

Doctoral Project Approval Sheet

This doctoral project entitled

A NEW NARRATIVE: A WOMANIST FRAMEWORK FOR
IDENTITY FORMATION AND SELF-RECOVERY

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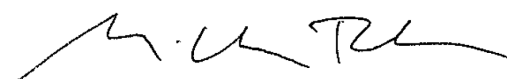
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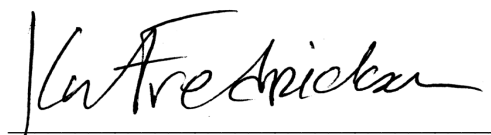
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A NEW NARRATIVE: A WOMANIST FRAMEWORK FOR
IDENTITY FORMATION AND SELF-RECOVERY

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BY

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ABSTRACT

A New Narrative: A Womanist Framework For Identity Formation and Self-recovery

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Doctor of Ministry

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Black women in America living in a White male-dominated patriarchal, capitalistic, misogynistic society are often forced to live on the margins as a shadow of themselves. They have learned the art of dissemination and acculturation causing them to shift and code switch as they seek to meet the needs of those in their life, without attending to their own needs. They have learned to wear the armor or mask of the StrongBlackWoman, as a survival mechanism that has often led to the loss of identity and sense of self.

The armor of the StrongBlackWoman is negatively impacting the mental, emotional, spiritual, physical, and relational well-being of Black women. These five areas of well-being are often overlooked not just by dominant culture but also by Black women and those within their community. Black women need a new modality that moves from surviving to thriving as they navigate the complexities and consequences of race, class, and gender in their daily lives and on their well-being. This project utilized a variety of methods to journey with Black women on their identity formation and self-recovery process in forming a new narrative.

Part One of this paper will examine the historical context of race, class, and gender in Los Angeles County. It will also look at the ways Black women sought communal well-being and were portrayed by others. Part Two will provide an overview of controlling narratives and the impact they have on Black women. It will also provide an overview of womanist methodology, theology, and recovery models used that will be useful resources for Black women in forming a new narrative. Part Three of this paper will discuss the New Narrative project design and implementation. It will also look at areas of improvement and next steps.

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To the little Black girls within us who didn't realize their
Black girl magic was meant for them

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PART ONE
MINISTRY CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

Whiteness is expansive.¹ It is invasive and all consuming. It has this way of infiltrating every aspect of our being and existence. The idea of Whiteness is not simply a reference to a social construct to divide and subjugate people groups along a White-Black continuum; rather, it is an ideology founded on the belief of a supremacy of one over and against another. It is an ideology that defines reality as it influences society, systems, and ways of being. Whiteness “attaches privilege to being White and male and heterosexual and nondisabled,” and to class as well.²

The sinister aspect of living in a world centered on Whiteness is that it poisons how we see ourselves. Shonda Rhimes introduced prime time to the old adage, “You have to be twice as good as them to get half of what they have.” For Black women in America this is not simply a platitude they have heard, but a reality we experience.³ Like most Black girls who grew up in America, my parents did the best they could in teaching me how to survive in a world that was different than the one they knew. As they prepared our generation to survive, they inadvertently taught us that we were not quite enough. They drilled into our consciousness the necessity of obtaining an education, while simultaneously reminding us that even with our best efforts we would receive only half of the reward in this country.

¹ Portions of the Introduction have been adapted from Tracey Stringer, “Renewal for WOC in Ministry” (course paper, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, January 2017).

² Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 8.

³ Neil Drumming, “Scandal’s Racially Charged Motto: You Have to be Twice as Good as Them,” October 4, 2013, https://www.salon.com/2013/10/04/scandals_racially_charged_motto_you_have_to_be_twice_as_good_as_them/.

While this platitude was important in enabling my generation to survive in a world that constantly assaulted our very being and existence; it did little in regard to helping us see our value. Platitudes like these coupled with controlling narratives and stereotypes continue to be used to misrecognize and control Black women's identity. This has marred the identities of Blacks, which has led to a fragmentation and lack of anthropological understanding of being embodied human being. This in turn has a detrimental impact on the physical, spiritual, mental, and relational well-being of Black women.

As Black women continue to live, work, and serve our communities and families, we are repeatedly exposed to traumatic situations. This can create an almost inescapable pattern of intergenerational trauma. The fragmentation, trauma, and false narratives can cause Black women to live in a perpetual state of survival. As a Black bi-vocational female pastor, who has worked in predominantly White institutions as well as within the Black church, I have experienced and seen firsthand the impact this has had on the identity formation of Black women. Chanequa Walker-Barnes argues that to survive Black women have embraced the StrongBlackWoman armor or a similar archetype that leads to extreme independence, caregiving, and emotional strength/regulation, which can negatively impact their overall well-being.⁴ Living in a survival modality prevents us from thriving.

The emotional, physical, spiritual, mental, and relational well-being of Black women is often overlooked not just by dominant culture but by Black women as well.

⁴ Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), Kindle edition, 18.

Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that since the categories of race and gender are narrowly defined—often by the experiences of Black men and White women—Black women’s experiences are excluded since they do not fit the experiences of all Black people and all women. This impacts Black women unfairly since their “intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism.”⁵ Examining three discrimination cases involving Black Women, Crenshaw was able to highlight the disadvantages of using a single-axis framework noting that it “erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification, and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group.”⁶

This filters the experience of Black women to the point of obscurity making it difficult to be seen and consequently addressed. She concluded that “any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.”⁷ Crenshaw also points out that intersectionality is not primarily about identity but about interrogating power and structural dynamics as they relate to difference and sameness and consequently, the impact this has on vulnerable identities.⁸

⁵ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (Volume 1989): 140.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38:4 (2013); Kimberlé Crenshaw, “On Intersectionality,” Women of the World Festival 2016, London, (March 12, 2016), <https://youtu.be/-DW4HLgYP1A>.

Since intersectional studies expanded into various disciplines there have been three primary ways it is utilized. The first is as an application of the frameworks and the dynamics it has within a context. Second, as an investigation of theory and method asking the questions of how it can be used and if it is appropriate to do so. Finally, by using an intersectional lens to analyze the existing realities, praxis and determine the appropriate intervention, if necessary.⁹

An intersectional lens will be utilized as I examine the social historical realities of Black women in America and the impact it has on their identities and well-being. I will employ a womanist methodology in constructing a holistic framework of identity formation and self-recovery, that centers the well-being of Black women. The aim of this paper is to discuss the social historical realities of Black women in America, the impact of misrecognition on our well-being, and examine key womanist resources to aide in the creation of New Narrative recovery groups based on a womanist framework of identity formation and self-recovery.

Part One of this paper will examine the social historical context in which this project takes places: Los Angeles, California. It will also look at the lives of women who helped to shape Black Los Angeles as well as how Black women continue to serve their communities and families today. Part Two will then explore both sociology and theological perspectives. In this section the concept of misrecognition and the impact of controlling narratives on the well-being of Black Women will be discussed. Additionally, it will provide an overview of key womanist theology and resources that will be utilized

⁹ Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies:" 786-787.

in the project, A New Narrative self-recovery groups. Part Three of this paper will identify the theory of the new ministry initiative, the project overview implementation, lessons learned, and recommendations to improve the project moving forward.

CHAPTER 1

BLACK LA AND THE WOMEN WHO SHAPED IT

Learn from or build on the past. Pick up the gems of the past. [It is a] constant reminder that the past is not all shameful and that the future may profitably be built on aspects of the past.

A.K Quarco¹

The authors of the “Declaration of Independence” believed in the idea that all men were created equal and were entitled to certain rights: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.² Yet a line was drawn between Whites and non-Whites; male and female. Black women were not seen as equal or even as people. This resulted in Black women consistently being denied political and civil citizenship, thereby preventing them access to these inalienable rights.³

This chapter will provide a sociohistorical analysis of Black women in Los Angeles to encourage a reflection on the past and to collect gems that will help on their

¹ Christel N. Temple, “The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States: A Modern History,” *Journal of Black Studies* 41:1 (2010): 127-50. Accessed July 25, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/25704098.

² United States Congress, “Declaration of Independence,” July 4, 1976, http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html.

³ Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002), 55.

journey ahead, a critical aspect to the identity formation and self-recovery process. Black women have played an integral role in shaping Black Los Angeles. Understanding the journey of Black women in Los Angeles becomes a source of pride. Drawing on the stories of how Black women in LA have used their resources, bodies, and minds to resist oppression for themselves and the larger community will enable those within the self-recovery groups to see themselves woven in a greater tapestry.

Black LA: The Early Days

Los Angeles was founded on February 4, 1781, by a group of forty-six settlers, half of whom were of African or half-African ancestry.⁴ In the nineteenth century the first English-speaking Blacks came to Los Angeles and consisted of a small mix of servants and slaves of officers from the Mexican-American War.⁵ These Black families were able to utilize their skills in order to gain wealth.

Blacks migrated to California to pursue a measure of freedom, economic possibilities, as well as education.⁶ While many Black women traveled with their families, it was not uncommon for groups of Black women to travel together. Many of these women were literate and utilized their knowledge to benefit the entire Black community, using education as the foundation. “In 1860, when the overwhelming majority of African Americans were illiterate, 74 percent of California’s Black female

⁴ Lawrence De Graff and Quintard Taylor, “African Americans in California History, California in African American History,” in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage) 2001, 6.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ William Coleman, “African American Women and Community Development,” in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage, 2001), 101.

population could read and write. Three decades later, a larger percentage of Black than White girls attended school for six or more months per year.”⁷ Black women’s activism, community engagement, and commitment to education paved the way for Black communities to incorporate cultural, social, and educational aspects into the fabric of the Black communities in California.⁸

As Black women made a life in California, they also fought against injustices utilizing legal and other subversive methods.⁹ Bridget “Biddy” Mason was enslaved by the Smiths, a Mormon family that migrated throughout the West to establish churches.¹⁰ In 1851, they relocated to San Bernardino, CA—taking the Mason family with them.¹¹ Although California was admitted into the Union as a free state, there were still forms of slavery rarely reported for the first decade.¹²

When the Smiths tried to relocate to Texas a slave state, Mason sought legal recourse to challenge the Smith’s right to own and relocate her and her family.¹³ With the help of Robert Owens, a former slave and respected businessman within the community, the Mason family was placed under protective custody, preventing the

⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 104.

¹⁰ National Parks Service, “Bridget ‘Biddy’ Mason,” accessed August 16, 2020, <https://www.nps.gov/people/biddymason.htm>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Coleman, “African American Women,” 102-103.

¹³ Ibid., 103.

Smiths from taking them to Texas.¹⁴ Mason filed a court petition seeking freedom for herself and her family. The judge eventually ruled in her favor, freeing all the Black families enslaved by the Smiths.¹⁵

After securing her freedom Mason began working as a nurse and was eventually able to gain financial security.¹⁶ Mason purchased land on Spring Street and built rental units for Black migrants, becoming one of the first women to own land in Los Angeles.¹⁷ She opened her home as a meeting space for the first Black church in Los Angeles: First AME Church and eventually gave money and land for the church building.¹⁸ Mason's charitable giving was not limited to churches—she gave to other organizations, provided food and shelter for those in need. Her actions demonstrated a concern for the wellbeing of the entire community, a key aspect in womanist philosophy.

Although she was described by many as Aunt or Grandma Mason and generally viewed as a respectable, kind, charitable, entrepreneur, and woman of faith, it did not prevent her from being depicted in stereotypical ways. In 1887, when she was required to testify in a case against Major Horace Bell, she was characterized as being “a most unwilling witness,” because she paused frequently during her testimony.¹⁹ In 1909, a *Los Angeles Daily Times* article that highlighted the achievements of Black women including

¹⁴ De Graaf and Taylor, “African Americans in California History,” 6.

¹⁵ History of American Women, “Biddy Mason,” May 2013, <http://www.womenhistoryblog.com/2013/05/biddy-mason.html>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Coleman, “African American Women,” 107.

¹⁹ *Los Angeles Daily Times*, “Bell's Libel,” *Los Angeles Daily Times*, June 22, 1887, 2.

Mason described here as a “woman of almost masculine strength.”²⁰ Despite the respectability Mason earned while alive, she was treated as less than in death, and buried in an unmarked grave.²¹ In 1988, nearly a century after her passing, a tombstone was placed over her burial plot, and a year later the city of Los Angeles commemorated a day to celebrate her legacy. This was followed by naming a building and park in Mason’s honor.²²

Despite having created and sustained many organizations, churches, and people within the Black community her legacy was removed from the public for over a century. Additionally, although a park was built in her honor, it could also be described as an outdoor walkaway. It consists of trees, benches, and a wall charting her works on the southside of the Bradbury Building. It is tucked away between two buildings and is not easy to find. Mason was able to gain wealth, influence, and a level of respectability, yet there were still ways in which she was denied basic liberties, treated with dignity and respect, and faded into the shadows. Remembering the endeavors of women like Mason in addition to how she was portrayed in society demonstrates the complexities of being a Black woman in America and the struggle to fight for life-affirming narratives while simultaneously seeking the well-being of the community.

²⁰ Kate Bradley Stovall, “The Negro Woman in Los Angeles and Vicinity—Some Notable Characters. Both Refined and Cultured in Life,” *Los Angeles Daily Times*, February 12, 1909, 4.

²¹ History of American Women, “Biddy Mason.”

²² *Ibid.*

Seeking the Promised Land

With the institution of Jim Crow, many Southern Black people began to look for new places where they could potentially experience the rights of a citizen, receive liberty, and pursue happiness. Blacks hoped to be able to create a community where they could live, thrive, and flourish and knew it could not be realized in the South.²³ This hope led to the great migration from the South.

Endorsement from leaders such as WEB Du Bois painted Los Angeles as the promised land: “LA is wonderful. Nowhere in the United States is the Negro so well and beautifully housed. . . . Out here in this matchless Southern California there would seem to be no limit to your opportunities, your possibilities.”²⁴ Jefferson Edmonds, editor and publisher of a local newspaper, the *Liberator*, wrote articles to promote LA as the Promised Land for Blacks. For Edmonds and other formerly enslaved, relocating to California initially felt like a land of opportunity that was free from the restrictions they encountered in Southern states.²⁵ The endorsements of Du Bois and Edmonds, coupled with the prospect of jobs and land, contributed to the increase of the Black population in LA during this period.²⁶

Prior to the 1900s, the population of Blacks in California was barely over 12,000.²⁷ During the Great Migration from 1910 to 1930, nearly 1.2 million Blacks left

²³ Lonnie G. Bunch, III, “The Greatest State for the Negro,” in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage), 2001, 132.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁶ De Graaf and Taylor, “African Americans in California History,” 12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

the South. Nearly 40,000 Blacks migrated to Los Angeles County, the only county in the West to attract such a large migrant population.²⁸ By the early-1910s, Blacks had established a bustling community with churches, fraternal organizations, clubs, newspapers, and some even owned real estate.²⁹

A Dream Deferred

While Blacks believed that LA County was the Promised Land, Whites were told it was a “White spot of America,” (a racially pure place) “a city built by White Americans for White Americans.”³⁰ The religious evangelicals of the South believed movement west was an opportunity to live out the Southern Errand, which included spreading the Gospel, securing their economic future, and preserving both family and culture. The Southern evangelicals who migrated to LA would not divest themselves of patriarchal ways, racial privilege, or White supremacist ideology.³¹

These religious migrants who were plain folks, preachers, and entrepreneurs each came to California with an agenda to spread the Gospel by changing the liberal agenda. To do so they began to have a vested interest in politics as one way of transforming culture. Additionally, they utilized the establishment of churches, denominational branches, schools, and parachurch ministries to change the landscape.³² The large

²⁸ Bunch, “The Greatest State for the Negro,” 144.

²⁹ De Graaf and Taylor, “African Americans in California History,” 19-20.

³⁰ John H.M. Laslett, *Sunshine was Never Enough: Los Angeles Workers, 1880-2010* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 20.

³¹ Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2011), 9-10.

³² *Ibid.*, xv.

migration of Whites from the Midwest and the South changed Los Angeles from a frontier city open to diversity into an “economic powerhouse with a narrow civic culture.”³³ These changes enacted by the evangelicals of the South had immense impact on the culture of southern California and the nation as “Californian precedents [often] became pedagogy for others” across the United States.³⁴

In the 1920s as the population of Black Angelenos increased, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) gained more power in the western South more than anywhere else. The KKK saw it as their mission to defend their communities from Blacks and any other form of what they saw as a threat to their community.³⁵ During the 1920s methods of segregation were implemented such as a White-only bus system and red-lining, which prohibited Blacks from extending into various communities within LA County. This confined the Black community to Downtown Los Angeles, creating overcrowding which led to additional health issues for the Black community.³⁶ These restrictive covenants also “deprived Blacks of the chance to free up new housing for Blacks with lower social economic status, while building an even stronger middle class.”³⁷

³³ Raphael J. Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White, Race and Power in Los Angeles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 26.

³⁴ Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt*, xxi.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁶ Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White*, 27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Employment sectors for Blacks were restricted to domestic, field, and service industries—with 80 to 95 percent employed in these sectors.³⁸ In addition, the LA open shop model weakened or prevented labor unions, leading to poor working conditions and wages.³⁹ Additionally, the open shops employed police officers to harass union supporters who advocated for better wages.⁴⁰ Blacks found themselves in an adapted sharecropping model, where most of their wages went to pay off debt accumulated as a result of getting goods and food from their employer to survive each month.⁴¹ Similar to Octavia Butler’s description of company towns in her novel *The Parable of the Sower*, businesses found ways to place people in a form of indentured servanthood creating a vicious debt cycle, as employees owed more than they earned.

While Black women chose to migrate to California in hopes of leaving sexual and economic exploitation, the job possibilities for Black women were limited to domestic work on and off the screen.⁴² Blacks were paid lower wages than Whites—making it necessary for both men and women to work outside the home to support their family.⁴³ According to Marcia Riggs the internalization of socially constructed gender norms created a hostile cycle between Black men and women.

³⁸ Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002), 82.

³⁹ Laslett, *Sunshine was Never Enough*, 321.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 321-322.

⁴¹ Glenn, *Unequal Freedom*, 87.

⁴² Shirley Ann Wilson-Moore, “Your Life is Really Not Just Your Own,” in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage 2001), 211.

⁴³ Glenn, *Unequal Freedom*, 82.

African American women either blame[d] men for not fulfilling their roles as providers and protectors or they blame[d] themselves for not being supportive enough of Black men, thus denying the sexism of Black men...African American men either blame[d] women for not being feminine enough and disrespectful of Black men or they blame[d] themselves for failing to provide security...and become abusive to women.⁴⁴

Riggs believes that the church could deconstruct rather than continue to be an accomplice to the myths of socially constructed gender norms.

This tension was further complicated by government programs which existed to assist women not working, although Black women were denied access to these programs.⁴⁵ This government designation that only White women could receive government support demonstrates the manner in which Black women were treated as less than. Additionally, this communicated a value of White motherhood over Black motherhood. These inequalities would have generational impacts on Black Angelinos as well as on the identity of Black women.

Serving and Leading

In the post-slavery period, the Black preacher took on the role of “social worker and political and religious adviser” for the community.⁴⁶ In turn this position allowed Black men to be treated with some measure of dignity not previously seen, as he was referred to as “Preacher,” instead of “boy.”⁴⁷ At the same time the Black church’s

⁴⁴ Marcia Riggs, *Plenty Good Room: Women Versus Male Power in the Black Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2008), 44.

⁴⁵ Glenn, *Unequal Freedom*, 92.

⁴⁶ Theresa Hoover, “Black Women and the Church: Triple Jeopardy,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, eds. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James Cone, 293-303, (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 379.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

captivity to White-male normativity informed the structure and practices of the Black church. Everything that is Black does not equate to liberating.⁴⁸ While Black liberation theology proclaims liberation that comes from God for all, it often has not considered the struggle of Black women.⁴⁹ Jacquelyn Grant argues that not considering the oppression at the hands of the Black church leads to an inauthentic liberation theology.⁵⁰

To prevent this from happening, Douglas encourages the use of a sociopolitical analysis of wholeness. This allows us to ask the question, “Is the way we are perceiving this and doing this beneficial for wholeness of all within the community?” It asks, “Does it consider the least of these? . . . Is this in any way oppressive and/or subverting the work of justice and liberation?”⁵¹ Questions such as these help to determine if it is beneficial to the whole community.

