

---

Theses, Dissertations, and Projects

---

2015

## Narratives of thriving : Black lesbian and queer women negotiating racism, sexism, and heterosexism

Arianne J. Napier  
*Smith College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Napier, Arianne J., "Narratives of thriving : Black lesbian and queer women negotiating racism, sexism, and heterosexism" (2015). Masters Thesis, Smith College, Northampton, MA.  
<https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/686>

This Masters Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, and Projects by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@smith.edu](mailto:scholarworks@smith.edu).

Arianne J. Napier  
Narratives of  
Thriving: Black  
Lesbian and Queer  
Women Negotiating  
Racism, Sexism, and  
Heterosexism

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative exploratory study explores the narratives that Black lesbian and queer women age 21 to 35 tell about their lived experience by addressing racism, sexism, and heterosexism and how Black lesbian and queer women live and negotiate in the world. In exploring these narratives, the research focused on the following questions:

*What are the ways in which Black Lesbian and Queer Women create their own story as they negotiate at the margins of society? How do Black lesbian women create meaning out of their experiences in the face of racism, sexism, and heterosexism?*

The study found that these 12 self-identified Black lesbian and queer Women were proactive and intentional about creating public and private spaces where they and other Black lesbian queer women could feel safe, comfortable, and free in being their full complex selves. The major findings included each participant exercised resistance strategies to maintain the integrity and expression of their identities, including engaging in practices of renaming to allow space for an intersectional and complex understanding of their identities. They were proactive in finding and building homeplaces to help them manage their complex and individually unique experiences of racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Their narratives revealed important themes regarding coming out and negotiating their identities within their family, faith communities, work, and other social

groups. This study revealed Black lesbian and queer women are not simply surviving they are thriving in their communities and in their lives. I conclude with a recommendation that clinicians develop a sense of how their own identities interact and intersect within systems of oppression, and of how Black lesbian and queer women might be impacted by racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other oppressions.

**Narratives Of Thriving:  
Black Lesbian And Queer Women  
Negotiating Racism, Sexism, And Heterosexism**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Social Work.

Arianne J. Napier

Smith College School for Social Work  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

June 2015



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I feel so much gratitude in my heart for the people in my life who have helped me through writing this thesis. It has taken a village to get me here.

~Jack, it is true that we had a rough start in the beginning, each of us misunderstanding one another in different ways. Yet through this process I consistently saw your effort, your willingness to try to understand. I am thankful for the time and energy you spent reading articles about this subject and asking questions to develop a deeper understanding of my investment in this thesis. Thank you for your patience, for following my pace even if sometimes it wasn't always in my best interest. Thank you for your excellent commentary and sensitivity in offering the commentary. Thank you for believing in me. I am deeply appreciative of our process together.

~Mom and Syl, thank you for the unconditional love. It has held me every step of the way, not just in this thesis process but in my lifetime, through each milestone, through each challenge and triumph that has led me to this point. To Dot, my grandmother, I hope I have made you proud.

~To my love, Chrisana, I can't tell you how blessed I am to have had you by my side in this process. You've seen the worst and the best of me and have held steady throughout my thesis writing. You were consistently my voice of reason, motivation, encouragement, and quite often the voice I didn't want to hear when I didn't want to be doing work. As always, you were necessary, and I am so grateful that you were walking alongside me.

~Professor Gary Bailey, I wouldn't be at Smith SSW if you hadn't told me in 2008 that I was supposed to be a social worker. Thank you for being one of my biggest champions for over 7 years. Thank you for seeing my true purpose.

~To my sisterfriends, I could not be more thankful for such wonderful women in my life. You've each encouraged me, believed in me, fed me, listened to me complain, cry, and completely regress while writing this thesis. Thank you for standing on each side of me, holding me up in this process.

~To my Smithie crew, I couldn't have survived these summers without each of you and certainly not this thesis process. Thank you for always raising me up, for the validation, for always making me feel seen and heard.

There are so many others that deserve thanks. You are known to me.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
III. METHODOLOGY.....	25
IV. FINDINGS.....	32
V. DISCUSSION.....	61
REFERENCES.....	69
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Facebook Recruitment Post.....	75
Appendix B: Email Recruitment Post.....	76
Appendix C: Informed Consent Agreement.....	77
Appendix D: Interview Questions.....	79
Appendix E: Transcription Confidentiality Agreement.....	80
Appendix F: HSR Approval Letter.....	82
Appendix G: Protocol Change Form.....	83
Appendix H: HSR Protocol Approval Form.....	84

*“There is obviously a huge amount of [research] to be done and each person who attempts to do a part of it with sensitivity and insight is making a contribution to more than scholarship. You are working quite tangibly towards the freeing of all of our lives.” -Barbara Smith (as quoted by Roberts, 1981, p.60)*

## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

As a Black lesbian woman and clinician I am deeply interested in working with queer people of color, in particular the Black queer community that has raised and nurtured me. This research is both a personal and professional endeavor aiming to explore the intricacies of Black queer women lives, as told by them. This research intimately explores the lived experiences of Black lesbian and queer women in relation to their intersecting identities and how they experience those identities in the context of racism, sexism, and heterosexism. The primary research questions to guide this qualitative exploratory study were: *What are the ways in which Black lesbian women create their own story as they negotiate at the margins of society? How do Black lesbian women create meaning out of their experiences in the face of racism, sexism, and heterosexism?*

To date, scholars such as Greene (1997), Moore (1996; 2008), Bowleg (2008a; 2008b) and Howard (2014) have contributed significantly to thinking about Black lesbian and queer women and have offered dynamic and colorful counter-narratives to the stereotypical depictions of Black lesbian and queer women. However, more research is

necessary to understand and celebrate the complexity and depth of Black lesbian and queer women experiences, for several reasons.

First, the existing academic literature on the experiences of Black lesbian and queer women is sparse, and in need of expansion. Theoretical lenses such as intersectionality and Black Queer Identity Matrix (Howard, 2014) need to be applied to empirical material and assessed. Second, the experiences of Black lesbian and queer women are rooted in structural inequalities affecting their intersecting social identities. (Bowleg, 2008a) These identities make them ripe candidates for understanding the influence of systematic oppressions and how these concepts are reinforced in our society.

Third, while there exists some theoretical and empirical academic literature about Black lesbian and queer women, there is an absence of complex portrayals of Black lesbian and queer women in the popular media, which are highly influential in determining social attitudes. When there are images of Black lesbian and queer women, the images are rife with stereotypes and caricatures of these identities, portrayed as “mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas,” (Collins, 2000). These roles and images are intimately bound with our slave history, and perpetuation of oppression for Black lesbian and queer women. These images also depart significantly from Black lesbian and queer women’s actual lived experience. In conducting qualitative research with people who self-identify as being Black lesbian/queer and a woman I hope to contribute to a more accurate public narrative as well as to enrich the modest academic literature.

Fourth, further research is needed to inform social work practice. While there is some psychological research (Greene, 1997; Hardy, 1997) that addresses working

clinically with African-American lesbian women, much of the research is outdated and isn't addressed from the perspectives or voices of Black queer women. This research is especially important to clinical social work practice because it is crucial for clinicians to have an understanding of how race, sexuality, and gender impact people's lived experiences. As is consistent with the NASW Code of Ethics it is important for clinicians to have broad understandings and frameworks to engage with Black lesbian and queer women in ways that maintain the dignity and worth of a person and to "promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity" (NASW Code of Ethics, Ethical Principles Section, paragraph 3) and are "mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity" (NASW Code of Ethics, Ethical Principles Section, paragraph 4). This research is essential in emphasizing that the experiences of Black lesbian and queer women should not be conceptualized or understood as a monolithic experience or as part of an additive approach (Bowleg, 2008a). Further, there are significant emotional and psychological vulnerabilities that exist as a result of managing these multiple oppressed identities and it is necessary for clinicians, researchers, and educators to be informed of these experiences to improve how they engage and work in response to the experiences of queer people of color.

Finally, qualitative research provides an opportunity for Black lesbian and queer women to create their own narrative, to give voice to their own story, however they want to define it, based on their own experience, and to position their stories in a place of power (Roberts, 1981). The telling of these narratives has the ability to be freeing for the participants and their stories have the power to challenge the oppressive structures that Black lesbian and queer women are navigating. Therefore, this exploratory qualitative

study will endeavor to explore what narratives Black lesbian women tell about the intersections of their identities.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

This chapter reviews the theoretical literature and empirical research that exists pertaining to the questions: *What are the ways in which Black lesbian women create their own story as they negotiate at the margins of society? How do Black lesbian women create meaning out of their experiences in the face of racism, sexism, and heterosexism?* I will first provide historical context from the literature on how Black women have carved a space for themselves in society, in political movements, and in their own communities, as well as how racism, sexism, and heterosexism/homophobia has operated in the Black community and in the lives of Black lesbian women. The following section will explore the concept of intersectionality, as well as explore the distinctive position of Black lesbian women as it relates to their multiple marginalized identities. Throughout these sections I will incorporate the existing research that addresses the multiplicity of Black lesbian women's lives.

#### Historical Context

Since slavery in the United States Black women have been oppressed across all sectors of society. Collins defines oppression as, "an unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society. Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity among other constitute major forms of oppression in the United States." (Collins, p.6, 2000) Historically, Black women have been in the position of having to create places and define



spaces for themselves in both public and private spaces to ensure that their voices, stories, and experiences were heard. Often Black women shared their stories in both white and Black communities with great risk of exile, violence, and social isolation, as their distinctive standpoint was often a threat to the status quo, and their invisibility was necessary in maintaining social inequalities (Collins, 2000). In addition, being Black, lesbian, and a woman put these women at even greater risk, as the sexuality identity marginalized them further and ostracized them from the Black community (Clarke, 1983; Smith, 2000), including places that historically would be considered safe havens such as the Black church, historically Black colleges and universities, sororities and fraternities, and Black civil rights organizations (Dudley, 2013).

Black Feminism began to take shape in 1970's because of the lack of inclusion and visibility of Black women in white feminist movements and Black communities. At this time Barbara Smith was at the forefront of this movement, writing, organizing, and building coalitions with other Black women and Black lesbian women to write the stories and experiences of Black lesbian women into existence. Black feminist analysis is rooted in the particularity of Black women's experiences. Jones, Eubanks, and Smith (2014) note, "we learn by analyzing our relations to, or membership in, oppressed and degraded social groups." Their efforts were intentional and strategic as they organized to create a collective voice of vast experiences. Black women were insisting in their writings, essays, workshops, lectures, and community meetings that the sexism in Black social and political thought, the racist bias in feminist theory, and the heterosexist bias in both communities be addressed (Lorde, 1984; Combahee River Collective, 1984; Collins, 2000).

This was a time of great tension for Black lesbian women within both white and Black communities, and it was frequently difficult to advance movements with common goals as a result of racism, sexism, and heterosexism. These oppressions within Black communities vilified Black women and Black lesbian women and served as a threat to mobilizing for liberation. The function of racism, sexism, and heterosexism was divisive in larger political movements, as well as to the individuals affected.

Since the 1970's several well-known Black lesbian women have written extensively about their lives through poetry, essays, music and have explored how they've been impacted by racism, sexism, and heterosexism (Clarke,1981; Lorde, 2007, Smith, 1983;2000). In this literature they explore the use and function of anger, erotic power, hatred and contempt, and how they have internalized the messages (Lorde, 2007; Clarke, 1981). They speak about being ostracized from communities that may have once been considered places of safety and refuge.

### **Intersectionality Theory**

As a result of the dissension within these communities there was a need to redefine and conceptualize social identity structures, not as independent phenomena but as interlocking matrices of privilege and oppression (Gopaldas, 2013). It is not enough to solely consider isolated dimensions of a person's existence and attempt to constitute it as their sum as a whole life (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). The Combahee River Collective stated "the development of an integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives" (Smith, 1983). This notion of using an integrated analysis and practice to think about identity is a tenet of intersectionality theory. Intersectionality

theory can be defined as an analysis “claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization” (Collins, 2000, p.246) “that starts from the assumption that social systems such as patriarchy, class, and race are inextricably interlocking and together cocreate a matrix of dominations, privileges, and oppressions”(Collins, 2000).

Few-Demo (2014), Greenwood (2008), and Crenshaw (1993) suggest that intersectionality theory has four basic tenets:

(1) social identities are neither exclusive nor discrete, and this complexity may cause conflict among identities (Crenshaw, 1993; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Few-Demo, 2014);

(2) social identities are rooted in ideological and symbolic domains (Crenshaw, 1993);

(3) social identities and their “associated systems of representation” are historically and contextually situated.(Crenshaw, 1993) and

(4) identities are embodied and operated within individuals and are affected by structures of power (Greenwood, 2008).

With this understanding intersectionality theory becomes a valuable theoretical framework to analyze and interpret the narrative data about the lives of Black lesbian women.

While there has been debate about the validity of intersectionality as a theory, paradigm, or methodology, Few-Demo (2014) asserts that intersectionality can be used as a framework to examine the nuances and complexities that occur within a social group, and to guide methodological considerations and data interpretation. Intersectionality is a theory that departs from Black feminism, and is fitting to use when exploring the

intersections of identity in the lived experiences of Black lesbian women (as in the present study). Collins (2000) notes, “by using intersectional paradigms to explain both the U.S. matrix of domination and Black women’s individual and collective agency within it, Black feminist thought helps reconceptualize social relations of domination and resistance” (p.247). In the present study I accept the premises of intersectionality and operate from the perspective that it is divisive and inaccurate to separate oppressions from one another, and that Black lesbian woman most often experience their oppression simultaneously (Smith, 1983).

### **Navigating at the Margins**

When thinking about Black lesbian women through the intersectionality theoretical framework it becomes clear that Black lesbian women hold an unusual social location within webs of power and privilege as a result of their intricate interlocking oppressions: that is, they navigate at the margins of institutions. Yet Black women and Black lesbian women must continue to operate within the world—inside racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist institutions. This necessity builds a natural duality of seeing and living both inside and outside these systems and institutions “living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both.” (hooks, 2000,p.341). The inside-out and outside-in perspective is the navigation that is necessary for the survival for Black lesbian women.

