Black and because I see these things. It bothers me and I have to do something about it, so I'm glad that I am because it gives me purpose. It gives me purpose.

Complexities of Black motherhood. I laughed as Demeter's humor slips through and lightens the weightiness of the topic. The old refrigerator she brought to store her baking supplies provides a constant serenade of humming and buzzing that causes us to lean in closer to one another as we speak. I asked Demeter about being a mother next and how she perceives her experiences as a Black mother. Demeter's eyes lit up as she spoke about her three daughters and how different they were, and how proud she was of them. Despite these joys, she described motherhood as the most stressful and frightening experience of her life, particularly being a Black mother to Black children and struggling to keep them safe in a world that oftentimes devalues them and deems them as threats. She delineated her feelings on motherhood below in further detail:

I think motherhood to me, is the scariest thing ever. It is so scary. My oldest is getting ready. She'll be in a senior high school, later this year and to know that she's going to have to go up in this crazy world, it's so crazy and I question sometimes, like why did I have kids in this world. You know, because it's like your heart out of and

walking and breathing and living and doing everything. You want to shield them, you want to protect them from everything and you know you can't, so it's definitely probably the toughest job in the world and yeah, it is scary that's what it is for me. Especially right now, when I'm trying to prepare my kids for all the craziness that they have to experience and deal with, yeah.

She shared an experience her older daughter had in school with a classmate assuming she was in a gifted class due to the minority quota and how she helped her daughter understand and deal with passive racism:

I'm sure, I have discussions with my kids that other mothers specifically White mothers don't have with their kids because of the fact that they're Black, because as soon as people see them, they're going to automatically judge them, treat them differently and my daughter who just recently had a situation in school. So her school has a national honors society and in order to get admitted they only have a limited number of slots. You had to have a certain GPA. You had to have extracurricular activities and then you had to write this essay and my daughter got in and her friend didn't, who's White and her friend tried to, well her friend's mother actually tried to say that it was probably because Brea was Black and Brea had to check her basically and say listen, first off I have the GPA So yeah it's definitely difficult that was the first assumption, as to why she got in. It couldn't be because she's smart. She's been gifted since she was first grade or something.

Demeter rolled her eyes as she told me this story and then began speaking about how difficult it is to exist as a Black person because of how others treat you, careful to emphasize that it was not being Black that made life hard, it was the perceptions and actions of others in

relation to being Black and being female that made it challenging. When I asked her about freedom and what that means to her she grunted and said:

Freedom. I don't know what that is because I feel like, we all have some sort of jail that we're in at different points in our life, whether it's financially, emotionally, spiritually, so freedom to me would be no worries. Not having to worry about my daughters growing up in this world and things they're going to have to face and deal with, not worrying if, I want to get enough customers throughout the week to pay bills. Yeah, freedom to me would be no worries and I don't think I'll ever that will ever happen, so I don't think I'll ever experience freedom at least not in this lifetime.

Me: The way that you described freedom. Do you think that being Black and being a woman impacts?

Demeter: Oh, definitely! Because I think, even if let's just say financially. I had all the money that I needed and you know, my girls were doing well at school and different things like that. There will always be those people that will mind me that I'm a Black woman and will hold it against me in same way shape or form, so I will never be free because I can't break out of this skin. You know, I'm in it. I live it. I can't disguise it, so yeah.

Demeter's words pulled at me, hitting me like steel boxing gloves as I was very familiar with the feelings she expressed. I understood how disheartening and how despondent the world and the people living in it can make one feel, the damned if you do damned if you don't impasse of Blackness... the impossibility of Black skin! The illusion of the given of freedom with the reality and responsibility and consequence of freedom were very different beasts in that for Black women they seemed to manifest differently, and not fully due to a varied social

reality. Despite the despair, the disappointment, and the frustration, in the end what Demeter could not live without was love. We ended the interview with her stating how important it was to her in all of the chaos:

I definitely have to have love. Whether it's god's love, love myself most importantly.

I definitely have to have love. I love to be surrounded by loving people. People who are just lovely in spirit, not matter what color you are, I have to have that because the world is so messy enough that you get enough of mess, you have to love to kind of overshadow all the hate, all the mess.

Demeter and I finished our interview around 8:30 pm Saturday night. After we said our goodbyes, I sat outside in my car jotting down notes and points I wanted to remember. Demeter's story definitely revolved around the existential givens of freedom and isolation, as she simply wanted to be visible and accepted on her terms rather than those of society. I watched her for several minutes through the bakery window, and watched her languidly move back and forth putting away cupcakes and slices of pound cake. I wondered what she was thinking now in the silence and the humming of the refrigerator in the store. I wondered was she looking forward to going home, or would she stay in the shop for a few more hours (as she revealed she did sometimes to have some peace and time to herself)? As she turned off the store lights and disappeared into the back I drove away glad to have had the opportunity to interview her, grateful that the bond of our skin color and gender allowed her to trust me enough to share her story, knowing that it was through the connection of skin and body that I would and could understand and empathize on various human levels.

Artemis

“Every family has their issues but generally my upbringing did not have a source of traumas that I think people associate with being Black, that go along with Blackness.”

Artemis and I first met at a professional conference where she was a judge. We knew a few of the same people and struck up a conversation about the general morale of Black students at the local university we both attended. Our chat was pleasant, especially given that there were few Blacks let alone Black women at the conference. However, we did not keep in contact after that until about a year later when Artemis received an advertisement for my study and emailed me volunteering to be interviewed. Artemis was my last interview.

It took Artemis and I about three weeks to finally connect, as I was recovering from a severe case of bronchitis, and she was diligently working on writing her dissertation. When we did eventually meet, we decided to do so at a local university library for a few hours. It was a beautiful march afternoon, and the university campus was abuzz with the exuberance and eagerness of youth so filled with hopeful expectation and possibility. I looked around taking in all of the students walking by me, most oblivious to my prying eyes and ears, and remembered myself fresh out of high school, filled with the same kind of hope and uncertainty about what lay before me. I took a deep breath in, closed my eyes and thought about how grateful I was to be beyond the wondering and hope, to have the materialization of uncertainty surrounding me...my marriage to a partner I was deeply connected to, the existence of my beautifully spirited little girl, a still emerging second career, and overall greatly fulfilling life. I thought of my 20 something self and smiled, as back then to her all of what I was living now was simply a concept, a dream.

In the midst of my reverie, I spotted Artemis approaching and offered her a quick and thoughtful smile. “Hey, Tamiko,” she said slowly and hesitantly. “Hmmm, that sounds like a contemplative hello,” I teased sensing from her body language and sigh that something was amiss. Letting out a loud and prolonged, sarcastic sigh, Artemis responded chuckling, “Yeah, I’m just having one of those days, trying to write my dissertation and I’m stuck, it’s not coming together like I’d like, so our interview is a welcomed distraction,” she told me as we walked up the stairs to the reserved room. What struck me most about Artemis was her commanding presence. She was tall, 5’11 with a solid frame yet still managed to move gracefully through her space. Artemis had a deep, articulate yet youthful voice...her tone denoted innocence, curiosity and uncertainty as there was always the lingering of a question in her statements by the rising intonation she placed at the end of each statement. She wore a stylish Afro hawk and denim jacket. When I looked at her I saw a teenager peering back at me, though she was 30 years old, and finishing up a PhD in communication. In fact, Artemis spoke about the opposite experience of looking more mature than her age growing up. “I developed really early. I’m 30 now but I’ve been the same size, I’m about 5’11 right now, like 260 but when I was 12 I was like 220 and the same height. I’ve been the same height, I’ve been wearing the same size clothes since I was like 13 years old. So I developed really quickly.” As she shared this with me, my heart ached for Artemis, as I pictured her as a 5’11 220 pound 12 year old, a child with a woman’s body trying to navigate a world so fixated on labels and categorization...the isolation she must have felt around her unique and commanding budding femaleness juxtaposed against her Blackness. Feeling trapped in a body that she could not embrace or feel connected to was a refrain that dotted Artemis’s narrative throughout.

Social class privilege. A central theme that connected Artemis's story was that of her middle class upbringing and how this social class privilege conflicted with her racial experience. Listening to Artemis' story reminded me so much of my own having grown up in a middle class family and being considered not Black enough or on the outskirts of Black culture, and the isolation and tension that came with that. Artemis had a very middle class upbringing in predominately White communities, and did not experience poverty or violence as is ascribed to many Black Americans. The life experiences and upbringing of Artemis and I were closely paralleled. We had more in common than any of the other women I interviewed. We were both raised in a middle class Maryland suburb, in a mixed community, and our parents were college-educated professionals who had successful professional careers. We both attended private schools throughout our education, and had stable family lives with both of our parents present in the home. Artemis describes her childhood and secure family life:

Anybody who knew my family and who came to meet my family, who didn't know me growing up like, "Oh man, you guys are like the Huxtables," before Bill Cosby took his downward spiral, like, "This Cosby show." He's like, "What? Your parents are still together? You guys have a okay, happy life?" I was like, "Yes." Every family has their issues but generally my upbringing did not have a source of traumas that I think people associate with being Black, that go along with Blackness. It really is like my immediate family, my parents were just ... I'm just very fortunate that they built an experience where I really didn't have ... I had a very easy relatively upbringing childhood really adulthood. That kind of trauma is not my story.

I was surprised and elated to hear Artemis speak of how her family was perceived by other Blacks, as I encountered some of the same attitudes and comments about my family being like the Huxtables (my father even physically resembled Bill Cosby). She continued to elaborate more about her parents and their lifestyle growing up:

My parents, they did well, they did well enough to send me and my sister to private school for the first 12 years of education. So I think that class is an intersection that doesn't get discussed. It wasn't like rich and going to cotillions but it was a very middle class upbringing. When we moved to Laurel, that's where my parents had bought their house, I was in late elementary school when that happened, home ownership. They owned their cars, they went to work.

She laughed as she remembered an experience she had one summer at camp when she needed to call her mother for something:

I worked for a couple of summers though in Seat Pleasant Maryland which is right outside of Washington DC, right on the border of the district line and I worked at a summer camp there. I got the connection from a friend of my mom or something like that. I worked there but I remember one time one of the camp counselors overheard me calling to my mom's work and hearing me ask my mom's secretary for my mom like can I speak to so and so? They're like, "Your mom has a secretary?" I'm like, "What? Yes." I never really thought about that. So they're like, "Your family must be rich," and I'm like, We're not rich. My mom, she's a director of a program at her community college and she has a secretary that answers the phone to the office or whatever.

Interactions such as the ones above increased Artemis's awareness of the stereotypes about how Black people lived along with the reality and existence of a Black middle class to which she and her family belonged. She delved a bit more into her class privilege in the following text:

So I think things like that brought to my awareness that there's a class position that goes along with my Black experience, that sometimes people when they get to know me they have interactions with me, that's not their assumption because there's a story that gets told about the Black experience that doesn't include the Black middle class experience even though historically there's a really strong legacy for the Black middle class but the way the narratives go, that's not really a thing.

Compounding the difference or otherness some Blacks noticed about Artemis and her family was also the fact that she grew up in very mixed environments where there were not many Black people. When she and her sister would travel to visit their grandparents who lived in an all Black community, the children in the community immediately singled them out due to their speech, style of dressing, and mannerisms:

when I would go to Detroit which is where my dad's side of family is from, as soon as I ... We were always suspects. Me and my sister were always like, "You are not from here. You go to school with a lot of White kids, don't you?" They probably weren't using the word bougie back then but that's what they meant. Stack up is probably a word that maybe got assigned more and it's not that I didn't get along with my cousins or anything like that but I was always marked differently, but also because we weren't from Detroit.

As with Artemis, the usual trauma associated with growing up Black (poverty, crime, absentee father) wasn't my story either. And yet here we both were not unscathed by living while Black and female. My class privilege shielded me from poverty but it did not and could not shield me from being Black or female, or what that meant within and outside of Black spaces and in predominately White spaces, as Artemis articulated below:

My school was very white, yes, but it was also mixed enough to have ... Like I said I was never the only kid of Color, there was maybe one or two of us. My childhood friend growing up, she was Black. We went through all of school together and there were other groups. I think what I did know was that my background was different, that my history was different than say the White kids. I think when you grow up in a mixed environment you play with those ideas of what it means to be a particular race. You're still figuring it out. I can say with my friends we play with it. We'd be like, "You're ..." I can't think of any black words, I can only think of how I would address my friends or how my friends would try to play with Blackness, talking about questions about hair or, "This person is White but they're also Black, we're going to call them a wigger." I never had a space that was all Black or exclusive to Blackness and so I think I developed my Blackness alongside all of these different groups of people who I interacted with, whatever, if they're from Sri Lanka or Puerto Rico or just being White.