Within the church context, women of color are “universally expected and asked by congregations and denominations to volunteer their services” and are rarely invited into senior leadership positions.⁵² Although Black women are referred to as the glue or backbone, they are often placed in support roles rather than in leadership.⁵³ Hoover

⁴⁸ Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 84.

⁴⁹ Jacquelyn Grant, “Black Theology and the Black Woman,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, eds. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James Cone, 323-338, (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 423.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ For detailed information on this analysis see Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 97-117. These questions arise based on three elements she believes are essential to wholeness.

⁵² Women of Color in Ministry, “WOCIM Explained,” accessed August 16, 2020, <http://womenofcolorinministry.org/what-is-wocim.html>.

⁵³ Day, *Unfinished Business*, 11.

writes, “To be a woman, Black, and active in religious institutions in the American scene is to labor under triple jeopardy.”⁵⁴ One way that Black women asserted leadership was through the club movement birthed out of the church.

Through the club movement, Black women utilized their time, energy, resources, and influence to greatly impact their community as they addressed social ills.⁵⁵ Los Angeles eventually became known as the “divine fire” as women’s clubs organized protests, provided vocational training, and started libraries as well as musical departments.⁵⁶ Black women in California protested, filed discrimination lawsuits, used their voices and put their body on the line as they protested.⁵⁷ Although these clubs consisted primarily of middle-class women, women from a lower SES were also actively involved in spreading this fire.

According to Shirley Wilson-Moore, “[T]he women’s club movement provided a platform for Black activism in California, and laid the foundation for future civil rights campaigns, organization, and leaders.”⁵⁸ For Black women, their social activism was personal and deeply connected to problems they identified within the Black community.⁵⁹ This was birthed out of a collective consciousness that believed ““your life is really not

⁵⁴ Hoover, “Black Women and the Church,” 377.

⁵⁵ Wilson-Moore, “Your Life is Really Not Just Your Own,” 215.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁵⁷ Coleman, “African American Women,” 112.

⁵⁸ Wilson-Moore, “Your Life is Really Not Just Your Own,” 219.

⁵⁹ Day, *Unfinished Business*, 11.

just your own,' but belonged to the 'Black race.'"⁶⁰ Wilson-Moore's comments also reflect the tension many Black women faced, choosing between their race or gender as they pursued the communal well-being.

The club movement also provided a space for political action through a variety of mediums. For instance, the Women's Republican Study Club led by Betty Hill sought to help inform voters. The goal of the Club was to recommend candidates whom they believed would benefit the wider Black community.⁶¹ Hill's organization and efforts led to the election of Fay Allen to the LA School Board, making Allen the first African American woman elected to office in California.⁶²

In 1920, of the 8,500 women employed in Los Angeles as telephone operators, store clerks, and saleswomen, only forty-two were Black.⁶³ Through the club movements, Black women were provided opportunities to break into industries that were previously limited to White women such as nursing, clerical jobs, sales, and teaching.⁶⁴ The club movement opened doors for Black women to enter into new occupations not only through protest and civil action, but also with financial assistance.⁶⁵ For instance, Bessie Bruington received scholarship assistance from the Forum to continue her education to become a teacher. Upon completing her education, she returned to become the first Black

⁶⁰ Wilson-Moore, "Your Life is Really Not Just Your Own," 220.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 220-221.

⁶³ Ibid., 223.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

teacher in the LA city district.⁶⁶ Similarly, Ruth Temple received support from clubs to aid in completion of her medical degree. Temple became the first Black female doctor in California and opened a medical practice in LA. With the support of clubs, Vade Watson-Somerville becoming the first Black woman in California to hold a masters in dentistry; she later opened her practice in Los Angeles.

While Black women entered these industries after great struggle, it was often in a token capacity.⁶⁷ It is important to recognize the immense pressure and burden that this often placed on Black women not only to succeed but to be exceptional. In many regards it was part of what it meant to be race woman, who placed her racial identity above all. To be the backbone of the family and the community often means that Black women were consistently undervalued, underpaid, underappreciated, and overlooked in these contexts where they give beyond their own capacities.

WWII Era and LA Boom

During the World War II era, the boom of industry created new opportunities and obstacles for Blacks in Los Angeles. Charlotte Bass was a key figure during this period in seeking to advocate for the advancement of Black people within her community. As owner, editor, and journalist of the *California Eagle*, Bass utilized her paper as a platform to highlight critical issues and advocate for reforms.⁶⁸ Nearly a quarter of the Los

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Regina Freer, "L.A. Race Woman: Charlotte Bass and the Complexities of Black Political Development in Los Angeles," *American Quarterly* 56:3 (2004): 607, accessed March 4, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/40068236. 607.

Angeles Black community subscribed to her paper. Understanding that the Black community was not a monolith, Bass sought to maintain ties to both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), who were often overlooked by mainstream press.⁶⁹ She used her newspaper to create a platform for both organizations.

Throughout her lifetime, Bass confronted a variety of issues around leisure space, employment, and housing discrimination. By taking a look at these key issues we can see the various ways Bass and other Black women sought to improve the quality of life for Black Angelenos during the post WWII period.

Leisure Space

While fighting employment and housing discrimination were considered essential to the Black community the fight for leisure space was equally important. In other states leisure space included access to entertainment venues, restaurants, and music clubs, for those in Southern California; it was equally important to have access to sunshine to enjoy outdoor leisure. For Black Angelenos leisure spaces represented full participation in all aspects of American society.⁷⁰ “In Southern California African American leisure spaces developed to promote the interest of the race and advance a complex mix of political

⁶⁹ Ibid., 612, 613.

⁷⁰ Alison Rose Jefferson, *Living the California Dream: African American Leisure Sites during the Jim Crow Era* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 13, accessed May 25, 2020, doi:10.2307/j.ctvsn3p0k.5.

perspectives supporting freedom, economic development, and emotional and physical rejuvenation.”⁷¹

While leisure came to be associated with consumption, historians note that for Blacks, it was a “product of distinctive initiative and resourcefulness, cultural self-expression, self-determination, and political activism amid systematic exclusion and dispossession of public rights.”⁷² Blacks recognized that creating leisure space was an act of self-determination, that promoted rest and play while creating business ventures, income, and a means to establish wealth.⁷³

In an effort not to be excluded from the sunshine and the benefits this leisure offered, the beaches became a battle ground for this civil rights struggle.⁷⁴ In 1912 entrepreneurs Willa and Charles Bruce began the establishment of a resort community on the beachfront along Manhattan Beach. Willa Bruce, opened Bruce Lounge, which she owned, operated, and managed.⁷⁵ The resort offered a place for out of town visitors to stay, it also had a bathhouse, prompting Black Angelenos from a variety of professions to flock to Bruce Beach.⁷⁶ In the decade following the Bruces’ move to Manhattan Beach, approximately six additional families purchased and built homes along the shoreline.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 22.

⁷³ Ibid., 23.

⁷⁴ Freer, “L.A. Race Woman,” 619.

⁷⁵ Jefferson, *Living the California Dream*, 35.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 37.

The Bruce lodge and beach encountered attacks and objections from the KKK. By the 1920s new local ordinances and actions by nearby White owners created a hostile space for Blacks Angelenos. The Bruces and nearby families faced hostility, harassment, and mounting pressures to close and move. Willa insisted on remaining open to provide a space for Blacks, since there were no other bathhouses they could use when they came to enjoy the ocean. She noted that, “Whenever we have tried to buy land for a beach resort we have been refused, but I own this land and I am going to keep it.”⁷⁸ In the same article Bruce was described as a “dusky proprietor” and “stout woman.”⁷⁹ Despite having her home address listed in the paper and described in less than favorable terms, Willa’s ability to resist was critical in the long, drawn out fight with the KKK, local residents, and city officials.⁸⁰

As Willa Bruce stood firm, the White residents involved the city, who condemned the Bruce Lodge and used eminent domain as a way to forcibly remove the Bruces and other families.⁸¹ Charlotte Bass recognized the importance of supporting the Bruces in their legal battle, called her readers and the NAACP to action. Bass argued that it was critical to attend public meetings as well as to jump into the ocean as both acts of solidarity and resistance.⁸² The Bruces were eventually forced off their land in 1924. The city argued the need to build a park on the property, yet it did not begin construction until

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ *Los Angeles Daily Times*, “Colored People’s Resort Meets with Opposition,” June 27, 1912, 15.

⁸⁰ Freer, “L.A. Race Woman,” 619.

⁸¹ Jefferson, *Living the California Dream*, 41.

⁸² Freer, “L.A. Race Woman,” 619.

1956.⁸³ Additionally the Bruces were later denied access to purchase additional property elsewhere as agreed upon.

After the closure of Bruce Beach, Blacks continued to protest along the shore, placing their bodies on the line and doing as Bass encouraged by continuing to jump in the water. On July 4, 1927, Elizabeth Catley was arrested for swimming.⁸⁴ For Catley swimming was an assertion of her own self-determination and a resistance to the societal norms that sought to subjugate and control Black bodies.⁸⁵ Several weeks later the NAACP led a dozen of its members to a swim in at Bruce Beach, the chapter's first act of civil disobedience.⁸⁶ The protest led to reopening Bruce beach to all of the public.⁸⁷ For the Black community, the need to find places for leisure, was about self-determination and not a promotion of the capitalistic consumption model. Creating space in the sunshine was an act of resistance and a declaration that Black bodies also deserve freedom—which includes rest, a concept often overlooked and undervalued.

Working and Living in LA

During and after World War II, many industries began to boom as the need for skilled labor grew to support growing military contracts in Los Angeles. This created thousands of new jobs for Blacks—so much so that by 1947 Los Angeles was listed as

⁸³ Jefferson, *Living the California Dream*, 52.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

one of the top ten cities that provide “the best employment opportunities for Black workers.”⁸⁸ This ushered in a time period where the Black community grew numerically and began to move to the middle class.⁸⁹ While there were more employment opportunities, it brought to the forefront the various employment disparities that continued to exist between Blacks and Whites.⁹⁰ Additionally, with the ending of the Federal Employment Practice Committee in 1946, Blacks no longer had the backing and support of legislation that could curtail racial discrimination.⁹¹

As Los Angeles grew, so did Hollywood, creating opportunities for employment in the entertainment industry through film production on and off the screen. Black women were often relegated to certain roles on the screen. For those who were of fair skinned or mixed race they were cast as the “tragic mulatto” or “evil temptress,” while darker skinned Blacks were cast as the “mammy” or maid.⁹² Hattie McDaniel won an Academy Award for her role as “the strong-willed mammy in the 1939 epic *Gone with the Wind*.”⁹³ This stereotypical role of a strong willed caretaker continued to show the way Black women were depicted.

While Daniel was criticized for acquiescing to a stereotypical role there were various subversive ways she resisted during her time in Hollywood. For instance it was

⁸⁸ Josh Sides, *LA City Limits African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 57.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁹¹ Ibid., 60.

⁹² Wilson-Moore, “Your Life is Really Not Just Your Own,” 214.

⁹³ Ibid.

McDaniel who pointed out to the film's producer the gravity of her work, which prompted him to submit her as an Oscar nominee.⁹⁴ Even though she was an Oscar nominee, when McDaniel arrived at the Oscars, she was not permitted to sit with the producer or other co-stars in the film but was placed at a seat against the far wall of the room.⁹⁵ Like Mason, Daniels was praised yet relegated to the shadows at the same, demonstrating the continued tension many Black women faced.

Unfortunately, after her Academy Award win, there was backlash as she was further type cast, and given the role of sassy mammy 74 times over the course of her career. Not only did she receive backlash from Hollywood, but also from the Black community including the NAACP who "disowned her for perpetuating negative stereotypes."⁹⁶ Even in her death, like Mason, she was denied entry into the Hollywood cemetery where other actresses were buried. It was not until 1999 that after much lobbying a memorial was placed in her honor at the cemetery.

While some criticized Black women for portraying stereotypical roles in the movies, it is important to understand the subversive ways in which they also contributed to the fight against injustice. McDaniel, Ethel Water, Louise Beavers, and other Black professionals sought to purchase homes in the community of Sugar Hill, but several White families filed an injunction. These actresses used their resources to fight, and "[T]heir efforts resulted in the dismissal of the injunction by the Los Angeles Superior

⁹⁴ Seth Abramovitch, "Oscar's First Black Winner Accepted her Honor in a Segregated 'No Blacks' Hotel in L.A.," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 19, 2015, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/oscars-first-Black-winner-accepted-774335>

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Court.”⁹⁷ Shirley Wilson points out that these “women who found careers playing docile and submissive servants helped fire the opening shots in the legal battle against residential segregation in California a battle that would culminate in the landmark Supreme Court decision *Shelley v. Kramer*, which outlawed restrictive covenants in 1948.”⁹⁸

Housing discrimination was another key issue for Bass who, understood the complexities of community activism and often went beyond writing and,

Actively involved herself in the defense of Black homeowners’ rights in the city. When Mrs. Mary Johnson appealed to the California Eagle for help after literally being kicked out of her newly purchased home by White neighbors, Bass “discussed the situation with some club women, and that evening a brigade of a hundred women marched to the Johnson home.” The women were ultimately successful in getting the sheriff to help Mrs. Johnson back into her home.⁹⁹

As restrictive covenants were eliminated and the middle class grew, Blacks communities began to develop in West Los Angeles. These communities formed coalitions in order to prevent White flight, stabilize integrating community, and the deterioration that often came with integration.¹⁰⁰ This resulted in the creation of affluent Black communities emerging in Baldwin Hills, Leimert Park, and Morningside Park further west of the city. However, the unintended consequences of this upward mobility was that it caused the poor communities to fall further behind both educationally and economically.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Wilson-Moore, “Your Life is Really Not Just Your Own,” 214.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Freer, “L.A. Race Woman,” 616.

¹⁰⁰ Sides, *LA City Limits*, 190.

¹⁰¹ Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White*, 30.

Revolt

While many middle-class Blacks relocated others remained and continued to build the existing Black community. Odessa Cox migrated to Los Angeles in early-1940s and eventually opened a cleaner with her husband in Watts. Although Odessa had the means to relocate to a more affluent Black community, she was committed to the betterment of Watts. In the 1950s Odessa began a decades-long battle to open a local community college in Watts and “founded the South-Central Junior College Committee, a group determined to bring a junior college to the Black community.”¹⁰²

Around the same time in 1949, the Los Angeles Crusade was led by Billy Graham launching him and the Evangelical movement into the spotlight.¹⁰³ Graham encouraged a colorblind Gospel, and argued that many of the societal problems could be attributed to personal sin that could only be dealt with by an individual’s regeneration. This, along with a declaration that racism was dead, “absolved White suburbanites of lingering guilt, when in fact prejudice remained entrenched in profoundly skewed economic structure and rationale.”¹⁰⁴ Backed by conservative evangelicals, the GOP argued that the civil rights works was completed and nothing further could be done through the government.¹⁰⁵ With the colorblind Gospel and political agenda White people felt absolved of personal and communal responsibility for sustainable change.

¹⁰² Sides, *LA City Limits*, 189.

¹⁰³ Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, 142.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

The Watts rebellion began after the arrest of Marquette Frye and his mother in front of their home. Although the Watts Revolt was not the first, it was however the longest, lasting six days, involving over ten thousand Blacks (2 percent of Black LA), and affecting 46-square miles. The Civil Revolt that occurred in Watts in 1965 dismissed the notion that LA was a post-racial progressive city.¹⁰⁶ It also “forced White Los Angeles to publicly face the long history of racial inequality in the city.”¹⁰⁷

While spurred by the arrest of the Fryes, the Watts Revolt was a response to decades of systemic oppression. According to Josh Sides, there were three factors that contributed to the Watts Revolt and other forms of resistance: different political aims of the second and third generation of Black Angelenos, the continued elimination of social programs promoted by White conservatives and evangelicals, and the widening economic gap between Blacks and Whites.¹⁰⁸ The second and third generation of Black Angelenos saw the various inequalities that continued to exist with their White peers and challenged the political and social aims of the previous generation, creating an “ideological fragmentation of the Black community.”¹⁰⁹ The continued harassment by LAPD, propelled young Black Angelenos to join the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers to seek new ways to resist. Additionally, rising unemployment and underemployment of Blacks—due to deindustrialization alongside selective reindustrialization—made it difficult for many to maintain a middle-class lifestyle.

¹⁰⁶ Sides, *LA City Limits*, 169.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

The Watts Rebellion of 1965 “was the incident that led the Los Angeles Board of Education to finally agree to open LASC.”¹¹⁰ Although Cox initially faced opposition, the school was eventually started in 1967. By choosing to remain, Odessa created space for the education of a generation of students in South Los Angeles. In 1969, Cox ran for one of seven seats for the junior college board of trustees, during a time of both financial and civil instability. In highlighting the positions of the fourteen candidates the *Los Angeles Times* used words such as stressed, pointed out, advocated when describing their positions. Despite her critical engagement and extensive understanding of the issues facing the school her positions and points were viewed as being critical or complaining demonstrating the ways in which her voice and perspective were portrayed.¹¹¹

Rising unemployment and underemployment of Blacks—due to deindustrialization alongside selective reindustrialization—made it difficult for many who had begun to achieve the middle-class lifestyle to maintain it. With the disappearance of 70,000 jobs, many Blacks were unable to gain access to adequate education, making it difficult to compete in the job market. As many industries began to leave downtown LA other industries emerged in outlying areas of LA County. The continued lack of reliable transportation and homes to live in made it difficult for Blacks to find work in the emerging and relocated sectors. The sweat shops employed only recent immigrants, leaving many skilled blue-collar workers with limited opportunities and thus moving many Blacks back to the service industry.

¹¹⁰ Marcia Johnson, “Odessa Cox,” BlackPast, April 17, 2016, <https://www.Blackpast.org/african-american-history/cox-odessa-1922-2001/>.

¹¹¹ Robert Rawitch, “Junior College Issues,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 5, 1969, 3, 33-34.

Many believed that under the Bradley administration (1973-1993), conditions would change for Blacks. Some Blacks were able to have new employment opportunities as teachers, welfare workers, and other public health service jobs.¹¹² Those who benefited the most from the Bradley administration were public employees, small entrepreneurs, and educated skilled workers already a part of the middle class.¹¹³ Many believed the administration did little for the poor and school desegregation: “The net result was a growing split between better-off upwardly mobile minority residents who moved to the suburbs and the majority of poor families who remained behind.”¹¹⁴ This created a permanent underclass of Blacks in LA County.

In 1991 cameras captured, Rodney King, a Black man, beat by four White police officers.¹¹⁵ In 1992, the case against the officers was moved to Simi Valley, “a mostly White conservative suburb where a number of LAPD officers lived.”¹¹⁶ When the officers were acquitted, people took to the streets revolting, resulting in the 1992 LA Revolt. In each of these revolts Black people brought the long history of oppression and injustice that Whites tried to forget to the forefront.

¹¹² Laslett, *Sunshine was Never Enough*, 264.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹¹⁵ Gerald Horne, “Black Fire,” in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California*. Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage, eds. Lawrence B. De Graffa and Quintard Taylor, 377-404, (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage 2001), 380.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Black Los Angeles Today

Black LA—like the rest of the nation—is not colorblind, and the systemic injustices which began in slavery birthed out of antiquity’s understanding of White-Black dichotomy has led to the continued oppression of Blacks in America. Conservative Evangelicals believe that as custodians of culture they must protect their fragmented society. This Christian nationalism “pervert[s] politics with intemperate religion and pervert[s] Christianity with self-serving politics.”¹¹⁷ This is a perversion that continues today and impacts the lives of Blacks in LA and America. This will continue to lead to revolts as Black people continue to use whatever means necessary to seek true equality.

As we look at the landscape of Black LA, today we can see that many of the same societal issues have continued since the Great Migration. Black Angelenos experience a higher level of unemployment compared to that of Whites. “Black workers with a high school or less education experience unemployment at almost double the rate as White workers at the same education level.”¹¹⁸ A 2017 study conducted by UCLA, revealed that due to many economic and social hardships, many Black residents have been forced to relocated outside of Los Angeles. Blacks are consistently underrepresented in professional positions such as manager or supervisor, and are relegated to entry-level positions in comparison to White workers.¹¹⁹ This UCLA study also notes that Black workers in LA consequently “experience a myriad of negative health outcomes due to

¹¹⁷ Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt*, 270-271.

