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## **Sistas On The Move: An Ethnographic Case Study of Health and Friendship in Urban Space among Black Women in New Orleans**

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Sistas On The Move: An Ethnographic Case Study of Health and Friendship in Urban Space  
among Black Women in New Orleans

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science  
In  
Urban Studies  
Anthropology Concentration

By

Valerie McMillan

B.A. Sociology University of New Orleans, 2005

December 2013

## **Dedication**

This is dedicated to my mother—a woman who was always there for me and whom I miss every single day. Thank you for always believing in me and knowing that there is a plan for me that is bigger than what I can visually see. I will love you forever!

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge everyone whose efforts contributed to the completion of this research.

I want to especially acknowledge my research committee members Ana, Renia and Rachel. Rachel, thank you for letting me know that the story I was meant to tell was important even when I did not know how much it was. Renia, thank you for your lifeline support when I needed it the most. Ana, thank you for being awesome and for your patience, your guidance and that extra push. David L., you were my first point of contact for my graduate school experience. Thank you for all of the support that you provided behind the scenes.

Florecita, you rock lady! Thanks for introducing me to SOTM and for giving me a yoga home. I love you.

I also acknowledge and thank all of my family members, friends, yoga teachers, coworkers and coffee shop baristas! All of the lattes, hugs, advice, sweat, laughs and cries were just what I needed.

Angela thanks for being an awesome sister and godmother. I love you appreciate all of your love, car rides, hugs and meals.

Trinette thanks for lending your words to this work and your love to me as a sister and friend. I love you.

Web, I am proud of you and look forward to the young man you will become. Thanks for being an awesome nephew. I love you.

Dad, thanks for always supporting me even when it meant travelling to a different country. I love you.

To the ladies of SOTM, thank you for sharing your energy, your words and your love with me. I truly appreciate each and every one of you. See you on the pavement.

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## **Abstract**

Black women are disproportionately affected by adverse health conditions, such as obesity and heart disease. For example, more black women currently die from complications associated with diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure than any other ethnic group in the United States (Gourdine 2011). There are however, increasing numbers of everyday black women who defy these statistics and are positive role models for all women. One such group of women is the New Orleans chapter of Sistas On The Move (SOTM), an all-female running group that emphasizes the importance of black women's health and builds community around physical activity. Through field interviews and participant observation, I examine the following questions: What motivates these women to run, walk and lead healthy lifestyles in New Orleans? How do SOTM members claim and utilize space in New Orleans for their physical health and social activities?

**KEY WORDS:** {Black Women's Health, New Orleans Health Networks, Female Runners, Urban Public Spaces}



## INTRODUCTION

There is no need to stare.  
We are not a curiosity.  
Most of us  
Will never be a size zero,  
And our heroes  
Are not photo-shopped fashion covers.  
We are wives, sisters, workers, dreamers and mothers.  
We have discovered  
That these perfectly paved pathways  
Belong to us, too.  
We run,  
Pushing a partner past that last mile  
Smiling through insecurities  
That get just a little less heavy  
With every day that passes.  
We run,  
From baby steps to marathons  
Racing against keeping pace  
With just being us.  
We have grown up thinking  
That this is not where we belong,  
Until like minds meet over the sound  
Of feet keeping steady strides.  
We run long.  
We love wide.  
We find sisters.  
We listen.  
We learn that we exist.  
We move beautifully as one.  
So there is no need to stare,  
When Black girls run.

[Black Girls Run: Asia Rainey, 2013]

As a black female and a New Orleans native, the topic of black women's health is one that affects me directly. In December of 2005, I lost my mother, also a black woman, due to her long battle with heart disease. Her heart disease was the result of a mostly sedentary lifestyle, and due to the fact that she smoked and ate a diet high in fat, salt and cholesterol. The tragic loss

of my mother, in addition to the displacement I experienced as a result of Hurricane Katrina, led me to abandon my own physical and mental health. At the time of my mother's passing, I weighed over 200 pounds and did not engage in any physical activity. In 2007, with the support of friends and family, I decided to make a complete lifestyle change as a means to decrease my chances of becoming a negative health statistic. I gradually changed my diet from a meat based to a plant based one, and began to engage in at least 30 minutes of physical activity, five days a week. Through those methods, I have maintained a weight loss over 70 pounds for the past six years.

My success is due in part, to the several female-led health communities that I actively participate with in New Orleans, which continue to inspire me and encourage me to remain active every day. I am motivated by these women who break through stereotypes, in order to live lifestyles that deviate from what is expected of them; especially in regards to black women and other women of color. Black women endure stereotypes from other black women and as a result of media representations which label them as lazy, big-boned and prone to lifestyles that are sedentary and to diets that are high in sodium; which will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters. The desire to further examine how these stereotypes are broken down led me to encounter a community of black female runners, who will be named Sistas On The Move (SOTM), for the purpose of this research study, in an attempt to preserve the group's anonymity. The premise behind SOTM inspired me to build my research around the local New Orleans chapter of the group. SOTM is part of a national collaborative which inspires black women across the United States to run, walk and take care of their health, "one mile at a time." Membership into SOTM is not exclusive to black women. In fact, I was introduced to SOTM by a close friend who identifies herself as Latina. Women of all ages and ethnic backgrounds are

welcome to gain membership into SOTM. These women actively engage in physical activity with each other multiple times a week and post and share online recipes of meal plans that they consider to be nutritious and heart-healthy with each other.

This local SOTM chapter accomplishes the activities listed above in New Orleans, which is a city that is better known for its fried shrimp Po-Boy sandwiches and drive-through daiquiri establishments, than communities built around health and fitness (McMillan 2012). Working with this group has also allowed me to examine some of the key concepts which contribute to the health paradigm and stereotypes of black women's health and to identify what black women are actually doing to shift that paradigm in a positive way. Furthermore, the New Orleans chapter of SOTM began in April of 2011, and when I began my research with them, their members had not yet been the focus of an ethnographic study. After I decided to make the local SOTM the focus of my research, I subsequently sought out to contact SOTM directly and to develop specific research methods.

## CHAPTER II METHODS

This research began in October of 2012 and ended in October of 2013 in New Orleans, Louisiana. In October of 2012, I collected preliminary data through the online Facebook<sup>®</sup> page of SOTM New Orleans as well as the group's national Facebook page. I then realized that I needed to become an official SOTM New Orleans member in order to gain full access to the group. This process was relatively simple. I requested membership on SOTM New Orleans' Facebook page and my request was approved within 24 hours. It proved to be a challenge, however; to gain access to individual members. For example, once I gained membership into both groups, I asked the national SOTM group if it were permissible to ask members to participate in my research study. My response from the national group was to contact members privately and individually in order to recruit them for the study. After I received those instructions, I waited approximately three months before I contacted any member directly to participate in my research study. My hesitation to contact SOTM members directly may have stemmed from a fear of what the "translation of the translator" (Williams 1996) would be. Brackette F Williams (Williams 1996) argues that the "translation of the translator" is bestowed on researchers by those individuals who are being researched and refers to how a native group identifies and categorizes the researcher within the group's own social or cultural identity (Williams 1996). Therefore, I feared how SOTM members would translate me.

In January of 2013, I finally contacted members of the New Orleans chapter of SOTM individually through Facebook and invited them to be a part of my research. The SOTM group welcomed me as one of their own and it appears they have translated me as the vegetarian yoga girl; an identity that I am comfortable with having. They labeled me as such because I often

spoke or posted about various yoga activities on the group's Facebook page. In May of 2013, I attended and participated in six consecutive weekly Saturday runs with SOTM members in Audubon Park, in addition to various other races and runs with the group as part of my field work and participant observation. During each run, I collected photographic data of the runners and of the park. After each run, I documented how members interacted with each other, and also documented the overall physicality of the public space.

Again, there was another "translator of the translation" that occurred during my participation in the Saturday runs with the group. It appeared that some SOTM members translated me as someone who is able to run fast and for long distances just by examining the build of my body. Members may have thought this because my arm muscles are long and lean from all of the "high to low" pushups that I do during my yoga practice. My calf muscles are toned more from my hereditary than they are from running long distances. SOTM members did not know this and some would inform me that "I did not have to hold myself back" by electing to walk or run with them. Additionally, these same members also admitted that they enjoyed my presence as a run/walk buddy. Other members offered me the challenge of keeping up with them during their long distance runs. This additional translation of the translator, which paints me as a runner overachiever, is a type of initial perception which is a part of the research process.

## **DEMOGRAPHICS ANALYSIS**

During my six weeks of observations, it was determined that approximately four to ten SOTM members participate in each Saturday run. An exception to this occurred during a Saturday run where the SOTM founders visited the city as part of the 2013 July 4<sup>th</sup> holiday weekend and Essence Festival.<sup>1</sup> Eighteen local members showed up to this nationally sponsored

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<sup>1</sup> The Essence Festival is a three day musical festival and marketplace and is the largest, singular celebration of African American Culture. It has been held in New Orleans all but one year since its inception in 1995. In 2006, the

run and over 200 SOTM members participated in this event, which was held at the Riverwalk in Downtown New Orleans. The 18 local SOTM members who participated in this event set a record for SOTM New Orleans members and that record has not been exceeded or met since. Drawing from the core group of members who regularly participate in each Saturday run, I conducted eight individual interviews for this ethnographic case study. I coded the interview data by analyzing important recurring key themes which I identified throughout the research. I grouped those themes under the following headings: Physical Activity, Self/Group Identity, Physical Space/Place, Virtual Space/Place and Diet/Food Intake (see Table 1). I framed the subsequent ethnographic discussion around the themes which were repeated the most by the SOTM members. The coding of these themes also gave me the opportunity to situate the actual language that SOTM members use to discuss their interactions with each other.

Demographic information was also collected as part of each individual interview. Data collected included raw data, (see Table 2) year of birth (see Table 3) and highest level of education (see Table 4). Half of the eight SOTM members who were selected for this case study were born between the years of 1970 to 1980. During my observation of the weekly Saturday runs, it appeared that members decided who to run and walk with in relation to their level of skill as opposed to age. SOTM members Angel and Tina for instance, would walk with those who were new to the runs and needed someone to walk with them. Other members such as Shelly would run by herself so that she can keep her own pace or would run with a group of runners who might challenge her to do a longer trail in the park. Half of the eight SOTM members chosen for this study are New Orleans natives. The other four members shared that they relocated to New Orleans for employment and other opportunities.

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festival moved to Houston as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Over 200 SOTM members from across the United States participated in the run events that the national group sponsored in New Orleans during the 2013 Essence Festival (New Orleans Online 2013).