I began recalling my own childhood, particularly my interactions with white classmates and neighborhood children. I silently evoked my own phantoms, as I reminisced on intimate lessons in race, one in which I was in the 1st grade and a white classmate insouciantly smiled and told me I had pretty white teeth for a Black person, and that I must

drink a lot of milk. Thrown off by her ostensible objective of complimenting me, I thanked her. Quite pleased with myself, I went home and communicated the compliment to my parents. My father snickered and told me it wasn't a compliment. I was puzzled until my mother deconstructed the girl's terms for me, and exposed what it meant about other Black people, and ultimately what it meant about me. I also became quite erudite in the hyper segregation of whites, given my father's ranking as a Black officer in the Army, living in officers housing, separate from the enlisted soldiers where most of the Children of Color and their families resided. White girls in the neighborhood befriended me after school as there were very few children in the nearby vicinity, yet denied and disregarded me shortly after another White girl moved into the community, or whenever they were around their white friends in school. Through these occurrences, I ascertained that whiteness was esteemed and significantly superior to be associated with than Blackness was. Precipitously, I was antagonized by goddesses of immortal whiteness, who sought vengeance against Blackness that ventured to strive, dared to be beautiful, desirable, shrewder than they, and the penance for such a transgression was to be distorted into a repugnant creature, to become a Medusa turning anyone White inquisitive enough to behold you into stone...such was and is the beginning of white fear and of the white terror patrolling streets of Colored minds. Gradually, I discontinued carpooling to school with white children in the neighborhood, insisting that my mother transport me by myself. She consented but would curiously ask me, "Oh, what happened to your friend, so and so?" I was too humiliated to tell her the truth, that even as an Officer's daughter I was not good enough, that all of their diligence at meritocracy to procure a better life for my brother and me was futile; we would permanently be stained, eternally be exiles dwelling on white soil. Yet I stood out like a skyscraper amongst my Black

acquaintances and friends because of my family's social class status, and living on the Officer's side of the military base rather than on the enlisted soldiers side where all of them lived. My parents recognized this reality, yet shrouded it from me as if there was protection in omitting this detail, that maybe I would not notice the insidious presence. However, when its manifestation became apparent, they inaugurated tactical strategies to extend our social circle beyond our white neighborhood and surround me with Black playmates. As I became a teenager, among the girls of Color it became a mantra, "Don't trust those white girls, they only want to use you." Yet, in spite of this awareness, I remained optimistic that this was not incessantly accurate, and cautiously sustained shallow acquaintances at the chagrin of friends of Color. In these mixed spaces, I was always reminded of my Blackness as was Artemis who so eloquently stated this:

I'm always marked as, "You're the Black one," people all the time know me or have remembered me because I've been the Black woman in the space or like, "I don't know you," but they remembered me because I stand out. So I think that at times I had to be so uncomfortable with that.

Gender marginalization. A major theme in Artemis's story was that of resisting gendered stereotypes and depictions, which directly engaged Yalom's (1980) given of freedom as she constantly felt as though who she intrinsically was, in various ways, was being limited by facticity (her gendered body and societal mores regarding gender). This particular area was challenging for her because of the very visible female body she possessed at such a young age. Artemis communicated the confusion puberty created for her and her attempts to resist her developing body and what it meant:

I have big boobs and I think that that became the thing that was like this is womanhood or something like that and my mom made me start wearing a bra when I was in second grade when she took me to Sears and we had to pick them out and I was traumatized. Maybe that was a little trauma but not major. These are woman things that you have,” and it was like, “Ah.” I actively rejected that. It’s not the attention that I wanted from kids. I look back and I was very tomboyish really through high school. Maybe as I got into high school I got a little bit more but that was because my mom would always push me. All I used to wear were jeans and T-shirts and I went to a private school where it didn’t have a dress code so it was jeans and T-shirts all the time.

Artemis’ very female body made it challenging for her to avoid societal messages of gender roles, expectations and stereotypes. She quickly understood that as a woman there were things she would be perceived as not able to do and should not do. One such message was in regard to female roles in authority. Her own father believed that women should not be in positions of authority and would not vote for her if she were running for president. When he shared this opinion with Artemis she was crushed. Artemis talked about that memory below:

I remember the time and the place so specifically. We were in the mall, Colombia mall. We were sitting in the food court having this discussion and I’m like, “What?” I couldn’t even understand how my dad can tell me that he wouldn’t vote for me for president. He was serious, just because I was a woman. I didn’t know how to comprehend it, I just remember being really, really hurt by it. That’s the first instance where it’s like, “There is this thing that people do that puts women in positions or gives these ideas about them. They are based on nothing because you know me,

you're my father. You know I'm a good person, I do good things or whatever," I was like, "But based only on my being a woman that you would decide that I should have this particular leadership position."

She would experience similar attitudes from men that she dated or male friends who assumed that simply because she was a woman she was incapable of having a rational discussion as women due to emotionality. Artemis voiced her frustration at this perception which was the opposite of who she was: "It's like because you're a woman you believe X, Y, Z and it's become the biggest pet peeve for me. I think that generalization is my biggest pet peeve of assuming that because I'm a woman I'm going to behave in a certain way or that I'm going to be really sensitive in a certain way."

We talked about what it was like to be a Black single woman in the southwest. Artemis mostly spoke of experiencing a lack of desirability from Black men or any men and how surprised she was that she missed that or that it mattered. This theme of desirability and an absence of dating options came up several times with other participants. Though I was married I told Artemis that based on the stories and experiences I'd heard of from other Black women living in the area, I could not imagine being single if my preference was to date Black exclusively as the options seem quite limited. Artemis chuckled and said, "You have no idea how limited it is." Artemis elaborated on just how limiting the lack of partnership was as she questioned various aspects of womanhood such as motherhood and marriage:

I don't have kids, I don't know if I want kids, I don't know if that's something that's very important to me. I'm not married, I don't have a family in that regard.

Something else like being a wife I think is something that goes along with narratives

about being a woman. My life as a dating story is not very extensive I guess you could say and so I think that even that part of the connection ... The unfortunate thing is a lot of how women get discussed is in contrast to something that's male-driven. Like I said like being a wife or somebody else, having a child, being somebody's mother, being somebody's girlfriend or significant other, those are a lot of ways that womanhood in a broad sense gets talked about and those are not things that I've really had a lot of or at this point have.

She added her desire to be in a relationship:

I would like a spouse or let's start with a partner, that's something that I would want but my experience with it is so limited. I don't even feel qualified to talk about it because it just feels such an anomaly in my perception.

Artemis described her dating history as "anemic" clarifying that she did not have much experience with men in intimate relationships. There was something about the resolve and longing in her tone when she spoke about both feeling almost like a foreigner in her own body and her lack of connections with men that made me ponder how the way we as a society perceive and label the body as one or the other, male or female rather than a balance of both is limiting for some people. Artemis' quandary made me deeply aware of how we mark the body greatly influences how individuals move and exist in the world, and how it also increases the isolation they feel as human beings as it impacts their opportunities and ability to make meaningful connections with others. I wondered on some level were we contributing to more meaninglessness rather than greater meaning in our attempt to categorize each other, and bring order to the chaos of our human worlds.

Isolation from other Blacks. As I listened to Artemis' interview, another recurrent theme was feeling isolated from the larger Black community and experience due to her middle class upbringing. The constant having to defend her blackness to other Blacks and seeking validation and acceptance for her unique Black experience was frustrating for her yet isolating. Artemis recounted numerous experiences such as the one below where she was ridiculed and questioned by other Blacks about her way of being and acting labeled as "White."

I can probably think of times where a distinction was made for me being not Black enough and being confused about what that means. I probably had a couple of incidents when I was younger about that. I came up in private schools. In one private school there was never a lot of Black kids but I was never the only Black kid. It was always in that arena but I had cousins who would be like, "You talk like a White person." I was like, "Wait, what? I don't understand." I had friends who people would call them Oreos. I was like, "Wait, what?" I'm not really understanding why that was being used or that sort of reference.

Once again hearing Artemis relive her childhood experiences raised my own from their forgotten graves, and I shared with her similar experiences:

I can identify. I believe it and I remember when I ... I think I hadn't probably seen Black neighborhood until I was probably a teenager, like 16. Actually spending time in one. That was when we actually moved to Maryland and my mother's family was there. I remember feeling like people look at me like I was a suspect because either how I spoke or how I dressed. They could tell that I wasn't from the neighborhood. So I definitely identify with that idea of growing up in an all-Black space and how

that might define how you understand it versus having to do that for yourself because you're surrounded by different types of people and not necessarily one idea, a cohesive definition of what Blackness is.

Artemis also spoke about her experience in graduate school when many of her colleagues were applying for food stamps or other types of financial assistance to survive while attaining their education, and the surprise by many of them that she did not have to do so, and was unaware that people were actually doing this:

It was probably wasn't until I got to my master's program where people were talking about financial aid and food stamps and stuff like that and I was like, "What?" Those are just things that I hadn't ... It just wasn't part of my experience. I was in a group for my master's program for minority students going into masters or PhD programs and so they were talking about these things as if they were universal experiences and I was like, "I don't know anything about food stamps," or whatever the program at Illinois was, whatever it was, applying for or like the ... I got my own loans but I couldn't get whatever the general loans where you work-study or something like that. I never qualified for that because my parents made too much so I was like, "I don't know anything about work-study or any of those things." I had some loans on my own but this is not part of my experience but they're talking about it as if it was like, "This is the Black experience, get your food stamps, get your whatever." I was like, "I don't think I have to do that." So I think those parts also inform my Blackness where I'm still like I'm still Black but I don't really know about that. It's always a back and forth I think between those.

I chuckled when I heard this story because I recalled similar interactions in graduate school where Black classmates were having discussions of applying for food stamps and government assistance, while my parents were paying \$1200 a month rent in an exclusive neighborhood in Clayton, Missouri while I attended Washington University's social work program in St. Louis, Missouri, along with providing me with a generous monthly stipend so that I could focus on getting my education and not working or struggling to do so. "A privileged Black woman, that's something they're not used to seeing," a friend of mine in graduate school would say to me during our conversations on navigating the system in our graduate program. I quickly became aware of the class privilege I enjoyed and how that somewhat altered my experiences from other Black people who did not possess the same class privilege, yet still did not negate my Blackness or femaleness in larger society, even if it created fissures within the Black community.

Being surprised and taken off guard by the comments and questions she received from other Blacks pushed Artemis to acknowledge her class privilege as well and still push back on the invalidation:

I definitely started pushing back even in like you were saying, readings about race or a scholar who talk about middle class experiences as ... I feel like sometimes we get twisted as in embracing whiteness and rejecting Blackness. It's like, "Can't this just be a different version of Black ...? Do I have to be rejecting something about being Black to say that this was my upbringing or this is my experience, this is the position that I had in whatever in terms of capital-driven opportunities?" That's not whiteness per se, it's a class privilege that goes along with my Black experience. But I feel like sometimes it gets twisted to where if that's what you do it's like you've been

influenced by whiteness and you have to unlearn these sorts of things and I was like ...

Me: “You’ve sold out” I interjected

Artemis: Yes, exactly, like, “You sold out.” I was like, “I don’t know if I was bought in but okay.”

Artemis firmly affirmed and declared that despite her divergent upbringing and class privilege she still identified as Black and would not allow anyone to negate her experiences as less than or invalid due to those differences as they were a unique part of her human experience, and her Black female experience.

Varied Black identities. In relation to resisting narrow definitions of what Blackness means, Artemis addressed the importance of race and the broadening of multiple experiences within blackness:

Artemis: So I really like and I am often drawn to people who are connected to the sense of Blackness, that Black is something that’s important and that there is racism and that are able to say that that exists and to call it out when they see it and not downplay it but that are also able to express that Blackness in a lot of different ways, like doing things like traveling to ...

Me: I laugh and add, “going skiing!”

Artemis: Going skiing, exactly. This is true, at one point when I was young I was like I’m going to start a company and it’s going to be called Black People Do and it’s going to be all the things that people say Black people don’t but it’s like Black people do. Black people do ski, Black people do go swimming, Black people they travel to places besides the Caribbean.

Me: “They drink green tea and do yoga,” I retort

Artemis: Exactly, they do yoga, all these things. I was like I’m just going to do all these excursions and it’s going to be called Black People Do, it’s going to be a Black travel group. Anyway I’m really drawn to that notion that expanding the representation like the Black experience. So it’s some sort of nebulous thing in there but I think I have gotten to where it’s just like this is me, this is how I’m living my life. I am about to be a Black PhD, all these things people would say, “That’s not really a thing,” or you see very few of. It’s like, “Well, I do it and I’m still a part of that Black story, that Black narrative,” and it’s important to me but it’s also important to me that it’s not unlimited

However, despite the diversity within Black culture, Artemis acknowledged and understood her contradictory position on what it meant to be Black that did qualify for questioning when that element of collective relations and respect was absent:

But I’m also very aware that, and this is why I said those things ground you and maintain the whole, that even I feel like I’m able to call out somebody’s authentic Blackness or not, “They’re not down for the cause.” I call out like celebrities or like other people that I know. I was like, “This Black person has no Black friends.” Even I knowing my experiences still have some line that I say, “This brings you in.” I’m not sure about her, those sorts of things where I’m like, “No, that’s not good enough. You need to do more to be aligned with the community than just having this skin type.”

This seeming contradiction in advocating for acceptance of various representations of Blackness yet having a barometer of required attributes to be considered part of the Black community was a precarious balancing of the individual and the collective (which are

interdependent and relational). It was a symmetry of personal and shared/communal identities that Artemis was still navigating.

Community death. When I broached the subject of death with Artemis she said that she did not have too much immediate experience with it in her family, and said the following: “I have this duality, I don’t know how you want to classify it but I think the way that I think about it, my individual family, close circle network, when I think about death in that particular space I don’t think about it in terms of race or in terms of gender.” Artemis thought of death strictly from a human perspective. She also acknowledged the communal aspect of death in the Black community and impact that the public death of any Black person has on the entire community due to shared collective identities:

But I also have a very strong connection to what that means in terms of the community and so I think that especially with all this Black Lives Matter stuff that’s been happening over the last few years, talking about Black death has been the forefront of a very public discussion and conversation that exhausts me. I can’t engage it all the time because having already known the history, having already grown up with an awareness of what these institutionalized systems do or work against the Black bodies, Black female bodies also in particular, having already known that but then having it being discussed so much and so openly and having to be often the ambassador for that to happen because of the nature of the classes that I teach or just my interest areas in general, it always feels personal.

Artemis expressed the emotional toll such incidents have on her personally due to her identification with Blackness:

It could have been me and I know what that means within a community sense, and that death in those ways in particular are always heavy. They always heavy and it's heavy to the point where I can't even engage them in the way that I probably could a couple of years ago and it could be because of my own personal space right now that I don't have the emotional energy to deal with it as in depth because I have other things going on for myself. But it's weighty and it always affects me.