¹¹⁸ UCLA Labor Center, Los Angeles Black Worker Center, and UCLA Institution for Research on Labor and Employment, “Ready to Work Uprooting Inequity: Black Workers in Los Angeles County, March 2017,” 3.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

racial discrimination in employment. . . . The convergence of the Black job crisis, spiraling housing cost, state violence and mass incarceration has resulted in a perfect storm of discontent in the Black community.”¹²⁰

The Black population in LA has been reduced by 100,000 residents or 5 percent, “while the Inland Empire has gained over 250,000 Black residents.”¹²¹ Many relocated to the Inland Empire in order to reduce the cost of living. However, they continue to commute to Los Angeles for employment opportunities that do not exist in the Inland Empire. This impacts the quality of life as well as overall community well-being. While the population of Black Angelenos has decreased, the overall population in Los Angeles has increased by 35 percent.¹²²

While many Blacks are leaving Los Angeles due to these factors, many have become a part of the chronic homeless population in Los Angeles. The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) reported that the “impact of institutional and structural racism in education, criminal justice, housing, employment, health care, and access to opportunities cannot be denied: homelessness is a by-product of racism in America.”¹²³ The study conducted by LAHSA in 2017 revealed that although Black Angelenos represent only 9 percent of the population, they make-up 40 percent of the

¹²⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹²¹ Ibid., 3.

¹²² UCLA Labor Center, *Ready to Work Uprooting Inequity*, 9.

¹²³ Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, *Report and Recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee on Black People Experiencing Homelessness* (LAHSA: Los Angeles, 2018), 5.

homeless population, while the White homeless populations has decreased by 7 percent.¹²⁴

Additionally, of the total Black homeless population, 34 percent are women.¹²⁵ Homeless Black women are depicted through a lens that prevents them from being seen and their needs met. In a listening session conducted by LAHSA, one Black woman described how she believed dogs were valued more than Black people. While another indicated she was required to attend programs for drug addiction although she did not need one and only needed housing yet she was not believed. Another Black woman noted that case workers simply “pathologize us, instead of listen!”¹²⁶ Each of these voices represents the ways in which Black women were not seen, heard, or valued.

Despite the ways Black women have been portrayed, they continue to utilize their resources for the advancement of the Black community. In the twenty-first century Black women continue to lead through movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), which picks up where the Club movement left off with a drastically different approach. In 2014, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, LA native Patrisse Cullors, who coined the BLM#, and fellow Angeleno Alicia Garza along with their New York-based friend Tometi began making plans to start an organization. What

¹²⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 79-80.

formed was a “Black-centered political will and movement building project called #BlackLivesMatter.”¹²⁷

Since the beginning the leaders recognized that while they would work with various organizations and other races, it would be essential for the core activists and organizers to be Black.¹²⁸ Since its founding as a network, it has centered the leadership of Black women, queer, and trans leaders.¹²⁹ As a result, the chapters are being mostly led by Black women. Hillel Aron writes:

In a nation where Black women are still stuck at the bottom of the power structure, Black Lives Matter is the only major national protest movement to be led by them in modern times. It has in the past two years become the most prominent left-wing movement in the country, a persistent topic on the national news and in both Democratic and Republican presidential debates.¹³⁰

Since many of the injustices are predicated upon a White supremacist patriarchal society, they argue it is key to have “Black women fight it.”¹³¹

BLM-LA seek to hold local leaders accountable by confronting power and “embraces the disrupt/build model . . . one that directly challenges institutions, while visioning and building liberative models.”¹³² This has led to many actions and initiatives

¹²⁷ Black Lives Matter, “Herstory,” accessed August 16, 2020, <https://Blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>.

¹²⁸ Hillel Aron, “These Savvy Women Have Made Black Lives Matter the Most Crucial Left-Wing Movement Today.” November 9, 2015, <https://www.laweekly.com/these-savvy-women-have-made-black-lives-matter-the-most-crucial-left-wing-movement-today/>.

¹²⁹ Black Lives Matter, “Herstory.”

¹³⁰ Aron, “These Savvy Women Have Made Black Lives Matter the Most Crucial Left-Wing Movement Today.”

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Melina Abdullah, “What the Black Lives Matter Movement Demands of Ethnic Studies Scholars,” *Ethnic Studies Review* 37-38: 8.

of the local chapter through disruption to bring about change. Some, however, have sought to discredit the movement and seek to ignore the leaders of BLM.

In 2015 BLM-LA attempted to meet with Mayor Eric Garcetti in a community led town hall. Instead the city led a town hall with Black male leaders that were agreeable to the mayor's initiatives. This demonstrated the way both the Black male leadership and city viewed the women-led leadership of BLM. Although Melina Abdullah was eventually allowed to speak, Pastor Kelvin Sauls whose church hosted the town hall meeting did not agree with Abdullah and attempted to take the microphone away from her, causing further disruption.

Revered KW Tullous, president of the LA chapter of the National Action Network, noted that while he supported the goals of BLM, he believe that their leadership was too young and in need of guidance, even though he's younger than Abdullah.¹³³ This points to the continued tension between Black women and male leadership within the Black community and church. However, this has not stopped the BLM movement.

Abdullah has continued to hold the city and LAPD accountable for its action, has been portrayed as controversial and has been a victim of political persecution. In 2017 Abdullah was arrested for battery after being accused of touching an officer's hand while he was arresting someone during a Police Commission meeting. While it was not her first arrest, it was the first time she was charged.¹³⁴ During her court appearance the charges increased to eight misdemeanors, as they had pulled together previous arrests and

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Jason McGahan, "The People v. Melina Abdullah," accessed August 16, 2020, <https://thelandmag.com/the-people-v-melina-abdullah/>.

charged her collectively. In February 2019, the city and Abdullah reached a plea deal that allowed for the charges to be dropped.

As part of the plea deal Abdullah was able to negotiate how the police commissioner's meetings would be run in the future.¹³⁵ Her lawyer noted that these shifts in the public meetings would not only be applicable to Abdullah but to others in attendance at the meetings as well. In February 2020, Abdullah filed a lawsuit against the city and former chief Beck for wrongful arrest, as she and others continued to resist oppression.¹³⁶ Abdullah's persecution demonstrates the way in which she continued to fight for the well-being of the community even while attending to her own legal battle.

Impacts to Building and Resisting

While Black women have helped to shape Black LA, they have also had to navigate challenges of identity as they sought to go about their daily existence. Melissa, a participant in the African American Women's Voice Project, pointed out that the challenge of being a Black was, ““Believing what I know and not what I'm told, and beginning to understand the divided. I am a Black woman. I am moral. I am intelligent. I am lovable. I am valuable. But the majority of the messages I get all say that I'm not.””¹³⁷

¹³⁵ James Queally, “L.A. City Attorney Agrees to Drop Charges Against Black Lives Matter Leader Amid Public Outcry,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-melina-abdullah-charges-20190206-story.html>.

¹³⁶ James Queally, “L.A. Black Lives Matter Leader sues city, ex-LAPD Chief, Beck, Alleging Wrongful Arrest,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-02-11/Black-lives-matter-leader-sues-city-ex-police-chief-beck>.

¹³⁷ Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* (Harper Collins: New York, 2003), 3.

Many Black women must learn to tell themselves what is true about their identity while simultaneously resisting what they are told.

Despite being portrayed as masculine, having their perspective minimized, labeled as confrontational and not treated with the same value and dignity as others, Black women have continued to shape and fight for the well-being of the Black community in Los Angeles. Many Black women in America have believed in the myth of the StrongBlackWoman (SBW) which has become an armor that Black women wear to navigate gendered, racialized stereotypes.¹³⁸ While it may have been beneficial during a certain point in time, the armor is causing more damage than good since it has become a part of who they are so much so they cannot remove it when they are not in battle.

Black women have internalized the characteristics of the SBW and began to live into patterns that create and perpetuate stress.¹³⁹ This embodiment of stress can lead to a cycle of breakdown, guilt, and further striving since they “interpret their suffering not as an indication of the injustice or lack of fit of the role, but rather as a sign of their insufficiency in adhering to the role.”¹⁴⁰ This view then leads women to strive harder to achieve what they have internalized.

According to the Black Women’s Health Initiative (BWHI), “Stress, racism, and sexism are strong predictors of our quality of life and ultimately, life expectancy.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, Kindle: 34-35.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁴¹ Linda Goler Blount, *Black Women’s Mental Health: Balancing Strength and Vulnerability*, Kindle Edition: Forward.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there are significant differences in the health of Black women in relationship to obesity and hypertension. While 38.5 percent of women over the age of 20 are considered obese, 59.9 percent of Black women are obese. Additionally, 33.4 percent of women experience hypertension, while 44.8 percent of Black women experience this. Additionally, the third leading cause of death for Black women is stroke. In each of these instances, White women's health issues mirrored that of the statistics of women in general while it was notably increased for Black women.¹⁴² Each of these health issues are also stress related.

A study conducted by Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) found that suicide was the third leading cause of death for Black youth between the ages of 18 and 24. While Black males committed suicide at a higher percentage than Black females, the percentages of these females who thought about suicide (17.4 percent), made plans (13.9 percent), and attempted suicide (8.8 percent) are significantly greater than males in their age range. The study noted that many of the risks that contribute to suicide included: marital status, family conflict, acculturation, hopelessness, racism, and discrimination.¹⁴³

Black women are often on the front lines of movements that seek communal well-being, and unconsciously wear the armor of the SBW, which impacts their mental, spiritual, relational, and physical well-being. Divesting of the StrongBlackWoman armor in exchange for life giving self-definitions is a life-long journey towards healing one's

¹⁴² CDCD Fact Sheet, accessed December 31, 2016, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/life-stages-and-populations.htm>. Data retrieved from fact sheet on women and racial groupings.

¹⁴³ Suicide Prevention and Resource Center, "Suicide among Racial/Ethnic Populations in the U.S: Black," (August 28, 2013), <http://www.sprc.org/sites/default/files/migrate/library/Blacks%20Sheet%20August%2028%202013%20Final.pdf>.

identity from the impacts of gendered, racialized stereotypes. The goal of this project is to co-journey with Black women during our identity formation and self-recovery process. Understanding where we have been enables us to collect gems for the journey ahead. It also connects us to a larger community of women who have come before us.

PART TWO

SOCIOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

CHAPTER 2

THAT'S NOT MY NAME

As Black women continue to seek well-being for the community and thrive in Los Angeles, they must also navigate the impacts of gendered, racialized stereotypes. This creates unique challenges for Black women in their identity formation process. To co-journey with Black women during the identity formation and self-recovery process it is important to understand the concept of misrecognition and the impact of controlling narratives has on Black women's minds, bodies, and souls. These controlling narratives are not unique to Los Angeles; however, we will spend time discussing the way Black women in Los Angeles have been impacted.

Identity Formation

“Who am I?” This age-old question is asked by most people at some point in their lifelong journey. Identity formation is an essential component in human development. However, this formation process does not take place in isolation. According to social identity and identity theories, the “self both exists within society, and is influenced by

society.”¹ This means that while we may be able to define ourselves, we are also influenced by our surroundings as we seek to form an identity.

Consequently, this means even our self-definitions are shaped consciously and unconsciously as we take our cues from our family of origin, social location, and other constructed ideas and norms. In addition, our identity is also validated by society.² James Cote and Charles Levine, in their reflections on Erikson’s idea of ego, argue that

The development and maintenance of the sense of ego identity is dependent upon the quality of recognition and support the ego receives from its social environment. A supportive environment is one that functions to successfully engage the individual in complex roles and, as such, validates the identity of the ego . . . the greater the sense of ego identity, the more unified is the personality, . . . the more integrated the personality is with the social world . . . the more consistent is the person’s behavior.³

Since the self does not exist in isolation how we see ourselves must be recognized and affirmed by others as we form a positive identity. Identity formation is a lifelong journey of being formed based on how we and others view us, while incorporating the various experiences we encounter in society.⁴

Recognition, validation, and support are important parts of this process. Jan Stets and Peter Burke point out that in order for one’s identity to be formed it requires a process of self-categorization and/or identification, which takes place within the “context of social structure [people] name one another and themselves [as a way of] recognizing

¹ Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63:3 (Sept. 2000): 232, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2695870>.

² James E. Cote and Charles Levine, “A Formulation of Erikson’s Theory of Ego Identity Formation,” *Developmental Review* 1:273-325 (1987): 275

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

one another.”⁵ That is to say that not only do we name ourselves but we name others as well. If recognition is a key component to forming our identity, what does it mean when societal norms and constructs that govern our community are skewed to the point where they affirm a negative image of ourselves and misrecognize?

Colonialism is an oppressive tool used to erase and diminish the humanity of Blacks. One way this happens is by misrecognizing Blacks as less than human, a second-class citizen, or inferior to Whites.⁶ Even within the “Declaration of Independence” several binaries existed between Whites and Blacks, men and women, property owners (haves) and laborers (have nots). In 1962, Malcom X argued that the most disrespected, unprotected, and neglected person in America was the Black woman.⁷ For Black women who live at the intersection of race, class, and gender in a White supremacist, patriarchal, capitalistic, society they are often misrecognized and are consequently forced to live on the margins as a shadow of ourselves.

Ubuntu is a South African ideology that has been a useful concept as one resists the goals of colonialism. *Ubuntu*, unlike colonialism, affirms the dignity of a person as intricately connected one to another. A key feature of *Ubuntu* is to help people understand themselves in relationship to one another, in empowering life-giving ways. The *Ubuntu* worldview “reflects the essence of being human, a humanity that is reflected

⁵ Stets and Burke, “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory,” 224.

⁶ Michael Onyebuchzie Eze, “I Am Because You Are,” *The Unesco Courier* (October-December 2011): 11.

⁷ Malcom X, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpr6PK-Cz3c&t=1126s> (May 5, 1962).

in collective personhood and collective morality.”⁸ This concept does not erase the individual’s autonomy but rather helps to see and recognize the humanity within one another and consequently seeks to promote a human way of interacting with each other based on the ideas of compassion, respect, harmony, dignity, and solidarity.⁹ This is a helpful concept to understand as it points to the need to constantly reframe how we view one another in life-affirming versus destructive ways.

The Crooked Room in a Crooked World

Melissa Harris-Perry, in *Sister Citizen*, contends that like the miner canaries, “Vulnerable communities of Black and brown Americans foreshadow the underlying problems likely to poison the US System. In August 2005, Black women of New Orleans became the nation’s miner’s canary. Issues of race, gender, and class inequality that affect Black women’s lives in America point to problems embedded in the fabric of the nation.”¹⁰ The continued mistreatment, disrespect, neglect, and lack of security afforded to Black women point to larger systemic problems within society. Additionally, this treatment impacts the mental, emotional, spiritual, physical, and relational well-being of Black women in ways that often require them to live in a perpetual state of survival.

⁸ Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, “‘I Am Because We Are’: Exploring Women’s Leadership Under Ubuntu Worldview,” *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 18: 2 (2016): 224.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹⁰ Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 15.

Identity formation for Black women includes resisting the oppressive narratives and social constructs that make it difficult to thrive.¹¹

Womanhood was shaped by the ideal of a true woman—White woman, who “possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.” Women were encouraged to aspire to these virtues in order to be considered a woman.¹² Black women were defined as the antithesis to Whiteness, resulting in the mistreatment of Black women. According to Patricia Hill Collins, “Intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence. . . . Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women’s oppression.”¹³

When Black women are misrecognized, it makes self-definition difficult, as it is an assault on the essence of who we are. Melissa Harris-Perry argues that “[W]hen they confront race and gender stereotypes, Black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some Black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion.”¹⁴ This makes meaningful engagement in the world challenging and difficult work.

When we live in an oppressive world, where power is used to distort reality and control lives, the cosmos is out of balance, resulting in a crooked world with a crooked

¹¹ Portions of this section adapted from “Race and Work in America,” submitted GM716.

¹² Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 2nd ed. (New York: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002), 72.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁴ Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 28.

worldview embody by the oppressed. Paulo Freire notes the oppressed must liberate themselves from controlling narratives shaped by the oppressor. Additionally since the oppressed may have internalized these narratives as true, the process of liberation can be a difficult task, as it requires the oppressed to rid themselves of the internalized self-deprecation and perception that has become a part of their identity.¹⁵

Socially Constructed Identities

We have all been misidentified, misnamed, or misrecognized at some point in life. While an occasional misrecognition can be brushed aside, consistent misrecognition of who we are can have an impact on our overall well-being. Black women in America are often misrecognized not just by being called someone else but are subjugated to controlling narratives that have been used continually to oppress Black women.

According to Harris-Perry, Black women in America often share a fictive kinship, which “refers to connections between members of a group who are unrelated by blood or marriage but who nonetheless share reciprocal social or economic relationships.”¹⁶ While fictive kinship can allow Black women to take pride and “draw emotional comfort from others women’s’ courageous and exemplary lives. . . .If one’s sense of self is connected to the positive accomplishments of other African Americans, then it is also linked to negative portrayals and stereotypes of the race.”¹⁷ Identity formation for Black women

¹⁵ For additional information see Chapter 3 where Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where he explains this approach at length.

¹⁶ Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 102.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

requires the ability to name ourselves in the face of being misrecognized. In the film

Homecoming, Beyoncé identifies both aspects of this fictive kinship and misrecognition:

As a Black woman, I used to feel like the world wanted me to stay in my little box. Black women often feel underestimated. I wanted us to be proud of . . . the process. Proud of the struggle. Thankful for the beauty that comes with a painful history and rejoice in the pain, rejoice in the imperfections and the wrongs that are so damn right. I wanted everyone to feel grateful for their curves, their sass, their honesty. Thankful for their freedom. It was no rules, and we were able to create a free, safe space where none of us were marginalized.¹⁸

Beyoncé sees both the pride in this fictive kinship while recognizing the pain Black women encounter as we struggle with the confining limits placed on us. Beyoncé used her stage and Homecoming Project to resist oppressive narratives.

Before we can resist the narratives and identities, we may have embraced we must understand what they are and where they come from. In 1962, Malcolm X asked a group of Black Americans who gathered in Los Angeles a series of rhetorical questions regarding who taught them to “hate the color of your skin . . . the texture of your hair . . . the shape of your nose and the shape of your lips . . . to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of your feet.”¹⁹ These rhetorical questions were used to encourage reflection on internalized negative narratives and self-hate. While his questions looked at the external features often used to cast Blacks in a negative fashion, the questions simultaneously move us to begin to examine the origins of misrecognition in America and the subsequent impact it has on our self-image, identity, and ability to thrive.

¹⁸ Beyoncé, *Homecoming*, Netflix, 2019.

¹⁹ Malcolm X, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpr6PK-Cz3c&t=1126s> (May 5, 1962).

Ethnic Othering

Misrecognition is not a new idea. Gay Byron's *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* show us that these concepts have their roots in antiquity. According to Byron, the dualistic understanding of Black and White throughout antiquity has contributed to unconscious "signifying" of Blacks that often leads to conscious actions that damage Black lives. In antiquity there were two main portrayals of Blacks, as uncivilized and unintelligent savages.²⁰ Both portrayals were used to argue the inferiority of Blacks to the superiority of Whites. Additionally, Blacks were cast as representations of evil, an embodiment of sins such as lust and passion.²¹

In Christian writings from antiquity, Ethnic othering was used as a form of slander. For instance, in the *Acts of Peter*, Marcellus tells of a dream of an Ethiopian (Black) woman who had the appearance of evil and was dressed in dirty rags, rather than clothing. The Black woman is chained like an animal by her hands, feet, and neck while dancing. The Black woman represented evil and needed to be destroyed in this dream. Once Marcellus is finished recounting the dream, Paul rejoices and sees the dream as an indication that God speaks to Marcellus.²² This praise of violence against the Black woman reinforces this ideology of Black as evil, while simultaneously endorsing this idea as a belief that originates from God, the sender of Marcellus' dream. This ideology does

²⁰ Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 17.

not afford dignity to Black women but rather applauds the destruction of our bodies—a phenomenon still seen today.

In Greco-Roman writings, immoral behavior was often equated with Egyptians, Ethiopians, and Blacks. This became a way of delineating White as good in contrast to Black as evil. People with Black skin were seen as those who no longer followed God, with hardened hearts, had a predisposition towards evil, and were savages who could not be civilized.²³ Ancient writers used ethno-political rhetoric as a way to define not only what was evil but also as a way of defining sin.²⁴ In the *Homilies of St. Jerome*, when he begins to discuss sin and vices he writes: “At one time we were Ethiopians in our vices and sins. How so? Because our sins had Blackened us. But afterwards we heard the words: ‘Wash yourself clean!’ And we said: Wash me, and I shall be Whiter than snow. We are Ethiopians, therefore, who have been transformed from Blackness into Whiteness.”²⁵ Jerome continues to explain in his sermon that Blackness was a cloak of sin. Jerome was not alone in his belief that Blackness was a symbol of sin. Barnabas warned believers to keep watch for the Black One, who could come into the community with lawless ways and lead everyone away from the faith.²⁶

²³ Ibid., 35.