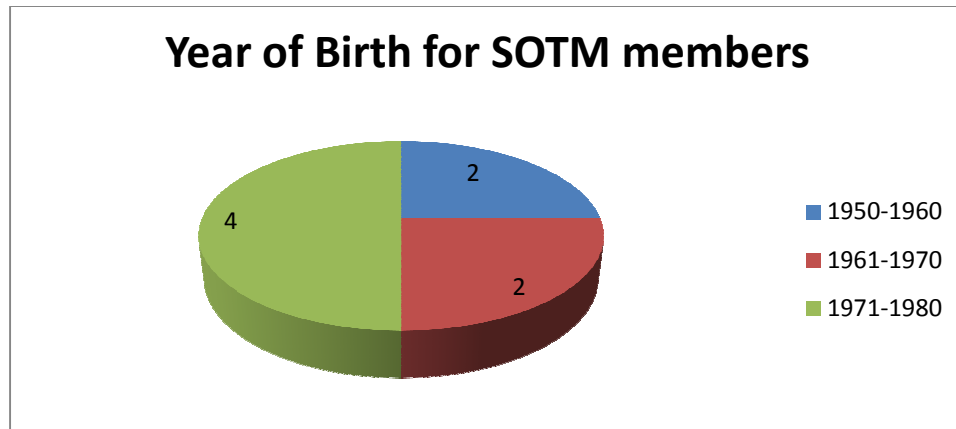
Each of the members who were interviewed shared that they had at least a two year Associate’s degree. These numbers show that these SOTM members are educated, employable women. They are educators, navy chiefs, attorneys, nurses, writers and therapists. Though their occupations and level of education alone do not guarantee that they possess middle class status, this data does suggest however, that these women joined SOTM for reasons other than the fact that membership into SOTM is free. Furthermore, the SOTM members who were interviewed live in suburbs of New Orleans. Outside from these areas having low levels of walkability which is discussed in the subsequent literature review, members stated that they enjoy the relatively quietness, and overall spaciousness which their neighborhoods provide.

<b>Physical Activity</b>	<b>Self/Group Identity</b>	<b>Physical Space/Place</b>	<b>Virtual Space/Place</b>	<b>Diet/Food Intake</b>
Walk	Education	Park: Audubon Park City Park	Facebook: Online, Posts, Pictures	Eating: Clean Eating, Cleanse
Race	Hair: Natural Hair, Relaxed Hair	New Orleans: Uptown, Westbank, Downtown, Gentilly, New Orleans East, Kenner, Slidell		Juicing, Juice Fast
Run (s)	Women: White Women, Black Women	Farmer’s Market		Protein, Fried Food, Lean Meats
5K, Half Marathon, Marathon	Sister, Friend, Associate			
	Runner, Walker			
	Clothes			
	Health, Obesity, Diabetes			

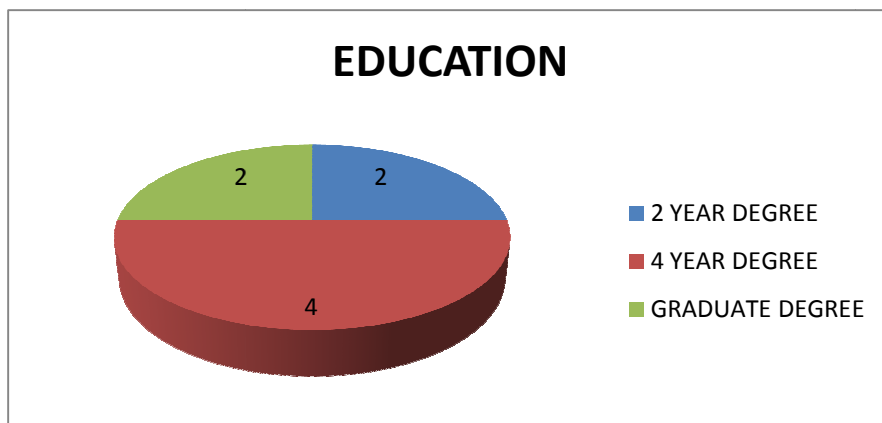
**Table 1:** Codes for SOTM Interview Data

MEMBERS' NAMES	MEMBERS NEIGHBORHOODS	BIRTH YEAR	EDUCATION	RESIDENCE OF BIRTH
Alexis	Slidell	1972	Associate's	Mobile, AL
Monique	Uptown	1955	Bachelor's	New Orleans, LA
Amber	Marigny	1975	Bachelor's	Washington, DC
Angel	Kenner	1960	Associate's	New Orleans, LA
Kelly	MidCity	1972	Master's	Middlesex, NJ
Brittany	New Orleans East	1963	Bachelor's	New Orleans, LA
Shelly	MidCity	1967	Bachelor's	New Orleans, LA
Tina	Gentilly	1979	Juris Doctorate	New Orleans, LA

**Table 2:** Raw Demographic Data of SOTM New Orleans' members



**Table 3:** Years SOTM New Orleans members were born



**Table 4:** Level of Education for SOTM New Orleans members



Through this research process, which included participation observation, the collection of demographic data and individual interviews with participants, I was able to craft an ethnographic narrative of SOTM members that examined the following questions: What motivates these women to run, walk and lead healthy lifestyles in New Orleans among preconceived stereotypes of black women's health? How do SOTM members claim and utilize space in New Orleans for their physical health and social activities? In addition to the research methods described above, I have also been engaged in the creation of a literature review that examines key concepts which contribute to the paradigm of black women's health in the United States in order to under the historical and cultural significance of this developing narrative throughout the course of this research. While I want to ensure that this research is relevant to the reader, whether they are an academic or otherwise, it is also my hope that the subsequent literature review and ethnographic narrative which follow remain authentic to the SOTM members who lent their voices and stories to this research.

### CHAPTER III LITERATURE REVIEW

Black women in the United States are currently faced with a health crisis epidemic. For example, in Louisiana alone, 11 percent of all blacks in the state were diagnosed as diabetic as opposed to 7.2 percent of whites even before Hurricane Katrina made landfall and devastated the State in August of 2005 (Wailoo et al 2010). Across the United States, the mortality rate for black women was reported as 33 percent higher than that of white women as recently as 2010 (Nelson 2011), and “more black women currently die from complications associated with diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure than any other ethnic group in the United States” (Gourdine 2011). However, the legacy of black women’s health is not limited to death and disease. Throughout American history there have been prominent women such as Harriet Tubman, Althea Gibson, Debbie Allen and Michelle Obama, who prove black women love to move and sweat in their bodies.<sup>2</sup> These women are mothers, educators, activists, dancers and athletes. There are numerous other examples that suggest Black women have always been vocal about their health and survival throughout American History.

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<sup>2</sup> Harriet Tubman was an abolitionist and former slave that led over 300 slaves to freedom by way passage of the Underground Railroad. Most of her journeys were accomplished by foot and Harriet was known to have “never lost a passenger” (PBS 2013)

Althea Gibson was an American athlete and professional tennis player. She was born June 23, 1940 and died November 12, 1994. Althea was the first black to win, the French Open, the United States Open, the Australian Doubles and Wimbledon in the 1950s (Tennis Fame 2013)

Debbie Allen is a choreographer, director, and dancer who worked on projects such as *Fame*, *West Side Story*, and *Sweet Charity* (Biography 2013)

Michelle Obama is the first black First Lady of the United States. First Lady Michelle Obama has made it her main initiative to eradicate childhood obesity within a generation with her Let’s Move Campaign. Mrs. Obama fights daily for this initiative because she believes, “The physical and emotional health of an entire generation and the economic health and security of our nation is at stake” (Let’s Move 2012)

Susan L Smith (1995) argues for instance that, “black women built their communities through their religious and secular associations including church groups and women’s clubs” (Smith 1995). These clubs such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), and the Tuskegee Woman’s Club of Alabama (TWCA) were formed in the late 1890’s by black women and its members labored to decrease the high mortality rates that impacted black families through their public health initiatives (Smith 1995). Their public health initiatives included the construction of hospitals where blacks would not be denied emergency care due to segregation laws, as well as education programs and wellness programs. Members of NACW and TWCA understood the importance of these female-led clubs and the impact they had on the overall black community. Following in the tradition of these pioneering women, there are increasing numbers of everyday black women that defy common stereotypes and statistics and are positive role models for all women. An opportunity exists to document the lives of these black women, and to include their individual stories in the larger discussion about black women’s health. Therefore, in the literature review that follows, I examine review key concepts and cultural dynamics in regards to the current state of black women’s health. This literature review also provides a conceptual framework for the following, subsequent ethnographic study of SOTM which documents the journeys of these everyday women as they strive to take care of their health and each other in the City of New Orleans.

## **CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF BLACK WOMEN’S HEALTH**

As mentioned previously, there are several cultural dynamics which contribute to the current state of black women’s health. These include cultural practices, economic limitations, societal infrastructure, overburdened lifestyles and lack of access to healthy food and supportive communities. For example, Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) argues that the cultural and institutional

practice of the commodification of black women's bodies has existed since these black women were purchased on slave auction blocks and "white men's right of access to black women's bodies was an assumption supported by their history as legal property" (Harris-Perry 2011). Furthermore, Dorothy Roberts (1998) argues that during slavery, black women's bodies were used to breed slaves by their slave masters and these women possessed virtually no personal power which would enable them to reject unwanted sexual advances. Slave women who were barren were often severely beaten as they provided no economic gain to their slave masters (Roberts 1998). These women were viewed by their slave masters as nothing more than chattel, and their bodies were nothing but a commodity to be traded and manipulated.

Natasha Gordon-Chimpembere (2011) argues that black women have been known to have fuller figures and more curves than white women, a phenomenon that has been interpreted as an idea that black women's bodies are deviant (Gordon-Chimpembere 2011). However, Amy Eraman Farrell (2011) discusses a cultural practice that actually celebrated white, middle class women with voluptuous and curvaceous bodies during the Pre-Depression era in the United States (Farrell 2011). She argues that during the early twentieth century, these women's bodies were considered a sign of their wealth and of a life of leisure because they did not have to spend their days working outside of the home (Farrell 2011). However, a change in political views and a stagnant economy caused by the onset of the Great Depression, vilified the voluptuous body and a mockery ensued of the black female body as it did not always fit the thin, slim body type (Farrell 2011). This mockery actually served as a double invasion on black women's bodies because even though their bodies may have been similar to their once revered and curvaceous white female counterparts, black women were never afforded the same social status that initially arose from having a fuller figure in the first place. At the time, this vilification was perpetuated

with media images of Sara Baartman or the “Venus Hottentot” that brand black women as obese, oversexed jezebels, and complacent mammies.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, it was often suffragettes, who championed women’s civil and voting rights during the early 1900’s who often led this vilification and published liberal propaganda that branded black women with the images described above (Farrell 2011). They equated black women and their bodies with the status quo, and with “out of date” middle class white women who were deemed as content with and proud of their curvaceous bodies and roles in society (Farrell 2011). Due to this cultural and political practice, black women were labeled with an identity which trivialized their bodies and their lives. Furthermore, this negative treatment of their black women’s bodies whether it is physical, political or mental, directly impacts black women’s health and has contributed to the current state of black women’s health.