Otherness and marked status. Artemis and I then moved on to the topic of the Black female experience. Immediately Artemis mentioned the otherness she always felt and the limitations in freedom that being Black and female presented personally and professionally. She shared her experience of taking a cruise with a group of Black female friends and the ways she and her friends felt they were being watched and surveilled by the other passengers, asking them questions about their intentions of travel, plans, and why they were there. She elaborates below on this experience and connects it with the way these perceptions affect her:

You can't just be casual, Black, free woman in the space of others because it's like what are they doing here? How did they get here? What's the back story? What's going on? I think knowing that you're always a representative of that even when you don't want to be, even when you don't claim it makes you think about how you move through the world. It makes me think about how I move through the world. Knowing that I'm one or the first Black female instructor that a lot of students have had makes me think about my behavior in the classroom and how I relate to people and how I talk to them. Can I just say anything? Am I going to be the angry Black girl if I talk about race all the times? But I have to be aware that that's what I become if those are

the moves that I decide to make. So I think it's the awareness of it that makes it ...

It's not like I always do what I want to do but I have to think about it or that I do think about it. I think there's a level of inhibiting that maybe other people don't have to experience because you can just be you all the time if you're a white male or whatever, you are just representative of you. It's like, "Oh man, now I've become that Black lady I had who taught me that one semester," or something like that.

The otherness caused her to wonder at times about the larger meaning as her experiences place her in direct confrontation with the existential concern of meaninglessness as she struggles to find significance in her journey:

I think at the intersection of being Black and female I have had that experience of what's the meaning of this particularly because my Black female experience is so different from ... It's not to say that everybody has a universal experience but the frequent perception of what that means has been so different for me that there have been times where I was like, "What is this? Why am I in this space with this skin as a Black woman that I'm always marked?"

Artemis continued:

I have questioned like what's the point that I have to keep being in the spaces where I don't fit in and I think that's probably the cross of it. I have long since forever, ever since I know since I was a little kid been like I do not fit in anywhere, none of these spaces fully fit for me. So I think it's like you already stand out as being marked as being double minority, Black and being a woman but my version of that is not really anybody else's version of that. We're in those exclusive spaces, I don't really fit in all the way with those groups. I do think that that uncertainty of what that means or the

significance of that or is it something just deficient or wrong with me because I can't fit in to these spaces that I'm supposed to fit into because they're already marginalized, what's the point of that?

Spirituality. Artemis was ultimately able to make meaning of her experiences and the soul searching questions and thoughts she mentioned above, due to her spiritual beliefs. While her othered status instigated deep existential anxiety (fear of nothingness and meaninglessness) Artemis believed there was a flow and intentional design to life, which balanced life out and helped to make sense of circumstances, and provided meaning:

My spiritual connection I think is also very important to me because when there is connection things make sense, there's a flow to things, there's an ease to how things progress and I think that that spiritual connection, because I've had so much uncertainty or this feeling that I don't fit into a lot of spaces, I feel like I've still been guided on a path of connections that make sense. So I think that one of my, not mantra but just something that guides my belief and how I make meaning of things is that all things happen for a reason. I believe that all things happen for a reason and so even those things that you think don't fit are aligning somewhere down the road for a bigger purpose, a bigger function, not just for me but in a broader scheme of things.

This spiritual perspective enabled her to make sense of familial loss and her decision to attend graduate school in the southwest, thousands of miles away from her family:

In the moment its like, "What am I doing here in the southwest Why am I here right now? Why am I here? My family has since experienced two losses since I've been living so far, what's the point? Why am I here?" But in the meantime I have been set up with a program that was a perfect fit for me. I'm it worked out well, a good

committee. So there's been things along the way even in these uncertain spaces and these spaces that don't make sense, that still seem to be connecting me to the next step or the next phase.

The yearning and deep acceptance Artemis had about being a Black female gave her life meaning and these multiple subjectivities were interconnected and inseparable for her:

I will say a lot of my version of Black woman is like Black woman just in line with these other identities like you were talking about, class, body, sexual orientation. I think all of those are really integral to my Black womanhood to where it's hard to talk about them separately because I see how they intersect so much with my humanity.

Our conversation left me feeling deeply validated in these other or different types of Blackness...diversity within the Black female experience. While Artemis's story was interwoven with various givens (isolation, freedom) her story epitomized the given of meaninglessness above all else, as her life choices and philosophy deeply reflected one of someone determined to create both meaningful connections with others while creating meaning and purpose for herself personally. Her awareness and anxiety of the groundlessness of life provoked her to make what she referred to as intentional connections with kindred spirits. How I hoped that this statuesque beauty did not take this for granted, never questioned the exquisiteness that I saw when I looked at her...a proud warrior slowly and deliberately moving through the space surrounding her; ready to draw her sword if need be, a quiet power springing from each step she took. I remember watching Artemis walk away, me going in one direction and she the other, and feeling a sense of sadness and loss that she was returning to the east. Before we parted, she told me that if I ever wanted to get coffee she would love to. I quipped back, "you've already said you have a very small, and

intentional circle of friends,” and she replied “but its not limiting” smiling. However, I had been down this road so many times in my life, enough to recognize a platitude of kindness in myself, as the writing was on the wall, Artemis was leaving this toxic desert in a few months, and with it she was leaving everything behind, including a burgeoning friendship. We would never see each other again, I thought as I looked into her clear eyes and smiled at her. Once again someone who shared pieces of my story was disappearing into the vastness of the world, imprinting me with a memory of perhaps a friendship that could have bloomed if we had met earlier. However, I understood her need to leave a place where she felt there was no hope for her to build the life she wanted, where she was isolated, and left on her own to deal with subsequent marginalization, seeking and searching for answers, seeking the truth of who she really was, and perhaps wanted to be. I understood her need to go, for her own psychological survival, and I was saddened that the city and world we lived in was still such that fear and intolerance stifled possibility and potential for those who were so deserving of a chance at happiness, acceptance and love. Such simple requests really, yet so complicated. My hope was that she would find whatever it was that she was searching so diligently for, and that it would be all that she dreamed it would be.

Chapter 5: Analysis and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which Black women's experiences pertain to the four existential givens as posed by Yalom (1980). Seven Black women were interviewed using an unstructured interview protocol based on the four existential givens of freedom, isolation, meaninglessness, and death. To analyze the data, I used portraiture as a methodology due to its congruency with Black feminism and existential psychology. In this chapter I will provide the reader with an analysis of the data as it relates to Yalom's (1980) theory and other related literatures.

Each of the seven women interviewed provided information pertinent to each of Yalom's (1980) four existential givens. In this manner, it is reasonable to assert that each of the existential givens posited by Yalom are relevant to Black women. Contraposition, an analysis of the data demonstrates that their identities as Black women affect the particular manner in which these givens are experienced and expressed. Furthermore, analyses also revealed that there are general experiences shared between Black women and yet there are also idiosyncratic ways in which these experiences are internalized and expressed across each of the seven women. Considered together, the overall thesis for the current study is that the existential givens are maintained and yet the particular manner in which each is experienced is both personal and socially mediated, especially in the case of Black women.

In the spirit of portraiture and the qualitative tradition, the analyses contained in this chapter are presented in a series of themes, as opposed to deductive responses to the original research questions. These themes will be further explicated in the following chapter, as they might be further applied to Yalom's existential givens and implications for practice. In the current chapter I have presented the themes as each emerged from the qualitative analyses

described in the preceding chapters. In addition to remaining consistent with qualitative convention, this approach to presenting the themes is consistent with the results of the current study in that each theme pertains to each of Yalom's existential givens and yet simultaneously illustrates the nuanced manner these givens must be apprehended for Black women.

The first category of themes, *social support*, illustrates the importance of social support networks and resources for Black women. The second theme is *limitations on freedom* that pertained to the various forms of marginalization Black women experience. The third theme focuses on *complexities of motherhood*. The fourth theme *social class* depicts the various lifestyles, personalities and social influences that affect concepts of Blackness and womaness. The fifth theme is *pride in Black female identity* that focused on feelings of connectedness, value and meaning of the women's Blackness and femaleness. Finally, the sixth theme centered upon *religion/spirituality* and how it is used as a coping mechanism and source of strength and meaning for Black women.

It is important to note that each participant reported experiences related to the existential givens in personal and complex ways. Also, consistent with Yalom's (1980) posits, each of the existential givens were experienced as a whole, with many or all of the givens in a confluence with the other givens. For instance, when talking about the connectedness between women there were also reports of isolation to help shield from aloneness. Similarly select participants cited the uncertainty of relationships, which reflected both the givens of isolation and meaninglessness. Thus, when I address how the women in the study experienced the existential givens, rather than address the research questions in a

linear fashion, I address the questions of the study more circumlunar, weaving the answers to those questions throughout the chapter and throughout findings.

Social Support

Black women in America have consistently experienced dehumanization, first as slaves, then as mammies and jezebels, and continuing into modern day as sapphires, welfare mothers and super-human (see West, 1995; Townsend et al., 2010; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). This shared history suggests that Black women encounter similar social opportunities and limitations. This collective wisdom on how to survive and thrive as Black women while encountering intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, sexual identity is known as Black women's standpoint (Collins, 2000).

An important aspect of standpoint is the emphasis on the deep kinship shared between Black women due to common racial and gender experiences. Relationships formed with other women in the community act as an important source of social support. Social support in itself is vital as it counteracts the existential concerns of isolation and meaninglessness, providing Black women solace from intensified periods of interpersonal estrangement (generally experienced as loneliness and separation from others) and a sense of purpose and meaning. All seven of the participants spoke on some level about the importance of relationships with other Black women, sisterhood, and mentorship, a concept Collins (1995) refers to as *other mothering* which can be described as the supportive relationships and social networks that Black women form with one another that provide support, mentorship, child rearing assistance, and a safe space to learn and process what it means to be Black and female in society.

Other mothering as a cultural meaning-making system is deeply connected to what Yalom (1980) coins *terrestrial meaning* (personal meaning making in which one derives sense and coherence to one's life), which the participants demonstrated within their shared narratives. Many research studies related to social support for Black women consistently show other mothering, kinship and connectedness with other women as imperative components to the wellbeing of Black women (e.g., Guiffrida, 2005; Hirt, Amelink, McFeeters, & Strayhorn, 2008; Mawhinney, 2011; Vickery, 2016). Accordingly, such forms of support and additional resources utilized by the women in the study were central to equipping them to handle the existential concerns of both isolation and meaninglessness, since cultural factors such as race, gender, economics, can increase feelings of insignificance and interpersonal estrangement (see Yalom, 1980). Hence, the theme of social support provides insight into two specific research questions in this study, how do Black women experience existential isolation and how do Black women experience meaninglessness.

Other mothering as a form of support. Consistent with the extant literature pertaining to the importance of supportive, mentoring relationships among Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Edwards, 2000; Gilkes, 1986) all seven women in the current study expressed deep satisfaction and comfort in forming friendships and relationships with other Black women. For example, Artemis, Rhea, and Demeter each expressed the importance of having Black female friends who can empathize and comprehend issues that uniquely impact Black women. In the case of Artemis in particular, she shared a recent experience she had on a cruise she took with a group of Black women that emphasized her conscious choice to surround herself with Black women. She intentionally chose to surround herself with other Black women rather than having a mixed social circle like the ones she

grew up in, due to enjoying the comfort and fellowship she feels in the presence of other Black women. When interpreting the participants' words one can extrapolate that these connections assuage the isolation and insignificance they experience in society due to her otherness (Blackness and femaleness).

Demeter and Athena spoke of the relationship aspect of shared experiences and identities with Black female friends over non-Black friends. Athena mentioned the lack of ease or difficulty that can occur with relationships with non-Blacks and why she is cautious about extending her social circle to include more racial and ethnic diversity, once again reiterating Artemis' and Rhea's feelings on the comfort and lack of self-consciousness that Black female relationships provide.

Both Athena and Hygeia validated the centrality of Black female relationships but more so from a perspective of elders educating and mentoring younger Black women which is a common practice in the Black community (Collins, 1995). Leading by example and being a positive role model of a Black woman was very important to Hygeia, as she believed she and every other strong Black woman's had a duty of "bringing them [Black girls] up and talking to them" in order to "always elevate them." Athena who doesn't have children but took on the role of acting as a surrogate mother to others' children talks about her "adopted" daughter Gina, explicitly illustrating aspects of community mothering and the part these relationships play in the Black community (Collins, 1995; Edwards, 2000). In each instance the participants acknowledged feelings of isolation in society due to the otherness they perceived about themselves from mainstream society, which ultimately increased their need to create and find supportive relationships and connections with those individuals who also held an otherness status related to their raced and gendered bodies, in order to gain

acceptance and find meaning in their Black female identity. Not every woman felt a connection with other Black women, which I expound upon in the next section.

Deviant voices and dissonance in other mothering. Within the larger theme of social support, several women expressed experiencing feelings of isolation from other Black women due primarily to social class issues. Persephone expressed a desire to have supportive relationships with other Black women due to the myriad similarities and shared racial identity, however felt as though her middleclass upbringing in a mixed and predominantly white neighborhood was a barrier to doing so. However, despite these feelings of isolation and rejection Persephone experienced from other Black women she quickly reiterates her deep desire to form such relationships, as seen in the following quote:

I feel like the big things we have in common. When we walk around in the world, nobody is like oh well what class are you? Nobody cares. They look at us and they're like Black women.

Demeter also alluded to feeling isolated from other Black women at times, particularly when she started a new business and did not get the support from the Black community and Black women that she anticipated. I echoed these sentiments as hearing Persephone and Demeter speak about their feelings of separation and isolation from other Black women due to either their upbringing outside of non-Black communities or business ventures reminded me of my own experiences struggling to connect with other Black women. Thus, while Persephone, Demeter, and I each experienced isolation in our pursuits of developing and maintaining friendships with other Black women (primarily related to social class differences) we all affirmed the value of these relationships in navigating the social milieu.

Kinship and connectedness with all women. Many of the women interviewed were not only able to derive meaning from connecting with other Black women, they were also able to connect with other non-Black women around universal attributes of womanhood, such as motherhood and distinctive feminine body traits and experiences. Gaia, Rhea, and Demeter articulated feeling a strong bond with both Black women and all women, due to shared experiences and ways of internalizing these experiences as women.