²⁴ Ibid., 56.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Constructed Myth and Identities

Alice Walker points out the contentious nature between Black women and how she has been viewed by others inside and outside of her community:

Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one's status in society, "the mule of the world," because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else—everyone else—refused to carry. We have also been called "Matriarchs," "Superwoman," and "Mean and Evil Bitches." Not to mention "Castrates" and "Sapphire's Mama." When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children. In short, even our plainer gifts, our labors of fidelity and love, have been knocked down our throats.²⁷

Misrecognition gives an inaccurate picture that requires Black women to conform and fit the expectations and behaviors of a false narrative. Walker understands the way misidentification can have a profound impact not just on the identities of Black women but also on their overall well-being and their relationships as well:

These controlling stereotypes and myths that have come to be seen as truth, are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life. Even when the initial conditions that foster controlling images disappear, such images prove remarkably tenacious because they not only subjugate U.S. Black women but are key in maintaining intersecting oppressions.²⁸

Many of the images are in opposition to the cult of the White woman and perpetuate the ideology that Black Women are other and not acceptable.

²⁷Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, eds. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James Cone, 339-348, (New York: Orbis Books 1979), 438.

²⁸ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 69.

In her book *Sister Citizen*, Melissa Harris-Perry identifies three stereotypes that contribute to the misrecognition of Black women today: 1. Jezebel—Hypersexuality—sexual promiscuity, 2. Sapphire—Emasculating brashness--the angry Black woman, Black3. Mammy—Devotion to others—caring of White concerns above her own.²⁹ It is important to look at each controlling narratives in addition to the StrongBlackWoman and the impact they have had on Black Women. In this next section I will discuss each of these controlling narratives and the ways Black women have worked to resist these images. Additionally, since this project takes place in LA, I will refer to many of the ways Hollywood contributes to the perpetuation of these narratives and discuss how it impacts Black women on and off the screen in Los Angeles.

Jezebel

During the fourth and fifth centuries, the desert fathers continued ethnic othering of Blacks to demonstrate the dangers of sexual sin. Ethiopian (Black) women were seen as those given over to sexual desires and labeled as images of lust and passion. Believers were taught the importance of self-control to escape her allure.³⁰ During slavery the image and term jezebel was used as a way to “relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive woman,” in order to justify sexual assault by White men.³¹

²⁹ Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 33 and 49.

³⁰ Byron, *Symbolic Blackness*, 78; 94-95.

³¹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 81.

Additionally, the trope allowed for the ideology that Black women should have increased fertility since they were believed to have an increased sexual appetite.³²

The jezebel trope has its roots in the biblical text of 1 and 2 Kings as the queen who married Ahab of Northern Israel. Her Hebrew “Izevel” is translated to Jezebel, which is a “cross between a taunt and a slur . . . her name could have meant ‘Ba’al Exalts’ but was transformed into ‘Lacking Nobility’ and ‘Fecal Matter,’” and it has “become a word for a certain type of woman.”³³ In 2 Kings 9:22 Jezebel is called a whore by Joram. In Revelation 2:20 the church of Thyatira is seen as being led into fornication because they “tolerate that woman Jezebel.” Ethnic other, the use of the image of jezebel in slavery, coupled with these biblical interpretations of the character of Jezebel has led to a modern definition of jezebel which refers to a woman who is perceived as having hypersexuality, is promiscuous, assertive, or sexually aggressive. Within the modern Christian culture, women are referred to as having a “Jezebel spirit,” which “almost always has something to do with evil, power, and sex.”³⁴

In 2 Kings 9:30-35, the violent and gory description of Jezebel’s murder shows how she is thrown from the window, her blood splattered on the walls, and horses trampled over her. Although Ahab’s death was an indictment against his leadership as a King, Jezebel’s death communicated a disdain for a certain type of woman. “Unlike Ahab, Jezebel does not dissolve into oblivion. She thrives, appearing again and again,

³² Ibid.

³³ Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 240.

³⁴ Tamara A. Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), Kindle Location, 1165.

responding to and triggering fear and desire . . . dying a violent death . . . reminding women what happens when they stand outside of the cultural scripts.”³⁵ Additionally, her death is also to serve as a warning to women who try to seize power from men.³⁶

Not only has this misrecognition of jezebel led to the sexualization of Black women but to condoning of sexual abuse—an all too common activity in slave castles, ships, and plantations. This is a concept that has led not just to misrecognition but to the exploitation, degradation, and commodification of Black women. Harriet Jacobs writes about how beauty becomes a curse and how on many occasions she was assaulted as a young girl during slavery and constantly reminded that she was to

Be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as Black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. . . . If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the White woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave.³⁷

Jacobs goes on to describe not only the physical and emotional pain inflicted by sexual abuse but also the strife created between the slave and the enraged jealous master’s wife, who also began to treat her with even more contempt.³⁸ The objectification of Black women’s bodies allowed slave owners to control their body, sexuality, and reproduction.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 245.

³⁷ Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 27-28.

³⁸ Ibid.

To advance the ideology of hypersexuality, Sarah Baartman (Hottentot Venus) was placed on public display in life, and her genitals and casted figure were displayed after her death. Baartman was paraded around to demonstrate to viewers that Black women had exaggerated sexual organs and buttocks as proof of their hypersexuality.³⁹ This and other forms of incorrect, misguided, and harmful scientific practices were used to justify the continued mistreatment of Black women's bodies, leading to the control of Black women's lives, rights, and citizenship. The notion of hypersexuality is in direct opposition to the notion of purity and virtue that was believed to belong to White women. "Race and gender science informed public ideas of who was capable of citizenship as the country reestablished the basis of political participa[tion] following the Civil War."⁴⁰ It was therefore argued that Black women did not possess the ability to be seen and treated as a human, let alone a woman or a citizen.

The rape of Black women in slavery, Jim Crow South, and Reconstruction went on without persecution and/or conviction as it was not considered a crime. Additionally, since Black women did not have rights and were prohibited from providing testimony in court, they could not bring about charges or defend themselves. Since the narrative has been shaped that Black women are hypersexual, lacking virtue and purity, the idea that she could be raped was not considered, further allowing her truths to be erased as nonsensical.

³⁹ Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 57.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

In contrast, during the Jim Crow South, Black men were lynched to protect pure White women from being “defiled.” Nearly 6 percent of Black men lynched from 1880 to 1940 were accused of raping a White woman, often without due process.⁴¹ The idea that White women required protection not only instilled fear of Black men but also was used to demonstrate the ways Black women were not women in need of protection. This ideology contributed to the continued sexual assault of Black women and the practice of suffering in silence.

While Black women can now use their voices and bring charges against sexual assault, the burden of proof continues to be placed on the victim. This is even harder for Black women to prove because the ideology of the hypersexual woman exists in our psyche. Hollywood continues to depict the hypersexuality of Black women. In 2002, Halle Berry became the first Black woman to win an Oscar for best actress in *Monster’s Ball*. Similar to Hattie McDaniel’s win, while many celebrated her accomplishments, others commented that she continued to portray the Black women as a sexual object, due to a vivid sex scene involving a racist character. This critique was given to both Berry and the Academy for awarding her the award in what they viewed as a representation of a sexual object, and the limited opportunities that Black women have outside of stereotypical images.⁴²

⁴¹ Robert A. Gibson, “The Negro Holocaust: Lynching and Race Riots in the United States, 1880-1950,” Yale New Haven Teaching Institute, accessed December 28, 2015, <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1979/2/79.02.04.x.html#b>.

⁴² DeWayne Wickham, “Bassett Criticism has its merits,” *USA Today*, (July 8, 2002), accessed December 28, 2015, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/comment/columnists/wickham/2002-07-09-wickham.htm>.

The images and controlling narrative of hypersexuality continue to impact the lives of Black women off-screen. In 1997, a teenager confided in Tarana Burke about an instance of sexual violence she experienced. Unsure of how to respond she simply said “Me too” as a way of identifying with the young girl based on her own history of abuse. Ten years later, Burke created a non-profit, Just Be Inc., as an effort to support and care for Black girls and women who were victims of sexual violence, one of the initial objectives was to support Black women so they would know they are not alone.⁴³ At the 10th Annual Women in the World convention in April 2019, panelist Brittany Cooper, in discussing the Brett Kavanaugh hearing, reminded the audience that, “The conflict of being a Black woman watching those hearings was that I was relying on the power of White girl tears to actually compel this nation to do something. . . . The thing that I know as a Black woman in this country is that if White women’s tears can’t compel any kind of moral compunction for White men what do you think this means for the rest of us.”⁴⁴

Cooper’s lament reminds us of the obstacles Black women face when dealing with sexual assault and attempting to compel the nation to believe them. A quick scan of the news cycle prior to the #MeToo movement in 2018 reveals the way Black women’s stories were portrayed. Instead of believing Black women, they were dismissed with the idea that “she wanted it.”

⁴³ Tarana Burke, “The Me Too Movement,” accessed August 17, 2020, <https://justbeinc.wixsite.com/justbeinc/the-me-too-movement-cmml>.

⁴⁴ Brittany Cooper, Women of the World Summit 2019 “Feminism: A Battlefield Report,” April 13, 2019, New York.

In the 2006 assault of a Black woman by the Duke Lacrosse team, the defense was mounted to shame the victim by calling her an exotic dancer instead of assault victim. Adding these words shaped the narrative, giving the indication that she welcomed the sexual advances and was sexual aggressive, a jezebel. In December 2015, Daniel Holtzclaw was convicted of eighteen counts, of rape and sexual assault of thirteen Black women while on duty as an officer in Southern California. Holtzclaw used background searches and outstanding warrants to find and accost Black women. He believed that if they attempted to report him, their words would be ignored because of their past. These predatory practices have created generational trauma, increased interpersonal conflict, impacted the ability for Black families to thrive.

The accusations against famous men such as Clarence Thomas, Mike Tyson, Bill Cosby, and R. Kelly have largely been ignored until after the resurfacing of the #MeToo movement. The way these Black women were not believed reminds us how power, privilege, and wealth can continue to shape the narrative but also seek to control the lives and bodies of women. Burke's #MeToo movement provides a voice for Black women and begins to reshape the narrative.

In *Black Sexual Politics*, Collins reminds us that the lyrics of Destiny Child's seek to communicate "their self-definitions as 'survivors' and 'independent women' express[ing] female power and celebration of the body and booty."⁴⁵ With their words these women are seeking to resist the narrative that their bodies are subject to the desires of others. Instead there is an embracing of their sexuality and an affirmation that they

⁴⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans Gender and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge. 2004), 29.

alone have control over their bodies and how they will or will not be used. When we look to the lyrics of artists such as Destiny's Child and subsequently Beyoncé, we see that they communicate empowering self-definitions and an embracing of their sexuality.

In the 2017 film *Girls Trip*, Tiffany Haddish is portrayed as a hypersexual promiscuous woman—so much so that it becomes the overplayed joke, along with outtakes primarily centered on her oversexualization. While the elements of the misrecognition are present, we also see ways in which the character continues to resist being limited to or confined by her sexuality. It is Haddish's character that continues to unite the friends, speaks truthfully, and directs them to God.

Additionally, when viewing Haddish's character through Collins' perspective we can see that she is also resisting the narrative and instead is empowered to celebrate her body and normalize a woman's sexual desire. In doing so she empowers other women to understand their sexuality and to activate agency while setting the terms with who and how they will engage as sexual beings. The tension between being labeled as hypersexual and activating sexual agency reminds us of the deeply held beliefs about Black women's bodies and the ongoing battle to liberate Black women's body from oppressive narratives.

Returning to Jezebel in 2 Kings 9, prior to being murdered we learn that she adorns herself. This has traditionally been interpreted to mean that “she hoped to entice her killer into sparing her.”⁴⁶ It has also led to the equation of both hypersexual and immoral behavior associated with women who adorn themselves. Yet, what we see in this passage is a choice by Jezebel to “live on her terms and dies a martyr to her people,

⁴⁶ Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*, Kindle Location 1114.

representing her gods, her husband, and her place as queen mother.”⁴⁷ While in the larger biblical text her death does not matter, she continues to resist even subversively to the point of adorning herself as a statement about “her sense of self . . . she is queen until the end, determined to go to her death on her own terms.”⁴⁸ Her last words are in fact not uttered but embodied as she asserts and embraces her femininity and beauty.⁴⁹

Since the objectification and exploitation of Black women’s bodies was sanctioned by the government, Sonya Taylor argues that Black women require a radical self-love that enables them to love a body that she has come to believe is unworthy of love, honor, dignity, and respect.⁵⁰ She argues that although both self-acceptance and body neutrality have their place, the unintended consequences is that “we practice self-acceptance when we have grown tired of self-hatred but can’t conceive of anything beyond a paltry tolerance of ourselves.”⁵¹ For Taylor, radical self-love is our inherent natural state, in the sense that we did not enter the world with a self-hate but rather with a sense of awe, wonder, and discovery as we encounter our bodies.⁵² Returning to this, can lead to radical self-love that affirm our bodies without judgment.⁵³

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1140.

⁴⁸ Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 246.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Sonya Taylor, *The Body is not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koheler Publishers, 2018), 5.

⁵¹ Ibid., 2.

⁵² Ibid., 10.

⁵³ Ibid., 9.

Furthermore, Taylor, Hill Collins, and Harris-Perry, see the need for Black women to combat shame that is often associated with these negative narratives. Taylor contends that this requires Black women to stop apologizing for the body they have been born with and accept oneself. Beyoncé, Haddish, and others demonstrate ways of resisting by living unapologetically in their bodies and accepting the fullness of their sexuality as a part of their womanhood, which leads towards liberation. In doing so they begin to reshape the oppressive controlling narratives of Jezebel, in much the same way Jezebel does in both her life and death. Body liberation is an ongoing process of radical self-love, as we learn to live more freely, unapologetically so in the various seasons of life.⁵⁴

Mammy and Matriarch

Both the controlling narrative of Mammy and Matriarch have been used to control Black mothering. Mammy is defined as a Black women, who is “faithful, obedient domestic servant,” often caring for White families’ needs and interest better than her own.⁵⁵ The mammy figure, is defined as selfless, docile and eager to dispense wisdom as the wise sage, who is there simply to help others. The mammy controlling narrative is “central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class.”⁵⁶ The normalization of the mammy places undue burden on Black women who are subsequently expected to embody these characteristics in their daily life as they are

⁵⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁵ Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 89.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 73.

simultaneously tasked with the responsibility of caring for their immediate and extended family.

Although Black women have worked throughout history in America, they have in been regulated to work in a “mule” type capacity. While sometimes this type of labor has been more easily discernable, other times it is a bit more covert. Due to the controlling images believed about Black women, they continue to be economically-disadvantaged from the service industry to the board room. Patricia Hill-Collins notes:

While the mammy image becomes more muted as Black women move into better jobs, the basic economic exploitation where U.S. Black women either make less for the same work or work twice as hard for the same pay persists. U.S. Black women and African-American communities pay a price for this exploitation. Removing Black women’s labor from African-American families and exploiting it denies Black extended family units the benefits of both decent wages and Black women’s emotional labor in their homes.⁵⁷

As Collins points out, this impacts not just the lives and livelihood of Black women but also their communities and families.

According to Barbara Omolade, over time there has been a mammification of professional roles that Black women hold. Omolade and others see this in the ways “the legacy of Black women’s work in domestic service weaves itself into the very fabric of professional Black women’s jobs.”⁵⁸ The mammification of roles leaves Black women in positions where they are expected to fix what is broken, provide excessive care, and often do so in alienated and isolated work environments.⁵⁹ At the same time, Black women

⁵⁷ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

may find themselves in public positions where they must serve a White superior and suppress their opinions.⁶⁰

Sammy, an LA resident working in a predominantly White institution, shared how her organization underwent restructuring. She noted that as two-and-a-half positions were eliminated from her department the burden to complete the task were added to her job functionality. When Sammy expressed a concern about being able to accomplish this task to her supervisor, together they went to the institution to see if the task could be eliminated and/or if Sammy could receive a salary increase for the additional work. Unfortunately, this request was denied.

Sammy shared how she took this as an opportunity to prove her value and worth to the company and began working seventy hours a week to make sure the responsibilities were covered. She lamented that, “I wanted to prove that I mattered. But it only proved that I could do more with less.” This only increased the expectations the company placed on Sammy. Additionally, Sammy shared how this eventually led to unhealthy eating habits, weight gain, diabetes, loss of sleep, and additional stress in her family. Sammy believed that she was failing everyone at work and home. She had internalized the narrative and it negatively impacted her value and worth. Additionally, she shared that since she was the primary bread winner in her household, she was too afraid to lose her job and lacked the confidence to seek work elsewhere even though she did not feel valued at the company.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

By relegating Black women to mammified occupations it also perpetuates the notion of White employer as superior to Blacks, in particularly middle-class White women, who employed Black domestics.⁶¹ Although Black women may no longer work in domestic industries, this narrative continues in the White imagination and deferential behavior is expected of Black women and when this does not happen conflict often arises.

Tammy, an LA resident who worked in predominately White company, shared how she was constantly reprimanded by her supervisor for asking questions to understand how the new initiative would be implemented, whereas her non-Black colleagues were encouraged to provide feedback and ask questions.⁶² Additionally, she lamented how when given a team project to work on with a White female co-worker, the colleague expected her “to do what she was told,” even though it was a collaborative project. This perceived insubordination was then reported to their supervisor and Tammy was given a warning and labeled as difficult to work with by members on her team.

Hollywood’s obsession with the Magical Black Negroes perpetuates these control narratives. The magical Negro is often the “only Black lead character in a film with a predominately White cast endowed with folk wisdom, spiritual, and/or magical gifts and abilities that are used to benefit the White characters in the film.”⁶³ A key feature to the

⁶¹ Ibid., 73.

⁶² The name of the individual has been changed to protect the individual’s identity who feared retribution.

⁶³ Cerise L. Glenn, and Landra J. Cunningham, “The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film,” *Journal of Black Studies* 40:2 (2009): 135-52, <http://www.jstor.org.fuller.idm.oclc.org/stable/40282626>.

magical Negro is their selflessness and desire to help Whites in the film. Although these are stereotypes, they allude to a reality that demonstrates an expectation placed upon Black women to care for the wellbeing of all, often at a detriment to themselves. The normalization of the magical characteristic of these Black women often places undue burdens on Black women who are subsequently expected to embody these characteristics in their daily life.

A quick glance at Hollywood reveals how this role is continually perpetuated. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), Lashana Lynch as Maria Rambeau is a single mother and former US Air Force pilot. Upon Danvers' return, unsure of who she is, Rambeau comforts Danvers, connecting her to her past personal and professional life, assisting her in recovering memories, and reminding Danvers of who she was. Danvers pleads for Rambeau to accompany her on a life-threatening mission, while leaving her daughter behind in the care of her aging parents.

The mammification of roles displayed in Hollywood can be seen not just in films but in television shows—where Olivia Pope is the fixer in Washington DC, fixing all of the problems of the powerful. Miranda Bailey on *Grey's Anatomy* dispenses wisdom, runs the hospital, and barely has time for her family. Dr. Loretta Wade counsels and cares for her many White colleagues' personal crises, in *NCIS: New Orleans*. On *How to Get Away with Murder* the show's star, Annalise Keating, played by Oscar winner Viola Davis, notes at one point how she must care for and fix everyone's problems.

After the USC scandal involving George Tyndall's sexual assault of female students and athletes, the school hired Wanda Austin to serve as the Interim President of

USC. Austin was the first African American and the first woman to hold this position at USC.⁶⁴ Austin deserved the promotion and was more than capable of handling the complex situations at USC. Nevertheless she was placed in a situation to be beholden to the stakeholders, the board of trustees, to repair USC's image, handle the allegations, and move the institution forward all while been watched by the public.