The oppressed position of Black lesbian women is often a source of great stress, trauma, and rage as they are forced to deal with onslaughts of racism, sexism, and heterosexism at all angles. However, hooks suggests that because this position offers no

“institutionalized other,” with no social or political power to oppress or exploit another group of people there is an inherent opportunity. hooks (2000) suggests that we use this position as a way to challenge the dominant narrative and actively build a counter-narrative. She challenges people on the margins to use this social position and vantage point as “a site of resistance,” to honor the position of marginality and to hold onto it, navigating from center to the margins and back again. This navigation allows the opportunity to take information, lessons, and leanings in these dominant spaces and using them to influence our own liberation, liberatory practices, radical perspectives rather than to assimilate into the center and adopt the “master’s tools.” Black lesbian women on the margins of society must learn how to navigate these power structures to build meaningful and life-sustaining relationships.

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular, and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identifiable as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish (Lorde, 1984).

Having briefly established some historical context and reviewed theoretical approaches to the exploring and gaining insight into the experiences of Black lesbian and queer women, I will review the empirical literature below.

## **Coming Out**

Narratives about Black lesbian women run the gamut in addressing multiple aspects of the Black lesbian woman experience. Some of the research addresses the complexity and multiplicity of the BLW experience and how these identities make the black lesbian women experiences unique. However, many articles address sexuality without considering how race and gender influence sexual identity, and coming out as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum (2001) and Jordon & Deluty (1998) reference the positive impacts of coming out as part of the LGBT, reporting coming out results in lower psychological distress, lower suicidal ideation, greater social supports, less anxiety and depression, and higher self-esteem. However, Rust (2003) suggests that LGBT people of color have difficulty coming out due to fear of racism within society and in LGBT mainstream communities, heterosexism, and conflicts related to religious or spiritual upbringing and belief systems.

Bowleg, Burkholder, Teti & Craig (2008) discovered in a mixed methods research of 19 Black lesbian and bisexual women (LBW) that they were more likely to come out if they had more social support, were active copers, and had a higher sense of self esteem. Other studies (e.g. Bowleg et al., 2008b) have identified some coping strategies as managing being out, covering their sexual orientation, or confronting or educating coworkers. The majority of the women found it “more stressful” not to be open about their sexual orientation (Bowleg et al., 2008b) and many purposefully chose to be out to challenge heterosexists’ assumptions. However, being out also meant having to negotiate and “make strategic decisions” about disclosing sexual orientation as a way of minimizing negative reactions. Six of the participants in the Bowleg et al. (2008b) study

chose to “conceal” their sexual orientation by monitoring speech and sharing little information about personal lives, and they reported stress in navigating casual discussions as they felt “on guard all the time”. The Black lesbian and bisexual women in this study who did not discuss their sexual identities publicly stated their choice was compounded by needing to maintain ties with African American communities, their families (especially elders in the family), and relationship to church community. For Black lesbian and bisexual women who chose to come out to their families or communities, they reported experiencing tacit acceptance, rather than complete acceptance or rejection. There were some who reported coming out to some family members and not others, as well as Black lesbian bisexual women who came out and felt their family was completely accepting. In addition the results of this study showed that Black lesbian bisexual women who more strongly identified their lesbian identity rather than their Black identity were more likely to be out and talking about their sexual identification. Bowleg et al. (2008a) found that this result is inconsistent with intersectionality theory as it suggests social identities are independent and separate, rather than interdependent as intersectionality theorists suggest.

## **Youth**

Coming out can be understandably difficult for Black lesbian women since the communities and identities they belong to have been oppressed and discriminated against based on race and gender; coming out as a sexual minority can feel even more isolating. This isolation can be even more difficult for people if there is no one in their community who share these identities. As a result, it is not hard to imagine the challenges and turmoil young people must experience when they are thinking about exploring their sexuality.

Research has shown “sexual minority” youth are taught implicitly through family, school, church and other authorities that heterosexuality is the only acceptable form of sexuality (Reed, Miller, & Timm, 2011). In addition, the larger societal message has been that being “ a woman” has meant behaving heterosexually and having children, and to be “a real girl” it is only appropriate to have desire for the other sex and ultimately express that through parenthood (Reed et al., 2011). This understanding supports the statistic that “adolescent lesbian and bisexual women are 2 to 10 times more likely to have been pregnant, be adolescent mothers, and have repeat pregnancies (Reed et al, p. 571) than their heterosexual peers. Reed et al. (2011) reported in a study of 14 young Black sexual minorities between 16 -24 years old that some of these youth are getting pregnant intentionally as a way of asserting their adulthood, believing that parenting and mothering will lead to acceptance and unconditional love, asserting sexual agency and reproductive freedom, and believing that as young lesbians that having children with a partner would legitimize their same sex relationships. There were also two participants who reported that having children and appearing feminine is what she “should do” and would make her life “easier” to meet goals of being successful and having a job. While there were some narratives in the research that suggested pregnancy was an “identity management strategy,” and a way of assimilating to heteronormativity, they were not attempting to hide or deny their sexuality. Instead pregnancy was conceptualized as identity affirming and validating to coming of age and adulthood. Reed et al. (2011) conceptualize their pregnancies as maintaining reproductive power and as “survival of identities difficult to express and...difficult to have legitimated” (p. 579).



In a study of Detroit Black lesbian and bisexual girls between 12 and 24, Robinson (2010) found that these young Black girls experience many of the same challenges white LGBT youth experience; the Black girls, however are lacking social resources. Robinson's participants addressed having witnessed and experienced abuse, domestic violence, and violence in their communities. In addition, most of the participants reported struggling with anger, problems with impulse control, and suffering from other mental health issues that stemmed from reactions/rejections from family members regarding their sexuality and gender expression. The participants in the study revealed there were limited spaces for them to be and feel comfortable, secure, and safe. Each of the participants expressed experiencing microaggressions based on race, homophobia in the Black community, and being vulnerable to street harassment as a result of being mostly with women (Robinson, 2010). Some of the participants expressed experiencing internalized homophobia, related to having grown up in homophobic church communities. Robinson (2010) notes it is essential to have mental health professionals and community workers to help young Black lesbians develop "whole, integrated personal and social identities, and to gain healthy emotional adjustment during their 'coming out' process" (p.67). In addition, Robinson's research suggests we offer interventions that address Black lesbian youths multiple, interlocking identities that are supportive and affirming of their lesbian, racial identity, and "womanist-centered." These interventions need to be implemented for the youth as well as their family, and help youth find faith-based communities that are supportive of their identities.

## **Black Lesbian Families**

In 2009-2010 Zuna Institute disseminated a National Black Lesbian Needs Assessment that was completed by 1,596 Black lesbian women that helped to identify issues Black lesbian women viewed as important. To complement the quantitative study they conducted multiple focus groups with Black lesbian women in New York, Denver, Atlanta and Chicago with an average of 12 people in each group. These focus groups revealed that Black lesbian women are concerned with issues related to family, health, identity, access to financial and community resources and community activism. The survey revealed that 69.5% of Black lesbian women were interested in creating families and having children, or already have children and 45% were currently raising children or are planning to co-parent.

## **Intimate Relationships**

There is insufficient information regarding the romantic relationships of Black lesbian women. However, in a clinically focused study, Hall and Greene (2002) explored the relational dynamics between Black lesbian women and their partners, specifically how similarities and difference manifest in the relationship, in particular through social class. Using five case studies they explored how social class impacted each of the relationships and found that it is imperative for couples to discuss their personal value system related to class with each other. They reported family legacy would influence a Black lesbians view of herself and of a potential partner. Hall and Greene (2002) found that it is the *meaning* assigned to class that determines whether or not class difference will be problematic in a relationship. While the study is limited by a small and homogeneous sample (10 well-educated middle-aged African-American lesbians), it does

offer insight into romantic relationships for Black lesbian women and is useful to consider for clinicians in social work practice.

### **Gender Presentation**

There are few studies that explore lesbian gender expression within the Black lesbian and queer community. The research that exists uses popular language like “butch” or “aggressive” and “femme” to be used to describe roles in the Black lesbian and queer relationships. The term “aggressive” can be defined as those “who identify as masculine in appearance, behavior, erotic expression, and/or relationship role” (Wilson, 2009). Femme is most commonly defined as, “women who identity as feminine in appearance, behavior, erotic expression and/or relationship roles” (Wilson, 2009).

Mignon Moore (2006) completed a mixed method study analyzing whether or how gender presentation is perceived or enacted in the Black lesbian communities in New York. Moore collected data through focus groups, participant-observation fieldwork, a 14-page survey, and through semi structured interviews. Moore aims to provide a window into the “the lesser known” black woman by presenting three physical presentations of gender, their meanings in relation to one-another as well as across class in black communities, and in relation to existing butch and femme definitions. Moore notes in examination of the existing literature that Black lesbian women in the 1970’s were more concerned with challenging racism, than joining the women’s movement, which was influenced by lesbian feminist ideologies. As a result, Black lesbian women continued to perpetuate gender roles and maintain butch and femme dichotomies within their relationships. In Moore’s sample of over 100 women, she discovered three categories of physical presentation. Femme/feminine women, “wear dresses or skirts,

form-fitting jeans, tops that are low cut or that show cleavage, makeup, jewelry, and accessories such as a purse or high-heeled shoes that display a sense of femininity” (p.124). Gender-blender, the second category, is specific to the Black-Latino population and departs from existing literature and understanding of androgynous presentation. Gender-blender women, “wear certain men’s clothing like pants or shoes, combined with something less masculine like a form-fitting shirt or a little makeup. Sometimes their clothes are not specifically men’s clothes but are tailored, conservative women’s items worn in a less feminine style” (p.125). In the Black lesbian community these women are often identified as “femme-aggressive” which is understood as both a feminine gender presentation and a masculine gender presentation. These women often wear their clothes in a masculine style but display their hair, breasts, and hips signaling women’s bodies. Moore’s final category, “transgressive” refers to women who, “usually wear men’s clothes and shoes and coordinate these outfits with heavy jewelry, belts with large, masculine buckles, and ties or suspenders for a more dressed- up look” (p. 125). Moore coined the term transgressive because many of the women she interviewed did not like the term butch or stud; some reported aggressive was more accurate, and they transgressed notions of femininity. Moore found that while femme presentation didn’t reflect any specific personality traits or ideologies, the participants who were transgressive also reported an assertive dominant personality presentation, which reflected how they felt they *should* behave. In contrast the transgressive women also reported their assertiveness is not enacted in intimate relationships. Moore’s (2006) research revealed that these categories are not fixed and have the possibility to change over time and noted explicitly that shifts in gender presentation are not random.

## **Multiple Forms of Oppression and Mental/Physical Health**

Wilson, Okwu, and Mills (2011) developed a questionnaire surveying 85 Black lesbian women at an event in California held for lesbians of African descent. They examined the relationship between multiple forms of oppression, mental health and physical health by exploring whether multiple forms of oppression would significantly predict health, including measure of depression as a mediating variable, “given that prior research has proposed mental health status as potential mechanism connecting oppression and physical health.” In this survey they measured physical health and mental health based on (1) health status, including physical and mental health; (2) health behavior, including routine medical exams; (3) health beliefs; (4) health care access, including questions about discrimination and health coverage; and (5) demographics (Wilson et al., 2011). Their research revealed Black lesbian women experience multiple forms of oppression including, but not limited to, racism, sexism, heterosexism, as well as ageism, weight-based oppression and gender expression discrimination (Wilson et al., 2011). They found that those who experienced weight-based oppression had indirect impacts of poor health as it decreased mental health, which in turn decreased perceived physical health (Wilson et al., 2011).

The Zuna Institute (2010) survey showed underreporting in domestic violence incidence because of fear of discrimination. The respondents have significant worries about mental and physical health, and research has shown Black lesbian women have “shorter life expectancies, higher death rates from heart disease, diabetes, and cerebrovascular disease” (Zuna Institute, 2010; Mays, Yancey, Cochran, Weber, & Fielding, 2002). The respondents addressed concerns about disclosure and invisibility in

the workplace, with health workers and physicians, and in the larger community (Zuna Institute, 2010) as they worried about rejection and discrimination based on sexual orientation, race, and gender.

### **Informal Social Supports**

The role of social support systems cannot and should not be underestimated for Black lesbian women, as these systems, when available or created, nourish, and provide a safe and protective environments for community members to be held and healed. Glass and Few-Demo (2013) define informal supports as elements that provide emotional, spiritual, and social support and connection, including “family of origin, extended family, religious organizations, and social networks” (p. 715). Glass and Few-Demo showed that Black lesbian women in relationships and with families are constantly negotiating their identities and their relationships to receive support as individuals, “the couple chose to enact dual roles, a culturally defined role as members of their Black community and a separate, private role as lesbian partners at home” (p.718). As found in other studies Black lesbians are often provided tacit acceptance from family or other informal social support systems. As a result of navigating within those parameters some couples have “desexualized their relations with their extended families to maintain positive and reciprocal social ties” (p.718).

In response to these dynamics some lesbian couples co-created a “homeplace” (hooks, 1997; Few-Demo, 2013) involving “a physical and emotional environment of safety, affection, and full acceptance of their lesbian identity that was not provided by family and friends”(p.720). Few-Demo showed that these women’s racial identities were often more integral to defining their personhood rather than their gender or lesbian

identity, and although there was minimal external validation for the Black lesbian couples, they did not want to end familial relationships or leave social institutions. Instead they employed resiliency strategies, like creating a “home place,” accepting fictive kin labeling, and creating boundaries around the family unit to control access and influence, that served as self-protective and allowed them to maintain those relationships (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013).