Limitations on Freedom

In the existential sense, ultimate freedom means the absence of external structure, as an individual is born into a world filled with chaos and nothingness, a world that lacks essential structure or an absolute design (Frankl, 1985; Yalom, 1980). Hence, the individual must create her or his own world, and take responsibility for her or his life, choices, actions, and overall condition. However, because we are born into a world that includes other people, and a preordained society with its own set of mores, ideologies and social conditions, these factors naturally affect how and why we construct our lives in the manner that we do. We are never purely singular, we exist both apart and as a part of the world (a concept Heidegger [1962] coined *dasein*, translated as being in the world) and must cope with the thrownness of life and our circumstances. Thus, while every individual experiences limitations on her or his freedom and must bear a certain amount of responsibility for the choices he or she makes, based on societal factors like race, gender, class, environment, social positionality, etc., those limitations, level of responsibility, and freedom of choice manifest differently, sometimes more strongly, and sometimes in inequitable ways for certain groups.

For Black women, racism and sexism interweave and manifest as phenomenon referred to as gendered racism (Crenshaw, 1989; Essed, 1991). Gendered racism can be

understood as the intersection of complex exchanges of oppression rooted in constructed ideologies, stereotypes, and racist perceptions of Black womanhood and gender roles (Essed, 1991; Crenshaw, 1989). Gendered racism creates varied and complex challenges for them as they engage in constructing and co-constructing their lives, and can severely limit the scope of the types of freedom they experience, whether it be emotional/psychological freedoms or physical freedom. Given so much of their lived experience is constructed for them by a heteropatriacial society through controlling images and stereotypical representations of Black femaleness, intense feelings of multiple forms of marginalization can arise, which many of the participants in the study confirmed experiencing. The first category within the limitations of freedom theme I will discuss is emotional/psychological marginalization.

Emotional and psychological marginalization. Emotional and psychological marginalization, gender marginalization and racism are dominant areas where the participants believed they experienced the most restrictions on their personhood and ability to fully express themselves. This category pertains closely to the research questions “How do Black women experience the existential givens of freedom?”, yet also touches on the questions of how they experience death and isolation as limitations on one’s sense of freedom.

The existence of historical images and stereotypes of Black women has been long standing and widespread within American culture and society. Persistent depictions of Black women as jezebels, mammies, and sapphires have not only influenced how society views and interacts with Black women, but also function as a level of social control on the Black female body and psyche in ways that are meant to reify specific behaviors from them resulting in emotional and psychological marginalization (West, 1995; Townsend et al., 2010; Stephens

& Phillips, 2003). Not only do these perceptions present themselves in prejudicial attitudes and behaviors, they also impact power dynamics and social positionality of Black women within society (West, 1995). Compounding this problem is the perpetuation of these images fueled by popular culture and the media as authentic and factual representations of Black womanhood. Such representations create a hostile and restrictive atmosphere for Black women in which facticity overrides transcendence as the constant pressure to either disprove such images by inhibiting their own behaviors, feelings, and ways of being or unintentionally embrace such images by refusing to self-monitor takes a toll on them psychologically and physically. For example, one of the most difficult and pervasive stereotypes Black women in the study disclosed was being perceived as the angry Black woman who is loud, aggressive and emasculates Black men. Since social expectations discourage displays of assertiveness and anger in women, what can be deemed as appropriate responses to micro-aggressions and racism is often misconstrued as unwarranted bellicosity in Black women (Vontress, 2012).

Subsequently, the internalization and persistent awareness of the sapphire stereotype may cause Black women to shoulder responsibility for the misconceptions, bias, and discomfort of others, or potentially prompt them to alter their behavior and ways of being in order to avoid appearing angry and intimidating when interacting with other groups (Greene, 1990; Lineberger & Calhoun, 1983). Many of the participants in this study eagerly shared the unfairness of the double-bind they perceived themselves to be in, and expressed feelings of fatigue and hopelessness in relation to dealing with such negative and controlling perceptions about their responses to life. These experiences resulted in them feeling emotionally limited, and as though they could not express normal emotions such as anger or frustration without their behavior being misread as inappropriate or threatening.

The mental strain of constantly balancing one's personal identity with prescribed social identities, social messages and perceptions, while encountering micro-aggressions and overt discrimination, increases psychosomatic issues among Black women. According to the National Survey of Life (Williams et al., 2007), African Americans are 57% more likely to experience depression compared to white Americans who have a 39% chance. However, despite these statistics, only 7% of Black women seek treatment for depression (Mitchell & Herring, 1998). Influences of culture and religion that communicate to Black women they must handle their personal struggles themselves, and archetypes such as the strong Black woman contribute to the stigma and low treatment rates among Black women for mental health issues (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). One of the participants in this study, Persephone, spoke about this in detail in her narrative, and most of the women disclosed suffering from symptoms of psychological stress in the forms of anxiety, sadness, and hopelessness when dealing with widespread negative representations of Black womanhood.

Four of the seven women repeatedly verbalized feeling as though they were not allowed to completely express themselves or reveal all aspects of their personality or feelings.

Gaia articulated feeling like she was forced to be in a box because she always had to confront people's perceptions about her being angry when she was merely reacting to upsetting situations that were impeding upon her sense of freedom and self-expression. In her portrait, she described her filtered way of expression as "Shaniquitude" which can be interpreted as another word for historical hostility. Similarly Demeter shared her exasperation at what she viewed as society's attempt to "shut me up" and not being permitted to fully express her emotions in society without being labeled or stereotyped as "angry." Persephone

proclaimed similar thoughts as she shared her experience with depression and the stigma around mental illness for Black women, saddened that it was almost shameful for Black women to present any other emotion or demeanor outside of strength and assertiveness. This particular segment of her portrait, corroborates psychological literature on mental health issues such as depression, low-self esteem, and psychosomatic conditions that can manifest among Black women who grapple with suppressed anger (Brown, 2003; Magee & Louie, 2016; Munhall, 1994; Nelson, Cardemil, & Adeoye, 2016).

Artemis addressed feeling like she was always being “watched” or “under surveillance” recently when she went on a cruise with a group of Black female friends. She then admitted to thinking about and modifying her behavior at times due to the awareness of others’ perceptions of her as a Black female, which a majority of the women in the study admitted as well. Their behavioral modification is a form of self-monitoring that current studies have linked to materializing as a consequence and response to deep-seated biases and stereotypical representations of Black women in popular culture and media (Littlefield, 2008; West, 1995; Williams, 1999). The next section I discuss the participants’ thoughts on feeling limited due to their gender, and the concurrent isolation that accompanied those perceptions.

Gender marginalization/sexism. Gender stereotypes are sets of highly prescriptive social rules and norms that ascribe specific desirable and acceptable behaviors to individuals based on their actual biological sex. They are closely tied to traditional social roles and generally reflect power inequalities between men and women, depicting women as the weaker, less competitive, more emotional gender needing the protection and guidance of men. Thus, gender stereotypes function as heteropatriachial constructions meant to perpetuate the status quo of men as the superior gender (Hoffman & Hurst, 1990; Jost &

Banaji, 1994). Gender stereotypes typically present themselves in four primary domains: personality traits, domestic behavior, physical appearance, and occupation, in which they guide and predict desired gender qualities. For example, women are supposed to possess ladylike, demure demeanors, procure positions that exemplify their caring and domestic nature, while men should be assertive and aggressive, analytical and authority figures. Nonconformity to gender stereotypes, roles and expectations are viewed as violations of social codes and can result in negative responses leading to various types of punishments like ostracism, and discrimination or lack of job promotions (Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, & Heilman, 1991; Rudman & Glick, 1999). Moreover, widely held beliefs about gender stereotypes are enduring, proving extremely difficult to change (Dodge, Gilroy & Fenzel, 1995; Leuptow, Garovich, & Leuptow, 1995).

For Black women, complicating an already challenging social landscape is the intersection of their femaleness and their Blackness (resulting in both gender stereotypes and racial stereotypes, i.e., gendered racism (Essed, 1991). For example, Black women have been stereotyped as strong, hardworking, dominant, welfare queens, and sexually promiscuous, all stereotypes that are in contrast to the stereotypes of white womanhood which include virtuous, feminine, and genteel (Collins, 1990; Jordan-Zachery, 2009). Correspondingly, Black women may be marginalized within their communities since racial group membership does not preclude them from a hegemonic gender hierarchy which places Black men at the top and them in subordinate positions. Black women who challenge such gendered beliefs or act in unconventional ways in relation to gender are met with attitudes of sexism which function to coerce them back into alignment with traditional gender norms. Each of the seven participants in this study contended with some form of gender marginalization. Specifically,

five of the seven women spoke at length about their experiences with sexism and gender stereotypes.

Athena grew up in an era before there were both civil rights and rights for women, so much of the limitations she experienced were not challenged as it was simply “the way things were.” She discussed the double standard women experienced during the 1950s in relation to having sex before marriage, children out of wedlock, and the additional social controls women confronted in regard to their bodies. Athena suggested that a girl’s life (i.e., freedom) and choices were severely limited and almost nonexistent after violating a strongly held gender rule regarding female virtue, describing a woman having a baby out of wedlock as “you can’t survive that.” Gaia talked about her experiences of gender marginalization in terms of sexism, social controls on the female body and double indemnity of race and gender (gendered racism). In chapter 4, Gaia recounted an encounter with a Black man she was dating where she was told she had to choose to be Black or a woman as she could not be both, to which Gaia states, “I can’t separate those two things”. This superbly illustrates the Black feminist’s idea of a double-bind scenario in which Black women who advocate for women’s rights and support their own gendered interests are deemed race traitors to Black men and the Black community, as the sociopolitical interests of the racial community (i.e., Black men) should have priority over Black women’s interests (Collins, 1998; Davis, 1981).

Demeter described gender marginalization in terms of dealing with the pressure of fulfilling gender stereotypes and social expectations around motherhood and marriage (which infringe upon her individual freedom), and the overall unhappiness such narrow definitions on womanhood produces for women, which in turn instigates further encounters with isolation, and meaninglessness. She referred to societal constraints as creating “miserable

women and spoiled men,” due to the hefty expectations on women to meet multiple role and responsibilities. Later in her portrait she discussed inequitable treatment women encounter within society, due to the burden of responsibility placed on the feminine body, and briefly touches upon how gender stereotypes impact professional and economic opportunities for women as solely based on gender women frequently are paid less than men despite their qualifications. Demeter’s narrative pinpoints Heilman's lack of fit model (2001), Rudman's status incongruity hypothesis (2012), and Eagly and Karau's role incongruity theory (2002) which highlight society’s prejudices against women in the workforce, while displaying prevalent feminine stereotypes women are incessantly confronting.

Continuing along a shared narrative that buttresses Demeter’s narrative on gender inequality, Artemis was deeply wounded by her father who at the time had stringent gender role ideologies and did not believe women should be in positions of authority. Such gender biases and prejudices against women in leadership positions (as demonstrated by Artemis’s father) are still ubiquitous, as current literature on sexism in the workplace highlights negative perceptions and gender stereotypes reflecting women as less capable of exhibiting the appropriate and necessary skills of a leader (Brescoll, 2016; Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012). In fact, the belief that women are inherently more emotional than men is one of the widespread and strongly held gender stereotypes in Western cultures (Shields, 2002). Numerous national polls undertaken in the last thirty years have repetitively discovered that the majority of society (including women) fervently supports the conception of women being biologically more prone to emotionality (Rudman, 1998)

Artemis was stunned that her father believed that there were certain tasks and roles that a woman should not engage in and that his love for her did not alter this perception of female inferiority. Artemis referred to these gender ideals as her “biggest pet peeve.” She also referred to the sexism she encountered when dating, specifically related to presumed narrow-minded assumptions about her emotional capability, which once again is strongly linked to existing literature on pervasive and commonplace gender stereotypes portraying women as emotionally unstable, overly sensitive, and irrational, thinking with their emotions over their intellect (see Brescoll, 2016; Fischer, Eagly, & Oosterwijk, 2013; Mavin, Grandy, & Williams, 2014). Artemis disclosed the isolation gender perceptions created for her emotionally, limiting her ability to connect as she uses phrases like “hurts me the most” and “I shut down” to illustrate the frustration she feels dealing with men who evaluate her strictly based on her gender. Growing up Artemis actively rejected the societal messages she received about what it meant to be female. Throughout her portrait she described her growing uneasiness about female social identity and her pushing back against the aforementioned gender stereotypes.

The examples provided by participants illuminate a critical argument in Black feminist theory wherein the intricate, and complicated intersectionality of Black women’s identities, particularly within their own communities where they are often coerced or encouraged to choose racial solidarity (Collins, 1998; Davis, 1981). Additionally, their gender membership may be devalued and marked as traitorous, thus creating restrictions on their ability to fully embrace every aspect of their personhood in a positive way, complicating their ability to transcend their social realities in favor of more conducive ones

aligned with their unique values and beliefs. However, not every woman in the study felt as though she was limited by gender stereotypes and sexism.

Dissonance and deviant voices. Two of the women, Hygeia and Rhea did not feel they were limited by their gender or that they experienced much sexism. Both were raised in households where gender roles and responsibilities were shared and loosely defined. This egalitarian approach tends to be a common feature among Black families based on the differing needs and structure of Black families (many of which are single female parent households) in which all family members are expected to contribute to the maintenance of the home to support and balance responsibilities in support of the bread winner (Barbarin, 1983; Beckett & Smith, 1981; Hill, 1999). This model greatly diverges from that of the traditional White family that tends to be more hierarchal in structure, yet is still influenced by mainstream culture in placing present Black men as heads of household.

Hygeia believed that she was not limited in any way due to her gender, given the upbringing her mother provided for her, instilling in her that she could do anything regardless of her sex or race. There were also flexible gender roles in her family as both boys and girls learned to clean, cook and take care of the household. Rhea also felt that there weren't as many gender roles or expectations in her household because her mother was a single mother living in the ghetto and depended on both her son and daughter to help her maintain the house any way they could.

Conversely, it is interesting to note that while both Hygeia and Rhea did not believe they were held to strict gender rules, as is consistent in many communities where resources are scarce and families depend upon their children and neighbors to survive financially and economically, still there were elements of gendered roles and characteristics. Career steering

was present in that they both were encouraged to pursue jobs typically deemed suitable for women, such as teaching and nursing, and they both assumed the strong Black woman stereotype, and saw themselves as feminine and girly individuals. Thus, there were subtle elements of gender stereotypes embedded within their stories when I listened and read between the lines.