### **The Sum of Her Parts: Criminalizing the Black Female Body**

Black women’s bodies are still subject to measures of social control and victimization. For instance, Dorothy Roberts (1998) argues that under President George H. W. Bush’s

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<sup>3</sup> Sara Baartman is the Khoisan Bush woman catapulted to infamy during the early 1800’s due to her voluptuous curves. Europeans saddled her with the name of Venus Hottentot as means to further her degradation. (Gordon-Chipembere 2011) Voyeurs paid daily in order to get a glimpse of the Venus Hottentot. Her body seemed deviant to European conquerors because of the size of the anomaly of her “hypersexual genitals. (Gordon-Chipembere 2011) Her size was common for the woman of her tribe, not an anomaly of her culture but definitely one in Britain and France where European women possessed a different body composition. After Sarah died her body parts were put on public display throughout Europe and her body parts were preserved in jars. Sara Baartman was finally buried in her native South Africa in 2002 after 5 years of negotiations between the French authorities, South African government and the Griqua National Council (Gordon-Chipembere 2011)

In 1923, a bill to create a “southern black mammy” monument on the National Mall was proposed but eventually denied as it would have would have furthered the branding of black female bodies. The bill was proposed by Senator John Williams and members of the Daughters of the Confederacy and protested by 2000 members of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA (Horwitz 2013)

administration and his welfare reform legislation, invasive birth control measures such as Norplant were sometimes deemed a mandatory procedure for women to undergo in order to receive welfare benefits (Roberts 1998). In addition, welfare reform enthusiasts argued that the castration of some black male prison inmates should be encouraged in order to decrease the amount of black babies that were born in the United States- which would result in another form of involuntary birth control for black males and females (Roberts 1998). Roberts argues that white conservatives who favored these procedures did so because they wanted to limit the amount of poor black babies who they believed would be born with undesirable traits such as sloth, a propensity to criminal behavior, and simplemindedness, which were genetically passed down from their parents. This form of biological determinism, which was eventually deemed racist and unlawful, argued that black babies were genetically inferior to white babies and therefore destined for lives of crime and vagrancy. Conversely, white women's bodies were celebrated by the same Bush presidential administration due to their perceived middle class status. In an effort to increase population rates among this demographic, numbers of fertilization clinics increased across the United States and media campaigns ensued to encourage white, middle class women to procreate and pass on their genes (Roberts 1998). Therefore, these institutionalized attacks effectively criminalized the bodies of black women and were woven into the social fabric of the United States.

### **Sweating Out Perms: Black Women and Hair Care**

In addition to the penetrating gaze that members of society place on black women and their bodies, some of black women's cultural practices also directly impact their health and their bodies. For instance, black women's relationship with their hair has often been cited as a reason for a lack of physical activity within the black community. Lanita Jacobs-Huey (1971) explores

several reasons as to why hair is important to black women. For example, “[Some] appreciated hair straightening as a means of managing their curly hair textures and negotiating their professional and sexual identities” (Jacobs-Huey 1971). This suggests that some black women believe that in order to appear professional in the workplace that they must wear their hair in straight and relaxed styles and will avoid activities such as exercise in order to maintain their hairstyles. These women also labor to maintain their hairstyles as a means to attract potential mates or to keep them interested. Dr. Regina Benjamin, the former United States Surgeon General, called on black women to choose “their health over their hair” during a speech she gave at the Bronner Bros International Hair show and stated that “black women have got to stop using their hair as an excuse not to exercise” (Hartman 2012). However, black female clients, whether they wear their hair natural or with chemicals, sometimes spend upwards of \$200 on their hairstyles (Jacobs-Huey 1971) and as actress Nicole Ari Parker argues, “Hair is a serious issue for most of us women because after spending a ton of time and money to have it washed, blow dried, flat-ironed and curled, none of us want to sweat and mess it up all over again” (Parker 2012). Parker has also developed a *Save Your Do* hair accessory to help active women protect and prolong their hairstyles.<sup>4</sup> Parker stated that Dr. Benjamin’s speech served as a wake-up call to her and fueled her motivation to create her *Save your Do* head wrap. Not all black women however, wear their hair straightened, relaxed or curled. They may wear their hair natural, with no chemicals or straighteners. Furthermore, Huey argues that some black women often feel that their validity of blackness is strengthened or weakened by their choice of hairstyle and that some black women who do wear their hair natural (see Figure 1), view others with straight and relaxed

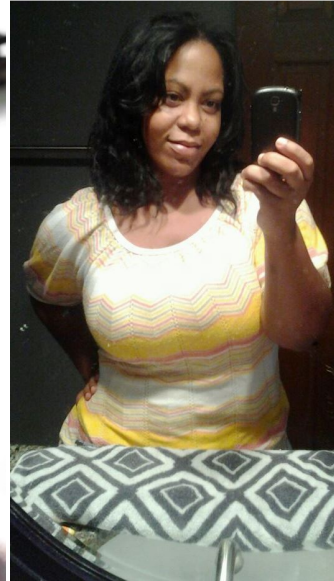
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<sup>4</sup> Actress Nicole Ari Parker has created *Save Your Do* gym wraps as a means to encourage physical activity amongst black women with humidity sensitive hair (Parker 2013).

hair (see Figure 2) as being oppressed and wanting to replicate a Eurocentric ideal of beauty (Jacobs-Huey 1971). Black women such as Jacobs-Huey, Parker and Benjamin have expanded the dialogue about black women and their hair. They have achieved this by acknowledging that black women's hair has been a hindrance for some to engage in healthy lifestyles, and are encouraging all women to move beyond a cultural practice to put their health at the forefront of their lives.



**Figure 1:** Natural Hair



**Figure 2:** Relaxed Hair

### **Fat Back & Collard Greens: The Impact of Soul Food on Black Women's Health**

In addition to personal hair care practices, the preparation of Soul food is another cultural practice which directly affects the health of black women. There is also an expectation within the culture of the South, with specificity to black families, to be able to prepare Soul Food at large family gatherings or even at regular meals. Examples of soul food include baked macaroni and cheese, barbecue ribs and fried chicken. The origins of soul food have historical and cultural significance. During slavery, slaves nourished themselves on pork and cornmeal. Their pork rations often came from the undesirable parts of the pig such as the hoofs, the tail or the pig



intestines. On a good day, their meals came from the scraps left from their masters' tables. The slaves supplemented this diet with seasonal crops when they were able to be planted (Hurt 2013). This included foods heavily seasoned with salt as a means to preserve meals and make them more flavorful. These meals sustained the slaves during their long, laborious tasks and brought families together as meals were often shared.

This slave diet has evolved to modern day soul food; a reclamation of rich, hearty foods by many blacks as a means to celebrate their cultural traditions. In his documentary *Soul Food Junkies*, Byron Hurt argues that, "Black people have took their food and seasoned it...fried it and with a pinch of this and a pinch of that turned survival food into a delicacy that people from all walks of life enjoy eating" (Hurt 2013). Soul food is an African, Caribbean and Creole tradition that will not disappear from American culture anytime soon! It is a profitable delicacy as people come from all over the world for a taste of New Orleans' rich, cultural cuisine. New Orleans Cuisine includes traditional soul food fare such as fried chicken but also includes Jambalaya, Gumbo, Bread pudding and Crawfish Etouffe. Restaurants such as Mother's in New Orleans; are known to have lines of customers outside of their door eager to feast on their fried chicken, red beans and rice and jambalaya. Soul food, Hurt argues, can also be prepared in a way that is healthy and still enjoyable. Greens for instance, he suggests can be prepared without the addition of pork meat or an abundance of salt (see Figure 3). In addition, Hurt shares that chicken can be breaded and placed in the oven as an alternative to fried chicken which will decrease the amount of sodium and cholesterol of the dish while maintaining its flavor.



**Figure 3:** Baked Chicken & Baked Macaroni with Cheese

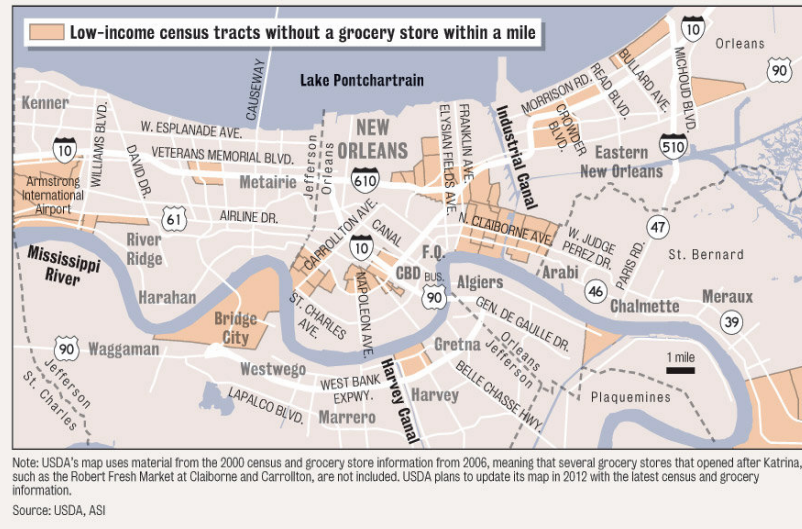
The way soul food is prepared is not the only contributor to poor food choices among black women. Black women are often the primary financial providers in their households and look for quick meals to satisfy their families in the evening. Quick meals often result in frozen dinners and frequent visits to fast food restaurants like McDonalds, Popeye's and Pizza Hut. Food deserts and food insecurity affect the households of many black women. A food desert (see Figure 4) is a census tract that meets both low-income and low-access criteria including:

1. A poverty rate that is higher than or equal to 20 percent or the median family income does not exceed 80 percent
2. At least 500 people or 33 percent of the population located more than 1 mile (urban area) or 10 miles (rural) from the nearest supermarket or large grocery store

[Dutko P, etal 2012]

## LOCAL “FOOD DESERTS”

ASI Federal Credit Union is in the initial group of 12 lenders nationwide to participate in a USDA/Treasury Department program inspired by First Lady Michelle Obama called the Healthy Food Financing Initiative. ASI now has \$3 million for a revolving loan fund to loan to entrepreneurs seeking to start healthy food businesses in “food deserts” within ASI’s footprint.



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**Figure 4 :** Food Deserts in New Orleans

About 2.3 million households in the United States do not have access to transportation and live more than one mile from a full service grocery store (Rose et al 2009). In the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, where most of the inhabitants are African American, 30 percent of residents live in these food deserts (Rose et al 2009). Lower Ninth Ward residents have seen some improvements in their neighborhood in regards to food choice with the creation of the Sankofa farmer’s market, which is “ the only open-air fresh market in the Ninth Ward area within a five-mile radius of the Tremé, Seventh Ward, Faubourg Marigny, French Quarter, Gentilly and Mid-City neighborhoods” (Sankofa Community Development Corporation 2013). Our School at Blair’s grocery (OSBG) is also housed in the lower ninth ward and serves as a Community Supported Agriculture market where residents can purchase fresh produce items (Kelley 2011). OSBG also operates as an “alternative school” for at risk youth and as an urban farming training center for youth and adults (Kelley 2011). However, even with the fresh food initiatives listed

above, the lower ninth ward of New Orleans remains without a full service grocery store and residents must travel at least three miles to get to the nearest grocery store that is in St. Bernard Parish (Boder et al 2010).

### **Making Ends Meet: The Economics of Black Women's Health**

As mentioned previously, socioeconomic limitations also directly impact the black women's health. Stereotypes and facts surround the buying power of black women to purchase fresh and healthy food, and to participate in exercise regimes. For instance, single, black mothers are often depicted as the "face of welfare" though they have never made up the majority of welfare recipients (Hays 2003). In the 1980's President Ronald Regan described black women as fraudulent welfare recipients who drive Cadillac cars and stay at home while the government covers their bills (Hays 2003). This stereotype is one that black women in the United States continue to fight. There are examples of wealthy black women who are economic power players in the United States. However, most black women in the United States do not live the lifestyles afforded to Oprah Winfrey, Condoleezza Rice, Michelle Obama or Beyoncé Knowles.

Unfortunately, for many black women in the United States, economic limitations are a definite hindrance to their health. Fitness clubs and gyms such as the French Riviera in New Orleans cost \$19 dollars per month for a membership (Riviera Fitness 2013). A more exclusive gym such as the New Orleans Athletic Club, offers a state of the art facility, with women-only workout areas, yoga classes, a boxing gym and sauna has a membership fee of \$80 dollars per month (New Orleans Athletic Club 2013). However, for families located in neighborhoods such as the predominately Black Hoffman Triangle in Uptown New Orleans the median income for, their median income is less than \$24,000 per year (United States Bureau of the Census 2010).