In a national sample of 5,500 Black lesbian women Battle and DeFreece (2014) explored the impact of religion/spirituality with community/civic engagement and overall health and happiness. The survey determined that Black lesbian women’s overall health and happiness was associated with high household incomes, being in romantic relationships, and high levels of spirituality. Battle and DeFreece (2014) defined spirituality as “one’s relation with God and self, while religion was defined [as]...communal practice and negatively views as denoting an oppressive legacy” (p. 6). The study noted that the prediction of happiness with spirituality affirms the cultural agency and adaptability of black lesbian women. Therefore, Black lesbian women’s relationship to spirituality improved their ability to cope with difficult situations, assess and make the most of difficult circumstances, to heal from the impacts of marginalization, and to maintain personal integrity. The self-reports of happiness and health from these black lesbian women are directly connected to their own agency, creativity, and will to create communities and spaces that allow them to find healing as they try to reconcile discrimination from their families, home church communities, and other institutions that have been racist, sexist, and heterosexist.

## **Resilience and coping strategies**

Using data from interviews at a Black lesbian retreat in Southern California Bowleg, Huang, Brooks, Black, & Burkholder (2003) explored themes of resiliency in the lives of women who identify as Black lesbian women. Bowleg uses a multicultural model of stress to examine multiple minority stress of Black lesbian women, as this model addresses “Black people’s ‘mundane extreme environmental stress experiences’ (MEES) (Allison, 1998; Peters & Massey, 1983; Bowleg et al., 2003). This model acknowledges, “racism and subtle oppression are ubiquitous, constant, continuing and mundane as opposed to an occasional misfortune” (Pierce, 1975, p.195). To understand resilience, Bowleg uses the transactional model of resilience to understand how stressors or challenges from racism, sexism, and/or heterosexism activate forms of resiliency. The interviewees reveal several links between racism and sexism, and frequently negotiating when, where, or whether to disclose their sexual orientation. The interviewees reported difficulty in living life as “complete” or “wholly” instead of with fragmented identities and being forced to “code switch” in different environments. This study reported resilience in external environmental contexts with families and Black communities, which at times served as buffers against racism, sexism, and/or heterosexism. Four of the interviewees reported their desire to remain connected within Black communities, like the Black church or Black community leaders, in spite of heterosexism because these environments served as a buffer against racism (Bowleg et al., 2003). Participants researched books, magazines and the Internet to identify resource for, by, or about Black lesbian women (Bowleg et al., 2003). There are numerous internal self-characteristics that the 19 interviewees employed that indicated resilience, such as spiritual



characteristics, feelings of uniqueness, self esteem, behavioral and social competencies, and happiness, optimism, and humor. This study identified resiliency tactics consistent with the transactional model and explained Black lesbian women are often resilient when managing their intersecting identities in the face of racism, sexism, and heterosexism.

Bowleg, Craig, and Burkholder (2004) conducted a mixed methods study at a Black lesbian retreat in California, to examine the active coping of Black lesbian women using a psychosocial competence model which assesses coping, trust, and self-efficacy to identify active coping behaviors. They asserted that individuals who possess psychosocially competent characteristics, like self-efficacy and self-esteem, are also adept at negotiating the changes of their environments and produce proactive responses to stressful life events. The researchers measured internal factors (including self-esteem, race identification, and LGBT social identification), external factors (including social supports and LGBT resources), with active coping based on the psychosocial competence condensed scale as the dependent variable. The study revealed that for Black lesbian women the internal psychological factors were more predictive of active coping than external factors. Bowleg et al. (2004) suggests that this was explained because active coping reflects an internal psychological dimension. A limitation of this study was its failure to capture extended family and friend networks as part of the external factors, even though research (Glass, 2013) has shown these networks to be protective factor for Black lesbian women.

Bowleg, Brooke, and Ritz (2008b) conducted a qualitative study exploring the stressors experienced by 19 Black lesbian women in the work place, and coping strategies they used. Each of the interviewees experienced the impacts of racism, sexism, and

heterosexism differently, and many of them conceptualized the oppression as separate acts of oppression, rather than interlocking systems of oppression. Through anonymous questionnaires the interviewees identified heterosexist related stressors that leave the women feeling marginalized. They expressed stress in having to monitor their behavior in fear their heterosexual female coworkers may mistake friendliness for sexual attraction, and the heterosexist focus of work place conversation that causes feelings of isolation (Bowleg et al., 2008b). The racism related stressors included the isolation of being the only Black person, as well as being passed for a job opportunity because of race. The sexism related stressors included women being perceived as less valuable than men, being perceived objectified and as sexual objects. (Bowleg et al., 2008b). Regarding the intersections of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, ten of the interviewees reported that being a Black lesbian woman made them vulnerable to multiple forms of work place prejudice. Ten of the 19 interviews reported that because their very existence strayed from the “White male norm” they were subject to discrimination or prejudice, and frequently it was unclear which social identity was causing the negativity.

## **Conclusion**

This empirical research supports the literature of essayists and theorists and is showing that Black lesbian women are disadvantaged and suffer disproportionately in comparison to straight white and Black communities, as well as the larger LGBTQ community. Many of these studies highlight that Black queer women bear the brunt of discrimination based on race, sex/gender, and sexual orientation creating difficult, stressful, and painful work environments. However, further research is needed to understand better how Black queer women navigate these forces, build meaningful

relationships within communities that provide nourishment, comfort and safety. In this research I explore the narratives Black lesbian and queer women are creating for themselves.

*“I am a storyteller. I’m a qualitative researcher. I collect stories; that’s what I do. And maybe stories are just data with a soul.” – Brene Brown*

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

This study explores the narratives that Black lesbian and queer women age 21 to 35 tell about their lived experience by addressing how the impacts of racism, sexism, and heterosexism impact how Black lesbian and queer women live and negotiate in the world. In exploring these narratives, the research focused on the following questions: *What are the ways in which Black Lesbian Women create their own story as they negotiate at the margins of society? How do Black lesbian women create meaning out of their experiences in the face of racism, sexism, and heterosexism?*

To thoroughly explore these questions a qualitative exploratory study was chosen, for several reasons. First, a qualitative approach empowers Black lesbian and queer women by placing their voices at the center of the research and providing a means for them to share their personal experiences in their own words. Second, a qualitative research design is appropriate given the early stage of research with this group of people. Qualitative methods fundamentally aim to empower the participant and privilege their stories and perspectives, which is a goal of this research. Lastly, given the lack of empirical research of Black lesbian and queer women exploring their experiences with

racism, sexism, and heterosexism there is a necessity for more research that captures Black lesbian and queer women experiences.

### **Sampling**

The sample for this study includes 12 women, ages 21 to 35 who self identify as being Black, lesbian or queer, and as women. Of the 12 people interviewed 10 of them were under the age of 30 years old. The participants were from diverse cities and states across the United States, including Wisconsin, Illinois, Colorado, Boston and New York City. I chose 21 to 35-year-old participants to narrow the phenomenon in the study, because the literature suggests that developmental stage as well as historical era may significantly impact how the participants conceptualize and experience their race, gender, or sexual orientation identities. Identity formation theories support that adolescent development and young adult development are stages when individuals are grappling with identity issues related to romantic relationships, friendships, sociopolitical beliefs/values, as well as meaningful interpersonal, vocational, and sexual choices (Sokol, 2009). Therefore, based on the literature I interviewed participants at a post-adolescent stage of identity development and when they would be able to be reflective and thoughtful about their experiences related to their race, gender, and sexual orientation. I chose the age 35 years because I would be recruiting my sample through the use of social media. Therefore, I was concerned I would recruit few subjects over 35 using social medias as the primary recruitment method and that subjects over 35 would be outliers based on their developmental stage and historical experience.

### **Recruitment**

The participants were recruited through non-probability methods of sampling; convenience sampling via social media, and snowball sampling. I expected the snowball sampling method allow me to recruit participants through trusted resources and would encourage participants to inquire about the study. Advertising for participants was conducted through social media, including Facebook statuses and in Facebook groups that cater to queer people of color in Boston, MA and New York, NY. Using social media proved to be well suited for the study age group, as I received seven email inquiries within the first two days of posting, 32 people shared my post in their own social groups and on their person Facebook pages, and I posted in multiple Facebook groups that catered to Black queer women. In addition, the research study was advertised at a local spoken word venue that caters to the Black and Queer spoken work community in Boston. Snowball sampling, however, resulted in no additional participants.

Once I established contact with the participants through email correspondence I asked two screening questions: (1) Are you between the ages of 21 to 35? (2) Do you identify as Black, Lesbian and a Woman? All of the participants who responded “yes” to all of these questions were emailed the Informed Consent Agreement (Appendix C) and provided instructions to read, print, and sign the consent form and return it by mail. Each participant was notified that the Informed Consent Agreement must be signed and received prior to the interview. Upon receipt of the signed consent form I contacted each participant and arranged a convenient location and time to conduct the interview. If the participant was unable to meet in person due to geographical distance/difficulty we arranged to meet via Skype. Mailing the Informed Consent Agreement via the US postal service served as a barrier for many of the potential participants, and as a result there

were seven potential participants that expressed interest and were not interviewed, as they didn't readily have access to a post office and preferred an electronic signature. As an alternative, I mailed consent forms with a self-addressed stamped envelope. This was an effective alternative and four consent forms were submitted with this method. To conduct the interviews we met in several café locations around Boston.

### **Ethics and Safeguards**

To ensure confidentiality of the interview data I assigned participant identification numbers that were attached to the participants chosen name/pseudonym, age, gender, race, and sexual orientation, which was stored in a secure folder on my password-protected computer. Once the interviews were transcribed, each interview was saved into a folder on my secure computer, utilizing the participant ID number. This number corresponded to all documents containing audio recordings of the interview. The names and contact information of the participants are stored in the research email account. Once the thesis is approved this information will be downloaded and stored on password protected external hard drive, and the research email account will be deactivated. All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period.

### **Risk and Benefits**

Participation in this study had several benefits and minimal potential risks for the participants, all of whom were informed of the benefits and risks in the Informed Consent

Agreement signed by each participant. The participants benefited from involvement in the study because they had an opportunity to share their experience as Black lesbian and queer women, which can be a meaningful, cathartic, and positive experience, given there may be few opportunities to do so in their daily lives. The interview provided the participants an opportunity to critically examine and reflect on their intersecting identities. Participant 7 stated, “I think what you are going to create, and what you are helping me do through this therapy [read: interview] is contributing to our culture and our collective consciousness and helping move us forward.” In addition, their stories are contributing to research related to the lives of Black Lesbian Women and will certainly support clinicians, educators, and others in helping professions to gain insight into their lived experience. The potential risks could come from questions related to race and racism, gender and sexism, and sexual orientation and heterosexism, which could cause emotional distress, as these questions, may be connected to painful or traumatizing memories. (However, none of the participants reported feeling unsafe or experiencing emotional distress.) Lastly, because participant recruitment was through social media, public announcements, and word of mouth, participants were notified that there could be some risk of other people becoming aware of the subject’s participation in this study. To ensure confidentiality and privacy, they were asked to not discuss identifiable or private information with others. Participants were provided a list of supportive resources based in New York, Boston, and at a national level.

### **Data Collection**

The data were collected via Skype or in person between February 20, 2015 and March 22, 2015, using semi-structured, open ended intensive interviewing with six



demographic questions, 19 open-ended questions, and seven possible follow-up questions. The in person interviews were held in several locations most convenient for the participants in Boston, two of the most frequent locations were, Ula Café and Café Aromi in Jamaica Plain, MA which can be accessed via public transportation and are wheelchair accessible. During the Skype interviews I was located in my apartment, in a secluded room. The interviews ranged in length from 35 minutes to 90 minutes not including the review of the informed consent agreement and an opportunity to ask questions. Each interview was recorded through an Olympus digital recorder and transferred to a password-protected computer directly after the interview. During the interviews, I took some notes, however I mostly recorded my reflections following each interview to accompany and support the thematic analysis. The interviews were transcribed by two professional third-party transcriptionists, each of whom signed Volunteer or Professional Transcriber's Assurance of Research Confidentiality (Appendix E) form. The transcriptions were saved in the corresponding file with the participants ID number.

The interview questions (Appendix D) were designed to evoke the personal narratives of how the participants negotiate their race, gender, and sexual orientation and how they are impacted personally and in their community by racism, sexism, and heterosexism. These questions address a range of themes including development of Black lesbian women identity, sense of community, navigating in communities/workplace as a Black lesbian women responses to racism, sexism, and heterosexism and personal accounts of participants' perception and understanding of their identities and how their identities intersect in their community.

## **Data Analysis**

I performed thematic analysis of the interview material as follows. I read and listened to each of the transcribed interviews multiple times and began coding by writing comments on the transcribed materials, identifying frequently used phrases, words, and language by the participants. I analyzed the content for relevant and repeating themes, phrases and language that came up in multiple interviews, in the literature, and I analyzed for themes that may have been unique. In this process I highlighted quotes and organized the quotes by a color-coded theme. The themes were based at the first level on the interview questions guides, and at a secondary level on categories that emerged from the data such as: (1) Family (influence of family, family resilience); (2) Black Community (influence of Black church, homophobia in Black community); (3) Self-Love (being unapologetic about identities); (4) Community Affirmation (sacredness of black spaces, feeling full acceptance in all identities, chosen family). Once I identified these themes, I grouped each quote/excerpt from the interviews under these categories. Under the themes and quotes I wrote comments that helped me draw connections to other themes that emerged to be formalized into the following findings chapter.

*“We are even more expansive than all these new words you are using for us like ‘fierce,’ ‘powerful,’ ok, we are, we are brilliant, we are shy sometimes, and we are, masculine and feminine and sometimes all at the same time...I think we are the divergent ones.”- Participant*

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Findings**

This chapter reports findings from 12 qualitative interviews with individuals who self-identified as Black lesbian and queer women ages 21 to 35 years old. The interview questions were exploratory questions to develop a sense of how Black lesbian women experience their identities within the context of systematic oppression, specifically racism, sexism, and heterosexism. In addition, the questions aimed to explore how these individuals create meaningful relationships and experiences to combat the systemic pressures in their daily lives. The interview began with demographic questions and remaining questions aimed to explore the participant’s personal and lived experiences. Of the 12 participants, 5 were conducted via Skype and the others were conducted in person.