The mammification of professional roles as identified by Omolade, can be difficult for Black professional women as they seek professional growth. Although it may expand opportunities for Black women, they will need to resist controlling narratives from co-opting them into roles of support and servanthood of others. There are many ways we see actresses, writers, and showrunners attempts at demonstrating this resistance on film. At the beginning of the series we see characters Pope and Keating fixing and caring for everyone's problems, during the last season we begin to see both women's assertion of their own agency and refusal to play small as they begin to prioritize their own well-being over and against others.

The mammy narrative is also a way to control sexuality as this trope was created after slavery since the jezebel narrative "could not alone support a system of domestic labor that required proximity between Black women and the White families that employed them."⁶⁵ This led to viewing Black women as an asexual surrogate as she mothers children and others she did not birth.⁶⁶ "The mammy represents the clearest

⁶⁴ USC, "Meet Wanda Austin," accessed August 12, 2018, <https://news.usc.edu/147849/meet-wanda-austin-usc-interim-president/>.

⁶⁵ Harris Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 70.

⁶⁶ Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 84.

example of the split between sexuality and motherhood present in Eurocentric masculinist thought.”⁶⁷

The mammy narrative was also used in hopes that mothers would teach Black children accommodating behavior in order to perpetuate the oppression of Blacks in America.⁶⁸ While this may be the case if this narrative internationalized, in many instances Black women were teaching their children how to navigate Whiteness, for their survival. Consequently, Black women who may have exhibited deference on the job critiqued this at home by planting new ideas of what could be possible as they attempted to mother privately.⁶⁹

In a further attempt to control Black maternal behavior, the 1965 Moynihan Report (*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*) implicated Black women as the source of the problem within the Black family. The report claimed that since Black men were not afforded the opportunity to demonstrate the responsibilities of providing for the family; and Black women “were already ‘accustomed to playing the dominant role in family and marriage relations’ that this role persisted in the decades of rule of life that followed,” this structure was the problem.⁷⁰ It concluded that this led to the destruction of the Black family which, “had been forced into a matriarchal structure which is . . . so out of line with the rest of the American society, . . . which presumes male leadership in

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 74.

⁷⁰ Moynihan, *The Negro Family*, 17.

private and public affairs. . . . A subculture, such as that of the Negro America, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at distinct disadvantage.”⁷¹

This report led to an offshoot of the mammy, the matriarch, which is defined as a woman who is head of a family and rules the household. Although the report named the Black family as matriarchal, they were more adeptly described as women-centered, since societal constraints limited the ability of women to rule and control their household.

As Black men sought to live into the White man’s image of manhood, it created unnecessary conflict between Black men and Black women. Crenshaw notes:

Black men and women live in a society that creates sex-based norms and expectations which racism operates simultaneously to deny; Black men are not viewed as powerful, nor are Black women seen as passive. An effort to develop an ideological explanation of gender domination in the Black community should proceed from an understanding of how crosscutting forces establish gender norms and how the conditions of Black subordination wholly frustrate access to these norms.⁷²

This could take the form of Black men seeking to control Black women. According to Keri Day, hegemonic Black Male Masculinity is seen as: not like a woman (forceful, rational, responsible), exerting control and authority over women, their emotions and bodies.⁷³ Day points out how this tension is exacerbated by the fact that these men continue to depend on women for their survival, thus creating a destructive pattern within Black relationships.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid., 29.

⁷² Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989): 155-156.

⁷³ Day, *Unfinished Business*, 84.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

In 2019, following the death of Sadie Roberts-Joseph at the hands of a Black man she was seeking to assist, Arah Iloabugichukwu discusses the ways in which Black women place the well-being of Black men over their own.⁷⁵ Iloabugichukwu laments that “Black women have carried an unyielding, sometimes unexplainable, loyalty to Black men even when loyalty cost us our lives.”⁷⁶ She goes on to discuss the implications of loyalty and vulnerability to Black men and the ways it has led to violence against Black women at the hands of Black men.

Black women have often been tasked with the responsibility of caring for their immediate household as well as their extended family in addition to their work responsibilities. The “second shift” refers to maintaining a disproportionate amount of the household responsibilities while the “third shift” refers to the mental energy needed to organize, remind, plan and implement the day-to-day functions of the household and parenting.⁷⁷ According to a 2018 survey, Black women are the only group of women who continue to “maintain high work hours regardless of the presence or age of their children.”⁷⁸ Although many Black women may see their unpaid work as a form of

⁷⁵ Arah Iloabugichukwu, “Black Women Can no Longer Afford to Save Broken Black Men,” July 31, 2019, https://madamenoire.com/1087680/Black-women-can-no-longer-afford-to-save-broken-Black-men/?fbclid=IwAR16wUs3AbdnjMZwR_t6z0Auqf0jXDMRF02UkUcdmCNSo9UVMuYaufKpv4w%23vuukle-comments.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Alice Williams, *The Mental Load Burning Women Out*, accessed November 12, 2018, <https://www.elephantjournal.com/2017/09/the-mental-load-burning-women-out/>.

⁷⁸ Sarah Jane Glynn, “An Unequal Division of Labor: How Equitable Workplace Policies Would Benefit Working Mothers,” (May 18, 2018), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2018/05/18/450972/unequal-division-labor/>.

resistance to oppression as they seek to equip the next generation and maintain the bounds of families, this does not mitigate the numerous ways they are exploited by the very family unit or loved ones they seek to care for.⁷⁹

In the self-recovery group I led, one participant discussed the ways she was tasked with caring for her sister, mother, and extended family unit even though they resided outside of her home. She additionally, discussed the strain this created in their relationship as she was expected to be the one to care for everyone, while no one seemed to prioritize how she was doing. A second participant in the group lamented feeling guilty at the idea of taking time for herself even in coming to the group. She shared how taking time for herself seemed selfish because her family needed her.

Sapphire

The third misrecognition that Harris Perry highlights is that of Sapphire, or the angry Black woman. This myth seeks to “characterize [Black women] as shrill, loud, argumentative, irrationally angry, and verbally abusive.”⁸⁰ Sapphire was a character on the 1930s Amos ‘n’ Andy radio show who was portrayed as “uniquely and irrationally angry, obnoxious, and controlling.”⁸¹ Additionally, the angry Black woman is seen as someone who is incapable of being vulnerable or showing empathy while at the same time holding fast to her independence.⁸²

⁷⁹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 46.

⁸⁰ Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 86.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸² *Ibid.*

Like the other controlling narratives, the angry Black woman defines the Black woman in opposition to the ideology of the true White woman, which argued that women were to be both submissive and pious. The angry Black woman, points to a perceived failure of Black women to be conformed to the model of womanhood.⁸³ Unlike the mammy and jezebel stereotype, there is not as much scholarly research written about the angry Black woman. Harris-Perry postulates that one of the reasons it has not been studied as a stereotype is because it has been more fully embraced as an “essential characteristic of Black femininity.”⁸⁴

These narratives can have a crippling effect on Black women. Molly, another Black LA resident, confided in me her frustrations at work as she tried to advocate for additional resources to be able to do the job she was hired to do.⁸⁵ Initially she noted she was willing to do additional work since she was promised additional resources when she was hired. However, whenever she discussed this with her supervisor, she was rebuked for being difficult and lacking understanding.

Similar, Lisa another Black LA resident, shared how she and a White male colleague sought the aide of their White female supervisor to assist in resolving a conflict.⁸⁶ Lisa’s supervisor initially expressed appreciation to Lisa for bringing this matter to her. However, as they continued to address the issue Lisa’s supervisor asked why she was being the difficult one. Additionally, her supervisor characterized her in her

⁸³ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 77.

⁸⁴ Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 88.

⁸⁵ The name has been changed to protect the identity of the individual.

⁸⁶ The name has been changed to protect the identity of the individual.

annual evaluation as insubordinate, confrontational, independent and angry. Lisa, was however able to question this characterization as a falsehood. This was later removed from the evaluation submitted, yet this stress made Lisa begin to speak up less even as she was tasked to do more.

In order to mitigate the impact, like Lisa, Black women may feel compelled to behave in opposition to this stereotype by not being as direct or assertive, and they may seek to downplay their own success as well. Likewise, if the angry Black woman is seen as an essential characteristic, it renders the non-angry Black woman invisible and failing to be a true Black woman. Nevertheless, when Black women do respond in ways that are seen as angry, even when they are justified in their anger, they are quickly labeled as the angry Black woman.

As Black women distance themselves from this ideology, it renders them silent, which can cause more harm than anger. Morgan Jerkins laments the way this type of dissemblance acts as a double-edged sword as she reflected on her choice to remain silent to not come across as an emasculating Sapphire. She notes, “as a Black woman, silence would never save me. It wouldn’t make me more desirable, only more susceptible to whatever a man wanted to give to me, even if it was a pittance.”⁸⁷ Cooper notes that when Black women are outspoken they are desexualized and viewed as un-datable since they cannot be conquered by men.⁸⁸ In order to compensate for this, Black women will

⁸⁷ Morgan Jerkins, *This Will be my Undoing: Living at the Intersection of Black, Female, and Feminist in (White) America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2018), Kindle edition, 74.

⁸⁸ Brittany Cooper, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018), 9.

often shift in order to make others in their lives feel more comfortable by not coming across as controlling or emasculating.⁸⁹

Cooper also acknowledges how dangerous it can be for Black women to display their anger, because in doing so, they are seen as “inconvenient citizens who keep on talking about their rights while refusing to do their duty and smile at everyone.”⁹⁰ Cooper observes that “Black women turn to sass when rage is too risky—because we have jobs to keep, families to feed, and bills to pay.”⁹¹ Cooper notes that sass, in many ways, is a “more palatable form of rage” that people can accept and, in some ways, embrace.⁹² Sass on Black women is seen as a desirable attributes adored by America.⁹³ Choosing how to respond causes Black women to perform a type of mental gymnastics in interactions with others. Sass, for Black women, is then a slightly safer way to express the complex emotions while safeguarding herself.

While Sass can be a useful tool, it has also come to be seen as another normative characteristic for Black women. Sequoia Holmes points out how as,

A self-identified introverted Black woman navigating mostly White spaces, I often find that my peers and coworkers have preconceived assumptions about who I am, based on my Black-womanhood. When I fail to live up to the funny, entertaining, sassy, Black woman stereotype, they’re quick to assume my failure to entertain is because I don’t like them. This isn’t a huge problem until it’s time for peer reviews, promotions, or layoffs. Then, it quickly becomes an insidious

⁸⁹ Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 207.

⁹⁰ Cooper, *Eloquent Rage*, 2.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 1

⁹³ Ibid.

dehumanization tool that can result in job termination because Black women are not afforded the luxury of introversion, especially not in the workplace.⁹⁴

Holmes points out how she was laid off for not speaking up enough while noting that a Vietnamese team member who also did not speak up yet was not criticized or let go.

Holmes compares the way that both these control narratives of Blacks and Asians contributed to evaluations of performance.

At the National Women's Studies Association annual convention in 1981, Audré Lorde discusses the complex relationship that Black women have with rage.⁹⁵ She notes that:

Everything can be used, except what is wasteful. You will need to remember this when you are accused of destruction. Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. . . . Anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies.⁹⁶

Lorde goes on to remind women that it is important that we not allow ourselves to fear anger but use it as a tool to begin to discover the truth needed to be expressed.⁹⁷

Cooper further illustrates the consequence of the angry Black woman myth as it encourages Black women to play small hiding parts of themselves. "Black women learn to live with every day—the sense that you are a woman before your time, that your

⁹⁴ Sequoia Holmes, "Black Women Aren't Allowed to be Introverted," *BESE*, August 23, 2019. <https://www.bese.com/Black-women-arent-allowed-to-be-introverted/>.

⁹⁵ Audré Lorde, "Uses of Anger," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 9:3 (Fall 1981): 8.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

brilliance and talents are limited by the historical moment and the retrogrades politics within that moment in which you find yourself living.”⁹⁸ To be judged in this way regardless of how hard you work, how qualified and gifted you may be, often leads to women’s continual shifting and dissemblance in order to be accepted but never truly seen, as they exist as a shadow of themselves. Suppressing anger can have the unintended consequence of internalizing the anger onto oneself.

As we turn to Hollywood again, we see how Taraji Henson, in *What Men What*, is seen as a sapphire—the angry Black woman—whose emasculating and brashness is off putting to the men in her firm and love life. In the poster advertising the movie, Taraji is seen holding two balls in between her fingers, signifying that she is a ball crusher. Throughout the film she is ridiculed for the way she behaves while her White male counterparts are praised for exhibiting the same traits and behaviors in the boardroom and bedroom. Throughout the film there are ways that Taraji’s character is in some ways asked to be less dominating and controlling to show her soft maternal side, to demonstrate that she exhibits the characteristics of a true woman. Taraji’s character rejects the idea that she must conform. Additionally, she learns to embrace her sisterhood, she sees a need to be interdependent and embraces her ability to lead in a way that is authentic to who she is without having to minimize her skills and gifts or silence her voice.

Comedian and actress Mo’Nique, has been characterized as an angry Black woman off screen. She notes that she was told she was difficult to work with and

⁹⁸ Cooper, *Eloquent Rage*, 60.

subsequently Blackballed, even after winning an Academy Award. This she noted impacted her livelihood.⁹⁹ In an interview with Steve Harvey, he accused her of handling the situation incorrectly and burning many bridges.¹⁰⁰ Mo’Nique rebuffed this noting she did not regret how she handled the situation and recognized the importance of being able to utilize her gifts and freedom. She noted that, “When you allow people to start taking your freedom and your gift, and making it become what makes them comfortable, we then lose.”¹⁰¹ While Harvey disagreed she pointed out the importance and value of integrity alongside the ability to freely use her voice.

StrongBlackWoman

While many women continue to resist the controlling narratives of Jezebel, Mammy/Matriarch, and Sapphire, these narratives continue to impact Black women in their everyday lives regardless of their socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and perceived popularity. As Black women continue to navigate these controlling narratives, they seek to find ways to minimize the impact. The StrongBlackWoman (SBW) describes Black women as being “motivated, hardworking breadwinners who suppress their emotional needs while anticipating those of others. Their irrepressible spirit is unbroken by the legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection.”¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Christie D’Zurilla, “Mo’Nique Slams Lee Daniels, Tyler Perry, and Oprah Winfrey in Harsh Standup Riff,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 15, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-entertainment-news-updates-may-mo-nique-Blackballed-lee-daniels-oprah-1494883625-htmlstory.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Steve Harvey, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sM5ao6JsgMQ#action=share>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 183.

In compassion to the jezebel, sapphire, mammy/matriarch, “the strong Black woman came to function as a racial and citizenship imperative for Black women . . . emanating from the expectation of African American communities from the needs of the nation that frame Black women in very narrow ways.”¹⁰³ This imperative is idealized and accepted as normative. While the SBW narrative has enabled centuries of Black Women to survive and accomplish much, it is a myth and has become its own controlling narrative unto itself.

The StrongBlackWoman has three core features: “Emotional strength/regulation, caregiving, and independence.”¹⁰⁴ These characteristics are not the problem in it of themselves. The concern arises when Black women embody these attributes, to the point that it interferes with “her physical health, her emotional and spiritual well-being, and her relationships.”¹⁰⁵ This in turn leads to emotional regulation preventing Black women from being vulnerable. Instead we continue to repress and suppress a variety of emotions.¹⁰⁶ The SBW has become accustomed to caring for others and we develop the ability to anticipate the needs of others.¹⁰⁷ These characteristics are often developed over time as part of socialization beginning at a very young age.¹⁰⁸ The StrongBlackWoman

¹⁰³ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰⁴ Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, Kindle 17.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 25.

also becomes the caretaker for all the communities of which she is a part.¹⁰⁹ Lastly, by focusing on self-reliance, she is seen as independent and not in need of help or assistance from others.¹¹⁰

Although it initially was a way of self-definition and empowerment it has turned into a prison, mask, or an armor that takes Black women captive instead of liberating them. The StrongBlackWoman becomes a “suit of armor, a protective covering worn by Black women to mitigate damage from a hostile world that constantly assaults their character with degrading images and stereotypes.”¹¹¹ While wearing the armor of a StrongBlackWoman may temporarily mitigate the impact and shame of these controlling narratives we have discussed so far, a danger arises when there is an enmeshment of these characteristics with one’s identity so that it “stifles authentic self-expression . . . the StrongBlackWoman is not an authentic identity . . . it does not reflect a woman’s true self.”¹¹² If Black women do not learn to remove this armor it will have long-term impacts. To begin to move towards healing, it is important to note:

Label the StrongBlackWoman’s experience of excessive other focus and role strain as indicators of codependency, enmeshment, or failure of boundaries. These labels emphasize individual dysfunction and ignore the systemic realities that shape African-American women’s ways of being in the world, including the cultural demands and expectations placed upon Black women by their families, churches, communities, and society.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 22.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 29.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 34.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 168.

This means it is more than just behavioral changes that need to be addressed for Black women to thrive. We must also address the systems they are a part of and how this impacts their lives.

Mask and Armor Off

In the last season of *How to Get Away with Murder* (HTGAWM), the main character, Annalise, is on trial for her life. Viola Davis noted how important the last portrayal of Annalise was for her as a Black woman, because it allowed her to remove stereotypes, boundaries, stigma and labels, enabling a different type of Black womanhood to be embraced.¹¹⁴ Within the season finale of HTGAWM, Davis' character Annalise struggles with how to portray herself. As she dresses herself, viewers are invited into her internal dialogue of wig vs. natural, sexy vs. professional and so on as she grapples with how to present herself in a fight for her life. What we see throughout this last season is the character wrestling with each of the controlling narratives of jezebel, mammy, matriarch, and sapphire.

However, it is not until she takes off her mask and removes the armor of the StrongBlackWoman, that she is able to find freedom. Her freedom however is not in the hands of the jury but comes as she embraces a new form of liberation as she releases her mind, body, and soul from the armor of the SBW. In her last monologue Annalise moves from resisting herself to embracing all of her nuances as she states,

I stand before you, mask off. To tell you God's honest truth: I have done many a bad thing. I've coerced witnesses, got clients to lie on the stand, bullied students

¹¹⁴ Angelique Jackson, "Why 'How to Get Away with Murder' Star Viola Davis Says the Series 'Ended Perfectly,'" April 3, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/viola-davis-how-to-get-away-with-murder-final-season-ends-perfectly-instagram-live-1234571117/>.

to tears, manipulated jurors like you, but those are not the crimes I'm being tried for. It's murder. And I am no murderer. What I am is a survivor. I survived getting taunted by the N-word when I was in grade school. I survived a sexual abuse by my uncle when I was 11. I survived losing my first love Eve because I was scared to be gay. Then the death of my son in a car accident, the murder of my husband, then alcoholism, depression, grief. And every death leading up to this trial. But today you decide, am I a bad person? Well, the mask is off, so I'm gonna say yes. But am I the mastermind criminal who pulled off a series of violent murders? Hell no. Who I am is a 53-year-old woman from Memphis, Tennessee, named Anna May Hartness. I'm ambitious, Black, bisexual, angry, sad, strong, sensitive, scared, fierce, talented, exhausted, and I am at your mercy.¹¹⁵

In this monologue Davis allows the Black woman to resist so many of the narratives and embraces a radical self-love. In removing the mask and taking off the armor, the character was able to be seen for all her complexities and allowed to be human.

She ends with the line "I am at your mercy," and in many ways this is a line not just to the jury but to the world as it asks: will you continue to convict Black women for the many ways in which as society you have required us to carry all of the world's burdens and pretend as though it does not impact our overall wellbeing? While it is important for Black women to discover a New Narrative it is also important for society to give room for this reshaping to unfold.

The Oppression of Black Minds, Bodies, and Souls

As Black women internalize isms and the controlling narratives, it leads to dissemblance, suppression, and assimilation to dominant culture. These ideologies can take root and become internalized. This will often lead to shifting, which is a survival technique that allows people Black women in particular to adapt or adjust as they

¹¹⁵ Dana Rose Falcone, "How to Get Away with Murder Series Finale: Who Gets Away with Murder-and Who Dies?" *People*, May 14, 2020, <https://people.com/tv/how-to-get-away-with-murder-series-finale-recap/>.

navigate a hostile environment in order to be seen as acceptable. This in turn leads to a misalignment of our genuine and authentic selves. Jordan Peele's two movies, *Get Out* and *Us*, help us to see the impact of internalized misrecognition narratives.