Hoffman Triangle families like so many other working class families do not utilize their spending potential index for gym memberships or home treadmills and elliptical machines.<sup>5</sup> Most of their income goes towards food and housing costs.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, sociologist Sharon Hays discusses that the need to provide for the immediate needs of their family forces working class black women to accept “the most menial work, the poorest hours, with no benefits and little flexibility (Hays 2003:22). Hays goes on to describe how working mothers are subjected not only to glass ceilings, a sex segregated labor force and “the mommy track” but also intense demands of their time and energy in regards to child rearing (Hays 2003). These women become overburdened with their lists of family obligations and often do not take care of their own needs and health.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF BLACK FEMALE NETWORKS**

The stressors mentioned above such as economic limitations, and a lack of food security directly impact all women. Leith Mullings (2005) argues however, that black women and other women of minority backgrounds have the added stressors of racism which also adversely affect their health. These stressors, Mullings argues, include a lack of quality retail and grocery stores, public parks, and housing in addition to air-borne pollutants that persist in many predominantly black neighborhoods. Many black women that have done the work to achieve middle class status are often unable to maintain their middle class status because of an unsecure job market and institutional racism (Mullings 2005). Mullings also suggests that many black women who live in New York’s Harlem neighborhood do so for several reasons; in spite of the statistics that suggests their middle class status is diluted by their living in these black and economically

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<sup>5</sup> Spending Potential Index – household based and represents the amount of money spent for a product or service relative to a national average of 100 (Business Analyst Online 2010)

<sup>6</sup> Hoffman Triangle Households spend an average of \$1,921.29 yearly for food  
The SPI index for food costs is 44 (Business Analyst Online 2010)

impoverished neighborhoods. Their black communities offer them a reprieve from casual racism, and place them in an environment where they have faith based institutions, family members as well as friends and neighbors (Mullings 2005). Furthermore, these women create “women-centered” networks; which allow them to reclaim their neighborhoods, as they collectively hold slum landlords accountable in civil court, and demand local political action in regards to the upkeep of public spaces and blighted lands. The presence of black, women-centered networks is not limited to the United States. For instance, Kimberly Eison Simmons (2011) argues that the group “Identidad” in the Dominican Republic seeks to “empower black women in their rescue of their Afro identity through symbolic, artistic and religious endeavors.” The group’s ideas and platform go against the popular idea that Dominicans distance themselves from their African ancestry and “marry up” in regards to race and socio-economic status (Simmons 2001). In this regard, the members of “Identidad” are similar to the black middle class women in Harlem previously described as they choose to live in their black communities, marry within their own racial groups and establish female-centered networks with each other.

In *Killing the Black Body*, Dorothy Roberts (1998) suggests that the communal networks which black women often form with each other were present even during slavery. Enslaved women of African, Caribbean and Haitian descent were rumored to join together in efforts to outsmart their masters and overseers. Roberts argues that these women would often feign pregnancies as it would sometimes mean less strenuous work duties and less time spent in the fields. Mothers who were nursing would take turns nursing each other’s babies if a particular mother was unable to do so at the time. These women were sometimes the only support that each other had, especially when they were without the fathers of their children. Even today, black women provide emotional support to each other as they are often single, heads of

households. For instance, during an infamous “welfare bust” in Chicago, 19 children of three black women who lived in a house together were found left alone and living in less than favorable conditions (Roberts 1998). Regardless of the extent of these women’s parenting skills, they felt compelled to live together and pool their resources in order to take care of their children. Their families were undeterred by lease requirements of welfare or other methods of social control imposed upon them. Instead, they decided to live together to help each other take care of their families. These women-centered networks described above are a coping mechanism for these black women’s everyday challenges, and speak to the power that these networks and communities can provide.

### **NEW ORLEANS: AN UNLIVABLE CITY?**

For many middle class black women who live in urban cities, time restraints and economic limitations do not deter their engagement in physical activity. Instead, their challenge in regards to their physical health lies within establishing a location where they can exercise. Interestingly, in addition to the unique cuisine of New Orleans mentioned above, the city is also known for the physical space of Congo Square-which was known as an epicenter for black culture, singing, dancing and social interaction during slavery. Congo Square (see Figure 5) is culturally and historically significant for many blacks and indigenous Americans. Originally, it was the site for the Houma American Indian corn feasts (Turner 2009). However, Richard Turner (2009) argues that in the late 1700’s the Code Noire (black codes), gave legal permission for African festival rituals to be held in Congo Square, the only place in the antebellum South to do so (Turner 2009). On Sundays Congo Square became a marketplace and a congregation filled with infectious rhythms, dance, and ritualized spiritual practices. This was considered a sacred place where men and women of color gathered to socialize and to celebrate each other. Cultural

bearers of second line culture believe that the singing and dancing of Congo Square were tributes to Santeria and Yoruba religious practices carried from West Africa, Haiti and the Caribbean during the slave trade (Turner 2009). After the civil war, Jim Crow segregation laws arose to keep these cultural activities regulated to Congo square. As a response, Turner argues that these cultural practices evolved to be more secular as to hide the true meanings and escape persecution from municipal powers (Turner 2009).

The social construction of Congo Square includes the indigenous and cultural celebrations practiced by slaves and free blacks who gathered in the Square on Sundays, during the slavery and Jim Crow era, thus giving birth to New Orleans' Second Line Culture. Second Line Culture is a combination of cultural celebrations including parades, singing and dancing rituals. A traditional second line includes the "first line", which is the social club that has organized the parade and its band while the "second line", is composed of family, friends and neighbors who also take part in the celebration (Breunlin and Regis 2006). Second Line Parades are funded by Social Aid & Pleasure clubs, which began as mutual aid societies to help members with burial costs and other financial hardships (Breunlin and Regis 2006).



**Figure 5:** Congo Square courtesy of [www.frenchcreoles.com](http://www.frenchcreoles.com)

Presently, it is often difficult for many black women in New Orleans to find a location as places such as Congo Square is more of a tourist attraction than the indigenous place that it once was. For example, the New Orleans East suburban neighborhood (see Figure 6) is predominately



inhabited by working to middle class black families. As is the case in many suburbs in the United States, New Orleans East does not have a high level of walkability. Christopher Leinberger (2011) argues that the walkability of an urban area or “walkable urbanism” refers to the ability to satisfy everyday needs such as school, shopping, friends and employment within walking distance of 1,500 to 3,000 feet (a quarter to a half mile) of one’s home (Leinberger 2011). This lack of walkability not only affects black women that live in New Orleans East; it impacts their families as well. For instance, in November 2005, the city of New Orleans transferred control of failing public schools to the Recovery School District (RSD) (Rasheed et al 2013). This move was done in an effort to improve school choice and enable parents to send their children to better performing schools outside of their neighborhoods. While students can now attend better performing schools in hopes to improve academically, this change takes a toll on them physically. Budget cuts and an emphasis on high stakes LEAP testing has resulted in the removal of physical education and other athletic programs in New Orleans schools.<sup>7</sup> Students are now faced with extended school days and longer bus rides to and from school because schools are no longer in walking distance from their homes. Furthermore, consequences of non-walkable cities for children and adults are an increase in obesity rates, asthma and depression (Leinberger 2011).

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<sup>7</sup> Louisiana Leap tests are held annually for students in grades 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup>. They measure a student’s mastery in English, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies. Students in 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> grade take the I Leap tests which are a precursor to the Leap. Each student must pass the Leap test in 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade in order to be promoted to the next grade level (Louisiana Department of Education 2013)



**Figure 6:** Map of New Orleans East

### **Crafting a Safe Space in Urban Spaces**

Once black women obtain a location to exercise, it is important that they feel safe and comfortable within that space. In *Between Good and Ghetto*, Nikki Jones (2010) describes the various degrees of “code switching” displayed by young black women in Philadelphia in order to maintain their safety and security. She describes self-identified “good girls” as those that may attend school regularly and spend much of their time inside, but must also be able to “fight when they have to” in order to avoid certain challenges (Jones 2010). In contrast, self-identified “fighter” or “ghetto girls” may give off the reputation of being a fighter in public but take on a completely different persona when around their family and friends (Jones 2010). These women continue to remain conscious of their surroundings; even into adulthood. Jones herself, when visiting one of her interviewees, shares that she made the conscious decision not to take the stairs alone in a high rise public housing complex for fear of being assaulted or experiencing any other harm. Jones understood that even with her academic and privileged background that she was not

impervious to danger and that for all women, there is more safety in numbers when they travel together.

The City of New Orleans, similar to urban cities such as Philadelphia also has a tumultuous relationship with concerns about crime and safety. In addition to a low level of walkability, neighborhoods in New Orleans also have varying levels of criminal activity. According a New Orleans crime data report, seventeen crime incidences were reported for the New Orleans East neighborhood within the 70127 zip code for the week reporting period of August 22, 2013 through August 28, 2013 (Crime Mapping 2013). Eleven percent of crime reported for this zip code was for assault. Transversely, the Uptown neighborhood where New Orleans' Audubon Park is located is within the 70118 zip code. Thirty seven crimes were reported in this area during the same reporting period, and ten percent of the crimes reported for this area were for assault. This data suggests that black women that live in New Orleans East, and endure the area's lower level of walkability, have the same or less chances of experiencing assault in their neighborhoods than they would by visiting Audubon Park. Statistics notwithstanding, the area around Audubon Park (see Figure 7) has a greater perceived sense of safety which may be in part due to the park being frequented by runners and walkers, bicyclists and roller skaters and is also equipped with several walking trails, and a substantive amount of tree canopy.



**Figure 7:** Audubon Park Walking Trail

## CONCLUSION

In closing, this literature review is not exhaustive of the research literature that exists about black women's health. It does however; analyze several central themes such as the use public space, the importance of women-centered networks, and the overall livability of urban places, in regards to the ways by which these paradigms contribute to the current status of black women's health. In addition, time restraints, cultural traditions, food choices, overburdened lifestyles and historical injustices were also examined in regards to how they contribute to the current state of black women's health. It is important to understand what factors have and continue to the current state of black women's health in order to postulate any means for a possible, positive change. Therefore, the paradigms and cultural dynamics mentioned above are not intended to serve as an excuse for black women to live sedentary lifestyles. They are instead intended to expand the dialogue of black women's health and to lay the framework for the subsequent ethnographic members of women such as the members of Sistas on the Move, who survive the fat jeans one mile, one meal and one member at a time.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **WALK THIS WAY: SOTM AND THE USE OF PUBLIC SPACE**

It is 7:45 am on a Saturday morning in early May. Traffic is moving slowly on St. Charles Avenue near Audubon Park. Weekend drivers are photographing the century old mansions on the Avenue and are looking for parking places in order to begin their morning runs, walks and picnics. Audubon Park itself is meticulously manicured and inhabited by moss filled Oak trees and various breeds of geese, ducks and squirrels. Inside the park there are visitors walking, running rollerblading, reading and riding their bikes. Today, there is also a drifting melody that can be heard from a violin player as he practices on his favorite park bench. By 8:05 am, there is a group of black women gathered in a circle around the entrance fountain of Audubon Park near St. Charles Avenue. There are seven of them today. The women are all dressed in bright neon colored tennis shoes and running apparel. Some are tall and robust while others are short and thin. Their brown colored skin is different shades of mahogany, caramel and ivory. They pause for a moment from their casual banter and ask a passerby to take their group picture. Someone agrees to take the picture which will be posted later, on the group's online Facebook page (see Figure 8). Introductions are made to those who are joining the group for the first time. Some members exchange exercise apparel in preparation for an upcoming race and store it in their vehicles before the morning run begins. Before the women take off, the group leader makes sure that everyone knows which route they have taken and that everyone has a walk or run partner who needs one. Once everyone is accounted for, the women take flight on their weekly Saturday run through Audubon Park. These are Sistas on the Move!<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Taken from field note data on May 4, 2013



**Figure 8:** SOTM members in Audubon Park

The excerpt described above is taken from a fieldwork experience which occurred during a Saturday morning run.<sup>9</sup> SOTM members meet up in Audubon Park at 7:00 am every Saturday morning to run and walk together and to support and inspire each other in this public, urban space. SOTM members' experiences of the Saturday run and other weekly runs continue to evolve whether it is through adversity, the addition of new park trails or through member growth and interaction. The analysis that follows focuses on the following themes: How do SOTM's weekly Saturday runs contribute to the social construction of public space in New Orleans? How do SOTM members claim and utilize public space in New Orleans for their physical health and social activities?