*Demographic data.* The participants ranged from 24 to 34 years of age and the average age of participants was 27. The majority of the participants (n=9) lived in the Northeast including Greater Boston area, New York City, Newark, Philadelphia, and DC, with the remaining participants (n=5) living in Denver, Illinois, and Wisconsin. All of the participants identified as being Black and some (n=3) of them identified being “mixed,” “biracial,” and one of them identified as being Haitian. Further, all of the participants

were born in the United States, and eleven of the participants were college educated and many (n=6) of them held other advanced degrees or were presently pursuing other advanced degrees.

Although there was not a specific question asking participants to categorize their gender presentation/expression many (n=9) of them self disclosed being femme presenting (n=4) or masculine/masculine of center presenting (n=5). In this study the words used were femme, *queer*, *lesbian boi*, *masculine presenting*, and *masculine of center*. The individuals in this study used the words *lesbian*, *gay* or *queer* to describe their sexual orientation. Queer also served as a sexual orientation identifier and a political label.

### **Nuances of Lesbian and Queer Identity**

*“Queer means conversation with the other parts of my identity...”*

Participants were asked to describe how they came to identify as Black lesbian women and indicate the development of these identities. This question provoked “coming out” stories, stories about family response to their sexual orientation, early messages and understanding about race, gender, and sexual identity. Over time, as many of the participants were using the term “queer” rather than lesbian and as a result, I incorporated the word “queer” into the question. They shared stories of first coming out and when they first heard the word lesbian, “I didn’t know it was bad, in society bad.” Many reported, “coming out” to themselves first and waiting to come out to others; family and friends and knowing from an early age, “I’ve been gay for like ever...my first fantasies were about women.” Others report coming out slowly and identifying as bisexual first before

landing on their lesbian and/or queer identities, as a way of easing into their sexual orientation identities.

Five of the participants reported that they initially identified as lesbian, however through self exploration, being in intimate relationships, and learning more about their sexual attraction for other people they discovered queer was an “authentic,” “accurate,” and inclusive identification. These five participants spoke of their lesbian and queer identities as encompassing their sexual orientation, “gender expression,” of their personal politic. They reported lesbian was at times a restrictive identification. One participant said, “I found myself really interested in masculine presenting people whether or not they identify as a woman, so I was attracted to trans men, in addition to, masculine, butch women...so that's why I tend to use the term queer...it's more fitting for me, because I think the term lesbian leaves out a population of people.” Another participant said, “I identify as a lesbian I'm very excited that I just love women, right? But in that, I love lesbians that are masculine identified. I love lesbians that have struggled with trans identities, and so it's really difficult to only identify as a lesbian, because then I think, that again, just enacts my privilege and converts their souls and so that's why I own my queerness. I identify as queer because I love some seriously masculine identified women and I want them to know like, if they are not women, then that's okay.” Therefore in some ways the development of their queer identities was in alliance and recognition of who they were attracted to so as not to invalidate the experiences of those with whom they were in a relationship.

Participants who reported queer as a political identification and concept seemed to also be using and conceptualizing queer as a verb, Queering, and a method of

deconstructing existing systems and questioning societal norms (Burger, 2001). Participant 10 stated, “Queer for me became not just how I identified sexually though it was also my politic as I like to...learn and also deconstruct systems that seem normal or unquestionable really get me questioning and digging. So for me queers not just about whom I chose to partner with sexually and emotionally and affectionately it’s also sort of a political moniker.” She goes on to explain, “because it [queer] marries who I want to be with sexually and also my political meanings which are leaning towards justice and equity really for all people situated in marginalized or minoritized communit[ies]. So queer means conversation with the other parts of my identity like my femaleness and my disabled identity and I’m also poly-polyamorous [sic] and I practice BDSM and kink so queer for me also encompasses those things that are abnormal and I live and exist in practice lots of things that are abnormal.” Many of the participants have engaged in thoughtful and critical examinations of how they choose to identify, an act of naming themselves as a practice to find a term that they align with, a queering of themselves. One participant also reports using the word queer to put distance between her and the stigmatization that is associated with being a lesbian, especially when considering the context of her Caribbean family.

### **Black Families Ambivalence about Sexuality**

*“I’m a Christian mother, but I’m a Mother first.”*

Most of the participants reported having strong connections and relationships with their family members, even if those relationships were often fraught with challenges related to their sexual identity. Overall, consistent with the literature, participants reported a desire to maintain relationship and closeness with their family members in

spite of not always feeling accepted, understood, or appreciated with regards to their identities. The participants reported having to frequently negotiate their sexual orientation identities and relationships with families, often not confiding in their families about their relationships and unable to discuss emerging questions about sexuality with their family. Participant 2 said, “so I’m having my first relationships with women and I’m having my first sexual encounters with women and I don’t know who to talk to, I don’t have any allies in my life, I don’t have any black lesbians in my life...my mama don’t know what the hell to say, so that was a struggle.”

Church and religion in the Black queer community are complex entities; and this was reflected in several of the participants narratives who discussed managing their queer identities in their religious families. Two of the participants referred to their families’ religions as “cults” and “cultish,” which seems largely reflective of the limitations members of the church communities have had with embracing their sexuality and their individual humanity. Participant 6 noted knowing she was a lesbian since she was 7-years-old and presents as “a masculine woman.” Despite her awareness, she had to maintain feminine appearances, including hair done regularly, wearing make up, and dating boys as a result of growing up in a “super religious” family and being influenced by her mother’s beauty pageant history. Participant 10 shared, “I wasn’t allowed to wear pants to church. And I had to wear either my hair tied or a prayer cloth.” Five of the participants reported that their families and other influential people in their lives struggled with their sexuality because of their religious beliefs. These participants and families came from diverse religious backgrounds, including Baptist, Jehovah’s Witnesses sector of Christianity and Pentecostal.

Of these participants many of them expressed a complicated relationship with religion. One reported the Black church provided a strong foundation and community of other Black people, “I saw what families could be, because of the church. At the same time... I have a lot of issues with the church because it’s telling me that I couldn’t be myself.” This participant went on to say she enjoys church, and the energy created in churches which is a common sentiment of members of Black churches, however when she invited her fiancé to church she was not accepted and welcomed into the space. As a result she made a decision to not attend church anymore. “I don't want to occupy that space that doesn't accept me in my full, authentic self.”

However, this was not the same for participant 11, who reported that it was important for her to sustain a relationship with God, with the church, and members of the church in spite of being unable to discuss her intimate and romantic relationships with them. Participant 11 reported that the church for her is about a faith in God as well as symbolic of a familial connection. She vividly recalled the first anti-gay sermon in which the pastor said it was the parent’s duty and obligation to teach homosexuality out of their children. Despite Participant 11’s recollection of that sermon, she reported a positive relationship with this pastor, and explained “he challenges my understanding of the world and my humility, and my sense of myself, and my sense of God, and my relationship with god...but me and him could not talk about my sexuality.” She reported feeling heartbroken about his religious rhetoric regarding homosexuality, especially since she conceptualized this church as a “safe space.”

These experiences are reflective of the complicated dynamics that exist within the Black community and within the Black church. The Black church has served as a



fundamental institution of Black communities and families, as one of the most effective institutions to combat systemic racism, poverty, and encourage political involvement. The Black church has helped to mobilize communities, provide food, shelter, encourage education and promoted knowledge as a tool of liberation and freedom. Simultaneously, while the Black church has been effective in creating positive change in their communities, they have also isolated and stigmatized members of their community. Participant 6 tells a story of being 18 years old and telling her mother, “I’m gay,” to which her mother responded by throwing her out of her home. Participant 6 said, “I got put out, I got my brand new car taken away from me and I was put out in the streets, and figure it out from there, because that’s what Jesus would do [sarcastically stated] is put your child out.” Although participant 6 was one of the only ones to reflect this level of family rejection her experience is not uncommon. Other participants shared that their families were not initially comfortable with their sexuality. Many family members insisted it was a phase, chose to ignore their sexuality for years, expressed anger, and used “Bible throwing,” as a tactic. Others have come to a place of expressing unconditional love, and have come to reconciliation with their faith and their motherhood “I’m a Christian mother, but I’m a Mother first.” These women shared about navigating their sexuality and sexual exploration in the context of family and church. Others talked about this navigation in the context of school and work, across multiple stages in life.

### **Negotiating Blackness**

*“White people always want to remind me of my place, no matter how far I’ve come.”*

Notably at least 5 of the participants reported the greatest negotiation of their identities comes with their Blackness and having to negotiate race and racism. Participant

8 reported, “the identity I negotiate mostly is being black, I feel that one is most policed.” She identified that the negotiation is often about not perpetuating stereotypes and expressed the pressure of representing an entire population of people as a result of being Black.

...I feel like I have to decide...I can't be the angry black woman; I have to speak a certain way, I have to act *appropriately*...I deal with clients who are black, or are mostly predominantly black, so when I'm like trying to express how ludicrous they are to my office mate, I feel really bad about doing it, because I feel like I'm making a mockery of my own—feel like I'm making a mockery out of my own people...I always have to be buttoned up...be more formal than relaxed, because... you never know if you do something wrong, if it's going to be 'oh that black girl.' Sometimes you're a representation of everybody...sometimes you're the one person who makes it and [if] you're the one person who makes it [and] fucks up, it's the biggest fuck up ever, and so I feel like I always have to be ahead...be on my grind constantly, because I'm the one who made it from my family, and I can't let them down.

Participant 8 is not the only interview who articulated feeling policed and cornered by racial politics. Participant 1 reported,

when I'm around white people...I have to dial everything down.

EVERYTHIING---I need to be the softest, I need to be... um, not quiet, but, not as outspoken... I cannot act like I'm a Black woman in church, you know, 'lawd' and that's me, I'm from the south, so anytime [something happens], 'Oh lawd' I

cannot say “oh lawd,” I will not be Aunt Jemima for them, and I can’t be upset and I can’t be angry.

Participants stated this negotiation happens with limited control over how they are perceived and treated. All the participants expressed the difficulty of being their “full authentic sel[ves]” in places with predominantly white people.

Some participants also expressed further marginalization in the queer/LBGT community and in heterosexual Black communities. Participant 12 notes, “the primary negotiation I end up having to do is around race in trying to deal with racism. Even like a multicultural, multiracial gay community...when I’m in either an all white queer space or a multiracial queer space where I’m either one of few Black people. People are just racist or anti-Black which is a valence of racism, which doesn’t really get acknowledged in multiracial queer communities.” This notion of anti-blackness came up in two interviews. Anti-blackness is a theoretical concept that addresses societal associations of blackness, black existence and its bonds to death and darkness.<sup>1</sup> Although not explicitly named this idea of anti-blackness came up in other interviews as the participants articulated how they

---

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Brady (2014) notes, “anti-blackness is the paradigm that binds blackness and death together so much that one cannot think of one without the other. When one thinks of dying, we think of “fading to black” — when we think of Death (Grim Reaper, Devil, Angel of Death), we think of a being cloaked in blackness” (p.2). R.L. (2013) understands anti-blackness in contrast to the affirmation of blackness and black existence...Black existence is fundamentally marked by social death, materially living as a sentient object but without a stable or guaranteed social subjectivity. And as such, the status of blackness forms the basis upon which white life can subjectivise itself, socially and materially through the negation of the black body. White life recognizes itself as a positive counterpart to the non-subjecthood of blacks.”

negotiated their blackness in their lives. Participant 8 articulates how she feels perceived and the strategies she feels are necessary to combat negative images.

There's also been times, when like, I'm in a high end store, [and] I've been like followed by the store security, the undercover security and I feel like I'm being followed because I'm black, that's always the easiest assumption to make...when I go into these stores I try to make sure that I'm dressed nicely, to like...un-alarm... just putting my hands up like, 'don't shoot!' like, I can afford to be here, I'm a good Black, accept me, don't think I'm coming to steal your stuff or anything, I'm one of the good ones.

Participant 8 clearly articulates the daily decisions she makes in an effort to feel safe, and to be perceived as “one of the good ones,” which included manipulation of her external appearance. It is important to note that Participant 8 identified as masculine presenting woman and to consider how her gender presentation impacted her experience.

### **Negotiating Gender Presentation**

*“That relationship absolutely influenced who I am now, and being okay with presenting masculine but being ungodly feminine...”*

In the interview questions there were no specific questions that asked about gender presentation or expression, yet 9 of the 12 participants disclosed their gender presentation and shared stories about what they understood about gender presentation and roles within the queer community. Participant 1 who identifies as a lesbian boi<sup>2</sup> and more

---

<sup>2</sup> The term boi has various meanings in different LGBT communities, however is frequently used with LGBT communities of color. bklynboihood defines boi as, “We are transmen, studs, doms, butches, tomboys, queens, Ags

masculine presenting reflected on when she first came out as a lesbian and was grappling with the role she felt she should play in her relationship: “When I first came out it was in 2005 and everyone was in their white t, baggy pants, you know, fitted cap, Airforce-1s, you know, hyper masculine, that’s the role I thought I had to play.” Participant 8 said, “when I first realize that I liked women, my first girlfriend, she liked more aggressive women, so, I think I tried to fit the bill of what she liked, so I was wearing like fitted caps, so if I had a fresh relaxer, I would throw a fitted cap on and have boxers on, you know, fitted caps are ok, but that messed up my hair, and boxers are like...no, I don’t really like to wear boxers, and so like, I think there was a time when I was trying to figure out who I was.”

These reports are consistent with Moore’s (2006) study on Black lesbian gender presentation when she noted that shifts in gender presentation are not random and happen for specific reasons, two of which she stated are, “they have recently come to identify as gay and are negotiating the type of gender to display” or “enter a new relationship and take on a gender presentation that is oppositional to the new partner’s gender display” (p.128).