Shadow Existence—Sunken Place

In *Get Out* Peele, shows us the many ways that racism and the internalized narrative have impacted who we are, as it seeks to control Black bodies into a forced way of being. Individuals are trapped in the sunken place, a constant state of suppressed emotions while their bodies and minds are used to accommodate the needs of White men and women. In the sunken place, Black bodies live as a shadow of themselves, a shell of their existence.

The movie centers on Chris, Black man's attempt to break free; he must conjure the will to resist the internalized narratives about Black manhood that consequently paralyzed him in the sunken place. However, if we look closely in the shadows we meet Georgina, a Black woman who like Hagar's body and mind is taken over for the benefit of the powerful.¹¹⁶ Since she is not the center of the narrative she fades into the background and appears throughout and is caught in between the Black man and White woman's story line.

While we do not know Georgina's backstory, we learn that the grandma is using her body. When we center her story, we see the ways in which she has not been a willing participant. As Georgina appears periodically through the film often without speaking,

¹¹⁶ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 16-17.

we get a glimpse into her reality in the sunken place. Unlike the other characters who only are set free from a flash a light that enables them to see the truth of who they are, Georgina is constantly fighting and trying to get out of the sunken place. The procedure works best for those who acquiesce, something she does not do.

When introduced early after hearing the tapping of the silver spoon which is used to control Black bodies, “Georgina goes into a sudden trance where she looks as if she’s having some sort fight inside her head, causing her to over fill Chris’ glass.”¹¹⁷ This incident is followed by a stern look by Mrs. Armitage that tells Georgina to get back in her place so that grandma can continue to use her body. Throughout the film, when Georgina appears, she is often seen looking at her reflection in a mirror or window. As she looks in the mirror a slight smile emerges as she strokes her hair and marvels at what she sees before her. These tiny moments of Grandma Armitage’s amusement and infatuation with the young beautiful Black body reminds us of cultural appropriation and how Black women are “condemned or hyper-sexualized for our physical traits/fashion but the same physical traits/fashions are celebrated when seen on non-Black bodies.”¹¹⁸

In the pivotal scene where Chris and Georgiana talk, we see fight even more. A confident grandma assures Chris that “she doesn’t answer to anyone.” Yet, when Chris makes a comment about the perverseness of Whiteness that makes him uncomfortable, the truth causes Georgina to fight. We see the smile slowly fade as Georgina’s eyes

¹¹⁷ Sharice B. “Why Georgina is an Unsung Hero in ‘Get Out,’” *Blavity News*, March 5, 2018, <https://blavity.com/why-georgina-is-an-unsung-hero-in-get-out?category1=trending&subCat=community-submitted>.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

water, lips quiver, and grasp as words try to escape her lips. It is unclear what she is attempting to say is she trying to cry for help, warn Chris, or simply breathe. Either way we see the fight progresses as a smile emerges and the sobs still being heard alongside a solitary tear that falls down her cheek. This battle ends as grandma emerges telling both Georgina and Chris, no repeatedly. With each no the grandma is attempting to regain control of the Black woman's mind and body by rejecting the notion of Whiteness. The scene ends with the grandma noting they, White people (and Whiteness by approximation) is good for Black people since it seeks to treat Black people as family.

What is revealed within this scene is the idea that Whiteness and the privileges associated with it exist in order to treat Black people like family but not as family similar to the way Black people are treated like human but as human. Since it is grandma speaking, we are reminded from the White gaze the various ways in which Whiteness constantly creates boundaries and paradigms for Black women who are not seen as fully human or fully woman.

Throughout the film Georgina is resisting oppression and trying to liberate herself at every turn she gets while also trying to get Chris out as well. There are subtle ways she tries to warn Chris by following him in night to look out for him, reminding him he was hypnotized the previous night, and opening the door for him to discover the truth about the oppression of Whiteness. Her commitment to continue to fight for herself and the well-being of others is displayed throughout the film, so that even while in the sunken

place, she continues to seek liberation for all. It is possible that over the years Georgina may have attempted to help the other Black men who had come over the years.¹¹⁹

Georgina's fight ends in tragedy as she does not make it out. It is unclear if it is Georgina who is trying to go with him or grandma who is trying to stop him from leaving, when Chris hits her with the car. Although Chris attempts to go back for her, it is too late. When she needed to fight for herself the most, she did not have the strength to fight the oppression long enough to be set free. When she needed someone to see her, fight with and for her, she was left behind. In many ways she saves Chris' life at the cost of her own. She died without being fully seen. She died as countless other Black women do in the middle of a Black man and White woman's story. It is a reminder of the dire consequences of the SBW armor as well as seeing the impact of systemic oppression on the mind, body, and soul of Black women. Black women will need to continue to divest themselves of the SBW armor as part of their own liberation. Black men will also need to consider the implications of not seeing Black women as co-journeymen on the road to liberation who travel alongside.

The Underpass—Tethered Doppelganger

In the movie *US*, Peele introduces us to the concept of a tethered doppelganger. Peele notes that the “main idea that went into writing this film is that we're our own worst enemy, and that idea created this monster, The Tethered. I wanted to forge this new

¹¹⁹ When Chris looks at each picture that Rose has of her captured Black bodies, they all are men with the expectation of Rose. Additionally, Georgina's picture is last on the stack. If the pictures are placed in order of capture, we can assume Georgina was the first of the 9.

mythology that explored our duality and the duality of the characters.”¹²⁰ In the film *US*, we begin to see the struggle between our public persona and our shadow existence as they each struggle to fight for domination and control.

What is different about *US* is that it centers on a Black woman which allows us to see the impact of oppressive internalized narratives on the entire family unit and consequently the larger community. Throughout the film each family member must grapple with their doppelganger and the controlling narratives. Zora, the daughter, must run twice as fast, working twice as hard in the race for her life. Gabe, on the other hand, as a Black man must deal with the limited and inadequate resources, he has at his disposal despite the economic gains he made, making his escape more difficult. Additionally, Gabe is injured early in the fight, leaving him crippled as he fights for his life and forced into isolation, unable to defend and support his family. Jason, the son, must deal with a loss of innocence as his games take on new meaning. He also witnesses things in the underpass that will force him to grow up before his time, a reality all too common for Black boys in America. In *US* we see the entire family unit wrestling with their tethered, a wrestling that takes place within and outside of themselves in order to get freedom.

At the same time, Adelaide, while fighting her own tethered doppelganger, instructs and leads her family through their individual and collective battle. Additionally, Peele introduces us to what he calls the underpass. It is here that Adelaide and Red enter a battle. In the underpass we begin to understand more fully the impact of Adelaide and

¹²⁰ Entertainment Weekly, “Jordan Peele, *Us*,” December 25, 2018, <https://ew.com/trailers/2018/12/25/us-movie-trailer-jordan-peeel/>.

Red's trauma, and the formation that took place between them both. Adelaide learned to assimilate, while Red found her voice, purpose and freedom. It was this that caused Red to seek freedom for her family and community as well.

Lupita Nyong'o, who played Red and Adelaide, reminds us that the movie is about the "duality of human nature. We all have a darkness inside of us that we often suppress. When it goes unattended to unacknowledged it can sometimes rear its ugly head and that can be quite destructive to us and in the world."¹²¹ She also reminds us not to see the character of Red as evil but examine what has led her to respond in this way. Both characters, Red and Adelaide, must grapple with the internalized narratives.

In both films Peele helps us to understand the complex realities of what happens when we have internalized a narrative. In each movie there was a fight to be free. In *Get Out* it was a freedom from the way others oppress one's mind, body, and soul. In *US* the characters must seek to get free from the ways they continue to own an ideology about who they are. The psychological impact that systemic racism and sexism created has lasting effects on Black women individually and collectively.

Shifting

One way that Black women deal with the impacts of misrecognition is by shifting. Shifting is a type of subterfuge where Black women hide their true selves to placate, meet others' needs, and accommodate for the differences in race, class and gender.¹²² Charisse

¹²¹ Trevor Noah's *The Daily Show*, Episode 3-237, March 28, 2019, Comedy Central.

¹²² Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 7.

Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden introduced the concept of Shifting based on their research and findings through the African American Women’s Voice Project. Shifting is a survival technique that Black women have adopted to allow them to navigate a hostile and crooked world that often does not see them for who they are.

The study identified six shifting strategies that Black women employ. The first strategy “Battling the myths,” which is altering actions to dispel the misconceptions about Black women in hopes to move above the controlling narrative.¹²³ The next strategy is “Scanning, surveying, and scrutinizing the environment.” This requires a need to be hyper vigilant, since there is a consistent need to be aware of their environment in order to know who they must be and how they can or cannot engage.¹²⁴ The third strategy identified is “Walling off the impact of discrimination,” which in many instances requires ignoring and even denying how we are effected by both racism and sexism in an effort to transcend pain and suffering.¹²⁵ This also keeps others at a distance, leaving Black women further isolated. Additionally, instead of dealing with discrimination and microaggressions, they may internalize these encounters as an indication that something is wrong with who they are.¹²⁶

“Seeking spiritual and emotional support through churches, religious communities, friends and family members” is another strategy utilized by Black women. Jones and Shorter-Gooden argue that having a “strong sense of purpose and transcendent

¹²³ Ibid., 67.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 71.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 66.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 73.

connection is absolutely crucial to their happiness and well-being.”¹²⁷ This means that Black women will often seek spiritual and emotional support from their family, friends, and spiritual community. Another way of coping is to “retreat to the Black community,” to have a break from shifting from the White gaze. However, sometimes this can create an additional burden as Black women are not able to be their true selves as they “shift to meet several of the complex behavioral codes that exist within their own community—what we call the ‘home codes’—rules of comportment within Black culture that are defined not just by race but also by gender and class.”¹²⁸ These home codes within the Black community consist of bigotry and misogynoir, both of which are oppressive to Black women.

The last coping strategy Jones and Shorter-Gooden identify is to “fight back” with subversive and overt activism, along with advocacy, in order to transform the narratives that require shifting in the first place.¹²⁹ Shifting requires a considerable amount of emotional and psychic energy as Black women alter themselves several times throughout the day to present an acceptable self to the world.¹³⁰ While shifting can begin to take place unconsciously and may appear “virtually effortless it can be costly physically, emotionally, and spiritually severely compromising her health and well-being.”¹³¹

Additionally, they note that due to intersectional racialization and sexism: “Black women

¹²⁷ Ibid., 81.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 83.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 87.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 61.

¹³¹ Ibid., 62.

may have to shift more often and more consistently than most others. . . . they must endlessly compromise themselves to put other people at ease, counteract the misperceptions and stereotypes, and deflect the impact of those hostilities on their lives and the lives of their mates and children.”¹³² Adelaide in *US* implored a few of these strategies as she “battled the myths,” while “walling off.” Even prior to the return of tethered she had a hyper vigil, constantly being aware of her surroundings. In the end she had to fight back for herself and her family as well.

Shifting can lead to a misalignment of who we genuinely and authentically are causing us to sink into an invisibility to others and even to ourselves.¹³³ Over time this can create what they coined a “yo-yo paradox” as Black women are tossed like a yo-yo between the various forms of themselves. Black women may “become psychologically or even physically ill from the stress of being all things to all people and nothing to herself.”¹³⁴ One such condition they believe is common for Black women is the Sisterella, who like Cinderella has learned to place the needs of others above her own. This can also lead to a disconnection and detachment not only from herself but also from an understanding of her own needs.¹³⁵

¹³² Ibid., 63.

¹³³ Ibid., 7.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 64.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 124.

Moving Forward

Jeanelle Austin, a former Pasadena resident, friend, and colleague shared on her blog her year-long journey back to returning to herself. For Austin it required a leaving to return to herself by prioritize her well-being. After relocating she acknowledged how it took a month before she was no longer in survival mode. Then she began to recognize the severity of her burnout as her stress levels “measured off the charts,” and all she could do was sleep.¹³⁶ She lamented that “For years, I had reiterated over and over again that Black Lives Matter. Well, I’m Black, and that means my life matters. I was of no use to anyone dead, and I was not interested in the cause of my death being stress.”¹³⁷ During her journey she recognized the need to surround herself with people who loved and cared for her well-being as she leaned into life-affirming rhythms.

Austin’s story is not unlike many Black women in LA and America who are the supporters of their family and community and feel the pressure to be the one who tries to “keep it all together.”¹³⁸ This leaves Black women to live “tormented by the anguish of stress” preventing them from living in peace.¹³⁹ bell hooks points out how peace and rest cannot come until Black women begin to embrace their value as a person.¹⁴⁰ Austin’s decision to center herself, enabled her to learn to live in peace. When asked to return to

¹³⁶ Jeanelle Austin, “The Beginning,” July 1, 2019, <https://jeanelleaustin.wordpress.com/2019/07/01/issue-1-the-beginning/>.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ bell hook, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 54.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 53.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 56.

the front lines in Minnesota in 2020 to lead and serve in her hometown in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd she could do so without allowing the movement or justice to take priority over her own well-being.

When we try to align ourselves to these distorted images, this can lead to many impacts on our mind, body, and soul. Controlling narratives have a way of making us feel never quite enough, leaving us in a constant state of readiness to fight. It is important for us to embrace identity politics that “evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.”¹⁴¹

When Black women are asked to conform to an identity that is not our own, it is like asking David to go to war in Saul’s armor against the giants. Like David, we must recognize who we are and remove the armor that weighs us down. A womanist framework of identity formation and self-recovery is both a deconstruction and reconstruction. It is a lifelong process of aligning oneself to an upright position as we live in a crooked room located in a crooked world that consistently misrecognizes Black women. Identity formation for Black women is a form of both liberation and resistance. It must begin with a radical self-love that embraces one’s is-ness as created in the *Imago Dei* and reflected in the Incarnation of Christ.

To deconstruct the internalized negative self-imposed on Black women, requires the ability to see the ways the sunken place (internalized isms) leave us trapped and paralyzed. Next it moves us into the underpass as we struggle with what happens to and in the body to rediscovery our authentic self. We can then begin to demand and acquire a

¹⁴¹ Comabhee River Collection, “Combahee River Collective Statement,” accessed August 17, 2020, <https://combaheerivercollective.weebly.com/the-combahee-river-collective-statement.html>.

true recognition of ourselves. This creates space to move toward individualization and self-actualization that enable us to stand in proclamation of the truth of who we are.

A womanist framework of identity formation and self-recovery draws on tools utilized by Black women for centuries in order to liberate oneself from the oppressive bondage and the ways Whiteness shackles our existence to a tethered doppelganger leaving us paralyzed in the sunken place. When Black women achieve recognition, it allows for a sense of pride. Pride allows us to begin to talk about ourselves in empowering ways. As we tell our stories of liberation, it empowers others to stand taller and utilize their agency to move towards a modality of thriving.¹⁴² This is an iterative process that happens over our lifetime and requires an element of self-recovery along the way as we seek wholeness.

¹⁴² Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 104.

CHAPTER 3

RE-IMAGINING: WOMANIST METHODOLOGY, MODELS, AND THEOLOGY

The identity of Black women in America, has been under constant attack. It has been contorted and manipulated for the sake of the privileged and powerful. By denying the humanity of Black women, the White patriarchal supremacist theology has crafted an identity that is contrary to what it means to be created in the image of God. When this happens, misrecognition occurs. Misrecognition is not just a sociological problem, but it is a theological problem as well. When we deny the humanity in others, we prevent ourselves from seeing God fully. When we misrecognize those created in the image of God, we run the risk of misrecognizing God. When we misrecognize God, we find ourselves worshipping a White Christ that endorses the subjection of Black bodies in forced oppression—both physically and psychologically, as in the sunken place.

A re-imagining of one's self is required to move beyond the controlling narratives identified in Chapter 2. This chapter will show how using womanist methodology provides resources needed to construct a framework of identity formation and self-recovery. Lastly key themes in womanist theology will be identified in this chapter and

will provide the foundation for the content that will be discussed within the New Narrative self-recovery groups.

Womanist Methodology

Alice Walker coined the term womanist in her work, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, in which she laid out a definition of womanist.¹ In the definition she identifies womanist as the opposite of girlish. Although her definition contrasts a girl to a woman, it is not about age. Whereas a woman is responsible and serious a girl leans toward frivolous endeavors. Womanist is a derivative of womanish, a term used by Black mothers to refer to their daughters whose posture, attitude, thoughts, and behavior move beyond that of a child as she engages herself, others, and the world. According to Walker a womanist is also a Black feminist or feminist of color who participates in the world with a courageous audacity as she seeks a greater knowledge and desire to understand ideas and thoughts more deeply.

¹ Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens Prose*, Kindle Location 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A Black feminist or feminist of color. From the Black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another Black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. 2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are White, beige and Black?" Ans. "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

Walker's definition, points out that a womanist loves women, others, creation, the world, and herself. Centering a holistic view of love leads to a commitment to the "survival and wholeness of [an] entire people, [including both] male and female." The focus on love also creates space to embrace both a woman's emotional flexibility that "values tears as a natural counterbalance [to] laughter," while also acknowledging a woman's strength.² While a womanist pursues the well-being of her community, she must however prioritize her health over and against other people or things. A womanist also embraces the nuances and diversity reflected in humanity.

Womanist comes from a tradition of women who have demonstrated a capability to accomplish great endeavors.³ This reminds us of the important role that remembering her-stories should play in Black women's self-recovery. Toni Morrison used the literary device of rememory to find a balance between remembering and forgetting.⁴ Rememory creates a space for Black women to walk into the lives of one another past and present and connect their stories to a greater tapestry of women who have walked before them.⁵ Walker's definition highlights the importance of loving fully, especially loving herself no matter what, a concept that will be important to discuss within self-recovery groups.⁶

² Ibid., Kindle Location 43.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Toni Morrison, "Rememory," *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 324.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ Ibid., Kindle Location 43.

Since, Walker's introduction of this concept, it has been adopted in a variety of fields including theology. According to Emilie Townes a "womanist theology is a form of reflection that places the religious and moral perspectives of Black women at the center of its methods."⁷ Just because the subject is a Black woman's religious experience does not mean it is womanist theology.⁸ Townes argues that a womanist theology uses an "interstructured analysis employing class, gender, and race."⁹ Furthermore, she notes that a womanist theology is both descriptive and prescriptive. It describes the sociohistorical religious experience of Black women which leads to prescription of real-time tangible actions whose purpose is liberation of Black women and consequently the wellbeing of the community.¹⁰ Womanist theology is constantly evolving as the project continues to address gaps left by both Black theology which did not deal with sexism and classism and feminist theology that did not address racism or classism.¹¹

Womanist Faith and Theology

Since the Church has historically, supported slavery and White supremacy, it is necessary for Black women to establish different ways to talk about God. To construct a new narrative for Black women, a womanist hermeneutics is needed in reading Scripture.

⁷ Emilie M. Townes, "Womanist Theology," *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, eds. Rosemary Skinner Keller, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Marie Cantlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 1165.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

The recovery of metaphors and the survival/quality of life motif in Hagar's narrative will aide in structuring the curriculum used within the self-recovery groups.

Hermeneutical Approach

A Womanist *midrash* is central in rediscovering God in a way that is relevant for Black life in America today. According to Wilda Gafney, a “womanist midrash, is a set of interpretive practices, including translation, exegesis, and biblical interpretation, that tends to the marginalized characters in biblical narratives.”¹² It also comes from the “sanctified imagination in Black preaching . . . where the preacher-interpreter enters the text” and “like classical and contemporary Jewish midrash, the sacred imagination tells the story behind the story, the story between the lines on the pages.”¹³ Drawing on the rabbinic tradition is also seen in the parables of Jesus as shown throughout the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus uses imagination and storytelling to help his hearers understand the messages. A womanist *midrash* is a hermeneutical tool that will be used when looking at Scripture that will be used in the New Narrative self-recovery groups.

Delores Williams sees the necessity of a womanist hermeneutics to incorporate the slave cultural heritage of the oral text, which slaves achieved, “Extracting from the Bible or adding to biblical content those phrases, stories, biblical personalities and moral prescription relevant to the character of their life-situation and pertinent to the aspirations of the slave community. They took from the Bible those things that assured them that

¹² Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 3-4.