These remembrances of feeling maligned due to their femaleness ties directly into the existential given of freedom as Athena, Artemis, Demeter, Gaia, Hygeia, Persephone, and Rhea are inhibited on various levels from fully exercising their agency to create and live the lives they desire. They do not perceive themselves as entirely liberated human beings as the heft of peripheral powers and influences steer the directions their physical vessels move toward. The existential given of isolation is prominent throughout these recollections of limitations on freedom, and inaccessibility to specific social dimensions and dynamics based on gender, as the actors living these ever shifting narratives are prompted to create meaning from their relegated status as women and forge solid relationships with other women as sources of sustenance, protection, and partnership. Through developing these support networks, as noted in the aforementioned themes of other mothering and fictive kinship relationships with other Black women and non-Black women, the corrosiveness of the multiple indemnity position many Black women find themselves situated in is eased.

In the next section I will address the participants' experiences of racism, which are intricately connected to all four existential givens, freedom, isolation, death, and meaninglessness, and therein both squarely and circuitously answers all of the research questions pertaining to the study on how Black women experience feelings of freedom, how

they experience feelings of death, how they experience feelings of isolation and how they experience feelings of meaninglessness.

Racism. The lives of Black women must be understood within a paradigm of multiple jeopardy, referring to the race, gender, and class discrimination Black women must contend with along with the intersection of these sources of oppression (King, 2007; Thomas, 2004) with other social factors which create what Collins (1995) calls the matrix of oppression. Racism can be understood as system of oppression that privileges one group over others solely based on race (Tatum, 1997). Because the United States is such a race-based country, racism heavily impacts every aspect of American life, since racism functions on multiple levels: cultural, structural, interpersonal. Interpersonal racism (prejudiced assumptions about an individual's capabilities, intentions and reality and racial discrimination (inequitable treatment of an individual due to her or his racial identity) can be stressful and lead to various adverse physical and mental health outcomes (Pieterse, Carter, & Ray, 2013).

The most common form of racism that every participant expressed encountering was racial micro-aggressions. Racial micro-aggressions are intentional and unintentional verbal, behavioral and environmental slights that convey negative and derogatory messages and racial insults toward people of color (Nadal et al., 2011). Studies have shown a strong correlation between the cumulative effects of micro-aggression related stress and health disparities among Black women, finding that such daily negative interactions increased feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability, anger, hypervigilance, (Helms, Nicolas, & Green, 2012; Sue, 2010), which then increase their likelihood of direct confrontation with the givens of isolation and meaninglessness.

During the interviews I asked each participant about her feelings and thoughts regarding limitations on her freedom, particularly in relation to racism she may have encountered directly related to being Black and female. Based on the challenges they face as a Black person and woman, each participant mentioned the psychological toll constantly dealing with the negative perceptions and behaviors of others can have, corroborating once again a reaction which is consistent with research on the mental health effects of racism (see Calabrese, Meyer, Overstreet, Haile, & Hansen, 2015; Jones, Cross, & DeFour, 2007).

Dealing with racist perceptions. Gaia's discussion on her experiences with racism center on dealing with the derisive and deficit perspectives of others in relation to her Blackness, and used the metaphor of Blacks being hunted like prey by serial killers. She also used vivid imagery including words like "chained" and "fetters" to describe the lack of freedom she felt from the mental stress of racism. Her experiences and resulting strife reflects research connecting psychological stress and racism (Carter, 2007; Murry, Brown, Brody, Cutrona, & Simons, 2001; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). Additionally, my status as an insider enabled me to both affirm and empathize with the requirement of Black women to balance personal freedom with those unseen yet very palpable fetters of freedom.

Due to consistent unpleasant incidents such as the ones shown above around her raced and gendered identity, Artemis, similar to Demeter, Gaia, and Persephone earlier, questioned the meaning of "being in this space with this skin as a Black woman that [is] always marked." These painful experiences arising from her personal and social identity, ultimately led her to question cosmic meaning in her raced and gendered experience, which then triggered feelings of meaninglessness and insignificance. In her portrait Artemis elaborated on these sentiments and the ensuing existential isolation accompanying her

thoughts and feelings of inconsequentiality (see Yalom, 1980). Artemis's encounters deftly elucidate the delicate connectedness and interwoven mutability of the existential givens in one's lived experience.

Like Artemis, Persephone experienced an early incident of racism in which she grapples with her marked status of being "singled out" and labeled "different" when a classmate in elementary school referred to her as "blackie" due to her skin tone. Persephone described the distinction and double consciousness of being Black and female which she referred to as "double other" and was frustrated with the double standard that accompanies Black women's beauty (referring to the desirability of black features yet the undesirability of Blackness and Black women). As a result of Persephone's personal encounters with messages of inferiority and undesirability, which she extrapolated as "the world is always trying to break you down in a million different pieces" and "you have to be strong," like many Black women, she internalized strength as a necessary attribute of Black womanhood to shield her from racism's negative impact, and embraced the strong Black woman archetype (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). The strong Black woman ideology is both advantageous to Black women as it does offer a layer of psychological protection and mental fortitude as Persephone demonstrates, yet it does have its disadvantages given the recent research that has highlighted the harmful health outcomes of this ideology such as hyper vigilance (Mitchell & Herring, 1998) and maladaptive coping strategies like depression which Persephone disclosed suffering from (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Donovan & West, 2015; Harrington, Crowther, & Shipherd, 2010; Harris-Lacewell, 2001; Mitchell & Herring, 1998; Romero, 2000; Woods- Giscombé, 2010). The strong Black woman paradigm will be discussed further in an upcoming theme - Black female pride.

In the next section I will introduce and discuss the theme of the complexities of Black motherhood. There is a direct link between motherhood and how a Black woman's personal experiences with existential givens, particularly in areas where she perceives limitations on her freedom related to her race and gender drive the manner in which she parents her children, and deeply influences the interpersonal relationships and interactions she has with them.

Complexities of Black Motherhood

There is a copious body of research that has explored the effects of systemic racism in American society on the self-concepts, self-esteem, and overall well-being of Black children and how Black parents engage in parenting (Caughy, Campo, & Muntaner, 2004; Coker, et al, 2009; Nyborg & Curry, 2003; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003). Despite a prevailing belief that children are color-blind (they are unaware of race and racism and cannot perpetuate it) numerous studies have demonstrated that children are conscious of cultural, physical differences among people, and absorb the reigning social attitudes and mores pertaining to cultural, racial and physical differences regardless of whether they have experienced direct encounters with people different from themselves (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 1996; Feagin & Van Ausdale, 2001; Lewis, 2003). A study completed by Goodman (1952) wherein she observed 100 Black and white children, ranging from three to five years of age, found that by the age of four the majority of young children already displayed racial awareness and actively expressed race related values and beliefs. This awareness is crucial for Black parents and mothers as it means their children will encounter issues of race, racism, and cultural identity in preschool. Given the dehumanization which often accompanies racism as a child's growing consciousness of the racist attitudes and practices of the majority

society, it is vital that measures are taken by Black parents to ensure their children develop a positive self-image bolstered by both familial and community influences. Also, it is essential that Black children are taught how to survive and thrive in a frequently hostile white hegemonic society.

Collins (1995) refers to this instruction of surviving yet thriving in American society by Black mothers as visionary pragmatism. Many of the Black mothers in this study spoke in detail about the concerns they had for their children's safety, and knowing they could not afford not to educate their children about the racism they would encounter due to the color of their skin, yet struggled with trying to find a balance between educating them enough to save their lives, yet not stifling or inculcating them with a spirit of fear and inferiority. Every woman interviewed also referenced or talked about the current social milieu that Blacks find themselves entangled in concerning the high profile cases of young Black children being murdered by citizens and police officers.

Five of the seven women were mothers or other mothers (Athena, Rhea, Gaia, Hygeia, and Demeter) and each conveyed her methods and challenges raising children in American society. These refrains focus on the joys and complexities of Black motherhood. The topics which repeatedly occurred across narratives and recollections of the women were teaching children about the Black experience/how to survive while Black, knowing one's collective history, and the complexity of Black motherhood. I will discuss the subtheme of racial socialization next. The following section and group of quotes listed below convey feelings of the participants on the importance of educating Black children about the dangers they face in society as Black individuals.

Racial socialization. A critical aspect of Black parenting is helping Black children develop a positive racial and personal self-concept, while simultaneously helping them adapt to mainstream society. A large body of literature exists that examines how Black parents engage in these practices termed racial socialization (Caughy, O'Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1997; Greenberg et al., 1999; Thornton, 1997). Multiple researchers (Boykin & Toms, 1985; Hughes & Chen, 1997; Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990) have defined racial socialization as behavioral and verbal practices that convey information about racial social positionality, along with individual and collective identity, and how these are influenced and shaped by social dynamics (Thornton et al., 1990). Racial socialization consists of three components, cultural socialization (educating children about the history and culture of their racial group), preparation for bias (preparing children for experiences of racism and providing them the necessary coping strategies and tools to deal with such encounters), and the promotion of mistrust (promoting ideas of suspicion and wariness of those who do not belong to one's racial group) (Hughes, 2003; Hughes & Chen, 1997).

Environmental and social factors guide the methods Black parents utilize. The inescapability of racial discrimination in the United States is a pervasive social factor that heavily influences this, as Black parents who live in environments where they believe their children will experience racism focus on providing their children with the coping strategies to deal with discrimination, while Black families who live in environments where fear and violence are prevalent are more likely to focus on encouraging mistrust of outsiders, though the components of racial socialization are variable rather than fixed (since they are determined by circumstances). Affirming and consistent with research on culturally adaptive

parenting strategies (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; LeVine, 1977; Ogbu 2003), in her own unique way each mother in the study sought to teach and promote the necessary behavioral skills and knowledge needed in order for her child/children to survive and thrive in the social environment they resided (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). Athena and Hygeia articulated their concerns and frustrations about recent killings of both young Black children and Black people, and strongly espoused that Black parents recommit to instructing their children on how to survive by not stooping to violence, rather using education as a tool to counter injustice.

Racial socialization reflects each of the existential themes of death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. For example, death is not an abstract or even distal proposition for the Black mother, but something present in every interchange. In a similar way, freedom is something that is desired and yet it must be mitigated by the perceptions of Blackness, namely the awareness of that one is not free to act without recourse because certain behaviors are expected, lauded, or even admonished simply because one is Black. Isolation from certain spaces, people, and opportunities abound for the Black woman and, consequentially, there is no luxury to maintain unbridled meaninglessness. Considered together, each of the givens as they emerged from the recollections of the participants seem to support the extant literature that discussed specific requirements in educating Black children about racism (Caugh et al., 2002; Coard, Wallace, Stevenson, & Brotman, 2004).

These existential experiences and resulting behaviors are not new, instead they appear to have a deep and long history in the Black women's script. For example, the experiences of Hygeia and Athena who both endured the segregation era precipitates that the same unspoken racial rules and harsh realities that influenced their lives and the lives of Black

children and their families remain extant today. There are existential tensions abound, at no point is one able to operate under the guise of color-blind ideology or otherwise face the consequences of punitive policies and state sanctioned violence against Blacks (Alexander, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Fear of death. Both Demeter and Rhea expressed how frightening motherhood can be for the Black woman, as they must always worrying about their children's safety and emotional well being. Gaia discussed trying to instill the needed survival skills in her children, yet protecting their self-image and positive self-concepts. For example, in describing a conversation she shared with her ten year old son, Isaiah, about the young twelve year old Black boy Tamir Rice who was shot and killed by a White police officer who mistook his toy gun for a real one, illustrates the unique experience of a Black woman's identity as a mother. In this episode each of Yalom's (1980) existential concepts of responsibility, isolation, meaninglessness, and death manifest and yet the unique overlay of Blackness differentiates their meaning from non-Blacks. This nuance is as clear as it is confounding, as illustrated in Gaia questioning, "How do I help him to understand that to have a healthy respect and a healthy fear? I don't want him to have fear though? That sounds strange, huh? Oxymoron? Healthy and fear?" The next theme I will discuss is social class.

Social Class

The theme of social class was prevalent in each of the participant's interviews, in differing ways as it related to existential issues of isolation, freedom. The prevailing narrative in American society concerning Black Americans is replete with images and depictions of Black families as poor, uneducated, and consistently in dire straits. Blackness is associated with various degrees of social, psychological, and collective trauma (Hyra, 2006). However,

with changes in society have come changes to the Black community, as many Blacks took advantage of new opportunities to educate themselves and partake fully in the economic world, causing the social mobility of many Black families into middle class status (Adelman, 2004; Hyra, 2006; Lacy, 2007; Landry & Marsh, 2011; Pattillo, 2013). Since the 1960s the Black middle class has experienced dramatic growth, tripling in size (Gates, 2004). With the upward mobility of many Black families and Black citizens came an increase in freedom and access to multiple resources (professionally, recreationally) which shaped the changing narrative of what was considered Black culture and what defined one's Blackness.

As the Black middle class continues to increase, social and political unity among Blacks is changing, as intra-racial class differences spring up between middle class Blacks and working class Blacks. The advent of a Black middle class has produced complex dynamics and escalating tensions as the common depiction of what it means to be Black continues to evolve (Marable, 2002). Middle class Blacks still possess racial membership but in many cases lack community membership as they relocate to more integrated neighborhoods. Thus, while racial discrimination and the navigation of white hegemonic society is still an issue that all Blacks grapple with in some form, the other concerns revolving around class and access to certain social resources (such as education, neighborhoods, extracurricular activities, etc.) greatly varies, thus shaping the types of experiences and situations some Black women are exposed to (Pattillo, 2013). Hence, class mobility of Black Americans also meant that those individuals now part of the middle class also benefited from a social class privilege that poor and working class Blacks did not have (Landry & Marsh, 2011).