Three of the five participants reported initially feeling compelled to replicate heteronormative<sup>3</sup> gender dynamics in their relationships when they were coming out or to

---

[Aggressive]-all self-identified bois and queers of color.” They use the terminology boi to challenge, resist, and critique mainstream notions of masculinity From, <http://bklynboihood.com/>

<sup>3</sup> “Heteronormativity is defined as a system of valuing heterosexuality as the natural and normative sexual orientation, thereby devaluing all other expressions of sexuality (Warner, 1991). It operates within a patriarchal framework where gender is viewed as a natural derivative of sex (Rubin, 1993; Warner, 1991) and males and females are depicted as appropriate and complementary sexual partners for the purpose of procreation” (Page & Peacock, 2013, p.640)

replicate societal notions of masculinity. Participant 1 reports, “I remember having to feel like, if I were as hard, or as mas[culine]...if I didn’t have the abs I wasn’t hard enough, if I didn’t sag my pants, if I didn’t have a certain walk, you know what I’m saying, everything had to be on point, but by male standards.” She shares “[I was] literally putting my life in danger” when walking down the street with a girl because she would engage in physical fights when provoked because she felt she was *supposed* to defend and protect as the masculine presenting person in the relationship. She noted other men praised her for this behavior.

Participant 6 highlighted the risks of having to maintain a heteronormative relationship she noted “I did have a boyfriend, he was my best friend, I really did love him, I really did love him...and I really did try, but I did not have romantic feelings for him and, um,...think a year later he ended up taking his own life, and it was because he was gay.” Participant 5 identifies as queer and says most people would perceive her as “femme” but doesn’t adopt femme as a term, “I didn’t really identify as femme, even though my presentation was femme. And I found that to be limiting.”

Unlike Moore’s study (1996) many of the participants reported feeling constricted by the feminine/masculine femme/stud/aggressive gender binaries and were actively creating new language to describe themselves or resisting the labels. Participant 1 identifies as a “lesbian boi” to describe her gender presentation and notes a resistance within her own body as she tries to make sense of her gender presentation juxtaposed to “a regular stud.” “I’ve gained a lot more weight...I’ve got curves in places I’ve never had before, and when I say the word boi, even if it’s with an “i” at the end, I look into the

mirror and I don't look like one...when I was young, I wasn't flat chested or anything like that, but I didn't have hips, I didn't have thighs, so you know, regular stud, when I was nineteen, eighteen...I know for a fact, a lot of the women who dated me, dated me because I looked like a cute boy." She continues later by saying that since her body has become more feminine she's struggled with how she wants to present her gender identity, and struggles with finding clothes that will represent and express her gender accurately.

One participant also talked about navigating gender roles as a Black masculine of center woman in the context of interracial relationships and shared her experience about how racism and heteronormativity impacted those relationships. Participant 11 states,

you date a straight white woman, their expectations of what you are when you are as a black masculine presenting female is deep. They're rooted in ignorance...

And I think that it took me a long time to get to a place where I was ok with me.

Because I think that in order to date in the heterosexual white dominated communities that I was in, I had to be this thing that they expect me to be...There

is first the expectation of your blackness. To be just hood enough to not make them nervous but to be entertaining. To be not smarter than them, but still find a

way to achieve as much, not to present smarter than them, but still find a way to

achieve everything that they've achieved because if not than you're lazy. To

represent your race, your everything, the assumption that you come from the inner city...So I'm combatting all those things. I'm a lesbian who's masculine

presenting. So now I have to combat the fact that you think I want to be a boy...

Now I have to be the ambassador for that...I'm already being the ambassador for

all these other “black things,” ...because you’re in such a heteronormative environment, so now I have to be the ambassador for all the gays ever.

Participant 11 identifies the compounding experience of being a Black lesbian and masculine presenting woman within heterosexual communities and in interracial communities. The femme and masculine presenting women reported resisting heteronormative gender binaries in their romantic relationships and learning to become more comfortable with themselves by manipulating their image through clothes, make up, hair and other accessories. Other participants have resisted perpetuating heteronormativity by acknowledging their privileged identity. “I present very femme and that's a privileged identity because I'm seen as heteronormative before I'm seen as anything. I have to open my mouth and part my lips; or I have to occupy certain spaces in order to be the beautiful queer self that I want to say I am... So there's a lot of meaning in that and an owned power. You know, power that I – that I don't necessarily want but since I own it, I want to do something with it...I gotta use my privilege for something. That's what I tell the white people to do, so I gotta do it.” Participant 7 highlights the practice and integration of an intersectional framework in her own life, as she is critical of all of her identities, including the privileged and marginalized identities.

### **Negotiating Black, Woman, and Queer**

*“There’s just no hope out here when you’ve got these three strikes.”*

The participants revealed great complexity in negotiating these identities, as they shared stories of being in intimate relationships with white people, living, working, and building community in predominantly white spaces, LGBT white spaces, building relationships with Black communities, and in particular the challenges around building



relationships/alliances with Black men. Four of the 5 masculine presenting people reported challenges in building relationships with Black men or other masculine presenting lesbian/queer people. The participants reported these negotiations often result in concerns for their physical and emotional safety. For example, participant 5, reported she has not disclosed her queer identity at work because, “I’m just getting to the point where I am trying to be fully a black woman in that space because it’s not ok, it’s not safe.” The process and action of negotiating multiple marginalized identities while existing in the center, in public space arose in nine of the interviews.

Participants expressed feeling unseen, invalidated, and unsafe to disclose their identities in public, or even to wear clothing that is more comfortable and reflective of who they are. Participant 8 reported, “I think what am I going to wear, but also when I get there, would I feel safe? Or would I feel targeted? And so for me, it’s sometimes easier to just skip it and not go.” Or participant 9 who is femme presenting noted, “when I’m in a public space, I don’t have to do that much negotiation; I can just blend in. However, sometimes, when that doesn’t happen for whatever reason – maybe it’s who I’m with, what I decide to wear, sometimes I think about my safety so that comes into play.” Participant 6 reported the incessant concern for safety as a masculine presenting Black lesbian woman. In our interview she shared her story of being violently and brutally attacked by a heterosexual celebrity male. She expressed feeling mostly unsafe in in predominantly heterosexual Black male spaces because she felt Black men were often threatened or intrigued by her masculine presentation. She notes,

In the black community, as you being a black woman, we’re treated a certain way anyway, and then, I’m a black gay woman, so...they don’t know if they want to

kiss me or fight me. I either get a good reaction and they're nice to me, or they're upset that I'm gay. [In] this particular instance, because I was a black gay woman and I was assaulted, I mean, nobody did nothing to help me, or save me, or, you know, rectify the situation. [sic]talking to law enforcement, they, a cop literally told me there was nothing they could do about it, and I was, you know, bleeding profusely and, I knew, a lot of it was because I had three, you know those three strikes against me, I was black, I was gay and I was a woman, and I wasn't a feminine woman, like an extremely feminine woman...it was just very kind of heartbreaking to see how I had to negotiate myself though, because his stance was, he said that I was hitting on a woman, he thought I was a man, and so he attacked me, and so he totally played the straight card, right? and they believed it, and, that's how they treated me, and I had to take it to trial, and I had to take it to court, and they did everything they could to make sure I did not- I would not get any justice, they destroyed the video footage, they destroyed the tape, now, mind you, I know a woman, and she had the exact same thing happen to her, and she's white and straight and he was arrested in hours and so, I, I spent a lot of time soul searching of course, putting myself back together after that.

As a result of this experience, participant 6 spent seven years fighting for justice through the legal system. She acknowledged being dramatically changed and traumatized by this violent assault as well as the aftermath, however she was eventually able to find some healing through therapy and the white LGBT community that rallied to support her financially and emotionally.

Some participants reported their Blackness, Queerness, and Womanness are identities that over time and in adulthood have become more easily negotiated and unconscious. In response to being asked, *what do these identities mean to you? What does it mean to be a black lesbian woman?* Participant 2 shares,

I am very much black, I am very much woman, when you see me these are the things you will put on me...for me, it does not feel like I am viewed as a black lesbian woman, therefore it is not necessarily an identity that I am, walking with every day, even though I know I'm walking with it... I'm a poet, I'm an architect, I'm [her mom's name] daughter...there are so many other things that come first, so as an adult...it's like, breathing and blinking to me...

She goes on to explain that these identities “are not always at the forefront of my mind.” As stated above, there are other identities that are equally important to her and she chooses to focus on identities that can be improved, like being a poet, professional, and student. She states that she is very intentional about the spaces she is in, “I do not often put myself in situations where my me is challenged,” implicitly stating that she doesn't interact in communities and spaces where her blackness, womanness, and sexuality are challenged and not embraced. “But I am not going to allow myself to be in a place where *that* negotiation has to happen.” Simultaneously, she noted she doesn't think these identities need to be negotiated more than any other identity.

I'm always turning on or off some part of me, so when I hit an art scene, when I hit a stage, I'm way more relaxed or way more chill...I don't hide my attitude, I'm honest, I'm raw, I speak a lot quicker, I'm way more passionate, I'm just a different kind of person. Whereas in a professional setting I'm a little more

reserved, I speak slowly, I listen more than I speak...so there is always some level of negotiation in my life...I've worn different hats for different people and so there is always a little bit of negotiation happening... there has never been enough of a negotiation to make me feel uncomfortable, I'm ok with the negotiation.

Participant 2 is the only person who explicitly expressed embracing the negotiation that comes with having multiple marginalized identities and owning this as part of her character. Indeed this has been an effective way of coping and managing the impacts of racism, sexism, and heterosexism. There have been many strategies these participants have used to not only survive within these systems, but also thrive.

### **Activism and Community Engagement**

*"I'm going to be the change that I want to see in the world."*

Other findings included almost all of the participants reported being actively involved in organizing that supported the lives of Black queer women. Each of the participants in their own way were actively working toward social change, through employment, creating art spaces, building communities of friends, or networking through online communities to create supportive spaces for Black queer women and members of the queer communities of color to gather safely and without judgment. Participant 2 has been very active and intentional in building communities and public spaces for queer people of color to gather, feel safe, and to "uplift and celebrate" their lives. She notes, "I am a black lesbian woman...I'm in a position to do things with those identities, I'm in a position to, through my art work and through my community organizing. I'm in a position to do things with those identities rather than just let them be inherent." Many of the participants have made it their life's work to use their identities as a platform to build

healthy and enriching communities. Participant 3 addresses some of the complexity in working in organizations that are actively working toward the advancement and uplifting of marginalized communities. She reported,

I've been dealing with unpacking racism in my job for a very long time...And I love my job though, we do really good work, but we also perpetuate a lot of bullshit, a lot of respectability politics and we're basically an assimilationist org, you're not a successful person of color until you make this amount of money and work at this place. And I think that's bullshit, so you know, we are working with very well meaning folks, white folks, but don't understand how what we are perpetuating is problematic.

Participant 3 reports she loves her job and she chooses to work within her job to help them unpack institutional racism. It is an overwhelming finding to see that in one way or another all 12 of the participants are politically involved in creating spaces that help Black queer women thrive. It seems to affirm the second wave feminism argument, "the personal is political." In addition, as participant 2 noted these identities in some way provide a platform "to do things" and participant 10 jokingly stated, "I am gay for pay." In addition, at least 4 participants reported they actively engage in cultivating positive and affirming communities because it is also mentally and emotionally nourishing to be in those spaces. Participant 7 also reported the positive benefits of being able to engage in an interview that is centered on the Black lesbian and queer women experience. She said engaging in the interview was like therapy, "I think what you are going to create, and what you are helping me do through this therapy is contributing to our culture and our collective consciousness and helping move us forward."

## **Tools of Resistance**

*“I think I operated in fear when I was younger because of what the labels could possibly mean and how they can marginalize me. I think my way to break outside of it was education and seeing mirrors like Audre Lorde.”*

It should be noted that of the 12 participants 11 of them have been formally educated and hold at least a Bachelor’s degree, and six of them hold postgraduate degrees in various fields. One of the participants disclosed the importance of education for her, “education is the most liberatory [sic] practice that I can engage myself in. It is the thing that helps make me free. They can take away everything from me but they can’t take away the things that I’ve learned.” As someone who is triply marginalized in this country participant 10 seems to hold her history in her everyday practices, and understands that education and knowledge are tools of resistance. In addition, their education, among other things also provides access to help them build communities or to be part of organizations that allow them to create change. Participants 9 and 12 reported that many of the meaningful relationships they have with other Black queer women occurred because they met them through college. Simultaneously their identities can also be the very thing that can deter them from pursuing higher education degrees. Participant 3 reported, “I was oppressed throughout college. I think that was really hard for me. To be in that space. And I really hope to never be in that space ever again...I still have nightmares. That’s why I don’t go back to grad school... I really just want to do this work and be on the streets and be with the kids...being in that space is really really tough for me.” Participant 3 mentioned the difficult time she had regarding her race and other identities that she felt were oppressed at her undergraduate institution primarily because it was

predominantly white institution that didn't always value her. She expressed the importance of being in Black queer spaces in being able to support one another, and in these spaces she feels she's able to achieve a sense of full acceptance because her peers come from "a space of love." She goes on to explain a space of love is about having solidarity with each other and acknowledging that they collectively need each other to depend on.

There were at least three participants who reported not always having a supportive community of Black queer women that they could rely on. Some of this they reported was based on their geographical location, for example one of the participants lives outside of Chicago and she noted she doesn't have a local community of Black queer women who support her. However, she reported she's built an online community that is supportive to her experience and through this community she has been involved in policy, media literacy advocacy, and working toward improving the lives of Black LGBT people. Like other participants who have lived in cities that lack a Black queer community, they noted having to, "find new communities and be intentional about who I access, and places I access," or "in order for us to feel like we had community we would have to host events pot lucks and parties...because there was no natural built in community." This notion of building and seeking an intentional community has been consistent through all of the interviews, as almost all of them have reported invaluable relationships and validation of their existence in these spaces. For those who did not presently have a community of Black queer community, I asked them to imagine what that community might look like? What do you think would have to happen in your community for there to be a space where you felt like you weren't negotiating and that you were accepted?