¹³ Ibid.

they were under God’s care, that God would eventually bring justice to their cause.”¹⁴

This oral slave tradition allowed both female-inclusive and androcentric ways of speaking and referring to God.¹⁵ Rooted in the oral salve tradition a womanist hermeneutic has three main aspects. First, it prioritizes the communal and lived experiences of Black women within the context of community and sees these narratives as valid sources in exegetical work. Secondly, it uses historical narratives of Black women—this can be in oral or written—to understand how Black women have understood and talked with God. Third, it uses artifacts from the lives of Black women such as traditional church doctrines, fiction, poetry, music, or dance to center on Black women.¹⁶

Williams also advocates for womanist hermeneutic of identification ascertainment to see the various levels of oppression. This includes “three modes of inquiry: subjectivity, communal and objective.”¹⁷ Subjectivity involves seeing who and what one identifies with in Scripture based on her own life and faith journey, while a communal mode examines what events the community identifies with. This identification-ascertainment helps one to be able to see the places the community needs to be critical of those “instances where the text supports oppression, exclusion and even death of innocent

¹⁴ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 188.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Mitzi J. Smith, *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 7.

¹⁷ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 149.

people.”¹⁸ This allows for a reading of Scripture that takes into consideration Black women’s experience. This technique will be implored as we study particular Scriptures in the self-recovery group.

Traditionally, images of God are cloaked in maleness. When we utilize only male language to refer to God, it isolates women from the sacred. Referring to God as she, he, or in gender neutral terms, in addition to recovering metaphors expands our notion of God.¹⁹ The metaphor of God is Mother is seen throughout the Old Testament. For instance in Exodus 19:4 God begins to speak to the gathered community, saying “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself.”²⁰ God implores the language of mother to describes herself and the phrase “bore;” which is reminiscent of mothers in childbirth.

In Deuteronomy 32:11-12a God speaks of the protection She provided in the wilderness exodus: “As an eagle stirs up *Her* nest, hovers over *Her* young; Spreading out *Her* wings, taking them up, carrying them on *Her* wings. So, the Lord alone led *them*.”²¹ This passage shares the ongoing care of a mother to her young. *El Shaddai* which is often translated God Almighty could also be translated “God of the Mountains.” *Shaddai* also means “breast,” since mountains look like breasts:

Therefore, *El Shaddai* is not only as mighty, grand, and awesome as a mountain but as powerfully nurturing, gentle, and loving as mother’s gift shared from her bosom. Behind her bosom, lie her heart and lungs - the power of life and breath.

¹⁸ Ibid., 150.

¹⁹ Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God the Trinity from a Womanist Perspective* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 61.

²⁰ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture verses are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

²¹ Italics indicate change from gender-neutral language to the feminine.

God is like a mother. El Shaddai is God of the mountain and God who is like a mother's bosom, mighty and intimately nurturing at once, without division or separation of nature and meaning.²²

By looking at the places where we can refer to God as she or use other feminine metaphors enables women to see themselves reflected in Scripture. According to Karen Baker-Fletcher, this “calls communities of faith back to the multiplicity of biblical metaphors for God. No one word describes the fullness of God's nature.”²³ Throughout the self-recovery groups we will spend time discussing these and other metaphors that shape how we talk to and about God.

Servanthood, Sacrifice, and Survival

For women of faith, the Church's teaching on servanthood often amplifies the StrongBlackWoman, as it is seen as critical to one's faith. “[T]he ideology of the StrongBlackWoman represents that very type of appropriation in that it teaches women and girls that their humanity, racial/gender identity, and Christian discipleship must continually be proved through their service to others.”²⁴ The Christian tradition teaches that love is a way to demonstrate self-sacrifice and self-denial, which “women learn to accept, submit to, and sometimes even welcome unjust suffering because such suffering is thought to be their divinely ordained role.”²⁵ These beliefs will need to be questioned

²² Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God*, 59.

²³ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁴ Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, Kindle 141.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

in order for Black women to reoriented their faith. Delores Williams' examination of the Hagar narrative is one way to begin to address this problematic faith traditions.

Hagar's narrative offers a vantage point of an oppressed African woman which is "congruent with many African-American women's predicament," since it shows the various levels of oppression she experienced.²⁶ Hagar's identity and life as a servant, is dictated by the needs, "problems and desires of her owners."²⁷ Williams pinpoints the harmful ways the doctrine of suffering and surrogacy, tend to support Black women's oppression. Hagar's narrative offers a new model of liberation as Hagar liberates herself.²⁸ Additionally, Hagar's interaction with God demonstrates that amid her suffering she was both seen and heard by God and consequently able to name God. Centering Black women's experience and using a womanist hermeneutical lenses can show Black women that their

Salvation does not depend upon any form of surrogacy made sacred by traditional and orthodox understandings of Jesus' life and death. Rather their salvation is assured by Jesus' life of resistance and by the survival strategies he used to help people survive the death of identity caused by their exchange of inherited cultural meanings for a new identity shaped by the gospel ethics and worldview.²⁹

This shift in perspective encourages Black women to see redemption through life, not death as outlined in the Jesus living ministerial vision.³⁰

²⁶ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 5-6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 164-165.

Sometimes the skills developed by Black women to survive are “exploited in the Black community and in the church.”³¹ As Black women continue to voice this exploitation and recognized the cycle that is tantamount to domestic violence they will need to continue prioritizing their health over and against the Black community. Additionally, like Hagar they will need to continue to find ways to liberate themselves.

Through the Eyes of God

In Zora Neil-Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she describes what transpires during the hurricane: “The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God.”³² Hurston understood that in many ways Black folks have looked to God to see themselves through the eyes of God. Emilie Townes’ notion of Is-ness. alongside Karen Baker-Fletcher and Kelly Brown Douglas will aid in a rediscovery of God as revealed in the Trinity and the Black Christ. Each of these ideas will assist Black women in understanding destructive ideas that have been internalized, preventing them from seeing themselves fully in the world and through the Eyes of God.

³¹ Ibid., 236.

³² Zora Neil Hurston, *Their Eyes Where Watching God* (New York: JP Lippincott, 1937), 187.

Similar to the *Ubuntu* ideology, is-ness emerges as a way for Black people to recognize they are a part of the beloved community of God.³³ Townes notes that,

is-ness is physical and spiritual. Is-ness marks the very nature of our breathing in and out as human being and the movement of creation itself. . . . Its primary concern is concrete existence (lived life) and the impetus for a coherent and unified relationship between body, soul and creation. In this sense, it is consonant with African cosmology that understands all of life as sacred.³⁴

Embracing is-ness moves us towards wholeness and away from the fragmentation of identities that are often created in Black women's bodies in America.³⁵ The embracing of one's is-ness is critical in forming our identity; this begins with rediscovering God embodied within. This stands in stark contrast to the notion that the divine would inhabit what has historically been deemed unholy. Is-ness is a way to affirm both the *Imago Dei* and humanity of Black women since is-ness begins with the life-sustaining breathe of God. During the self-recovery groups this concept will be discussed but also practiced as using mindfulness exercises will help Black women become aware of their connectedness to their breath and consequently to there is-ness and the spirit of God.

The Trinitarian Dance

Within the Trinity, there is communal expression of love that begins with God's love of self, Son, and Spirit, and extends to all creation.³⁶ The Trinity consist of three

³³ Townes uses the sermon of Baby Suggs from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a backdrop in which Suggs helps people to embrace their full self when she invites them to learn to love their flesh.

³⁴ Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 48.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

³⁶ Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God*, 18.

persons (*hypostases*) God/Mother, Word/Wisdom, and the Breath/Spirit of God, which dwell together in one divine nature.³⁷ The Trinity is engaged in a dance in “which God relates dynamically within God’s self as the immanent Trinity.”³⁸ This Trinitarian relationship can help Black women to understand how to relate to others. Chanequa Walker-Barnes notes that the Trinity,

Enables and encourages us to imagine the Divine as three interconnected persons, each willing to risk loving and being loved by, knowing and being known by the Other. Yet even in their interdependency, they maintain fully intact boundaries such that each has a unique identity that is not diminished by being in relationship, but rather is supported and reinforced by it.³⁹

The relational component of the Trinitarian tradition is a helpful paradigm for Black women who often do not have “fully intact boundaries” and live in fragmented existences when they shift to meet the needs of others. This encourages Black women to create and maintain healthy relational and social boundaries as they engage with others and movements for communal well-being.

In Genesis 1, the Trinitarian dance unfolds in the creation account where God is present, speaking, and breathing life into creation. Within the creative activity there is a symmetry indicating a need for wholeness, as each aspect compliments the other and creates a counterbalance in life. There is day and night, rest and work, moon and sun, male and female. Each has its place within creation and each is declared good both individually and collective, not at the exclusion of the other. Although the work of

³⁷ Ibid., 56.

³⁸ Ibid., 24-25.

³⁹ Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, 150.

creation could have taken place within moments, it is stretched over time, with breaks, rest, and reflection interspersed revealing the need for a balanced pace in life. This balance invites one to incorporate work, imagination, creation, reflection, affirmation, and rest within daily, weekly, and annual rhythms of life.

In Genesis 1:2 we encounter the Spirit/Breath of God the “life inspiring relation of God” hovering over emptiness.⁴⁰ This poetic verse also demonstrates an important truth: the Breath of God, looks into nothingness and brings forth life. This idea of creating something out of nothing is known all too well for those who have lived where resources are scarce. “The poor and the frugal around the globe know what it means to live with a scarcity of resource, a kind of nothingness, and make something out of it. . . . One can conclude that what looks like nothing to us is something to God.”⁴¹ In holding onto this imagery it allows Black women who have learned the technique of making something out of nothing to see themselves reflected in the Triune God. While it may be a survival technique it is one that requires both creativity and imagination.

John 1:1-5; 14 enables us to see how the Word was present in creation as the second person of the Trinity. This Wisdom, or *logos* as identified in John’s Gospel, helps us to see how the Wisdom of God became flesh in the incarnation of Christ. By tying Wisdom with Logos, it “integrates the divine wisdom found in Jesus the Christ with the Greek understating of divine *Logos*.”⁴² This allows us to encounter the living Wisdom as

⁴⁰ Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God*, 62.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 60.

seen in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Additionally, by drawing on the meaning of Wisdom, when looking at Jesus we understand that the,

Word/Wisdom of God is male and female. . . .Therefore, Jesus the Christ fully incarnates the Word/Wisdom that biblical writers have written of in feminine and masculine language. No, in response to many who ask, this does not mean that Jesus “was a woman.” It simply means that Jesus is fully the Wisdom and Word of God from before the beginning of creation as we know it.⁴³

This is the mystery that lives within the incarnation of Jesus. Within the fully incarnated Wisdom of God we find a restoration of the personhood of all, regardless of race, class, or gender.

The Black Christ

The Black Christ emerged as slaves reinterpreted Scripture for themselves. In doing so they drew on three aspects that centered their faith in the Black Christ: There existed an intimate relationship between the slave and Jesus; Jesus radicalized the slaves to fight for freedom; and The Black Christ shed light on the contradictions seen with the White Christ.⁴⁴ During the Black Power movement, The Black Christ reemerged as a way to reject the White Christ, who was in opposition to liberation.⁴⁵

In addition to metaphors, Douglas sees the importance of having living symbols and icons since “Christ is a living Christ.”⁴⁶ This allows her to construct a Christology where Christ can be “seen in the face of a Sojourner Truth, a Harriet Tubman, or a Fannie Lou

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 19-21.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 108.

Hamer, as each one struggled to help the entire community survive and become whole.”⁴⁷

By seeing Christ in the face of Black women who have sought wholeness for the community, three things are accomplished:

1. Demonstrates the Black Christ is present in the community when people are struggling for community wholeness
2. Challenges Black folk to continue to engage and participate in activities that foster both unity and freedom.
3. It shifts the focus on what Jesus did that makes him the Christ and shows his liberating and life sustain prophetic presence.⁴⁸

In seeing Christ in the faces of the least of these it also holds the community accountable for the wholeness of all.⁴⁹ This also eliminates the possibility of endorsing aspects of Black life and culture that are destructive for the Black Community.

Seeing Christ in the face of those who seek wholeness can also be a source of pride, similar to the way fictive kinships operate. As Black folks develop a sense of self that is rooted in “a pride in their own culture and historical heritage, as well as a knowledge that they are children of God, then they will not be as vulnerable to the oppressive structures, systems, and ideology’s that attempt to convince them that they are nobody, and that their lives are not worth living.”⁵⁰ By seeing Christ in the face of Black women, it “disavows the centrality of Jesus’ maleness in determining what it meant for him to be Christ,” instead it focuses on “his humanity and his liberating actions on behalf

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 108-109.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 106.

of the oppressed.”⁵¹ Seeing Christ in the face of Black women restores and affirms the personhood, dignity, and humanity.

Turman’s Womanist Ethnic of Incarnation

Eboni Marshall Turman’s womanist ethic of incarnation provides an example of how a womanist theology can be used as a resource for Black women’s identity formation and self-recovery journey. Turman argues that the physical body has often been a problem for the Church. “The politics of incarnation, that is, the objective and/or subjective choregraphing of bodily identity, has historically been enacted in relationship to certain kinds of bodies—those that defy normativity—in ways that breed brokenness and division.”⁵² This has created ongoing conflict with the early church as they struggled with agreeing on Christology; this continues today.

Before the Council of Chalcedon in 451, there were two main Christological traditions that emerged: the *Logos-Sarx* (Word-Flesh) from the Alexandrian school and the *Logos-anthropos* (Word-human being) from the Antioch school.⁵³ For the Alexandrian school, soteriology was not based upon the human flesh, but rather the flesh that was saved because of the relationship the flesh had with the “Word” that dwelt in the flesh. In contrast, the Antioch school argues that the very fact that Jesus was human holds

⁵¹ Ibid., 109.

⁵² Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 37.

⁵³ Ibid., 20.

the most significance to soteriology. For this school, the focus was on the duality of God within the Body of Jesus Christ, where they continued to maintain separate existences.

At the Council of Chalcedon the Church decreed that the “indispensable and qualifying characteristics of Jesus Christ: (1) divine personhood, (2) human nature, and (3) the hypostatic union of the human and divine natures in the Divine Person of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁴ This led to the Definition of Faith, which shaped creeds and Western Christianity. Although the Council of Chalcedon brought together these two dueling points of view in the Definition of Faith, Turman points out that the Church does not operate from the point of view of both/and but rather functions as an either/or with its praxis. This leads to oppression and dehumanization of some bodies and the divinization of others.⁵⁵

A disjointed either/or Christology exists as the Church struggles “between who the church says it is (Christian identity) and what the church actually does (Christian ethics) precisely because of primary (mis) conception of bodily integrity that ends with and, thus, is severely distorted by the ‘either/or’ moment of Jesus.”⁵⁶ Turman sees a need to hold together the incarnation of Jesus alongside

What happens to Jesus (the Passion and Resurrection) and what will happen as the future of Jesus (the *Parousia*), that the Christ event approximates any justice-making, transformative sense at all. To disqualify any one of these aspects while privileging another is deeply problematic precisely because it dismisses the pertinence and equalizing tendency of the mediating premise of Chalcedon and its designation of Jesus as both/and.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 42.

Additionally, when we look at what seems to be the broken Body of Christ, it actually reveals a wholeness as it highlights injustices done within the body and society “while simultaneously pointing toward the possibilities of plenitude and redemption.”⁵⁸

Turman believes that the dilemma encountered at the Council of Chalcedon offers a chance to embrace both/and when looking at the incarnation of Christ.

This moves Black women toward wholeness, and away from the limitations of W.E.B Du Bois’ double consciousness, since double consciousness is primarily concerned with *kata sarka* what happens to the body, its

Is-ness is only (de)legitimized by the negotiation of the White gaze . . . double-consciousness requires that the Black body be broken under the White gaze and reconstituted by it. When Black bodies are determined by the gaze of being-outside-itself that replaces the priority of the *en sarki* with the *kata sarka*, the result is a disembodied essence, a sort of existential death.⁵⁹

By prioritizing the social-historical circumstances, this can also lead to an identity shaped through the prism of *kata sarka* as well which is dominated by the White gaze, “even within these quality of life seeking liberative paradigms, Black identity is held hostage to the fantastic hegemonic imagination it defies, and is substantiated only by way of a reactionary posture that first responds to its ‘according to the flesh’ social and historical predetermination.”⁶⁰ Turman urges the womanist project to continue to be grounded in Alice Walker’s definition of womanist as it embraces both/and of the *en sarki* and *kata*

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 156.

sarka. For Turman, a womanist ethic of incarnation gives space to hold the both/and, while simultaneously allowing for self-definition beyond the White gaze.

Womanist methodology begins with a radical subjectivity that privileges Black women's experience and starts with what takes place first in the bodies of Black women while not dismissing what happens in their social-historical reality. "The womanist project thus adheres to the logic of incarnation . . . insofar as it mandates a negotiation between the *kata sarka* and the *en sarki* with one caveat: This negotiation between 'two seemingly opposed identities' always privileges the radical subjectivity of the latter while rejecting the unqualified authority of the former."⁶¹ This prioritizes what happens in their body over and against what happens to the body which moves a Black woman to "Loves herself. Regardless."⁶²

According to Turman, a "womanist ethnic of incarnation asserts Black women as the incarnate image of God in the world—the 'substance' of God as to his humanity, and thus posits Black women as the primary resource for resisting injustice and reconstituting the body and the soul of the Black church."⁶³ Embracing both/and allows for wholeness and an "in the flesh body ethics that engenders justice for every body, and not just some of them."⁶⁴

⁶¹ Alice Walker's Definition of a "Womanist."

⁶² Alice Walker's Definition of a "Womanist."

⁶³ Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*, 161.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

In this womanist ethic of incarnation, Turman looks at Black woman's body in the pew on Sunday and notes three movements that pivot her toward wholeness within her personhood: the reach, stand, and sway. The reach represents the

Moment when what is in the flesh materializes in contrast to that which has occurred according to the flesh, and embodies a No! posse that rejects the primacy of what has been promulgated concerning Black women's identity. The reach renounces the privilege of its *kata sarka* destination, and instead embraces an identity that . . . implies "something else" that is at work in Black women's bodies.⁶⁵

The stand demonstrates an act of both inclusion and disruption, as it proclaims that I am here. This standing is inspired by God and demonstrates an act of resistance to the sociohistorical norms that sought to subjugate "Black women to a posture of submission and inferiority."⁶⁶ Lastly, the sway communicates that despite the various ways in which Black women's bodies have been seen as inferior, even while being a sight for God's activity in her, she will continue to "keep moving in and through an unjust world."⁶⁷

Using a womanist methodology and examining womanist theology provides resources for the New Narrative groups that will be utilized in this project. Rediscovering various theological concepts about God is essential in helping Black women reimagine themselves through the eyes of God as well as gives language about how to talk about God. Turman's example also shows the way womanist theology can be used to craft an alternative identity.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 170.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 171.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

PART THREE
MINISTRY STRATEGY

CHAPTER 4

UNMASKING: BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

The identities of Black women are often misrecognized due to controlling narratives. This has various impacts on their social, mental, physical, and relational wellbeing. A womanist methodology and theology provide resources for Black women as they continue the identity formation and self-recovery process. This chapter will discuss the project theory and praxis in light of the social historical realities of Black women in LA.

Black women have played a critical role in the development of Black LA. Biddy Mason who won her freedom and went on to provide stability in the Black community through economic development, social programs, and financing Black churches. Odessa Cox found ways to use her voice to engage the Black community and raise awareness around issues such as education. Willa Bruce built places of rest for Black Angelenos as she fought for leisure spaces. Black women used the club movement to push forward various agendas, meet societal needs, and support each other in the day-to-day realities that existed. Similar Black Lives Matter started a global movement to bring to the

forefront the injustices experienced by Black people in America particular at the hands of police.

Black women's commitment to the well-being of their community has placed them on the frontline of many movements that seek justice. At the same time, their contributions have not always been valued or seen. Black women's contributions are often subject to erasure from our collective memories, disconnecting one generation from the next. Understanding one's history is a critical aspect of the identity formation and self-recovery process.

The intersectional reality of Black women has been unseen as these unique issues are relegated to the shadows by Black men who neglect issues of class and gender and White women who neglect issues of race and class. Black women have been misrecognized with the use of controlling narratives jezebel, mammy/matriarch, and sapphire that are attempts to control Black women's bodies, minds, and souls.

These controlling narratives continue to follow Black women on and off the screen in Los Angeles. The continued used of the controlling narratives on screens causes one to question whether life imitates art or does art imitate life? In looking at the portrayal of these ongoing narratives you begin to see that both are true. While art may begin to imitate life, it also has a power to continue to allow narratives to form and consequently to be normalized in life. The Times Up Movement has begun to demand diversity in front of and behind the camera to move beyond depicting Blackness from the White Gaze.