Throughout the participant's narratives in this study, we witness the convolution of the givens manifesting themselves through more freedom provided by class privilege, to the burden of the responsibility of freedom (feeling one has to be a good representative of the Black community within spaces poor Blacks don't have access) to isolation in the form of distance and mistrust of other Blacks based on social class. Many of the women in the study spoke about their class privilege and how they were shielded from some of the harsh social realities of poverty, yet felt segregated and isolated from other Blacks due to their class privilege, and how their middle class status was perceived by some in the Black community, given divergent values. For instance, education, ownership, worth ethic, and entrepreneurship were important principles for middle class Blacks, which closely reflected traditional white mainstream standards (Taylor, 2002). Working class and poor Blacks who did not ascribe to these values were viewed by many of the participants as having a poor work ethic, or suffering from other moral flaws that contributed to their lack of education and opportunities to advance themselves. This perspective failed to acknowledge the influence of social structures and institutions that contributed to social inequality, and solely placed responsibility on the individual. Athena's, Hygeia's, Persephone's and Artemis's narratives substantiated the above values as they each spoke at great length about the importance of education, working hard, and ownership of property. They also discussed their lack of familiarity with customs in all Black communities and discomfort when traveling through or visiting extended family in all Black communities (reflecting research on the Black bourgeoisie's connections with working class Blacks weakening due to growing economic division [e.g., Marable, 2002]). For example, Artemis, who grew up in a mixed middle class neighborhood shared some of her experiences around growing up in a non-Black

neighborhood and feeling out of place and judged by other Blacks who were incredulous to the lack of suffering and dysfunction her family presented. Artemis also talked about how many people equate the Black middle class experience with a rejection of Blackness and acceptance of white mores, further shedding light on the complexities of one's middle class status melded with their Black experience. She also rejected and pushes back against this idea that being economically viable somehow negates her Blackness, and offers that it is one aspect of her experience in trying to assuage the sense of isolation she feels due to this privilege by viewing it as part of her Black identity with others, not separate. Artemis described the stable upbringing she had, challenging the narrative of the Black family and Black life as shrouded with trauma as it is not an accurate portrayal of all Black people and families, particularly those belonging to the middle class. Persephone who also grew up middle class in a predominantly white neighborhood talked about the isolation and judgment she felt from other Blacks, because she did not grow up in Black communities or around many other Black people.

Athena, Hygeia and Rhea referred to middle class status as a perceived social protection from violence and mistreatment, yet acknowledge that even with this class privilege, race privilege is more prevalent in providing social protection. They also each demonstrated prejudice against working class and poor Blacks in their attempts to draw distinctions from themselves and the uneducated Black population. Hygeia contributed poverty, single motherhood, and a lack of education to the civil rights crisis the Black community, and particularly Black men are experiencing, while Athena lauded the culture of educated Black Americans as she grew up in a Black middle class neighborhood in Harlem. She also talked about Black property ownership growing up (a documented value of the

Black middle class, Hydra, 2006; Taylor, 2002) once again illustrating a stark contrast between the narrative often painted in the media of Blacks living in extreme poverty rather than a middle class lifestyle. As the women in this study illustrate, class privilege for many Black women directly reflects dimensions of the givens of isolation and meaninglessness, while concurrently providing more freedom of choice and responsibility, as they attempt to make meaning of their class privilege in context with their Black experience and that of the prevailing Black community and broader society.

Varied ideas of Blackness. Twentieth century theorist Du Bois (1903/1965) often talked about the dual existence of Black people within a white hegemonic society as creating dual identities in Black people, wherein they developed a self that acclimated and understood white mores and culture along with the self that understood, and lived in Black communities. However, for Black women there is a multiple consciousness that emerges based on the myriad identities they ascribe to, particularly related to gender, race and social class. One of the interesting areas that kept re-emerging among the participants dealt with social class and varying degrees of Blackness (i.e., how Black identity and culture is defined and expressed). As Black women join the middle class, and have more access to various resources and financial wealth which increase their ability to participate in a multitude of activities, the perception of what it means to be Black and the idea of a uniform concept of Blackness changes and evolves to be more eclectic and individualistic.

Artemis voiced her exposure to certain activities and experiences that may not necessarily be associated with Blackness, however because she is a Black person experiencing them it becomes part of how she defines her identity and experience. Gaia shared her diverse interests, consciously and intentionally pursuing activities that were not

usually associated with Black people or Black women such as playing the cello, becoming a trapeze artist, and a Shakespearean actor. These women elucidate the multiple consciousness's they manage ranging from a Black self, a Black self within a white hegemonic society, a female self within a male dominated environment, an economic self within and outside of the Black community, a community self and an individual self, each adding meaning and complexity to their existence and selfhood. The next theme that will be presented is pride and meaning in Black Female identity.

Pride and Meaning in Black Female Identity

Cultural identity is extremely important in how individuals perceive themselves in the surrounding world, and in relation to the community they are a part of. It is connected to Yalom's (1980) concept of specialness, as it is the embracement of one's cultural identity as a way to elevate one's existence in such a manner that he or she believes herself or himself to be unique from others. In other words, specialness is a mechanism for one to resist meaninglessness in their identity, yet it can also be argued that specialness also propels the given of isolation (as specialness may potentially separate one from something or someone). Furthermore, in American society, the idea of cultural specialness has transmuted into a complex explanatory hegemonic system, in which White Americans, who due to privilege and power have elevated their racial status above others to be considered superior and exclusive. Reflecting Yalom's existential given of isolation, Black women's marginalized social status within the above system potentially places them in vulnerable positions in which they experience feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. The isolation Black women may feel due to sensing an overall aura of insignificance (lack of specialness) in society makes it of the utmost importance they develop a strong self-identity revolving around their gender

and racial identity, along with healthy support systems of other Black women which shields some of the negative impact, and counters the meaninglessness of being told they do not matter by providing meaning to their subjugated status. In combating the pervasive and harmful images and roles that society has cast Black women in, communal archetypes emerged to cultivate a sense of optimism, and unswerving strength as fundamental components of identity and connection for Black women. This is all the more important as generations of Black women maintain a sense of dignity while reflecting on their lives and contributions to their families and communities. Within the narratives, stories and experiences of the participants in this study, a motif that continually arose was one that depicts Black women as stoic and strong figures with an almost superhuman amount of resiliency. This positive characteristic of Black womanhood is often referred to as the Strong Black Woman archetype, which reflects a cultural exemplar of Black women as altruistic, independent, mentally and physically tough, and resilient despite the many social challenges they encounter (Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008). The matriarchal image represents a sense of perseverance, strength, and confidence, while an imposed icon, has enabled generations of Black women to sustain a sense of pride and dignity, while traversing multiple oppressions (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008). Thus, viewing one's race and gender as positive attributes increases the connection and well-being of Black women, despite the distorted social narratives in society of the undesirable Black female.

Pride and strength. The existential given of meaninglessness is clearly illustrated in this study through the participants' embracement of the Strong Black woman archetype as a source of pride, strength, and deep connectedness with current and past generations of other

Black women. Their identification with both their race and gender provided deep meaning to their lives, and sheltered them from isolation by creating bonds with others who shared those personal characteristics, and expressed value and pride in Black femaleness. Both Athena and Hygeia (in their mid-70s) who were born during a time when Black people had very few civil and personal rights, and segregation existed on top of extreme violence due to race, share their deep pride of being Black and female, and the enduring strength they inherited from their mothers and other women in their communities. Gaia's interview was filled with expressions and examples of how happy she was to be in the skin she was born with. She repeatedly talked about her pride of being a Black woman and her pride in other Black women, their achievements, and their collective strength, and referred to them as superheroes for their resilience, once again referencing the Strong Black Woman archetype. Like Gaia above, Demeter expressed her gratefulness for being a Black woman, and compared Black women to being godlike. Artemis explicated her Black female identity as being a central part of her personhood, which was not divisible or separate, while Persephone referred to Black women as the trendsetters in society. The women in the study deftly illustrate in the above examples engagement in what Yalom (1980) describes as a sense of personal mastery and willing (control over their own lives and identities). Though the women's external circumstances within society are unchanged, their phenomenological world is changed through the construction and explanation for the Strong Black woman archetype.

However, as mentioned previously, numerous studies have found the Strong Black woman Archetype to also be disadvantageous due to the pressure it places on Black women to be mentally strong, support others, while meeting the responsibilities of parenthood, and partnership, yet suppressing and ignoring their own pain, health, suffering and vulnerabilities

(Carey, 1979; Koppersmith, 1987; Wallace, 1978). Sustaining this pretense can lead to greater psychological/mental distress and adverse health outcomes. Many of the women spoke about the difficulties they experienced trying to juggle being strong and independent with showing human frailty and physical and psychological vulnerability, which is consistent with findings related to health outcomes and the Strong Black Woman archetype (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Black & Peacock, 2011; Romero, 2000; Ward, & Heidrich, 2009). Despite the paradox of the archetype, the level of psychological protection and connection it offered the women in the study outweighed the negative aspects of maintaining the image, which is also consistent with the literature on the Strong Black Woman archetype (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008). The next theme discussed is on the participants' perspectives on spirituality.

Spirituality

For Yalom (1980), religion and spirituality are defense mechanisms that human beings employ to provide order and cosmic meaning to the world they reside in. This schema is created in response to the nothingness and inherent meaninglessness of the universe that every human being must confront in life. Existing literature suggests that Black women historically have utilized religion and spirituality, specifically the church, and the Bible as safe and transformative spaces (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Taylor, Mattis, & Chatters, 1999). Spirituality and religion are repeatedly pinpointed as chief elements to Black women's meaning making processes and is an important element to their capacity to cope with adversity, and myriad daily life issues including stress related to racism, sexism, classism, and psychological stress. Mattis (2002) examined the influence of spirituality and religion on how Black women dealt with and negotiated the daily struggles they faced. A key component

of their ability to cope entailed believing that a higher power would intervene and handle life's challenging problems. Also, spirituality facilitated a deeper consciousness in understanding what their purpose in life was, and helped answer and add clarity to some of the pivotal existential questions during times of reflection, adversity, and growth (Bacchus, & Holley, 2005; Mattis, 2002). In essence, consistent rituals and practices related to religion and spirituality aid Black women in successfully and healthfully confronting and accepting reality, while allowing them to transcend and find respite from harsh social realities. The women in the study confirmed these findings, as spirituality and religion were vital aspects of each of the women's lives that I interviewed. In this section I will share some of the perspectives, thoughts, and beliefs the women held about spirituality and religion, and how they incorporated them into their lives to counter the meaninglessness, and isolation that facticity produced.

Religion as a coping strategy. Religion was used as coping strategy to deal with the stressors of racism. Four of the seven women spoke about relying on their faith in God to assuage the worries and troubles they experience in life. Rhea talked about how trusting in God enabled her to deal with her worry about her Black sons being harmed due to racial violence, and Athena who grew up during the height of the civil rights era shared how she had overcome many difficulties in her life because of her strong religious upbringing. Demeter reiterated her belief in God (whom Yalom posits represents an ultimate rescuer) as the pinnacle to surviving, and Gaia mentioned religion in terms of providing a place of acceptance.

Belief in higher power in control. Two of the women shared their belief in a higher power, yet did not necessarily call this higher power God, and instead chose to use the term

spirituality. Artemis and Persephone talked about their spiritual connection with something higher as providing meaning and context to life. Thus, all of the women had some belief or religious/spiritual practice that allowed them to make meaning of their lives, more easily deal with struggles in life, and move through the world feeling connected to something greater than themselves. Such practices and beliefs, particularly the belief in God, provided both cosmic (divine) and terrestrial (secular) meaning, and functioned as defense mechanisms meant to protect them from the harsh realities of life, and the corresponding anxiety uncontrollable life circumstances produced.

In summary the seven participants' stories provided rich and thick description data and painted a picture of how they each experienced the four existential concerns of freedom, death, meaningless, and isolation. Moreover, the interviews provided information that gave insight into the seven participants' unique experiences and perceptions, and also revealed coherent patterns among them regarding resources and skills used to navigate society, how they addressed cultural and gendered identities, and their connections and connectedness with other women, their communities, and society. Chapter 6, the next and concluding chapter is comprised of the conclusion, limitations, and implications for future research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Implications

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black women experienced Yalom's four existential givens (1980). Specifically my study asked the following research questions which I will answer individually below:

- 1) How do Black women describe their experiences of freedom?

For this study, freedom was defined as one's ability to exercise agency, act on one's will and to create meaning in one's life. The experiences of freedom for Black women in the study were diverse yet possessed many similarities. The theme of limitations in freedom, driven by the narratives of the seven participants, delved into the various forms of marginalization that the participants felt and experienced as Black and female. Subcategories within this theme were emotional and psychological marginalization, referring to the restrictions Black women perceived and felt due to societal messages and stereotypes regarding both their racial and gendered identities. For example, five women in the study, Rhea, Gaia, Persephone, Artemis and Demeter disclosed feeling as though they had to modify their responses and behaviors, or not display anything other than strength and diplomacy in order to avoid being labeled as "the angry Black woman" or viewed in a negative manner.

A second subtheme within the theme of freedom was racism, as all seven women's stories were riddled with incidents of racial micro-aggressions and overt discrimination. Such experiences left deep psychological wounds and caused additional emotional stress (supporting research on the adverse effects of racism on Black women's physical and mental health (Helms, Nicolas, & Green, 2011; Pieterse et al., 2013; Sue, 2010). Several meta-analyses reinforce these observations with respect to the connection between mental health

and racism among Black women (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012).

A third subtheme among the participants within the main theme of freedom was sexism/gender marginalization. In some manner every woman contended with gender stereotypes, including rules and expectations that dictated the qualities and behaviors she should possess by design of her femaleness. These gender biases were dominant in certain domains of the women's lives, particularly the workforce, and in intimate relationships which were governed by pervasive social beliefs and stereotypes on their emotional fitness and competency as women, mostly working in ways that placed them in subordinate positions, depicting them as the less capable and weaker sex. This finding was consistent with a large body of literature on sexism and gender stereotypes (Fiske et al., 1991; Rudman & Glick, 1999). Nuanced within gender marginalization was the participants' encounters with gendered racism, a combination of race and gender discrimination explicit to Black women, which created even greater challenges for Black women both as women and as Black women (Essed, 1991; Crenshaw, 1989) which made it difficult for some of the participants to determine whether it was discrimination based on their gender, their race or both.