Participant 10 said, it would require for those of us who are oppressed “to unlearn that internal, internal oppression and also intra-community shit that we do to each other... to other poor trans queer people of color.” Their responses reflected a desire to be embraced by the Black queer community with understanding, openness and ability to hold one another accountable. Another participant noted that she hopes to one day be embraced and fully accepted by white communities. She noted before that happen she believes, “white folks, they would have to take a lesson in Black people's humanity... like I don't think white people see us as human... and them being able to recognize our humanity, I think would be first step to gaining that freedom or gaining that acceptance... and what's funny is that for me, that' so far removed from all of my identity markers—the ones I put on myself and the ones that I was born into... like I just want to be seen as human.”

### **Sacredness of Black Queer Spaces**

*“Making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world.” hooks –home place as a site of resistance*

For the participants who felt they had a community of Black lesbian and queer women they were asked to address what the community provided for them and to address the importance of the space. A consistent theme was that each participant talked about intentionality and choice. Many of the participants talked about being proactive about creating their own spaces, sometimes in their own homes, where they could achieve full acceptance. For example, participant 1 said, “me and my girlfriend have parties at our house and the rule is no white people. That’s the rule.” When asked, “why you make it



specifically a black women [only space].” She replied because we need it, we don’t have it.” She goes on to say, “when you’re around conscious black people there is a certain uplifting that happens, and it just happens, cause melanin, that’s why. You know, it’s a complete understanding, it’s like church, if you’ve ever been to the south and been to a black church, then you know why, it’s something that can’t be described and white people never have it because that’s just not how it works, so when you are around conscious black people, and feminine energy, that’s the cosmos right there, it’s healing.” The concept of these spaces being healing and “like church” came up in other interviews. The participants referred to poetry venues, parties, and gatherings at people’s homes as the places that carried this energy. Participant 4 reported, “I’m energized in those spaces. Usually I am in a place where I feel like, again, fully accepted and just validated in a very energetic way or a very spiritual way so I think that even if we're not explicitly having conversations that deal with our Blackness or womanness or our queerness in some way...just the mere presence of that.” Participant 4 is also a leader in her city’s Black queer community and hosts a poetry venue for Black queer people of color to gather and feel welcomed and embraced. She describes what she has heard from guests over the past five years, “it’s a welcoming space and it’s a sacred space. And it’s like a sanctuary for people. A lot of people refer to it as church for them. It’s just like you go...you feel healed from it, like the words that people are sharing with one another. And everyone respects each other. And if you’re not respectful, if you get on stage, you will be leaving the stage soon. You are accountable; it’s a village of accountability...I feel like everyone that comes into that space is affirmed, and you can feel that and that’s why it’s such a

beautiful space.” These are the communities and venue spaces that Black queer women are building for them to support each other and be held by one another.

Within these interviews two participants mentioned the idea of chosen family, which is a concept that is familiar to the larger LGBT population. Participant 7 says the Black queer community is a place,

I can be honest and not fear judgment, so the fact that I can be honest and not fear judgment, [I know] I’m loved. I feel unconditional love and respect. And I feel people always have my best interests at heart, even if they are being critical...they just want to see me grow. I’m blessed to have people around me that act as mirrors and that I can also be a mirror to them too. That it’s reciprocated... I’m humbled too by my friendships. I’m closer to my friends than my family and I got to choose my friends, so it’s even more beautiful feeling that you choose who you are close to, you choose that...I’m blessed to be apart of that. I feel whole and I can be whoever I am in that moment. And be free. So I guess those are the feelings that are associated the most with the spaces that I’m a part of.

When asked, “what does the community do for them?” many of the participants talked about the importance of shared experience, not necessarily identical but are interconnected and familiar. Participant 10 says,

what community does for me is it allows me to speak short hand to not have to explain every nuance...I don’t have to play dictionary or give an over elaborate explanation of things that to me are heterosexist or racist or homophobic or any of it. With my Black crew I can just as easily be like oh my god I want to go to bed with Idris Elba or oh my god I want to go to bed with Kerry Washington. Like

both of those things are not out of the realm of possibility. And the other thing I really love the way that we break down things are not identical but similar so like if my friend has a really racist experience in Boston she calls me about it like the conclusions we both draw about that experience are typically like layered right on top of each other.

Participant 12 shared a similar sentiment, “I think it's like deeply meaningful to have a network of people who identify as I do and I don't have to explain myself as I walk into a room or when we are having conversations about intimate relationships, or just you know, I think more than anything, it's more like an ideology or a political worldview that is shared.” Participants reported that having a community of people who look like you has great influence on sense of self worth and personal value, participant 9 said, “it just reinforces my value and my worth, and like I know that there are other women who go through the same struggles as me, and we can talk about it or we can not talk about it – but we can you know, have a good time. We can be supporting. We can, I don't know, help each other in this world sometimes, because it's hard out here.”

Participant 8 reported relationships with chosen family serve as reminders and give permission that is acceptable to “live our truths and not have to hide who we are... it reinforces that, being, a lesbian or being in the queer community isn't necessarily a stigma, it doesn't have to hold you down or hold you back, you can still be successful even though you're not living the, a certain lifestyle, or the “American Lifestyle’.”

All 12 of the participants stated in one way or another that these spaces provided a space for them to be “free” to feel liberated from daily stigma, judgment, and served as a window to continue to move forward. Participant 9 reported,

I feel like when I am in particular queer community events, because there are lots of people who look like me in some ways, or either they look like me or the space is really intentional about saying that this is a safe space and you know, we will not tolerate sexism, any kind of phobia, any kind of "ism." I think when that is particularly declared up front, that's nice. That safe space is intentional in addition to being in queer spaces and seeing someone that looks like me. And so when that happens, I don't have to um, decide when or not I'm going to disclose things about myself. I don't have to think about my safety. I'm free of all of those um, oppressions, so it's really comforting and relieving.

### **What they want people to know about Black Lesbian Women?**

One of the final questions I asked the participants in the interview was, *What would you want people to know about Black Lesbian Women?* This question was designed to provide a space for each of the participants to speak openly and honestly about what they hoped for in envisioning Black lesbian and queer women in the world. Ten of twelve participants gave clear and unique responses that speak eloquently for themselves, as follows:

- “That we fit at the nexus of, we are intersectionality, that's what I want everybody to know, everyone loves throwing around the word and pretending like they know, but we are intersectionality, no one has the ability to break down things, and see things and analyze things from multiple perspectives the way that black, lesbian queer women can, period. End of sentence, exclamation point. I'm tired of us being silenced, like we don't have nuance or depth.”

- “Black lesbian women are resilient. There are many forces upon us every single day, in those identities. We always have to think about our safety, we have to think about so many negative things that could happen to us. I also think it's something, at least for me, it can be dynamic and ever-changing... just allowing the space to let those identities be fluid and dynamic and changing, and not letting the definition be rigid and limiting...dynamic-ness and resilience.”
- “We’re fierce. [laughing] We deal with so much! Cause we are - there’s levels to this shit, not only are we Black in a society that has oppressed Black people, but we’re women in a society that oppresses women. Black woman is enough, never mind throwing on being gay. There’s so many levels. We survive and we know how to survive in the face of so much oppression and opposition to us, everyday. The media attacks women and makes us feel like we are never pretty enough, that we always have something to fix... we feel like we have so much to prove because we’re under represented all the time and being gay just adds to that. It’s like, no one would choose this life, but we live this life that no one would chose!”
- “We’re some powerful motherfuckers, and that’s what I want to say. I mean, like, that’s what I want people to know about black lesbians.”
- “We’re not this monolith, we’re not just all the same. We have so many different experiences, and I feel like people need to be, they don’t need to know more about black lesbians themselves, I just think that, cause I don’t want them prying into our lives unnecessarily, but I just think people should be more aware that we

- exist and be more intentional about checking their privilege when we are in those spaces.”
- “We are, perhaps more multi-faced than the most intricate diamond one could come across. We are so many different things at a given moment, and, that, that’s ok, like, let us be those things, and like, just like as a black lesbian woman, be those things...as a black lesbian woman, there are so many things at any given moment that could be working against us, and at the same time, there are so many things at any given moment that can be working for us and through us and by us and because of us, and it’s like, it is a struggle and I get that and it is not always a beautiful thing, but, I think like, I think it’s, it’s such an opportunity, it’s such an opportunity... We are so foreign, we are technically everything we are not supposed to be, like we are so foreign to the norm, that, you ain’t got no other choice than to be just baaad. You know what I’m saying? Be a boss, because like, every rule they set, we was like, “nah, not gonna do it,” that’s a very difficult life to live, but, live it, live it. Because we really got no other choice, either you live through it and with it and despite it or you die.”
  - “I think there are so many different ways to be a Black queer person, a Black queer woman, and I think that, I think that you know, just because I identify how I identify, I’m still not like anybody else—and I don’t think that anybody else is necessarily like me because of those identities. We may have had similar experiences, but everyone is kind of impacted by them in a different way.”
  - “We’re the crème de la crème. If you see a black lesbian, who’s in the world, and it looks like they are doing well, and it looks like they are mentally intact, you

- should, you should almost bow down, because there is nothing more oppressed than that...that needs to be acknowledged, that needs to be praised, that needs to be considered on a daily and I feel like we definitely need to be uplifted.”
- “We are even more expansive than all these new words you are using for us like “fierce,” “powerful,” ok, we are, we are brilliant, we are shy sometimes, and we are, masculine and feminine and sometimes all at the same time, and we are lonely sometimes, and we are new and we’re old, you know, we are, we’re part of this, post end of the Mayan calendar development of collective consciousness everybody trying to find some kind of yoga piece within themselves, I think we’re the answer to it. I watched Divergent recently, I think we are the divergent ones.”
  - “You are loved and valued and you are part of a sisterhood that spans, you know, all the way from the beginning to the end, from the alpha to the omega. We have always been here, we will always be here, even when they erase our names and erase our identities.”

## **Summary**

This chapter presented the findings of 12 interviews with Black lesbian and queer women between the ages of 21-35 speaking about the experiences of their identities. This chapter was organized thematically based on the themes that arose across each of the interviews, which presented the collective experiences related to the participant’s race and sexuality. They provided valuable information about how they navigate their identities in the context of work, family, and in community. The following chapter will discuss the meaning of these findings and the implications they may have for future research.

## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to explore how Black lesbian and queer women navigated their lives, and created meaning out of their experiences given the impacts of racism, sexism, and heterosexism. The narratives of the 12 participants in this study were gathered through in person and Skype interviews, with the intention of eliciting in depth responses regarding their personal experiences with how they managed racism, sexism, and heterosexism, and created meaningful relationships and communities in spite of these oppressions.

This chapter will include an exploration of the findings in the context of the literature reviewed. These findings include: (1) development of chosen family and intentional community spaces, (2) resistance strategies to maintain integrity of self-identifications (3) practice of intersectionality. This section will conclude with a brief discussion of the studies limitations, implications for social work practice, and areas for future research.

#### **Findings in relation to Literature**

The findings revealed the complexity of identity and personal experiences of participants with regards to race, gender, sexuality and experiences with racism, sexism, and heterosexism. The intersectional understanding of their marginalized identities as Black lesbian and queer women was evident in their narratives and throughout the



literature. There were limited reports of experiencing sexism. When sexism was reported as a stressor, the participants frequently addressed this in the context of race and racism. This is consistent with the existing literature (Bowleg, 2008b).

### **Creating a “homeplace”: Chosen family and intentional community spaces**

One major finding was that all 11 participants were proactive and intentional about creating public and private spaces where they and other Black lesbian/queer women could feel safe, comfortable, and free in being their full complex selves. Study revealed participants found their friendships and other chosen communities to be vital relationships. These relationships appeared to provide not only support but also a deep love and intimacy that made these community spaces and chosen family special.

Participants supported the major findings in the literature that emphasized the importance on social supports and in finding or having a “homeplace” (hooks, 1990). hooks notes that a “homeplace” is “a safe space where black people could affirm one another and by doing so heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination.” Hardy (1997) defines home, as “it is also a state of being, a sense of intrinsically fitting in to the community around you and being welcomed, invited, accepted and free to be complete.” Almost all of the participants (n=11) talked about creating, participating in, or looking for a community that would embrace their full expansive identities. As consistent with Glass and Few-Demo’s (2013) and other scholarly research (Burton, Winn, Stevenson, & Clark, 2004) the participants created a “homeplace” (hooks, 1990) for themselves, in which they were able to celebrate and feel comfortable in expressing their multiple identities. In addition, several participants (n=9) described their relationships in Black lesbian and queer experiences as “healing” or “validating” and spoke explicitly about

feeling free, as a result of not feeling policed, which participants reported is often the experience in predominantly white and heterosexual communities. These findings are consistent with the existing research (Glass and Few-Demo, 2013; Hardy, 1997; Burton et al., 2004) as the participants report feeling drawn to communities that are protective against discrimination/prejudices, racism, and heterosexism. By validating and affirming their existence these spaces encourage and teach Black lesbian and queer women how to love, nurture and respect themselves and each other.

**Naming: resistance strategies to maintain integrity of self-identifications**

More than half (n=7) of the participants reported an unapologetic sense of self-love related to their race and sexuality. The resilience of Black lesbian and queer women was astounding in this research and is consistent with the existing research on resilience (Lourdes, 2014), resilience and resistances strategies (Bowleg, 2003; Greene, 2000; Wilson, 2002). Several participants frequently engaged in practices of renaming and reconceptualizing their identities and in exploring their gender presentation. Existing feminist and sociological research emphasizes the power in naming one's self and in developing self-definitions. Collins (2001) notes there is a necessity in being able to name oneself that serves to counter and resist the degrading images of Black women in the United States. This can be applied to Black lesbian and queer women, as many of the participants were manipulating and disregarding commonly used and arguably more 'acceptable' language for language and terms that were more complex. Those participants who chose to be identified as queer, showed a sense of agency as well as resistance when they renamed and reidentified themselves. Collins notes that self-definition is an act of constructing knowledge, "a type of knowledge essential to

resolving contradictions. To learn to speak in a ‘unique and authentic voice,’ women must ‘jump outside’ the frames and systems authorities provide and create their own frame” (p. 110) Therefore, this act of renaming and reconceptualization is an act of resilience, an act of resistance, and this ability to construct one’s own knowledge is an act of survival.