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<sup>9</sup> SOTM members refer to their weekly meet-ups as runs. However, members are welcome to run, walk or jog at their own pace.

## **SOTM AND THEIR SATURDAY RUN**

SOTM member Tina is known as the Ambassador for the New Orleans chapter of the group and is invested in her leadership role. As a SOTM ambassador, she individually approves new membership requests for members and does so within 24-48 hours. She also coordinates the Saturday runs, is often the first member to arrive and ensures that every member has a walk or run partner who needs one. Tina shares that she initially became motivated to run and join a running group after she noticed white females running in Uptown New Orleans:

Whenever I would drive Uptown along St. Charles I would always see white women. Every single day I would see them and they would run and they always looked like they had nothing on their minds and that it was effortless like, "I'm just running." I guess I was actually envious of that because so much goes on in a days' time and I kind of always wanted to run. I needed a different outlet to kind of not think about anything and have everything off my mind. I started looking for running groups and I wanted to focus on groups that were specific to black people because I didn't see black people running every day. I would always see white women and I would see white men now and again. But just looking at women they were white...and Uptown.<sup>10</sup>

Here Tina shares that she was envious of the white, female runners who appeared to run with total freedom and an absolute abandon of stress or worries. At the same time, these women inspired Tina to want to embody that sense of freedom herself and to seek out or establish a running group for women of color in New Orleans. Therefore, In March of 2011, Tina conducted online research and discovered the national group of SOTM and that they were in need of Ambassadors/Leaders to start local SOTM chapters in different cities. After she realized that SOTM was geared towards improving the health of black women, Tina then contacted the national SOTM group and informed the founders that she was not yet a runner, but that she was willing to be a leader and start a local chapter in New Orleans. By April of 2011, Tina had set up a SOTM New Orleans Facebook page and began walking in City Park at 8:00 am on Saturday

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Tina, June 25, 2013 at P.J.'s coffee shop.

mornings. Tina's mom initially participated in the Saturday runs with her, but soon stopped coming. Tina commented on what may have led her mom to stop coming, "The more I walked, the more I got ready to start running. I started running and other people were starting to come and started run too. Maybe she thought the group was getting too advanced because she just stopped coming."

Tina does not suggest that her mother's absence affected her negatively. Tina does admit however, that new SOTM members would sporadically join her for the Saturday runs but that she desired a larger and more consistent membership base. Tina's desire soon became a reality. For on one Saturday morning in City Park, Tina met Kristin, a founding member of an all-female and mostly white running group who was in the park that day for an early morning race. At the time, Kristin's running group consisted of a larger member base so she invited Tina and the other members of SOTM to join her group on Saturdays in Audubon Park for their morning runs. Tina agreed and decided to switch SOTM's weekly Saturday morning runs from City Park to Audubon Park. This move, Tina believed, would offer a chance for the then sparse SOTM members to run or walk together with another group of women. Audubon Park also offered a longer trail because at the time, City Park only offered a trail that was  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile long. According to Tina, the joint group runs with Kristin and her group members lasted for a couple of weeks before SOTM members were back to participating in the Saturday runs with just their own members. Tina attributed this to a belief that the other running group changed their meet up schedule to an earlier time and that their members did not meet on a consistent basis. Furthermore, SOTM members decided to continue their weekly Saturday runs in Audubon Park despite the initial challenges that the switch brought for some members. These challenges



included the ways that SOTM members were received when they first switched their weekly Saturday runs from City Park to Audubon Park:

We have dealt with some instances of not being well received. When we were the cheer squads at races that members participated in, we have had several instances like what does that sign say? Sistas on the Move? That's Racist! White women move too! And I mean they said it real nasty. It was just white people. White women in general...they see the shirts and are like white girls run too. It's like of course you do. We see you. I don't know if it's an issue of not paying attention or white privilege. I'm like when you run look around and you tell me who you see. We know you run. I'm telling you that we do too and it's a problem why?

Here, Tina vents her frustration about the racial tension that SOTM members were met with during their Saturday runs. She and the other SOTM members choose to be a part of a running group which puts emphasis on black women running and taking care of their health. Their desire to verbally make their presence known in public spaces such as Audubon Park with their SOTM logos on t-shirts and signs, appeared to make some white runners feel out of place or uncomfortable. For instance, the white women who Tina describes above perceive the name of SOTM as one that promotes racial division within the New Orleans' running community. Tina suggests these white runners' outrage may be tied to a belief that these white female runners are oblivious to the fact that thousands of black women that die from heart disease and obesity related conditions every year (Gourdine 2011), and that black women, at least in Tina's perception, are noticeably absent from the community of female runners who run Uptown. Furthermore, Tina argues that the presence of SOTM members with their SOTM apparel and signs are more of a call to action for black women to take care of their health and not a means to promote separatism among the running community in New Orleans.

The tension that members of SOTM initially experienced in Audubon Park speaks to the racial history and legacy of the park. For instance, Audubon Park and subsequently Audubon Zoo were built on remnants of the Foucher and Bore plantations in Uptown New Orleans.

During the 1930's Audubon Zoo was built and Audubon Park was renovated through funds acquired through the Works Progress Administration (Donahue and Trump 2010). Though Audubon Park was not a whites-only facility, Jim Crow laws kept blacks from fully enjoying all of the amenities of the Park and the neighboring zoo at the time. Park officials were also visible to ensure that "blacks kept moving all the time and were not permitted to use the benches" (Donahue and Trump 2010). This low tolerance for blacks in the park was still not enough for many concerned, white citizens. Donahue argues that these citizens wrote letters to New Orleans Mayor Maestri at the time which would say things such as, "Audubon Park is recreation for the white man-not the negro" and that "their making use of the playground equipment prevents white children from using them" (Donahue and Trump 2010). Black citizens, who visited the park at the time, were aware of this tension and did not feel welcome in this space. Therefore, the racially charged responses from white female runners that SOTM members initially received, was a familiar reminder of how blacks who visited Audubon Park in the 1930's and 1940's were treated. Despite these initial challenges, and the racial history of the park, SOTM members continue to meet up for their weekly Saturday runs in Audubon Park. They do so to claim this space as one where their members can gather to exercise and socialize regardless of their ethnic or racial identity. There are also several functional reasons as to why SOTM members gather in Audubon Park every Saturday.

### **The Anatomy of Audubon Park**

SOTM members for example, stated they enjoy the fact that Audubon Park is located in the Uptown neighborhood of New Orleans and is adjacent to Audubon Zoo. Even though Audubon Park is accessible by bike, bus and streetcar lines, (see Figure 9) each SOTM member drives herself to the park every Saturday. SOTM members suggest that they would be willing to

carpool together to Audubon Park on Saturday mornings but that they have not done so yet. SOTM member Shelly shares that she has not carpooled yet because, “other SOTM members are slow to moving and I like to be early.” Shelly also shares that she is often the first member to arrive on Saturdays and enjoys the quiet that engulfs Audubon Park before 7 am and before everyone else begins to arrive.



**Figure 9:** Public Transportation in front of Audubon Park

During their individual interviews, SOTM members also commented about the functionality and overall aesthetic of this public park. SOTM member Angel, who lives the New Orleans Suburb of Kenner, drives 20-30 minutes from her home to Audubon Park each Saturday. She does not appear to be deterred by the fact that the park is at least 15 miles away from her home. Angel argues instead, that the favorability of Audubon Park resides in its abundance of trees for shade cover, extended walking trails; which in some parts of the park are over three miles, and the variety of individuals that frequent and use the park. SOTM member Alexis shares that the trees in the park are “pretty to look at” and help her feel relaxed while running

and added that the trees in the park can be a runner's only refuge when the rain interrupts a run or when a member needs to take a break. SOTM member Alexis shares that when she visits Audubon Park there are other "runners, walkers, bike riders and horse riders" and that they share a diversity of ages, sexes and ethnicities. Alexis' and Angels' observation of the diversity of the park is in contrast to Tina's initial perception that only white women ran in the park. Tina who lives in the Gentilly neighborhood, argues that the availability of options in Audubon Park are absent in parks or trails near her home; and that parts of her neighborhood are even without sidewalks that are suitable for walking. The importance of sidewalks for many residents of urban cities is discussed later in this chapter.

The options which Tina mentions that are present in Audubon Park include two walking/running trails that SOTM members choose from for their Saturday run. One trail is inside Audubon Park and is approximately 1.8 miles (Audubon Nature Institute 2013). The other trail goes around the park, which SOTM members fondly call the fly and is approximately 3.8 miles.<sup>11</sup> SOTM members such as Alexis enjoy running the fly because "it's a change of scenery and it's a longer trail." SOTM member Angel enjoys the 1.8 mile trail because "it has more trees and more shade." SOTM member Brittany feels that she has outgrown Audubon Park and needs "longer routes" and a "more varied trail." This speaks to the diversity of the skill of the SOTM members who meet up on Saturdays for the group run. Some members are walking a trail for the first time in years and for them to complete the 1.8 mile trail once is a great achievement. Others members such as Angel, start off walking, then begin to jog and are able to run around the trail several times. Some members have advanced to running trails with obstacle courses and mud runs in an effort to keep challenging and improving their exercise regimen.

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<sup>11</sup> The fly is named for the butterfly shaped river viewing shelter which existed in Audubon Park during the 1950's and was later demolished. The fly is located along the River view side of Audubon Park along the Mississippi River and provides a playground, picnic tables and a baseball field for guests (Audubon Nature Institute 2013)

## **The Social Construction and Social Production of Public Spaces**

Previously, I mentioned how SOTM member Tina professes that some of the sidewalks in her neighborhood are not suitable for walking. Interestingly, in urban cities such as New Orleans, sidewalks take on a social life of their own and become a place “where people take to the streets to celebrate, protest and mourn” (Louikadou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009). Sidewalks also contribute to the social production of public spaces which Low argues; include “its social, economic, ideological and technological” components which create the overall physicality of the space (Low 1996). The absence of walk-able sidewalks can deter many urban residents from exercising, especially if they are unable to afford other costly exercise regimens and also obstructs the social production of a space (Low 1996).<sup>12</sup> Fortunately for Tina, she did not let a lack of walk-able sidewalks deter her and found other means to exercise. However, the loss in functionality of her neighborhood sidewalks which Tina describes, speaks to a debate that Louikadou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht argue exists between homeowners and municipalities in regards to whose responsibility it is to financially maintain and upkeep these “public” sidewalks (Louikadou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009). Lastly, this abandonment of the upkeep of these sidewalks may also be attributed to the fact that neighborhoods such as Gentilly in New Orleans are built towards a more suburban environment where walkability is secondary to a drivable urbanism where a car culture takes precedence over pedestrians (Leinberger 2011).<sup>13</sup>

Public parks, in addition to sidewalks are also part of the built environment of urban cities neighborhoods and are utilized for a multitude of purposes such as running, walking and picnicking which contribute to the social construction and social production of these spaces

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<sup>12</sup> The price of gym memberships in New Orleans is discussed in the Literature Review on page 20 of this manuscript.