2) How do Black women describe their experiences of isolation?

Yalom (1980) makes the important distinction between three forms of isolation; interpersonal isolation, intrapersonal isolation, and existential isolation. Interpersonal isolation-separation from others, was the form of isolation that the women in this study primarily focused on. Isolation for them occurred in circumstances rooted in their racial and gendered identities that conflicted with mainstream norms and ideology. For example, each woman shared examples of feeling isolated from the larger society due to pejorative representations of

Black womanhood and an othered status. For some women, particularly Artemis and Persephone, isolation also arose due to social class differences between them and the Black community, wherein they described themselves as being interlopers who were unfamiliar with the culture and mores of an all Black community (which they were not raised in). The subthemes in limitations of freedom (sexism, racism, and psychological marginalization) were also demonstrative of areas in their lives and experiences that instigated a sense of isolation. The women dealt with isolation through various systems of support, including forming supportive social bonds with other Black women, and relied heavily on community support (other mothering, spirituality/religion) to counter their feelings of isolation. The ways in which the women in the study sought to rectify isolation corroborates Yalom's assertion of the major defenses utilized by individuals in dealing with isolation as being relational in nature usually manifesting through interpersonal relationships and our interactions and connectedness to other people (Yalom, 1980).

3) How do Black women describe their experiences of meaninglessness?

The portraits of the women in this study revealed myriad ways that each of the women experienced the given of meaninglessness and dealt with meaninglessness. Meaninglessness (insignificance) typically arose for the participants in relation once again to the paradoxes existing between their human identity and that of their socially constructed identities. Social inequalities deeply rooted in systemic racism that resulted in inferior social status and subjugation to white hegemonic mores and practices deeply impacted many of the women (causing various forms of psychological distress and struggles with depression-which is a derivative of meaninglessness/feelings of insignificance and lack of value). Participants managed feelings of meaninglessness through developing strong self-concepts around their

identity, which celebrated the strength and resiliency of Black women. These positive self-concepts allowed the participants to feel a sense of deep pride in their racial and gender identities and acted as buffers and protection against racism and harmful stereotypes and representations of Black womanhood. Religion and spirituality were also used as coping tools to manage sensations of meaninglessness, along with supportive fictive kinships and mentoring.

Another area where meaninglessness manifested was in the women's experiences with motherhood, wherein the participants who were mothers were required to help their children deal with the social reality of what it meant to be Black in the United States, along with the meaninglessness and lack of value attached to Blackness. Mothers engaged in a process known as racial socialization seeking to foster high self-esteem and positive racial identities while teaching their children the necessary behavioral competencies needed to deal with experiences of racial discrimination. Overall, meaning-making processes and interpersonal relationships (family, friends, community and religion/spirituality) were the ways in which the women found meaning and purpose.

4) How do Black women describe their experiences of death?

The concept of death was one that the women in the study could not avoid talking about as Black women. Their social positionality in society predisposed them to vulnerability in many areas and roles in their lives (mentally, physically, as mothers, wives, and friends). Key themes that emerged around death were the significance of community death (meaning the death of a Black person in society whether a public figure or member of Black society, e.g., Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin, Whitney Houston), and fear of possible death due to physical violence motivated by racism. Interestingly death was one of the only givens that

was not explicitly talked about as experienced personally as a Black woman, while the threat of death due to one's Blackness was expressed, the actual concept of death was talked about from a very personal and human perspective. For example, Artemis stated that she did not think or experience death as a Black woman; she experienced it as a person, a human being. Hygeia who was a nurse said that she never got used to death because it seemed so final, and that we all bled the same color when cut, so death did not discriminate. Gaia did not like to talk or think about her own death as it was scary and she was enjoying life too much to think of it ending. Once again, the participants did not explicitly use raced or gendered perspectives which could signify that of all the givens death was and is the great equalizer.

Implications For Practice

Existential psychology is one of the three primary schools associated with humanistic psychology (Task Force for the Development of Practice Recommendations for the Provision of Humanistic Services [Division 32 Task Force], 2004). Outcome research that considered the most common factors in desirable client outcomes, including a variety of clinical and non-clinical client concerns, are generally associated with humanistic practices (Wampold, 2007; 2012), not limited to quality therapeutic relationships and the given clinician's belief in the actualizing capacity of the client to heal or thrive. Considering that Black women often experience greater stress and compromised physical and mental health outcomes, it is reasonable to infer that social systems are not providing adequate relational support for Black women and, therefore, it is incumbent upon human service providers to augment these important conditions in practice.

Existential and humanist approaches to the helping services require that authentic relationships be shared between the service provider and client (Spinelli, 1994). Given the

results of this study, the type of authenticity discussed by non-Black existential psychologists is only partially applicable; that is, for many Black women they are required to patrician their authentic humanness against authentic reactions to being marginalized as Black, marginalized as a woman, and always marginalized as a Black woman. In this manner, it is no less authentic to express oneself differently as a Black woman, but this manner of expression is certainly different than the unmitigated and guileless authenticity described in traditional existential psychology. This harkens to Du Bois' (1903/1965) concept of "double consciousness" whereby each Black person experiences one's identity as divided between a variety of parts, predominately the Black consciousness and the consciousness of the hegemonic and influential white society. This double consciousness leaves very little value for the self consciousness, which is the closest reflection of one's authentic self. As such, a primary thesis for existential human service praxis as most relevant for Black women is that practitioners must embrace the manifold realities and identities for Black women, as both self-agents but also as people affected by the various roles they maintain (see Lemberger & Lemberger-Truelove, 2016). Simply put, existential praxis has to evolve from a predominately self-psychology of personal actualization and include multiple parts self and social influences (Cooper, 2016). This type of praxis must then extend into teacher education pedagogy, as the same elements that are necessary for a human services practitioner are necessary for the humanistic educator. Cultivating authentic relationships with Black female students must be the focus of teachers, along with developing an understanding of how multiple systems of oppression function in the lives of students in dehumanizing ways. Furthermore, committing oneself to cultivating and practicing empathy, compassion and unconditional regard are key ways in which educators can counter the dehumanization Black

female students may experience in society and in school setting. It is this intentionally seeking to humanize themselves and their students in their own interactions and perspectives that must be the goal of the humanistic educator (Freire, 1970).

In this study, Yalom's existential given of isolation for Black women is manifested as separation from oneself, separation from mainstream society, and separation from one's community. For Yalom, his original conception of isolation was chiefly concerned with the solitariness of being, as exemplified by the following sentiment:

No matter how close each of us becomes to another there remains a final unbridgeable gap; each of us enters existence alone and must depart from it alone.

The existential conflict is thus, the tension between our awareness of our absolute isolation and our wish to be part of a larger whole. (Yalom, 1980, p. 9)

Black women are faced with profound isolation based on their relegated position in society as undesirable others. The accompanying feelings of loneliness that arise from isolation may be rooted in the fact that Black women struggle to find the necessary validation that each person requires for the preservation of a cohesive self. Our relationships and connectedness to other people such as parents, significant others, children, and friends operate to substantiate our existence, and allows us to maintain the illusion that we are not alone and can depend on other people and society to shield us from death and defenselessness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Becker, 1974; Buber, 1970; Stuewe-Portnoff, 1988). This belief of being intricately connected to others works to minimize the emergence of isolation, existential anxiety, and assists in the maintenance of an integrated self, which was demonstrated by the participants in this study through their development of meaning-making systems (positive strong Black female archetype) and social support systems (fictive

kinship and othermothering) that validated their Blackness, femaleness, and humanity in ways that connected them with their racial community, gender community, and human community. When these relationships and social support systems were absent in the lives of the seven in the study, feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness and existential isolation increased which is consistent with existential literature positing the immediate link and overlap of existential isolation, anxiety and meaninglessness (Fromm, 1969; Hertzog, Audi & Cohen, 1980; May & Yalom, 1995; Yalom, 1980).

As supported by the results of the current study, Black women's isolation is one-part personal and yet another part that is never escapable from her identity as a Black woman. For human service praxis, this reflects multiple social, psychological, and health outcomes associated with feelings of connectedness and self-regulated strength in Black women (see Davis, 2015). Therefore, praxis must ameliorate individual autonomy but only insofar as it pertains to relevant relationships customary of Black women. Moreover, praxis should also encourage healthy and constructive relationships, communication habits, and activities that endorse collective wellness.

Akin to experiences of isolation for Black women, meaningless in this study extends prior conceptions of existential ideology and includes more relational elements. In this manner, human service practice can augment Black women's feelings of worth and other related meaning systems by eliciting and supporting their personal and social narrative through validating their experiences and assisting them in seeking out crucial social relationships and connections with other Black women who can affirm shared experiences while affirming their Black femaleness as they find their voice (Comstock et al., 2008;

Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). Parallel in structure to the current research design, the telling of personal stories might have a cathartic effect for Black women in particular.

The inevitability of death has an additional dimensionality for Black women, particularly given premature mortality rates for Blacks (see Satcher et al., 2005). In Camus' (1943/1991) version of existentialism he asserted that death is the only philosophical problem in living. For Black women, living is often stifled and therefore death is simultaneously persistent and yet something to be challenged. This sentiment was reflected in the interviews of the current study, but further mirrors researchers' who found that Blacks' private regard for race was more predictive of their reasons for living than were the value they placed on one's racial identity (Street et al., 2012). In terms of implications for practice, these results suggest that Black women draw from internal resources to confront any form of adversity, nonetheless the ultimate adversity of death. This outcome supports traditional humanistic and existential psychology literature in that the amelioration of internal resources more likely leads to more constructive mental and social outcomes (Division 32 Task Force, 2004).

Regardless of the potential for human service support, Black women seek out mental health services at a lesser rate than other groups (Sanders-Thompson, Bazile, & Akbar, 2004). Many of the reasons associated with this trend is that Blacks perceive mental health care with social stigma, lack of affordability, lack of trust, and experience with culturally or personally unresponsive practice (Sanders-Thompson et al., 2004). In short, for Black women it appears that mental health practice lacks the basic dignity of humanity; that is, the so-called givens of existence are not so assured. This caution returns us to the work of Bruce Wampold (2007; 2012) who illustrated that the common factors for effective therapeutic outcomes hinge on one binding element, namely the authentic helping relationship shared

between clinician and client. As illustrated by the results in the current study, Black women have generally not experienced an authentic relationship with the broader American milieu, but it might also be the case that human service practice has lacked this essential ingredient as well. Prominent humanistic psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1957) suggested that an authentic relationship between clinician and client is necessary and sufficient for growth and actualization. Given the social marginalization of Black women, existential practice might require confronting structural inequalities as additive to the necessary and sufficient conditions for growth, but it appears nonetheless essential that both social advocacy (in professional, educational, and other social environments) and therapeutic practice must include authenticity between the Black woman client and her support agent.

Limitations of the Study

This research study focused on interviewing Black women in regard to their experiences with the four existential givens, therefore findings cannot be generalized to include Black men or people from other ethnic groups. In a similar manner, consistent with most portraiture studies the sample size in the current work is somewhat diminutive and therefore the findings from them cannot necessarily be generalized to reflect the experiences of all Black women. Instead, the primary value drawn from the sample used in this study is the thick and descriptive insights offered by each of the participants. The prizing of the participants' individual stories provided compelling insight into the existential givens, and this somewhat limited approach to research was probably the most humanizing and theoretically appropriate. In short, this most obvious limitation is probably the greatest strength of this scholarly endeavor.

The particular composition of the sample also reflects another possible limitation, at least insofar as the generalizability of the findings. Each of the women interviewed for the current study identified as part of the Black middle class. Generally speaking, the sample was more educated and more economically privileged than the preponderance of the Black community, thus the experiences reported here might not thoroughly or accurately represent working class Black women. Also, although many of the participants hailed from a variety of regions of the United States, each resided in the Southwest at the time of the study. Given the dearth of concentrated Black communities in Southwestern US, it is possible that the individuals in the current study have nuanced experiences. It is also possible that Black women who choose to reside in the Southwest are dispositionally different than other Black women.

Lastly, the fact that I am a Black middle class female can be viewed as a limitation in the study, as my shared race and gender identities with the participants, along with similar life experiences may have affected my ability to be impartial in the construction of the study, the representation of the data, and the interpretation of the results. Furthermore, while portraiture is most likely the most theoretically and demographically germane methodology given the nature of this study, the interpretative nature of the analyses and the expository manner in which the data are presented could further exasperate any bias I might have as a researcher. This said, I utilized each of the customary qualitative methods checks, not limited to my own internal regulatory processes of journaling and critically reflecting upon my own beliefs.

Future Research

The nature of this study was largely exploratory. To date, existential psychology has included far too few empirical investigations of its most familiar theoretical tenets, nonetheless proven the relevance of these tenets to ethnic or gender minorities. This initial study was a logical first step in considering the relevance and inclusivity of existential psychology; this said, given the dearth of empirical work in general, it would be sagacious to replicate this work with a broader sample including both particular groups of ethnic minorities but also diverse groups within the ethnic majority population. Samples of participants from diverse geographic regions, social classes, age cohorts, gender and sexual identities, and other formal and non-formal groupings are each ripe for investigation. If Yalom's (1980) existential givens are truly universal, it is reasonable to consider the lived experiences across the greatest diversity of peoples.

In addition to replicating the current research design to include a larger and more diverse sample, given qualitative approaches are not designed to compare or correlate experiences as fixed constructs, the construction of a theory-relevant quantitative instrument and the completion of a quantitative correlational study can further test the supposed universality of the givens. Stated otherwise, using a valid and reliable standardized instrument will allow a researcher to analyze relationships between and amongst groups for each of the existential givens.