### **Practice of intersectionality**

Many of the participants reported an intersectional and nuanced understanding of their marginalized identities as well as their privileged identities. Each of the femme presenting women in the study reported identifying as queer as a result of how they understood their identity in relationship with someone else. They expressed understanding their femme identities carried some extent of privilege which implicates them in an oppressive system. Their willingness to admit this is consistent with Jones (2014) and Howard (2014) both of whom note that an intersectional lens of marginalized identities, will help them better understand themselves and communities. This practice of reflexivity is not simply a process of self-reflection it also requires accountability. Arguably this practice of intersectionality and reflexivity is the development of a queer consciousness that has enabled them to “overcome barriers and increase the possibility of alliance building” (Jones, 2014, p.35).

### **Limitations in Study Data and Design**

There were several limitations to the study data and design The primary limitations was that it reached only a select group of Black lesbian and queer women born in the United States ages 21 too 35; as an expectable consequence of the sampling methodology, this group tended to be highly-educated and connected to Black lesbian

and queer networks. This level of education gives the study participants access to information and resources that they may not otherwise have, as well as provides a language and critical lens to help them understand and reconceptualize their identities. Black lesbian and queer women with limited resources, access to formal education, and lower socioeconomic statuses might offer different narratives in which oppression is equally as prevalent, but in which the resources for resisting oppression -- words with shared meanings, opportunities for psychological and physical connection, places of psychological and physical sanctuary -- are far less available.

Another limitation was that the sample size was small (n=12), and might not be representative of the population from which it was drawn. However, the information gathered accurately reflects the target population and is consistent with much of the existing literature.

Lastly, the interview questions were purposely designed to be vague to allow people to openly answer the questions based on their own definitions and understanding of their own identities. However, the broad interview questions allowed each participant's interview to vary in length and in depth, resulting in some of the questions being misinterpreted or parts of the questions going unaddressed. In spite of the vague answers, I was still able to interpret the data, assess the tone, and develop meaningful findings based on their experiences.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

The implications for this study include the need for more research about Black Lesbian and Queer women and their experiences navigating systems of oppression with multiple marginalized identities. While there has been a growing body of work that is

addressing the lived experiences of Black queer identity (Lourdes, 2014; Howard, 2014; Johnson & Henderson, 2005) it is important that future researchers also examine the cumulative impacts of racism, sexism, and heterosexism on this population. This research could be used to inform how we practice clinically with Black lesbian and queer populations to help us understand how racism, sexism, and heterosexism is impacting their psychological health. In addition, this research reminds us that it is important to consider how discrimination, prejudices, and various oppressions are impacting our clients. Hardy (1997) notes it is the clinician's responsibility to "to help clients address, head-on, the stories of their marginalization and help them to understand how it impacts on their lives, and then help them find strategies to respond to the crazy-making effects of oppression in the sanest ways possible" (p. 7). In addition, when working with this population as a clinician it is important to have a sense of how one's own identities interact and intersect within systems of oppression, particularly racism, sexism, and heterosexism can impact this population. Dyche and Zayas (2001) recommend exercising cultural empathy, which aims to, "abandon the search for certainty, accept ambiguity, and suspend attention to themselves and the natural inclination to pursue safety" (p.248). Instead clinicians should attempt to imagine the lives of clients through their words, their voices, their self-described experiences, and allow themselves to be touched by the clients' experiences. (Dyche and Zayas, 2001, p.248).

### **Significance of the findings**

These findings are significant as they contribute to a limited body of empirical literature that addresses the Black lesbian and queer experience. These findings should serve as a reminder to social workers of their ethical obligations to be culturally

competent, to improve their understandings of oppression, to be committed to social justice, and service. Their narratives should tell us the increasing importance of trying to create a space that feels comfortable and safe, with the intention of embracing their full humanity, and their multiple identities. These findings will hopefully encourage social workers to be more thoughtful about how they engage with in therapy with Black lesbian and queer women. It is my hope that these findings will encourage social workers to take heed to Hardy (1997) to “help [clients] find their own pathways back to Home, where they can finally feel whole and connected. Since not all of our suffering is truly located within our psyches, helping clients to identify and counteract the forces that disrupt their sense of Home is critical” (p.26). The findings of this research supported that a sense of home for Black lesbian and queer women can be incredibly healing for the mind, body, and spirit. Even in the face of racism, sexism, and heterosexism a homeplace can recharge and reenergize to give this population strength to continue to thrive and be resilient.

### **Areas of future research**

This research could be expanded on in several ways. Primarily it would be useful to continue this research with a larger sample size and with a more diverse group of people regarding education, class, and geographical locations. It would be useful in further research to broaden the sample to include the broader queer community, including transgender people of color and people across the gender non-conforming spectrum, who may have similar experiences and could also contribute to the nuance and complex understandings of identity. In addition, while there were two participants who spoke about engaging in therapy, a future study could assess for specific therapeutic and mental

health practices that help Black lesbian and queer people manage and deal with racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Finally, another area for future research would be to explore how Black masculine presenting queer people experience these oppressions differently and how that may impact their emotional and psychological health. Much like the limited empirical research on Black lesbian and queer women there is an equally small amount of research (Valenti, 2012) on the long-term impacts of heterosexism and heteronormativity for Black lesbian/queers who present as masculine.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study reveal the complexity of Black lesbian and queer women lives, as well as their resilience and ability to adapt and thrive in communities and relationships that have often not celebrated them. These narratives reveal that Black lesbian and queer women have created meaning in numerous ways through building community, developing deep and intimate friendships, accessing community and online resources, and in caring for themselves with unconditional and unapologetic love.

Additionally, as a Black lesbian woman doing research on the lives of other Black lesbian and queer women this research has had a tremendous impact on my understanding of Black lesbian and queer women lives and has served as a reminder that our lives are complex, difficult, and vast. Listening to these stories required me to consistently manage my emotions in order to maintain the integrity of their narratives. It was a gift and an honor to listen to these 12 women share their stories. It is my hope that I have shed light on the perspectives of Black lesbian and queer providing a lens through which clinicians and other professionals can gain insight into Black lesbian and queer from their own perspective.

## References

- Battle, J., & DeFreece, A. (2014). The Impact of Community Involvement, Religion, and Spirituality on Happiness and Health among a National Sample of Black Lesbians. *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*, (1). 1. doi:10.5406/womgenfamcol.2.1.0001.
- Bassichis, M., & Spade, D. (2014). PART III: INCARCERATION: Chapter 9: 'Queer Politics and Anti-Blackness'. *Queer Necropolitics*,1.
- Bowleg, L., Huang, J., Brooks, K., Black, A., & Burkholder, G. (2003). Triple Jeopardy and Beyond: Multiple Minority Stress and Resilience Among Black Lesbians. *Journal Of Lesbian Studies*, 7(4), 87-108.
- Bowleg, L., Craig, M. L., & Burkholder, G. (2004). Rising and surviving: A conceptual model of active coping among Black lesbians. *Cultural Diversity And Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 10(3), 229-240. doi:10.1037/1099-9809.10.3.229
- Bowleg, L. (2008a). When Black + Lesbian + Woman ≠ Black Lesbian Woman: The Methodological Challenges of Qualitative and Quantitative Intersectionality Research. *Sex Roles*, 59(5/6), 312-325. doi:10.1007/s11199-008-9400-z
- Bowleg, L., (2008b) "Bringing Home More Than a Paycheck:" An Exploratory Analysis of Black Lesbians' Experiences of Stress and Coping in the Workplace. (2008). *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 12(1), 69-84.
- Brady, Nicholas. (2014, February 27). Riding with Death: Defining Anti-Blackness. Retrieved from <https://progressivepupil.wordpress.com/2014/02/27/right-to-death-defining-anti-blackness/>



- Brah, A., & Phoenix, A. (2004). Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality. *Journal Of International Women's Studies*, 5(3), 75-86.
- Burger, G., & Kruger, S. F. (2001). *Queering the Middle Ages / Glenn Burger, Steven F. Kruger, editors*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought [electronic resource]: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment / Patricia Hill Collins*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Clarke, C. (2000). The failure to transform: Homophobia in the Black Community. In B. Smith (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) .*A Home girls: a Black feminist* (pp.190-201) New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, (6). 1241.
- Dyche, L., & Zayas, L. (2001). Cross-cultural empathy and training the contemporary psychotherapist. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 29(3), 245-258.
- Engel, R. J., & Schutt, R. K. (2013). *The practice of research in social work / Rafael J. Engel, Russell K. Schutt*. Los Angeles : SAGE, [2013
- Glass, V., & Few-Demo, A. (2013). Complexities of Informal Social Support Arrangements for Black Lesbian Couples. *Family Relations*, 62(5), 714-726.
- Gopaldas, A. (2013). Intersectionality 101. *Journal Of Public Policy & Marketing*, 3290-94. doi:10.1509/jppm.12.044
- Greene, B., (1997) Lesbian Women of Color: Triple Jeopardy. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 1(1), 109-147.

- Greene, B. (2000). African American lesbian and bisexual women. *Journal Of Social Issues*, 56(2), 239-249.
- Greene, B., & Boyd-Franklin, N. (1996). African American lesbian couples: Ethnocultural considerations in psychotherapy. *Women & Therapy*, 19(3), 49-60. doi:10.1300/J015v19n03\_06
- Hall, R. L., & Greene, B. (2002). Not Any One Thing: The Complex Legacy of Social Class on African American Lesbian Relationships. *Journal Of Lesbian Studies*, 6(1), 65-74.
- Hardy, K. V. (1997). NOT QUITE HOME. In *The Family: A Magazine For Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, & Their Relations*, 2(3), 6-26.
- hooks, b. (2000). *Feminist theory : from margin to center / Bell Hooks*. Cambridge, Mass. : South End Press, [2000].
- Howard, S. C. (2014). Black queer identity matrix: towards an integrated queer of color framework / *Sheena C. Howard*. New York, NY: Peter Lang, [2014].
- Howard, S. C. (2014). *Critical articulations of race, gender, and sexual orientation / edited by Sheena C. Howard*. Lanham : Lexington Books, [2014].
- James, S. M., Foster, F. S., & Guy-Sheftall, B. (2009). *Still brave : the evolution of black women's studies / Stanlie M. James, Frances Smith Foster, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, editors*. New York, NY : Feminist Press, 2009.
- Jones, R.G. (2014). Divided loyalties: Exploring the Intersections of Queerness, Race, Ethnicity, and Gender. In edited S.C.Howard. (1<sup>st</sup> ed.), *Critical articulations of race, gender, and sexual orientation* (pp.23-46). Lanham:Lexingtonbooks

- Lorde, A. (2007). *Sister outsider: essays and speeches / by Audre Lorde ; [new foreword by Cheryl Clarke]*. Berkeley, Calif.: Crossing Press, c2007.
- Mays, V. M., Yancey, A. K., Cochran, S. D., Weber, M., & Fielding, J. E. (2002). Heterogeneity of Health Disparities Among African American, Hispanic, and Asian American Women: Unrecognized Influences of Sexual Orientation. *American Journal Of Public Health, 92*(4), 632-639.
- Moore, M. R. (2006). Lipstick or Timberlands? Meanings of Gender Presentation in Black Lesbian Communities. *Signs: Journal Of Women In Culture & Society, 32*(1), 113-139.
- Moore, M. R. (2011). Two Sides of the Same Coin: Revising Analyses of Lesbian Sexuality and Family Formation Through the Study of Black Women. *Journal Of Lesbian Studies, 15*(1), 58-68. doi:10.1080/10894160.2010.508412
- National Association of Social Workers*. (2008). Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Okeke, Alexandria. (2013). A Culture of Stigma: Black Women and Mental Health. Undergraduate Research Awards. Retrieved from:  
[http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=univ\\_lib\\_ura](http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=univ_lib_ura)
- Page, A. D., & Peacock, J. R. (2013). Negotiating Identities in a Heteronormative Context. *Journal Of Homosexuality, 60*(4), 639-654.  
 doi:10.1080/00918369.2012.724632
- Parreñas, J. (2006). A new lesbian lexicon, Part I. *Lesbian News, 32*(4), 27.

- Reed, S. J., Miller, R. L., & Timm, T. (2011). Identity and Agency: The Meaning and Value of Pregnancy for Young Black Lesbians. *Psychology Of Women Quarterly, 35*(4), 571-581.
- R.L. (2013, June 5). Wanderings of the slave: black life and social death. Retrieved from <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/wanderings-slave-black-life-and-social-death>
- Roberts, J. R. (1981). *Black lesbians: an annotated bibliography / compiled by JR Roberts; foreword by Barbara Smith*. Tallahassee, Fla.: Naiad Press, 1981.
- Robinson, A. (2010). Living For the City: Voices of Black Lesbian Youth in Detroit. *Journal Of Lesbian Studies, 14*(1), 61-70.  
doi:10.1080/10894160903058899
- Sokol, Justin T. (2009) "Identity Development Throughout the Lifetime: An Examination of Eriksonian Theory," *Graduate Journal of Counseling Psychology: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 14*.
- Smith, B. (1983). The Combahee River Collective Statement. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology, 272*.
- Smith, B. (2000). *Home girls : a Black feminist anthology / edited by Barbara Smith*. New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 2000.
- Valenti, M. (2012). Lesbian gender identity development and gender roles of young Black women. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 72*, 5625.
- Wilson, B. M., Okwu, C., & Mills, S. A. (2011). Brief Report: The Relationship between Multiple Forms of Oppression and Subjective Health among Black Lesbian and

Bisexual Women. *Journal Of Lesbian Studies*, 15(1), 15-24.

doi:10.1080/10894160.2010.508393

Wilson, B. M. (2009). Black lesbian gender and sexual culture: celebration and resistance. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 11(3), 297-313.

doi:10.1080/13691050802676876

Zuna Institute (2010). Black Lesbians Matter. Retrieved from

<http://zunainstitute.org/2010/research/blm/blacklesbiansmatter.pdf>

## **Appendix A: Facebook Recruitment Post**

Do you identify as a Black Lesbian Woman? Are you interested in sharing your experiences related to being a Black Lesbian Woman? Would you like to share your experiences with racism, sexism, and heterosexism? If you've answered YES to any of these questions then I would love to hear from you!