<sup>13</sup> Leinberger describes drivable urbanism as neighborhoods that are designed to support the use of vehicles. These neighborhoods have smaller if not absent sidewalks, and residents would have to walk across several lanes of traffic in order to get to supermarkets and other businesses (Leinberger 2011)

(Low 1996). Low argues that the social construction of a space reflects how it is transformed through people's daily actions, rituals and interactions within the space, which create symbolic meaning. SOTM members meet up in Audubon Park for their Saturday morning runs in the park's circular entrance garden which is adorned with a spouting water fountain. The social production (Low 1996) of SOTM's meeting location, which is the actual physical location, resembles another public meeting place in New Orleans—Congo Square (see Figure 7) in that both spaces are located in circular entrances. Both Audubon Park and Congo Square hold cultural significance for those who visit these spaces.

SOTM members contribute to the social construction of Audubon Park as they participate in a weekly Saturday ritual where they meet-up in the entrance circle, photograph the members in attendance, walk, run and socialize with each other through the park, return to their meeting location and go on with the rest of their day. The cultural significance of Audubon Park to SOTM members is expressed every time they meet up for a Saturday run. That significance is memorialized as members take a group picture of themselves before each run. The picture also symbolizes that SOTM members have claimed this space in Audubon Park for all of their members and serves a physical manifestation of the journey they are on together.

### **SATURDAY RUN RITUALS**

As evidenced above, SOTM's Saturday morning run is a ritualized experience for members. SOTM members also engage in various individual rituals in regards to their hair care and clothing choices as they prepare themselves for the Saturday run. Clothing choices are also important concerns for members. They must decide what outfit will best suit their individual running/walking needs in New Orleans' notoriously hot and humid weather. Several members share they are also self-conscious about the attire that they run in and how their body will fit in

them. Member Brittany shares that the summer heat doesn't affect her attire but how her clothes fit her body does:

I still wear the same (outfit). I bought a skirt to run in. I'm going to try it today for the first time. I bought a cheap one from Wal-Mart because Amber had on one Monday...She said they ride up. I'm self-conscious about my thighs so usually I run in capris.<sup>14</sup>

Here, SOTM members are directly concerned and aware of how they are perceived by others; specifically other runners and people in the park, when they are out for a run or walk. Some members feel that that they do not want to over-expose their bodies. However, the more these members exercise, they appear to be more comfortable with exposing their skin. Tina shared a similar story as Brittany:

Initially tights were out of the question. Like look at my thighs. I was completely self-conscious all of the time. I had to wear some sort of sweat pants or something that didn't conform or I would find the biggest longest shirt possible and over time it kind of evolved. I would see other people out who seemingly didn't care what they look like and I'm just going to wear these tights and u going to like it... eventually as my body started to change I was like maybe I can wear tights and shirts that are some sort of substantial length. Especially with the heat...I haven't stepped up to shorts level yet.

As SOTM members exercise more, and see their bodies transform, they become bolder in their exercise gear choices. SOTM members argue that many of the popular exercise apparel brands do not accommodate fuller bodies. Tina criticizes the Lululemon<sup>®</sup> lifestyle brand because of her belief that their clothing is not geared towards women with fuller bodies and the pricing of their apparel is prohibitive for many black women as she says, "I am not paying \$90 for a pair of yoga pants." Lululemon (see Figure 10) is not the only apparel brand that is criticized for the style or price of their apparel.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Brittany, June 5, 2013 outside New Orleans' City Hall.



Run Inspire Crop II  
\$86.00 USD

**Figure 10:** Lululemon running pants Courtesy of [www.lululemon.com](http://www.lululemon.com)

### **Where's My Size**

SOTM member Shelly expressed that even SOTM apparel does not fit the body types of many of their members. Alexis shared a similar sentiment when she stated:

Some women complain that the clothes are not a big enough size. Normally running gear is not for bigger women. The merchandising is really not a problem for me but simply trying to encourage people to work out is my goal.

Other SOTM members that are not even in New Orleans appear to agree with Shelly and Alexis.

In fact, at a SOTM national event held during the Essence Festival in New Orleans, a member directly addressed one of the SOTM founders about the size and style of SOTM official apparel. The member stated, "You all should consider creating tops for women with size G and H breasts. We want to look good when we work out too!" The founder agreed and stated that the organization would look into it.

This suggests that even though SOTM was founded in the interests of black women, many of its members still feel marginalized in regards to their bodies. Some of the members mentioned above, that are not ready to wear certain clothing, are carrying on the legacy of trauma forced upon their ancestors during slavery. These women are affected by the criminalization of black women's bodies (Roberts 1998) and feel that their bodies can only be



shown when they fit a certain build or type. However, members such as Tina and Brittany suggest that since they have been running and being a part of SOTM, they are now more comfortable with wearing a more expansive range of exercise apparel. Tina will now wear tights to run in and Brittany is experimenting with running in skirts. Furthermore, since the Essence event in July, the national SOTM group has adjusted their official apparel in order to accommodate more body types. They have increased the range of styles of their apparel that is available for members to purchase. The actions of the national SOTM group and those of their individual members are all steps towards more black women healing, accepting and appreciating their bodies.

### **The Root of Hair**

Personal hair care is also a weekly ritual that SOTM members take part in before participating in the Saturday runs. SOTM members are aware of the idea that there are black women who choose not to exercise because they do not want to sweat out their hairstyles. For many black women, their hair care practice is a weekly, if not daily practice. However, the SOTM members that participated in this research state that their hairstyle choices do not hinder their exercise habits including their weekly meet-ups. Alexis states that her overall health is more important than her hair as shared:

I used to have relaxed hair and I still worked out. Most of the time, I just went to the hairdresser more often. I was spending that money to get it done. I went natural for medical reasons temporarily and after a few months I said I think I'm going to stay. I was almost 200 lbs., so I could not care about my hair. It took me about 6 months to lose 50 lbs. I changed my diet and exercised. You can work out and then go do your hair afterward. Its ok not to be big boned. Everyone's bones are the same size. It's just fat.

Here, Alexis describes her own personal health journey and how she was able to lose 50 pounds and did not let her hairstyle deter her – she simply visited her hairdresser as often as needed in order keep up her “relaxed” hair. Unfortunately, all black women do not share have the budget

or the time to see their hairstylist as often as Alexis did. In her response, Alexis also alludes to a belief held by some black women that they are big boned, and therefore prone to be heavier than women of other ethnicities. Alexis argues that everyone's bones are the same size and therefore, not an excuse to hang on to fat or to be sedentary. Angel shares Alexis' sentiment in that she also does not let her hairstyle hinder her exercise schedule as she shares:

(It doesn't affect me) not at all, because it's hair. Not even when I had a relaxer. Now that I'm natural it's easier but even before I could put it up in a ponytail. I was a wash, roll and get under the dryer type of girl. I could take care of it myself. With the humidity I was always a pony tail girl. The hair, that's not a big deal to me.

Angel's statement suggests that she is a "kitchen beautician" (Jacobs-Huey 2006) because she can style her hair herself. She also states that she, like Alexis once wore her hair relaxed, but now opts for a natural hairstyle where her hair is free from chemical straighteners. Angel's ability to take care of her own hair is a way that she and other members who lack the resources that Alexis has, is able to exercise and still maintain their hairstyles. Shelly also shared a similar statement as Angel and Alexis in that her hairstyle choice does not impede her ability to exercise. She even shared what her exercise regimen is when she goes on vacation:

I do the cornrows because they are easier and I can wash them and don't have to worry about combing my hair out. A few weeks ago I flat ironed my hair and I went on vacation. And I didn't know how much I would get to work out so I brought the flat iron just in case. I went for a run and I was sweating but I didn't care. But I know a lot of sisters what they are going to do with their hair.

For these SOTM members, they do not allow their hair care practices to impede their exercise regimens. They are aware however, of the idea that hair care is a deal breaker for many black women who do not want to sweat out their hair. SOTM members are aware of the cultural significance of hair to black women. Instead of offering excuses for this, members provided the suggestions described above as to how black women can work out and still take care of their hair. They did so with the idea perhaps, that their personal experiences will inspire others.

## **CONCLUSION**

Before Tina started the New Orleans chapter of SOTM, she did not identify Audubon Park or City Park with black women as she suggests that she would only see white women running in uptown parks. Now, the New Orleans chapter of SOTM has existed for almost two and half years and Tina and the other SOTM members have claimed these spaces for exercise and social activities on a weekly basis. Furthermore, there are currently four official weekly runs for SOTM members in New Orleans; one is on Saturday in Audubon Park, another takes place on Mondays and Wednesdays in City Park with LTS and the newest run takes places on Thursdays near Dillard University. A further examination of the remainder of various other runs and races which SOTM members participate in, in addition to how individual members identify themselves within the SOTM group, will be discussed in the subsequent chapter.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **SOTM: A COMMUNITY OF WALKERS AND RUNNERS WHERE NO WOMAN GETS LEFT BEHIND**

The ideals that “no woman will get left behind” and “that someone will always walk with you” are at the core of the SOTM community. These ideals are not always noticeable from a first glance at the SOTM New Orleans’ Facebook page or at members during a weekly run. They do however, become more apparent when a new SOTM member does not give up during her first weekly runs because her walk/run partner is motivating her every step of the way. A Facebook post posted by a SOTM ambassador, that asks members to check-in after a rain storm prematurely ends a Saturday run, also supports these ideals. What follows in this chapter is an analysis of how SOTM members exemplify the ideals mentioned above and prove that they are a community of runners and walkers where “no woman gets left behind.”

#### **I WILL WALK WITH YOU**

Regardless of their individual goals, SOTM members find time to make other members feel comfortable; especially new ones and as member Brittany suggests, “Someone will always walk with you.” New members join SOTM with the belief that they will not have to embark on their fitness journey alone. SOTM member Monique for instance, recalls that during her first and only Saturday run with the group, that Tina walked with her the entire time and that it was an “enjoyable experience.” Monique’s experience suggests that there is a certain level of planning and consideration that goes along with each weekly meet-up to make sure each new member feels welcome and comfortable. Tina supports this idea as she argues, “If I know I haven’t been somewhere before and everyone takes off running, I’m going back to my car. If you have it in your head that you are going out with this group and they leave you to fend for yourself, then you will say I don’t want to be with these people. They are all friends, they don’t know me and

why would I come back?” Tina also shares however, that her desire to encourage new members to participate in the weekly meet-ups has adversely affected her own running goals:

Since I am in an ambassador position, when someone new came in I would just walk with them to help them. Instead of trying to improve my own running, my time was spent making them feel comfortable. So now Angel, I was with her walking, and now she is winning races in her age bracket. And I can't run a 5k consistently.<sup>15</sup>

The scenario described above suggests that Tina is exhibiting characteristics of Mulling's Sojourner Syndrome (Mulling 2005). She feels personally compelled as the SOTM Ambassador to walk with new members and help them feel comfortable at the weekly meet-ups. Tina is proud of Angel's accomplishments, but would like to increase some of her own. Tina also reveals that when she walks with someone and “they never come back again” that she has “wasted her time” and has done so at the expense of enhancing her own running ability. Tina admits that “she is ultimately responsible for her own health and fitness” and is also relieved that more SOTM members have now stepped up to assist new walkers/runners, therefore allowing her to run or walk at her own pace. She shares:

I think of how can I put my own time in and still be a leader? The good thing is now we have more people and distinct walk/run groups. So now a person can come and almost whatever run or walk level they are, they will have a buddy and I do not have to be everybody's buddy.