Finally, since Yalom's existential psychology was developed specifically to inform psychotherapeutic practice, results from the current study can inform the construction and testing of a number of intervention studies, particularly utilizing complementary alternative medicine such as mindfulness, mind-body practices like yoga and meditation as possible

resources to treat the multiple stressors that Black women encounter due to their marginalized status. For example, considering current events pertaining to policing of the Black community and the Black Lives Matter movement, a researcher can provide a therapeutic intervention focused on ameliorating Black women's feelings of isolation, meaninglessness, and concerns with socially construed death. It is reasonable that such an intervention might provide a more humanizing experience than interventions either agnostic to the particular experiences of Black women or neglectful of the basic human dignity implicit to the givens.

Furthermore, it is reasonable that these connections be made within education, as indicative in this study and others, Black female students are exposed to controlling images and unflattering stereotypes about what it means to be Black and female (i.e., Jezebel and Sapphire stereotypes) as early as childhood (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darenbourg, 2011; French, 2013; Froyum, 2010; Townsend et al., 2010). We cannot be so naïve as to believe that these narratives do not infiltrate the educational system in ways that disadvantage Black female students who are measured against white feminine virtues, and labeled as aggressive, loud, and intellectually deficient (Fordham, 1993; Lei, 2003; Robinson & Ward, 1991). A significant body of literature on the American educational system has validated the existence of racial and gender bias toward Black children in educational environments, and indicated that Black children are subjected to inequitable and harsher punishments, higher rates of suspension for minor infractions, and consistently tracked into lower performing and special education classrooms throughout their academic journey (Anyon, 1996; Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Feinberg & Soltis, 2004; Gillborn, 2008; Lareau, 2011; Oakes, 1985; Simons, Murry, Mcloyd, Lin, Cutrona, & Conger, 2002). Further complicating the educational milieu for

Black children is the process of deculturalization and assimilation of dominant White cultural mores at the expense of maintaining a healthy perspective and development of their own racial and cultural identity (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Hartlep, 2011; Spring, 2016; Spring, 1994). These factors coupled with classism create a matrix of oppression for the Black female student that eventually can result in and further increase the growing economic exploitation, and disenfranchisement she might experience (Greenleaf, Ratts, & Song, 2016).

All of these factors for Black females can translate into being placed on an uneven life trajectory in which they may be unaware of, and/or powerless to interrupt, which then limits their choices in employment, careers, access to resources, all due to the fact that they lack desirable cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1987; Giroux, 1983; Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and influences how they experience the four universal concerns of life. As such, since we know that these nuanced and overt aspects of facticity significantly impact the manner in which Black girls are marked in society, it is the call of the educational system then to work on creating conducive learning environments that address the unique needs of Black female students. As illustrated in this study, the academic community must foster supportive relationships with Black female students, and assist them in fostering supportive relationships with other Black female students, along with pairing them with Black female mentors (othermothering) as these support systems are crucial in the positive development of self-esteem and Black female identity, along with countering the isolation Black female students might experience due to an othered status. In addition, their multiple identities as raced, gendered, and classed individuals must be acknowledged, and incorporated into the curriculum in a positive manner. This means that educators should be aware of how multiple oppression and multiple social identities can manifest in students' lives, and use this

knowledge as an asset to strengthen their interactions with students rather than as limitation, yet also must honor students' individuality as not all Black female students will have the same experiences or experience the aforementioned social reality in the same manner. To require that these young girls fit into a meritorious mold that functions from a color-blind ideology places them at a gross disadvantage as they can never succeed under such circumstances without paying a substantial cost. Most importantly, it is crucial that those involved in the education of Black female students engage in critical self-reflective practice so that they are aware of their own biases and ideologies, and how these elements influence how they teach and interact with Black female students. Lastly, but most importantly we must teach Black women from childhood how to engage in empowering internalization processes that humanize and strengthen their sense of worth and value, rather than unquestionably and unknowingly embracing disempowering internalization processes that reify their subjugation and continue to dehumanize and disempower them. This is done by reiterating and reinforcing their sense of agency and choice, specifically in regard to their perceptions of events and the meaning of those events in their lives.

Conclusion

As a human being, the individual cannot flee the uncertainty and randomness of existence. There are givens of life (universal concerns) that are markers of the human condition, and it is our confrontations with these aspects of human existence such as death, meaninglessness, freedom and isolation that work both independently and concomitantly producing existential anxiety and meaning (Becker, 1974; Bugental, 1965; May, Angel, & Ellenberger, 1958). These givens are impacted by social circumstances such as race, gender, class position, etc. referred to as facticity (social reality, Tillich, 1980; Willcocks, 1980;

Yalom, 1980). This study investigated the influence and impact of facticity on the ways in which Black women experienced Yalom's existential givens: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness.

In humanistic existentialism and many other critical social theory fields, there is a tendency to think of humanness as standing on its own and any social construction outside of that as something forced upon the individual that thwarts the authentic or true self. However, as results from this study of the existential experiences of Black women suggests, it is how we understand ourselves and our social positionality in the world (facticity) that provides the meaning. In other words, we cannot exist outside of our society just as it is an integral part of how we see ourselves so are the multiple identities we create to enrich our personhood and provide our lives with meaning and purpose. The narratives of the women in this study demonstrated the importance of their racial and gendered identities in contextualizing their human existence and in providing them with a sense of belongingness, meaning and purpose within a society where they often experienced marginalization based on external ideologies and representations on what Black womanhood was. Participants indicated that the multiple identities that Black women assumed only become limiting when they are constructed and used in ways that do not allow people to contextualize and co-create their own sense of meaning around these various identities, and how they experience the existential givens. Particular to Black women, the existential given of freedom reflects a history of slavery, Jim Crow, and the existential given of death reflects disproportionate death rates across Black communities (Clegg, 2016; Otuyelu, Graham, & Kennedy, 2016; Walker, et al., 2016).

The given of isolation extends beyond any self-centric solitude and reflects the distance between Black women, other women, and Black men. For Black women, the given

of meaninglessness cannot possibly reflect the general ambiguity felt by others, as the Black woman has no choice but to adopt meaning through caregiving. Considered together, the four existential givens hold a non-universalist dimensionality for Black women, preordaining identities and roles that overlay whatever personal identity might have otherwise existed in a vacuum of whiteness, maleness, or simply humanness. What the Black woman has to sacrifice in separating herself from these preordained identities is as potentially calamitous as is adopting them in an impersonal manner. For example, as a Black woman to neglect the history of oppression is to neglect the ongoing persistence of racial marginalization. To disregard the specific meanings impressed upon the Black woman is to risk one's assumed position in the family, community, and larger society; however complex, these tropes have served as important meaning structures in the stead of the more personal meaning luxuries afforded to others.

The fact that being Black and female was so intricately tied to the participants' personhood reflected this idea that one cannot separate her or his social and personal identity from their humanity. Essentially it is all of those aspects that make the individual uniquely human rather than simply a universal human.

Based on the results of this study, and the implications of the widespread effect that Black women's race and gender identities have on their overall human existence, the charge of a culturally appropriate application of existential psychology is to try and eliminate the conditions for racism without absconding into the universal, and rejecting the conditions of race in favor of pure transcendence. These conditions of race, no doubt, make it difficult to make progress and there is always the temptation to bypass facticity in favor of some universal trait. Thus, learning to find synergy and relatedness in social relationships and in

self are vital to developing and maintaining authenticity (Cooper, 2016). This recommendation is based on the findings in this study that illustrate the importance of facticity and meaningful relational exchanges in the lives of the seven women interviewed. The data based on their narratives clearly shows a strong correlation between their raced and gendered identity to that of their human identity. This is a crucial point to remember particularly within existential psychology and other humanistic therapeutic practices that seek to treat the human condition. Practitioners must be cognizant of the holistic nature of the Black woman's identity and not attempt to separate her race and gender from her identity, yet must not base treatment methods on pervasive impersonal hegemonic representation of her raced and gender identity. In other words, it is the Black woman's ability to create and embrace affirmative identities which are also co-constructed with society, that provide her humanity meaning. This social constructivist ability is what makes all human beings unique and different from other species. That we can create identities for ourselves that provide context and value for our lives, that we have the power to enact change in our perceptions of our lived experiences in a universe that explicitly shows us every day that there is no meaning other than that which we forge for ourselves, with and because of others must always be remembered and never taken for granted.

Appendices

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Script

Thank you for agreeing to interview with me regarding my research project. As pointed out during our pre-screening meeting this interview will allow me to hear your voice and experience as a Black woman living in society. There will be two interviews conducted for this study. The second will build upon our interview today, serving as a follow up for reflection and any questions or clarifications I may have.

As a reminder, if you do not wish to answer a certain question during the interview please respond with —I prefer not to answer this question. If at any time you decide to stop the interview and remove yourself from the study, please let me know and all documentation, including any dialogue will be destroyed and will not be used in this study.

Do you have any questions before we start the interview? Let's begin. [Turn digital recorder on and begin asking questions in unstructured format to guide the interview.]

Interview Questions

1. When did you first realize you were Black? What was your first memory of your racial identity? Has racism affected you? If so, how?
2. When did you first realize you were a female? What was your first memory of your gender identity? Has sexism affected you? If so, how?
3. What does being a Black woman mean to you?
4. What does being Black mean to you? How does identifying as Black shape your life, if at all?
5. What does being a woman mean to you? How does identifying as a woman shape your life, your beliefs, feelings, etc.?
6. What does motherhood (if relevant) mean to you? How does being Black impact motherhood for you?

Interview Questions are based on the 4 givens as noted by Irvin D. Yalom: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness

1. Tell me about times when you experienced feelings of meaninglessness? How has being Black affected those feelings? How has being a woman affected those feelings?
2. When you think about death, what do you think about death? How does being Black influence those feelings? How does being a woman influence those feelings? In what ways do you think of death as a mother (if relevant?).
3. Tell me about times when you experienced feelings of isolation? How has being Black influenced those feelings? How has being a woman?
4. Tell me about times when you experienced feelings of freedom? How has being Black influenced those feelings? How has being a woman influenced those feelings?
5. In what ways does your life have meaning? How do you find/experience meaning in your life (i.e., what things are important in your life that make life worth living)?
6. How does being Black and being a woman influence how you experience meaning in life?

Thank you for your participation in this study! Do you have any questions for me pertaining to the study, or anything we have talked about today? Once both of the interviews have been transcribed I will follow up with you via email, or in –person to have you read the contents. I hope this has been a positive and meaningful experience for you. Thank you again.

Appendix B
Recruitment Materials
Recruitment Flyer

BLACK WOMAN SPEAK



COME AND TELL YOUR STORY/SHARE YOUR WISDOM!

I am looking for volunteers (Black women who are 26 years of age and older) to interview on their life experiences. As a participant in this survey, you would be asked to: recall some memories from your own life and answer questions about them. The study will consist of 1 60 minute interview. If you are interested, please inquire here: blackwomanspeak@gmail.com

Thank you!

**This study has been reviewed and approved by the
Research Ethics Review Board, University of New Mexico**

Participant Recruitment E-mail

Hello,

My name is Tamiko Lemberger-Truelove and I am a doctoral student at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. I am conducting a research project on Black women and how they experience the four ultimate human concerns of freedom, death, meaninglessness, and isolation. This study will explore the feelings, strategies and practices that Black women use in order to address these existential concerns. (IRB approval #)

I am contacting you because this listserv will aid me in identifying Black women for my study. I am looking for participants who are Black women who have developed enough independence to accumulate their own unique life experiences outside of that solely based on their family of origin. I would like to interview Black women, 26 years of age and older. Participation will include two 60-minute individual interviews with the participants. Appointments will be scheduled with each participant in a private, reserved room at the University of New Mexico.

Participation in this study is voluntary and if chosen for this study all information shared will remain confidential. There will be no compensation for participation in this study, and again, participation is voluntary.

This research is interesting to me because I am a Black woman and I appreciate the nuanced and multidimensional ways of being that many Black women possess, and I feel it is important to understand how Black women negotiate the intersectionality of their existence as human beings in order to find meanings in life. If you are interested in participating, please contact me at blackexistentialstudy@gmail.com

Sincerely,

Tamiko Lemberger-Truelove
Doctoral Student
University of New Mexico at Albuquerque

Appendix C

Data Analysis Procedure

| Steps | Procedure | Justification |
|--|---|---|
| Review of impressionistic record | Ruminative, thoughtful record that identifies emerging hypotheses, initial first impressions, researcher's thoughts, process experiences, and identified significant interactions and reactions during interviews | Used for the discovery of themes, and patterns, development of dialogue of ideas, and convergence of phenomena (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) |
| Open coding | Guided by the research questions of the 4 existential givens | Provides development of emergent themes, new ideas, and insight into data (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) |
| Triangulation | Compared interview data, field observations, notes, impressionistic record | Looking for points of convergence as emergent themes arise from this layering of data (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) |
| Emotion coding Values coding | Labels emotions recalled or experienced; identifies key values, beliefs or world view of participant | Investigates subjective side of human beings and provides more complex representation of one's character (Saldana, 2009) |
| Axial coding | Collapsed open codes into larger codes | Create codes that include broader participant experiences (Saldana, 2009) |
| Development of Emergent themes using five modes of analysis in portraiture | Repetitive refrains Resonant metaphors Poetic & symbolic expressions Triangulation | Iterative and generative process that give the data shape and form (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) |
| Creation of individual profiles | Created seven separate documents containing life themes, core values, patterns and key quotes for each participant | Looking for reoccurring themes and patterns within individual |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| Word scanning | Used a word counter program to see which words and phrases occurred the most frequently and which givens reoccurred most frequently in individual narratives | Looking for convergence and patterns (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) |
| Triangulation | Compared transcript notes, reflections, and master list | Looking for points of convergence as emergent themes arise from this layering of data (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) |
| Compilation of master list | Created a single document containing life themes, core values, patterns and key quotes from all seven participants | Looking for reoccurring themes, subthemes and patterns among participants |
| Triangulation & Refinement of themes | Compared transcript notes, reflections, and master list, and refined themes and subthemes | Refinement of themes, looking for points of convergence as emergent themes arise from this layering of data (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) |
| Compilation of individual research portraits | Constructed individual narratives which included life themes, dominant givens, significant quotes from interview | Blending of aesthetics and empiricism, capturing the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) |

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