My name is Arianne Napier and I am an MSW student at Smith College School for Social Work completing a graduate research study. I am interested in exploring the narratives and experiences of individuals who identify as Black Lesbian Women, to provide a space for these individuals to share how they create meaning and negotiate their identities. I am looking for participants who self identify as Black, Lesbian and a Woman and are between the ages of 21 and 35. The 60-75 minute interview would be confidential and could be conducted in person in the Greater Boston Area or via Skype.

If you are interested in participating, please reply to this post or send a private message on Facebook I will be happy to provide you with more information or answer any questions. In addition, if you know anyone who fits these criteria and who might be interested in participating please share this post or forward this to them. If interested please email me here: [NarrativesofBLW@gmail.com](mailto:NarrativesofBLW@gmail.com)

Thank you for your time!  
Arianne J. Napier

## Appendix B: Email Recruitment Post

Hello,

My name is Arianne Napier and I am an MSW student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am seeking participant for my graduate research study. I am interested in exploring the narratives and experiences of individuals who identify as Black Lesbian Women, to provide a space for these individuals to share how they create meaning and negotiate their identities. I am looking for participants who self identify as Black, Lesbian and a Woman and are between the ages of 21 and 35. The 60-75 minute interview would be confidential and could be conducted in person in the Greater Boston Area or via Skype. Participation in this research provides an opportunity to share your experiences related to your identity and have your voice be heard. In addition, participation in the study will come with coffee/tea/snack or a \$10 gift card to Starbucks/Dunkin Donuts will go to the Skype participants.

If you are interested in participating, please reply to this email I will be happy to provide you with more information. In addition, if you know anyone who fits these criteria and who might be interested in participating please forward this email to them or have them email me at: [NarrativesofBLW@gmail.com](mailto:NarrativesofBLW@gmail.com)

Thank you for your time and support!  
Arianne J. Napier

**Appendix C: Informed Consent**  
**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**  
**Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA**

**Title of Study:** Telling our story: The Experiences of Black Lesbian Women Negotiating from the Margins

**Investigator(s):** Arianne J. Napier

Dear Participant,

My name is Arianne J. Napier and I am a Masters' level social work student from Smith College School for Social Work. This study is part of research I am conducting to explore the narratives and experiences of individuals who identify as Black Lesbian Women, to better understand how people who identify as Black Lesbian Women create meaning in their lives when negotiating their identities in the face of racism, sexism, and heterosexism. The data developed will be used for my master's thesis and in possible presentations or publications of my thesis. You are being asked to participate in this study because you identify with as a Black Lesbian Woman and are between the ages of 21 and 35. To participate in this study you must engage in a 60-75 minute in-person interview or Skype interview.

In this interview I will ask you questions about your demographics and questions related to your identity and your experiences related to racism, sexism, and heterosexism. By participating in this study you will have an opportunity to share your experience as a Black Lesbian Woman and explore how these identities have impacted you and your life experiences. By sharing your experiences, you will be contributing to research related to the lives of Black Lesbian Women. The result of your participation in this study may help clinicians, educators, and others in helping professions gain insight into the unique position of your lived experience. There are minimal risks for participation in this study; however, some questions related to race and racism, gender and sexism, and sexual orientation and heterosexism may cause emotional distress, as these questions may bring up painful memories. Lastly, because participant recruitment has been through social media, public announcements, and word of mouth, there is a risk of you becoming aware of other participants in this study. To ensure confidentiality and privacy, please do not discuss identifiable or private information with others. Any identifying information provided during the interview will be kept private; I will invite you to create a pseudonym for privacy, if you wish. The recording of the interview will be kept on a password-protected computer and will be discarded after three years. The recording of the interview will be transcribed by the researcher or by a third party transcriptionist who will sign a confidentiality agreement.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You can choose to withdraw at any time during the study. You may choose to skip any question, but once the interview is completed you can request to have your data be removed up to 1 month after the interview. All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. In order for your answers to be used for my research you must complete all of the demographic information and more than 50% of the questions. You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any questions or concerns about



your rights or any other aspects of the study, please email me at [NarrativesofBLW@gmail.com](mailto:NarrativesofBLW@gmail.com) or the chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974 extension 80.

If you need supportive resources, please find the list of resources at the end of this form. Your participation in this study can be in person in the Greater Boston Area or via Skype. In addition, for your participation in this study, there will be coffee/tea/snacks provided at the time of the in-person interview or a \$10 Starbuck or Dunkin Donuts card will be mailed to you if you participate via Skype.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, agree to be audiotaped during the interview, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. After you have signed and dated this form, please make a copy for your personal records and return the original form back to me via US Mail.

Thank you for your participation in this study.

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you are experiencing distress as a result of this study, please refer to the following websites:

Hispanic Black Gay Coalition (Boston)

<http://www.hbgc-boston.org/>

Family, Community & Civic Organization

Fenway Health (Boston)

<http://www.fenwayhealth.org/site/PageServer>

Community Health Center

Boston Alliance of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Youth (Boston)

<http://www.bagly.org/programs>

Social Support Organization

Callen Lorde Health Services (New York)

<http://callen-lorde.org/>

Community Health Center

Therapists Near You

<http://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/>

Psychosocial Support

If you are interested in supportive resources as a result of this study, please refer to the following resources:

bklyn boihood

[www.bklynhoihood.com](http://www.bklynhoihood.com)

Family, Community & Civic Organizations

Black Girl Dangerous

[www.blackgirldangerous.org](http://www.blackgirldangerous.org)

Advertising & Media

Family, Community & Civic Organizations

## **Appendix D: Interview Questions**

### **Personal**

1. Can you confirm the following information your: **pseudonym, age, and where you live** currently?
2. Where are you originally from? What family members were influential in your upbringing? Can you tell me about where you grew up ie your neighborhood?
3. What is your relationship status?
4. If employed what do you do for work and what do you do beyond that?
5. How did you come to identify as a BLW? Can you tell me the development of your Black Lesbian Woman identities for you? Can you tell me what these identities mean to you?
6. Have these self-definitions changed for you over time? If yes, how so?

### **Community**

7. Do you feel there are moments and/or events in your life where you are able to be a Black Lesbian Woman, without having to negotiate any of these identities?
  - a. Can you tell me about these moments?
8. Do you have a community of other BLW?
9. What does the community do for you?
10. Do you feel there are places or spaces in your life where you are able to be a Black Lesbian Woman, without having to negotiate any of these identities?
  - a. What does it feel like to be part of that space?
  - b. What do you think it is about that space that allows you to feel that way?
  - c. If not, what do you imagine a space like that would be for you to not have to negotiate any of your identities?
    - i. How do you imagine you would feel in a space like that, if it existed for you?

### **Personal**

11. Are there people who help you feel comfortable with all of your identities?
12. What is it like for you when you have to negotiate these identities?
13. Do you feel like you are negotiating your identities daily?
  - o If so, what does that look like for you in your daily life?
  - o What contributes to you feeling like you have to negotiate your identities?
14. How do you manage/deal with racism, sexism, heterosexism?
15. Can you tell me about the worst experience in your adult years when you knew you were being oppressed based on your BLW identity?
16. Can you tell me of an experience when you were being oppressed but it wasn't clear which identity was being targeted?

Your participation in this research suggests that you may believe it is important to share your story and the narrative of BLW.

17. Can you tell me why you chose to participate in the study?
18. What would you want people to know about BLW?
19. What do you think is most important about the experiences of BLW?
20. What would you say to a 15 yo who identified as a Black Lesbian Girl?
21. Is there anything else you'd like to include that wasn't discussed?

## Appendix E: Transcription Confidentiality Agreement

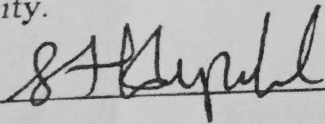
### Volunteer or Professional Transcriber's Assurance of Research Confidentiality

This thesis project is firmly committed to the principle that research confidentiality must be protected and to all of the ethics, values, and practical requirements for participant protection laid down by federal guidelines and by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee. In the service of this commitment:

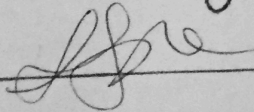
- All volunteer and professional transcribers for this project shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
- A volunteer or professional transcriber should be aware that the identity of participants in research studies is confidential information, as are identifying information about participants and individual responses to questions. The organizations participating in the study, the geographical location of the study, the method of participant recruitment, the subject matter of the study, and the hypotheses being tested are also be confidential information. Specific research findings and conclusions are also usually confidential until they have been published or presented in public.
- The researcher for this project, - <sup>Arienne J. NAPIER</sup>~~insert name of researcher~~ - shall be responsible for ensuring that all volunteer or professional transcribers handling data are instructed on procedures for keeping the data secure and maintaining all of the information in and about the study in confidence, and that that they have signed this pledge. At the end of the project, all materials shall be returned to the investigator for secure storage in accordance with federal guidelines.

### PLEDGE

I hereby certify that I will maintain the confidentiality of all of the information from all studies with which I have involvement. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to such information, except directly to the researcher, - ~~insert name of researcher~~ - for this project. I understand that violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for disciplinary action, including termination of professional or volunteer services with the project, and may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.



February 25, 2015



February 29, 2015

Signature

Date

ARIANNE J. NAPIER  
~~Insert name of researcher~~

Date

## Appendix E: Transcription Confidentiality Agreement

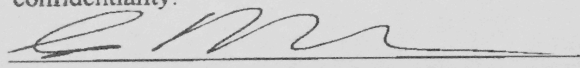
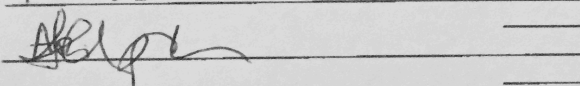
### Volunteer or Professional Transcriber's Assurance of Research Confidentiality

This thesis project is firmly committed to the principle that research confidentiality must be protected and to all of the ethics, values, and practical requirements for participant protection laid down by federal guidelines and by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee. In the service of this commitment:

- All volunteer and professional transcribers for this project shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
- A volunteer or professional transcriber should be aware that the identity of participants in research studies is confidential information, as are identifying information about participants and individual responses to questions. The organizations participating in the study, the geographical location of the study, the method of participant recruitment, the subject matter of the study, and the hypotheses being tested are also be confidential information. Specific research findings and conclusions are also usually confidential until they have been published or presented in public.
- The researcher for this project, - *Arianne J. Napier* - shall be responsible for ensuring that all volunteer or professional transcribers handling data are instructed on procedures for keeping the data secure and maintaining all of the information in and about the study in confidence, and that that they have signed this pledge. At the end of the project, all materials shall be returned to the investigator for secure storage in accordance with federal guidelines.

### PLEDGE

I hereby certify that I will maintain the confidentiality of all of the information from all studies with which I have involvement. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to such information, except directly to the researcher, - *Arianne J. Napier* - for this project. I understand that violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for disciplinary action, including termination of professional or volunteer services with the project, and may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.

	Signature
<u>ROSE WILSON</u>	Date <u>3/19/15</u>
	Date <u>3/25/15</u>
	<i>Arianne J. Napier</i>
	Date _____

## Appendix F: HSR Approval Letter



---

**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

January 22, 2015

Arianne Napier

Dear Arianne,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Jack Simons, Research Advisor

**Appendix G: HSR Protocol Change Form**

**RESEARCH PROJECT CHANGE OF PROTOCOL FORM – School for Social Work**

You are presently the researcher on the following *approved* research project by the Human Subjects Committee (HSR) of Smith College School for Social Work:

**«Project\_Name»  
Arianne J. Napier  
Research Advisor: Jack Simons**

.....

I am requesting changes to the study protocols, as they were originally approved by the HSR Committee of Smith College School for Social Work. These changes are as follows:

I am requesting to add in a line in the informed consent agreement to inform the participants that a transcriptionist will be used.

[DESCRIBE ALL PROTOCOL CHANGES BEING PROPOSED IN NUMERIC SEQUENCE; BE BRIEF AND SPECIFIC]

1. I am including in the last line of the second paragraph in my informed consent agreement, "The recording of the interview will be transcribed by the researcher or by a third party transcriptionist who will sign a confidentiality agreement."
2. I've also added another Appendix (Appendix F: Transcription Confidentiality Agreement)

.....

- I understand that these proposed changes in protocol will be reviewed by the Committee.
- I also understand that any proposed changes in protocol being requested in this form cannot be implemented until they have been fully approved by the HSR Committee.
- I have discussed these changes with my Research Advisor and he/she has approved them.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understood the information provided above.

**Signature of Researcher:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Arianne Napier** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name of Researcher (PLEASE PRINT):** \_\_\_\_\_ **Jack Simons** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** 2/17/15 \_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE RETURN THIS SIGNED & COMPLETED FORM TO Laura Wyman at [LWyman@smith.edu](mailto:LWyman@smith.edu) or to Lilly Hall Room 115.

\*\*\*Include your Research Advisor/Doctoral Committee Chair in the 'cc'. Once the Advisor/Chair writes acknowledging and approving this change, the Committee review will be initiated.

.....

## Appendix H: HSR Protocol Approval Form



---

**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 18, 2015

Arianne Napier

Dear Arianne,

I have reviewed your amendments and they look fine. These amendments to your study are therefore approved. Thank you and best of luck with your project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Jack Simons, Research Advisor