Tina's efforts to encourage new SOTM members to take their first run or walk has not been in vain because Angel for instance, is now a Co-Ambassador along with Tina and will lead group runs and meet-ups in Tracy's absence. The idea of “walking alone” may have deterred some SOTM members from exercise, before they joined the group, because they may not have exercised in years or did not know how to begin an exercise regimen. In addition, Angel, Tina and other SOTM current and future members lead active lives. They are also dealing with the cultural dynamics that were described in the literature review which include, but are not limited

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Tina on June 25, 2013 at P.J.'s Coffee shop.

to: time constraints and economic limitations. These are in addition to the racialized discrimination that these women have encountered in regards to their black, female bodies. For these women, walking alone is not a viable option and they choose to be a part of a group where they identify with and are motivated by other members. Angel supports this idea as she shares, “[Being in a group] keeps you going.” Angel also shares how she encouraged her friend to walk, and to set smaller, more achievable goals for herself before aiming towards completing a marathon:

My friend Elaine, I think that she sets high expectations with running. She and I keep conversations back and forth. I say you have to start with the walking, running, walking, running. She talks about wanting to do a half marathon but she’s not training for it. You can’t do it like that. You got to do something small, keep doing the 5ks consistently where it will get you to the place where you get into it and do it.<sup>16</sup>

Angel offered her friend simple training advice and after months of encouragement, her friend has taken her time with walking and has joined the SOTM group. As Angel demonstrates, it is not always simple to encourage new members to join SOTM. Some members for instance, hesitate coming out to weekly meet-ups because they feel they will be unable to run and will get left behind. Member Shelly shared that she herself hesitated before she joined SOTM due to a belief that she would not be able to keep up with the pace of the other members:

The first thing I thought was I can’t keep up with these sisters. I found the oldest person I could find. All I knew was I couldn’t keep up with them and I found the slowest runner. And I was the first person in. Then I was like oh you have runners and walkers. So I got information after as to who are the faster runners, and I knew that if there was a day I wasn’t running I could walk with someone or if I want a challenge there’s someone I can jump with. Some days you plan on running and then say we are just going to walk and chat.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Angel on June 20, 2013 at the Hey Café.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Shelly on June 21, 2013 at the Bean Gallery Café.



**Figure 11:** SOTM members at a Saturday Run

Shelly may have been intimidated when she first went out to a weekly meet-up but soon realized that there were other members who were at various fitness and running levels. She initially strategized to align her herself with whom she thought was the slowest runner, but realized perhaps, that she could not discern that type of information from just a glance at the different members. It was after she actually participated in a weekly run with members was she able to determine each member's individual skill level. This helped to put Shelly's mind at ease and allowed her to feel more comfortable within the group because, on any given day, she could decide to walk or run the trail and feel assured that she would have company along the way.

### **Walkers Talk, Runners Run**

Shelly's statement also revealed that she could choose to "walk and chat" along the trail with the walkers if she desired a less strenuous workout. This supports the statement that Brittany made that, "Honestly, the runners are usually not together. The walkers talk. And usually we're just running." Alexis reinforces Brittany's statement when she was asked about what runners discuss during a weekly run:

If you're really running you're running. Now (if) I'm running with beginners or people that don't have a quick pace then that's when I talk. You talk about different shoes and you talk about different running things. Now if I'm running, I'm not having any conversations.<sup>18</sup>

Brittany's, Alexis' and Shelly's statements suggest that there is a clear distinction between the experience of those who run during weekly runs and of those who walk. When SOTM members run during the weekly meet-ups, they do so independently of other members and are concentrating their efforts on completing the trail. Although Brittany's comments suggest that when she runs at her full pace that she is not having any conversations, she will however slowdown in order to encourage other members and to run and talk with them. At the same time, members such as Shelly, sometime make the conscious decision to walk the trail because they look forward to the conversation that occurs when members walk together.

## **NO WOMAN LEFT BEHIND**

In this chapter, I have already discussed the idea that part of the core of the SOTM movement is the idea that someone will always walk with you. Another core aspect of the SOTM movement is an idea that "no woman will be left behind." SOTM members do not merely recite this ideal. It is exhibited at every runs, race and meet-up. I have witnessed several instances of this throughout my weekly runs with the group. This notion is exemplified during each Saturday run. One Saturday morning for instance, I was completing fieldwork with SOTM; I decided to walk around the 1.8 mile trail in Audubon Park twice with Kelly. Tina started off walking behind us. As we were halfway through our second lap around the track, we paused for a moment, looked around and noticed that Tina was no longer behind us. We thought about turning around and going back to look for her. After a minute or so, we decided to make it to the end of the trail and just wait for her near the entrance circle. Once we arrived, we saw that Tina was waiting for us! She walked around the trail once and decided that she was finished for the

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Alexis on July 7, 2013 at Fatoush Café.



morning. Kelly and I thought we were looking for her, but Tina made sure that no woman was left behind.<sup>19</sup>

### **Facebook Community of Sistas on the Move**

The SOTM New Orleans' community is actually made up of two parts: the online Facebook community and the actual physical community where members meet up with each other for weekly runs and various outings. Both the virtual and the physical aspects of SOTM community are vital and often overlap with each other. For instance, membership into the SOTM community is obtained through their Facebook page; which is moderated by Tina. As a SOTM ambassador, she individually approves new membership requests for members and does so within 24-48 hours. Each new member is then greeted with a short biography of the organization through email. Tina then asks each new member to introduce herself to the group via Facebook post and to say why she is interested in being a part of the group. This exercise introduces each SOTM member to making their own posts in the group as members often post about their non-scale victories, challenges, weekly meet-ups and health related questions.

Members' non-scale victories include successes and goals that go beyond actual weight loss. Member Alexis recently posted about her non-scale victory of eliminating meat out of her diet for a week. She also posted weekly pictures of her meat-less dinners that she prepared, (see Figure 9) along with the recipes, in order to share them with other members. Members responded to Alexis' post with questions about how each of her meals came out and congratulated her on completing her 30 meat-less days! Tina also shared her non-scale victory of completing a 5k race on her birthday in 45 minutes. Members immediately responded to her Tina's post as well with words of encouragement and of celebration of her birthday.

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<sup>19</sup> Taken from field note data on April 22, 2013.



**Figure 12:** Alexis’ “Veggie Frittata”

In addition to being a platform for members’ posts, The SOTM online Facebook community is also utilized to make sure no member gets left behind; which helps to ensure the safety of each member. As is their custom, if one or more SOTM members are unaccounted for after a run or race, another member will post a Facebook message which will ask the unaccounted for member (s) to check-in and let everyone know that they are ok. This was exemplified after the NOLA Run for Boson was over and two members were still unaccounted for after other runners had already begun to leave. On April 22, 2013 SOTM New Orleans members participated in a “NOLA Runs for Boston” event in honor of those impacted by the Boston bombing the week before. The race was a 2.6 mile, free fun run that was held at City Park.

Tina posted a message in the Facebook group that said, “Hey Lisa and Jackie, please check in and let everyone know where you are. Everyone else is at the end of the track.” Lisa

responded with a post that said, “Hi, we are fine, we stopped at my car and are on the way back.” In this instance, a Facebook message was utilized because everyone in the group can see the message and can respond if they have seen a particular member. This works the best when the members who are out together bring their phones with them and have access to good phone and internet signals. If a member does not respond, one or more members of the group will go back to look for her to make sure everything is ok.

As evidenced above, whether they are running or walking in their neighborhoods or in well-lit public parks, SOTM members must be cognizant of their environment in order to protect their safety. This is especially true in an urban densely populated city such as New Orleans. For example, in 2012, the city of New Orleans reported 193 murders, 163 incidences of rape and 1,326 incidences of assault (City of New Orleans 2013). These statistics definitely provide cause for SOTM members to must remain vigilant of their safety during their run/walk and other meet-up activities. SOTM Member Blake is now all too familiar with the dangers that can arise from living in an urban city such as New Orleans. She shared on the SOTM Facebook page on a sunny afternoon; she went out for a run in her neighborhood and had some men tried to grab her. Fortunately for Blake, she was able to get away from her would be attackers and safely made it home. Though she revealed that the experience rattled her, she decided that she would not give up on running but would instead, she would just run on the park trails and with other group members.

Following Blake’s post, other SOTM members immediately posted words of concern and of encouragement for her bravery. An online discussion continued on the groups’ Facebook page as to how members could stay safe during weekly runs. In addition to running or walking together, members suggested carrying pepper spray and a whistle while running. Shelly even

suggested that the group take self-defense classes together.<sup>20</sup> Blake's experience and the statistics listed above suggest that the right to run and walk and in a safe space is a definite challenge for many women who live in urban cities such as New Orleans. Incidences of crime do manifest themselves in suburban and rural cities as evidenced by the recent tragedies at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut and the mass shooting in Aurora, Colorado.<sup>21</sup> These cities still do not endure the same frequency of assault and other attacks as a city such as New Orleans. Furthermore, though they are not unique to urban areas, the life lessons that SOTM members and other women learn from growing up and living in cities such as New Orleans prove to be invaluable to crafting safe spaces for each other.

### **SOTM: MORE THAN JUST A RUNNING GROUP**

On a Saturday night in September, a group of SOTM members met up at the Velvet Cactus, a Mexican restaurant in the Lakeview neighborhood of New Orleans, in order to fellowship with each other. I arrived to the restaurant a little before 9:00 pm and was welcomed to the sound of top 10 pop songs as I entered the restaurant. Purple, red, black and orange flags adorned the exterior and interior of the restaurant. The outside courtyard was equipped with an elaborate fountain which was decorated with multi colored gem stones, bottles and beads. It was reminiscent of an ancestral altar meant to please the ancestral spirits that were present throughout

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<sup>20</sup> The suggestion of the self-defense class speaks to how members meet up for other exercise activities outside of running. Members also meet up with each other at African Dance classes, yoga classes and cross training activities.

<sup>21</sup> On December 14, 2012, an armed gunman entered Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut and fatally shot twenty children and six adults. This mass shooting occurred in a middle class suburban town and sparked a contentious debate about enforcing stricter gun control laws in the United States (Candiotti et al 2013) On July 20, 2012, a masked gunman walked into a screening of a Batman film into the suburban town of Aurora, Colorado and began shooting in the audience. Twelve people were killed and 58 people were injured (Frosch et al 2012)

the restaurant.<sup>22</sup> Adjacent to the courtyard was a full bar that was housed completely separate from the restaurant and served as a designated smoking area. Inside the restaurant, photos of nature, black cats, skull heads lined the walls of the space. The entire “cantina” appeared to be a safe and calming space and fragrant with aromas such as fresh garlic, basil and grilled vegetables.<sup>23</sup>

When I arrived, the other SOTM members were already seated and gathered around a long, rectangular table. A server placed bowls of tortilla chips and salsa along the table while members sipped on cocktails and conversed with each other. Members were dressed in high heels, dresses and fitted denim jeans; a definite change from their running gear of tights, shorts and tennis shoes. At the table, members introduced themselves for those who may be new and shared what brought each of them to join SOTM. The discussions of the evening were not exclusive to running. Members also discussed recent travels they had just returned from in addition to an upcoming event that would be at Tulane University which would feature the hip hop artist, Common. Some members were obvious Common fans as they set reminders of the event in their cellular phones. For dinner, members dined on grilled tilapia, steak tacos and Caesar salads. After dinner, members were in no rush to leave the restaurant as Angel ordered all of the women a round of drinks. Some members also coordinated their plans for after dinner to go to a nearby party together. At the end of the evening, the members took several photographs (see Figure 10) in front of the restaurant’s fountain to commemorate the evening. This entire meal and gathering of SOTM members is significant because it was not done to

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<sup>22</sup> An ancestral altar is a place, usually within the home, that is meant to honor loved ones that have passed away. These altars are also utilized in various religious beliefs such as Christianity, Santeria and Buddhism to honor their specific deities. In this particular cantina, the altar that is inside the courtyard may hold reference for the Mexican Day of the Dead, where deceased family members are honored and remembered (Autry 25 2013)

<sup>23</sup> A Cantina is the Mexican name for bar, saloon or restaurant. Originally, Cantinas only allowed men admittance. Now, cantina’s are popular names for Mexican styled restaurants across the United States and in Mexico (De Garine etal 2001)

celebrate a race or even the SOTM national convention. It was simply a dinner, where SOTM members met up to socialize and to enjoy each other's company.



**Figure 13:** SOTM members at the Velvet Cactus

The New Orleans chapter of SOTM began as a vehicle to encourage black women to take care of their health one step, one block at a time. SOTM members accomplish this as they come together for several weekly runs where they walk, talk and run together. Since its inception in April of 2011, SOTM New Orleans members have expanded the group beyond the walking trail and into several aspects of their lives. This is exemplified in the ways by which members network with each other outside of walking trail and how they throw each other birthday parties, commune over meals and enjoy concerts together. Therefore, SOTM may be a community of runners and walkers, yet members' interaction goes beyond just physical exercise. What follows in the remainder of this chapter is an examination of how the SOTM New Orleans group is more than just a running group.

For SOTM members such as Amber, SOTM is her only outlet outside of her job and her home life. She shares that if she did not participate with SOTM that she would be home with her

boyfriend and that she “does not want him to my only source of entertainment.” Amber is also eager to sign SOTM up for different races outside of the weekly meet-ups and took the lead to create a SOTM New Orleans team for the Zombie Run which was held June 23, 2013 in New Orleans’ City Park.<sup>24</sup> The entry fee for the run is \$45 if you are part of a group and \$50 if you participate as an individual. A portion of the proceeds from the Zombie Run went towards benefiting Active Heroes and Rebuilding Together New Orleans.<sup>25</sup> During the Zombie Run, SOTM members met up at 6:00 am in City Park under the auburn park shelter as they distributed supplies. The supplies included Zombie Run t-shirts, a water bottle, headband, safety pins, twist ties, and red “life” balloons. The life balloons represented members’ internal organs and were the target of the zombie’s conquests. SOTM members did their best to hold onto at least one balloon. Some were successful; others did not escape the wrath of the zombies. Members also took pre and post zombie run pictures which were later posted on the group’s Facebook page. When the race began, all of the SOTM members were together. That soon changed after the whistle blew to begin and members were individually dodging zombies as if the 5k race was a game of flag football. Before the race ended, SOTM joined back together as some members waited for the rest of the group to catch up. Together, they linked themselves together as a human chain to ward off the zombies as they made their way across the finish line-as a team. This gesture gives more credibility to SOTM’S idea that “no woman gets left behind” because even though members may have separated during the race, they made sure that they finished it together.

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<sup>24</sup> The Zombie run is a 5k (3.1 mile) race that is held at different cities across the United States. Participants can either sign up as a runner and actually run the race, or as a zombie, where the goal of the latter is to playfully impede the runners throughout the course. Each run benefits local charities in the host city (Zombie Run 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Active Heroes is an organization that helps veterans and their families through physical therapy and mental health activities (Active Heroes 2013). Rebuilding Together New Orleans is an organization that utilizes volunteer labor to repair and rebuild homes of low income and elderly residents in New Orleans (Rebuilding Together New Orleans 2013).



**Figure 14:** SOTM members after the Zombie Run

### **Run With Benefits**

There are SOTM members that see each other several times a week whether it is at a meet-up or another outing. They see each other sweat during an intense run, or cry because a member has completed her first 5k race. Alexis shares that being a part of SOTM has helped her adjust to relocating to New Orleans as she states, “(I am) becoming friends and associates with other members and we have started hanging out. Since I am in the military, I had to relocate to a new place. I don’t know anybody so going to different places (with other members) is good.”

During field interviews, SOTM members were also asked, what, if anything, would they change about the Saturday meet-ups in Audubon Park? There was a consensus among many of the members who were interviewed in that they would like to see more women come out to the weekly meet-ups and many of them were unsure as to how to achieve this. Tina shares that is often easier to get members or potential members out to a food gathering than it is to get them on the walking/running trail:



“It’s a kind of bonding experience. Food seems to get people’s attention. For some reason you take running or the fitness portion out and its food, and we are sitting around doing something like that people will come out. People will come to a meet and greet and will not come out to run.”

Here, Tina expresses appears to be a bit dismayed at the idea that new members will come out to social gatherings and will not come out to run or walk. Her statement also suggests that SOTM members bond over food and that it becomes a fellowship experience, as evidenced by the dinner mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Even with Tina’s hesitation about new members and food gatherings, she continues to participate in them with the group and even organized one at her home. She held a meal planning gathering where SOTM members joined together to share vegetarian and pescatarian recipes. This event was held on a Sunday afternoon in July at Tina’s home. Six members were in attendance and included Tina, Amber, Angel, Shelly, Kenya and myself.

Each member drove herself to the gathering by herself and either parked in Tina’s driveway or found a spot along the street. Members were casually dressed in jeans and sweats. Each member brought a dish and a printed recipe to share with the group. On the menu was freshly brewed herbal tea with mint, grilled asparagus, chef’s salad, orzo and mushroom rice, olive humus and warm baked pita bread. The food spread was laid out in Tina’s spacious and sun-filled kitchen. Along her kitchen counters were mason jars filled with fresh basil, thyme, violets, rosemary and other herbs and flowers. The SOTM members discussed several topics at the table during their meal. Amber excitedly shared the secret ingredients of her orzo dish and Angel stated that was intimidated by vegetarianism because of her aversion to vegetables. Angel also admitted that if she had someone prepare the meals that were at this meet-up that she would give it a try. Kenya also shared that she enjoyed tasting the foods at the table but that she was unfamiliar with foods such as quinoa or even asparagus and that the experience pleasantly

enlightened her. No pictures were taken at this event and no running was involved either. It was simply a meet-up to encourage nutritious food choices among members.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I have discussed various ways in which SOTM is a community of runners and walkers, where someone will always walk with you and where no member will be left behind. These ideals help to encourage each SOTM member to take control of her own health one step at a time-and are accomplished in several ways. One way is through SOTM's Facebook group which provides members with an online support system in order to share their goals, successes and struggles. In addition, SOTM's weekly runs provide a safe location where members can run and walk together in addition to just enjoying each other's company. In closing, all aspects of the SOTM community described above are accessible to members at any time; regardless of how often or how little that each member participates.

## CONCLUSION

When this research began, its purpose was to examine some of the key concepts which contribute to the health statistics and stereotypes of black women's health and to identify what black women are actually doing to improve their health and to challenge those stereotypes. The concepts which were examined included cultural dynamics such as the culture of soul food, the criminalization of black women's bodies and black women's hair care practices which all have the ability to negatively impact the health of black women. The purpose of this research was further achieved through the creation of an ethnographic narrative about the interactions of the New Orleans chapter of the female running group - SOTM. Through field interviews with and participant observation of SOTM members, this narrative was crafted around the following questions: What motivates these women to run, walk and lead healthy lifestyles in a statistically unhealthy city? How is membership in SOTM beneficial to the overall health of its New Orleans' members? The subsequent analysis revealed that are three key themes which justify these questions. The first is an idea that these women claim public spaces within the City of New Orleans in which to exercise and interact with each other. The claiming of Audubon Park, as one of those public spaces is justified because SOTM members did not associate black women with running or walking in the park. Now, SOTM members make their presence known in this Uptown park every Saturday morning. The second theme is an ideal that "someone will always walk with you" and that no member has to embark on her journey of health alone. This translates to members having walk or run partners for every weekly run, walk or race. This ideal is also manifested in SOTM's online posts as they encourage each other to work towards and past their individual goals. The final theme is the ideal that "no woman will get left behind". This is also exhibited at every weekly run as members wait for even the slowest walker or runner

to finish her journey around the park. This ideal also speaks to members concern for the individual safety of each other as women must be vigilant and aware of their surroundings at all times, a byproduct of living in urban cities that are prone to acts of personal violence.

In closing, this narrative suggests that the experience of being a black female is not limited to negative statistics or stereotypes. This research does not suggest however, that membership into SOTM will alleviate all of the health problems of black women. Instead, it provides a platform for further research that exemplifies how even one committed individual can encourage change in a larger community and how participation within a supportive community is important for continued growth. This was exemplified in the fact that Tina, the SOTM New Orleans chapter, started this local group on her own and at the beginning, was the only person present at the weekly runs. The chapter has now expanded to an ever growing community of women who motivate each other and are not dismayed about the statistics and stereotypes about black women's health. They actively encourage each other take charge of their health in spite of cultural practices or other limitations; therefore choosing to impact black women's health in New Orleans in a positive way – one mile at a time.

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## VITA

Valerie McMillan is a New Orleans native and received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology from the University of New Orleans in May of 2005. After graduation, she moved to Chicago to work in the fields of non-profit development and domestic violence case management. In January 2010, Valerie enrolled in the University of New Orleans' graduate school to pursue a Master's of Science degree in Urban Studies with a concentration in Anthropology. She completed urban planning internships with Burk-Kleinpeter Planning/Engineering firm and with the University of New Orleans' Transportation Institute in 2010 and 2012 respectively. Valerie presented, *Where My Girls At? An Ethnology of Gender in New Orleans Second Line Culture*, at the 2011 American Anthropological Association's (AAA) National Conference in Montreal, Quebec. She also chaired the panel, "Crafting Women's Worlds" during the same conference. Valerie later received a thesis research grant from the University of New Orleans' Graduate School to study carnival traditions in Rio de Janeiro Brazil in February 2012, and was awarded a Ratepayers scholarship by the University of New Orleans also in February of 2012. In March 2012, her article: *Ethnography of Life Yoga Studio*, was published in the March 2012 issue of Anthropology News Academic Journal. Valerie was named "Most Outstanding Graduate Student" by the College of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of New Orleans in April 2012. She is currently employed full time by the City of New Orleans as a Management Development Analyst in the Treasury department and is also enrolled in the inaugural *Free to Be Power Yoga* teacher training. Upon graduation, Valerie intends to teach yoga and to continue her work and research on the health of women and girls.