While in recent years we have begun to slowly see this come to light there is much to be done in reshaping these controlling narratives both on and off screen. It is critical for Black women to understand these controlling narratives, the impact on their overall well-being and acknowledge the various coping mechanisms we have implored over the years.

Black women wear the armor of the StrongBlackWoman or shift to deal with the controlling narratives at the cost of our own well-being. This is driven by the communal expectation that Black women embody attributes of the StrongBlackWoman along with the internalized of the StrongBlackWoman myth as a true measure of Black womanhood. The Black community continues to praise Black women who exhibit SBW characteristics of extreme caregiving, and emotional strength/regulation. Leading to Black women becoming emmeshed with the SBW, to their own detriment as this often leads to Black women not knowing their true self. The character of Georgina in “Get Out” portrays very vividly, what happens to Black women who are simultaneously fighting the controlling narratives while trying to be strong and liberate others. They do not have enough left in them to fight for their own well-being, and in the end are left behind and do not make it.

Part of the recovery process involves the ability to center the Black woman’s experience. Since there has been a propensity to neglect the care of Black women by themselves, their communities and churches, this point cannot be emphasized enough. To center their needs is a difficult concept for Black women who have traditionally believed that their identity is tied to their ability to care for others.

Luke 10 provides insight on the need to love ourselves. In the parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10:23-29:

Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.” Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

This narrative begins with Jesus affirming that his disciples were able to have eyes to see and ears to hear what others desire but cannot hear or see. While he is speaking with his disciples a lawyer approaches Jesus and asks the question: “what needs to happen in order to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answers with a question prompting the lawyer to reflect on the law. In verse 27 we see the response given by the lawyers is to love your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind. In addition, he responds you must love your neighbor as yourself.

The conversation continues with the lawyer asking, “Who is my neighbor?” revealing he in fact desires to hear and see yet cannot. The lawyer apparently understood what it meant to love God and himself but the idea of neighbor brought a level of unease. To help him see the neighbor, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan.

For one to be able to demonstrate love and have eternal life it is rooted first in a love of God and then in a love of self. It is impossible to love your neighbor as yourself if you do not first love you. This first requires Black women to recover God that has often been cloaked in both Whiteness and maleness making it difficult for them to relate to

God and see themselves in God's image. By recovering metaphors such as mother, learning to see Christ in the face of Black women, as well as embracing a womanist ethnic of incarnation, Black women can begin to recover a God who sees and hears them. As Black women continue to focus on the life and ministry of Jesus which ushers in a new ministerial vision as demonstrated in the incarnate Black Christ we begin to recover essential elements of what it means to live and have life to the fullest. This serves as a reminder that it is through life that we find redemption and are made whole, not in backbreaking self-sacrificing acts of surrogacy.

It is important to begin any framework that seeks the well-being of Black women with an understanding of self-love. Communal well-being should be a by-product of love of self even as demonstrated in the parable of the good Samaritan. Shifting the focus to the well-being of the Black woman creates space for Black women to begin the deep work of unmasking the internalized messages that keep them in a sunken place as they wear the armor of the StrongBlackWoman, prohibiting them from identity and self-recovery. In this framework, Black women move to the center of her story.

Models and Strategies for Self-Recovery Groups

Thriving is a holistic approach and will require various tools and resources. I believe self-recovery groups is a way to encourage Black women to embark on both an identity formation and self-recovery process that will enable us to understand the systemic realities of race, class, and gender in America and the implications this has on our day-to-day lives, identities, selves, and communities.

bell hooks and Chanequa Walker-Barnes each provide guiding principles for establishing self-recovery groups to address the impact of internalized racism, sexism, and classism on one's identity. Additionally, they offer practical steps and resources for co-journeying with Black women on the road of self-recovery. Self-recovery groups then become a setting for the restorative work to take place.

In *Sisters of the Yam*, bell hooks begins with a stark indictment noting that: "I have seen that we cannot fully create effective movements for social change if individuals struggling for that change are not also self-actualized or working towards that end. When wounded individuals come together in groups to make change our collective struggle is often undermined by all that has not been dealt with emotionally."¹ For Black women, as they seek the well-being of the community—they tend to neglect the well-being of self.

hooks, recognizes that community is essential in sustaining life as it offers spaces to share the secrets of healing while connecting with one another.² She began Sisters of the Yam recovery groups as a subversive response to internalized racism. The groups brought together Black women who were "estranged from life-affirming world-views and life practices," due to working or being in predominately White spaces.³

¹ bell hooks *Sisters of the Yam* (Boston: South Ends Press, 1989), 5.

² Ibid., 9.

³ Ibid., 10.

While the work of self-recovery is not impossible, it does require work just the same. Audre Lorde, in her essay “Eye to Eye,” seeks to help Black women understand the deep work needed in self-recovery:

Learning to love ourselves as Black women goes beyond a simplistic insistence that “Black is beautiful.” It goes beyond and deeper than the surface appreciation of Black beauty, although that is certainly a good beginning. But if the quest to reclaim ourselves and each other remains there, then we accept another superficial measurement of self, one superimposed upon the old one and almost as damaging, since it pauses at the superficial. Certainly it is no more empowering. And it is empowerment—our strengthen in the service of ourselves and each other, in the service of our work and future—that will be the result of this pursuit.⁴

Like Lorde, hooks understood the deep work necessary for self-recovery, and that this work is not done in isolation but within the context of community. hooks realized that as Black women gathered, they shared the secrets of healing, since they “knew how to live well and long despite adversity . . . pain, hardship, unrelenting poverty, and the ongoing reality of loss. They knew joy.”⁵ hooks formed the Sisters of the Yam support group since a yam was “a life-sustaining symbol of Black kinship and community.”⁶ She notes that recovery groups should create a space for Black women as they seek their own well-being, while addressing an assortment of concerns and issues Black women encounter living in America.⁷ It is important to create space to co-journey instead of attempting to be the leader. A co-journeyer instead is going through the process as well while guiding the group, but each member will seek their own well-being in the context of community.

⁴ Audre Lorde, “Eye to Eye: Black Women Hatred, and Anger,” *Sister Outsider*, 174-175.

⁵ hooks, *Sisters of the Yam*, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

As Black women commune together, they will find the communal healing needed to thrive in their world.

Drawing on her experience with leading recovery groups and her own process, hooks advocates for, similar groups to take place. These groups created a “Space where Black women could name their pain and find ways of healing. The power of the group to transform one another’s lives seemed to be determined by the intensity of each individual’s desire to recover, to find a space within and without, where she could sustain the will to be well and create affirming habits of being.”⁸ In these groups hooks began to see that healing could take place when women began to understand the various factors in their life that were inflicting pain.⁹ Self-recovery, like identity formation, is a lifelong process, but not one that is impossible.

hook’s Strategies in Recovery Groups

bell hooks recommends thirteen strategies when establishing recovery groups. The first strategy that hooks proposes is commitment to the spiritual practice of truth telling. She notes that many of the survival strategies that may have been helpful in the past are no longer appropriate in our current context, as “dissimulation makes us dysfunctional. Since it encourages us to deny what we genuinely feel and experience, we lose our capacity to know who we really are and what we need and desire.”¹⁰ Although

⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰ Ibid., 24.

we may dissimulate in order to keep people from knowing what is really going on inside of us, honesty leads to healing.¹¹

The second strategy she proposes is learning from critical affirmation which is different than harsh critique and truth telling. She encourages Black women to move beyond just “telling it like it is,” which often can wound.¹² In contrast critical affirmation involves the risk of receiving “constructive confrontation and challenge” that comes from a place of respect and love.¹³ The next strategy she proposes is helping women to view their work or job through the lens of “right livelihood.” hooks notes that Black women “often enter the work field not to fulfill a calling or vocation but out of necessity.”¹⁴ Yet many find themselves unfulfilled and stressed, doing work that they do not enjoy. The Buddhist concept of right livelihood helps direct us toward a mindful way of pursuing work, that will enhance the well-being of Black women.¹⁵

Not having agency over one’s own life can lead to addictive behaviors. The groups must also be communities that deal with addictions that are often the result of “suffering and woundedness caused by political oppression/exploitation.”¹⁶ Many of the addictions people experience are birthed from the internalized negative belief we have

¹¹ Ibid., 27-28.

¹² Ibid., 21.

¹³ Ibid., 26-27.

¹⁴ Ibid., 43.

¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁶ Ibid., 67.

inherited and require an attention to our mental well-being.¹⁷ Another strategy is to unlearn self-hate and embrace ourselves. This requires our ability to understand that our self-worth is not tied to our ability to serve and care for others.

The next strategy she proposes is the importance of learning to deal with death, grief, and letting go. She believes that “unreconciled grief, sadness, and feelings that life has lost meaning are all states of being that lead Black women into life-threatening depression.”¹⁸ Additionally, these groups should provide a space to reconcile various aspects of our sexuality. The idea of the erotic is different from the sexual, and is essential to our overall well-being, as it is about learning to create space to “experience and know pleasure.”¹⁹ Emphasizing a Black women’s need to rediscover *eros*, is also learning how to be receivers of love, and establish life-giving relationships to learn to live in healthy communities. Each of these requires a love of self, regardless.

The deep pain and hurt that Black women have experienced as a result of internalized hate makes it difficult to love ourselves and consequently to receive and give love to others. Love is not the same as care which “many Black women make care synonymous with love, we confuse the issue.”²⁰ Once we open up to love, it gives space to move us from individualism to engaging in community, hooks’ tenth recommended strategy. “Many Black females have learned to deny our inner needs while we develop

¹⁷ Ibid., 70.

¹⁸ Ibid., 109.

¹⁹ Ibid., 116.

²⁰ Ibid., 129-130.

our capacity to cope and confront in public life. Therefore, we can often appear to be functioning well on jobs but be utterly dysfunctional in private.”²¹

Additionally, hooks sees the need to find joy that comes as a result of reconciliation with self and others.²² This requires the ability to let go of the pain and bitterness that we have been cultivating.²³ hooks also encourages a reconnection to nature. She discusses the ways Black people have traditionally had a connection to nature that allowed them to cultivate a sense of wonder and discovery as they engaged with nature.²⁴ This also allows for creative imagination and to recover the sense of wonder that was often lost.²⁵ Lastly, she discusses the need for contemplative spaces that allow one to connect with the spiritual world. This is especially the case for Black women who are often too busy to slow down and be mindful of what is happening to them and in the world.

Walker-Barnes 12- Step Recovery Model

While hooks provides various strategies, Walker-Barnes’ 12-step model allows Black women to begin to grapple with addiction to the StrongBlackWoman²⁶ The 12-step provides a framework for seeing the StrongBlackWoman as an addiction. While this may

²¹ Ibid., 138.

²² Ibid., 167.

²³ Ibid., 164.

²⁴ Ibid., 177.

²⁵ Ibid., 116.

²⁶ For further study see pages 185-195 in *Too Heavy a Yoke*.

be difficult for some who are uncomfortable with the recovery language, this should not take away from the benefits of the model. The addiction and recovery language while strong gives space to understand the severity of the issue at hand. Additionally, it does not condemn the individual to a lifestyle of addiction but rather brings the propensity for addiction to the forefront.

Allowing this to stay in a place of prominence does not glorify addiction, but ensures we understand the daily work of recovery. The 12-steps then become an aid in guiding individuals through the recovery process.²⁷ The recovery group is a healing community, and as such, it is important to utilize the language that promotes life-long healing of the individuals within the group.

By confronting addictions it allows Black women to discover the pain the addiction seeks to soothe. By embedding the 12-step model as used by the recovery community into the framework of the self-recovery group, it can help individuals to see the need for ongoing healing. The twelve-step model should be seen as an “aid to authentic spiritual growth for Christians. . . . As they put themselves into the hands of God they discover firsthand the loving redeeming, supporting, moral, and confronting nature of God.”²⁸ The self-recovery group is a healing community, and as such, it is important to utilize the language that promotes life-long healing of the individuals within the group.

²⁷ Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, 186.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

StrongBlackWoman

Both hooks and Walker-Barnes note the importance of addressing the myth of the StrongBlackWoman (SBW). The SBW is a form of misrecognition that is often unnamed because it has become an expectation that Black women embody.²⁹ Walker-Barnes reminds us that the StrongBlackWoman has become “a force of habit ingrained in many African-American women from childhood.”³⁰ Taking off the armor of the StrongBlackWoman requires embracing emotional flexibility as it empowers Black women to find a balance between vulnerability and strength. If Black women continue to hold on to this distorted ideology that a SBW is the equivalent to an “earthy mother goddess who has built-in capacities to deal with all manner of hardship without breaking down, physically, or mentally,” she will not be able to take off the armor and deal with the root of the addiction.³¹ Healing from the addiction of the SBW armor also requires releasing a false sense of control.

Sacred Space

Black women experience racial, vicarious, and intergenerational trauma, while encountering microaggressions daily. It is important for them to have a sacred place to begin their identity formation and self-recovery process. A sacred space requires three elements. An environment that is life affirming, allows women to be brave as they risk taking off their armor as well as a space where they can encounter God.

²⁹ Ibid., 14.

³⁰ Ibid., 185.

³¹ hooks *Sisters of the Yam*, 70.

A safe space is “an environment in which everyone feels comfortable expressing themselves and participating fully, without fear of attack, ridicule or denial of experience.”³² By its very nature the topics that will be discussed will create internal conflict and will not be free of bias. Instead of focusing on safe space, a brave space is more helpful since participants must be willing to risk and engage in practices such as truth-telling, in a way that does not require dissemination, justification, shifting, or code-switching.

To remove the armor of the StrongBlackWoman, will require Black women to understand they are in a life-affirming space. A life-affirming space will be one that is welcoming and hospitable while giving room for truth telling. At the same time, this space must be careful to not avoid difficult topics, ideas, or conversation so it requires a level of bravery to be vulnerable. Since the goal of our time together is to bring about healing, it will require a level of risk by participants, making it important that I as co-journeymen inform participants of the risk, while continually seeking to maintain a sacred space during the journey.

In addition, there needs to be a way for people to connect to God as they seek wholistic healing. Cindy Lee notes that sacred space:

Provides a holy “playground” for human communities to interact with the divine and supernatural. Although we primarily engage with spirituality through soul and mind, a sacred space allows us to also engage with our body and senses . . . our physical experience through the body is one of the initial ways in which we interact with the supernatural. . . . The experience of religion, then, is not just a

³² University of New Hampshire, “Social Justice Education Concepts Defined,” accessed August 22, 2020, <https://www.unh.edu/inclusive/trainings-news-events/social-justice-education/sje-concepts-defined>.

study of theologies, texts, and beliefs, but the experience must also include the everyday practices of rituals and symbols.³³

If connecting with God is more than a mental exercise but an embodied experience, sacred spaces become equally important in the identity formation and self-recovery process.

Additional Strategies for Recovery Group

In addition to utilizing the strategies advocated by hooks and Walker-Barnes I propose additional elements that could be used as needed based on the group. These include scriptural study, Pain and Peace cycle, and inner healing prayer. Each work to help the individual through a recovery process mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually in a relational setting.

Scriptural Studies

Since Day, hooks, and others have advocated for transcendent communities of faith it will be critical to create space for Black women to not only commune with God but to talk-back to Scripture and question what they believe about God. Rather than teaching what a passage means based on exegetical study, it is important to create space for Black women to talk-to the text themselves. Using a dialogical pedagogical approach versus a banking or anti-dialogical pedagogical approach, will be helpful during the scriptural study.

³³ Cindy Lee, "An Introduction to Sacred Spaces," accessed February 27, 2019, <https://findingeden.org/sacredspaces/sensescapes-of-religion/>.

In the groups I will have space for both teaching and learning going back-and-forth as we study Scripture together. In doing so Black women can rediscover God and begin to see ourselves through the eyes of God. This will involve studying of critical passages and concepts to understand the Trinity and Incarnation of Christ. Each of these will be instrumental in shaping a womanist theology of personhood as discussed in Chapter 3.

These studies and teachings will use a womanist hermeneutic to look at women throughout Scripture. Inviting women to see this process unfold will give space for women to reconnect with God and themselves in life-affirming ways. In the recovery group I ran, we looked at Genesis 1-2, Hagar, Hannah, Mary, and Elizabeth. However, after running the groups and further study I see the need for further engagement in other passages and theological concepts. In the next chapter I will discuss this in more depth.

Pain and Peace

A violation of love or trust creates pain and/or confusion.³⁴ When people feel pain and confusion, they feel unloved or unsafe and will look for ways to cope. This typically will invoke the flight, fight, or freeze responses to cope. For instance, if people feel unloved, they may blame others and/or become involved in activities that shame themselves. On the other side if they feel unsafe, they may exhibit controlling behaviors or seek to escape into a chaotic setting.³⁵ This leads into what is called the pain cycle.

³⁴ Terry Hargrave, "Restoration Therapy: Elements of Healing in Marriage and Family Therapy," (Marriage and Relate Strong Training, Pepperdine University, April 15, 2016)," 2.

³⁵ Ibid.

Terry Hargrave proposes helping individuals to move into a peace cycle which begins to affirm what is true and is a necessary part of the identity formation and self-recovery process. He argues that “the focus of this intervention is to primarily use imagery to help the client focus on the different choices concerning his or her identity and power to provide safety.”³⁶ This can come from the person, others, or God.³⁷ Hargrave proposes the need to create new neuro pathways that begin with seeing what is truth.

The goal of the peace cycle is not to dismiss that pain inflicted but rather to work toward understanding the source of pain and any unhealthy coping mechanisms. The peace cycle has four steps: say what you feel, what you normally do, what is truth, and how you will respond differently. Within the recovery groups I taught on the pain and peace cycle. This enabled the women to become aware of their initial response to pain as well to uncover what lay beneath those feelings. Teaching Black women to walk through this cycle can help to reveal the deep pains and lead to the discovery of new or hidden truths.

Inner Healing Prayer

Black women are burdened and bound, looking to receive the liberation which Jesus spoke of in Luke 4. Since we are spiritual beings it is also important to see ways in which our innermost being also needs healing as part of the identity and self-recovery process. For many, “the relationship with ourselves is often negative. . . . And our

³⁶ Ibid., 4.

³⁷ Ibid.

relationships with others are often warped as well.”³⁸ Some of the healing work requires a spiritual response as well.

Inner healing prayer involves a level of pastoral counseling coupled with prayer. It requires an ability to create space to hear and discern from the Holy Spirit. This type of ministry is best described as the “transformation of the inner being of a person . . . the mind, the emotions, the painful memories, the dream. It is the process through prayer whereby we are set free from resentment, rejection, self-pity, depression, guilt, fear, sorrow, hatred, inferiority, condemnation, or worthlessness, etc.”³⁹ Inner healing prayer is not counseling and as such should also not be seen as a replacement for counseling. The goal of inner healing prayer is to create a space for the individual to discern areas in which they have been wounded.

Utilizing conversation and prayer, the prayer minister and prayer receiver engage in a dance with the Holy Spirit in order to begin to see points of pain and to listen to how the living, breathing Word/Wisdom of God is inviting them to respond in order to receive healing. Creating spaces for inner healing prayer allows space for the Holy Spirit to begin to move and work in the lives of those who need freedom.

Delores Williams points to the many ways the spiritualist Black churches tapped into a “highly developed spiritual consciousness fortified by their belief that they could communicate with the spirits of the ancestors and these spirits could have an effect upon

³⁸ Charles H. Kraft, *Deep Wounds: Deep Healing* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1993), 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

daily life.”⁴⁰ Although many Black spiritualist churches had a syncretism element, this did not hinder their concept of God. While it is not necessary to have syncretistic elements, it reminds us to be able to see the ways these forms of encountering God were prevalent in other parts of the Christian tradition. Inner healing prayer then becomes another way to help heal the wounded soul of the Black woman. Although I was not able to utilize this strategy in the New Narrative recovery groups, I continue to see the value and importance. In reflecting on next steps, I share how this can be implemented in the groups in the future.

New Narrative Self- Recovery Groups

Based on the social-historical realities faced by Black women in LA and the ways they have been misrecognized and wear the armor of the SBW, the ministry initiative I propose is the New Narrative self-recovery group. I will utilize the strategies advocated for by hooks and Walker-Barnes to help frame the self-recovery group. The group will provide a sacred space for Black women to process the impact of misrecognition on their overall well-being as discussed in Chapter 2. The content discussed was built around the womanist methodology and theology that have been discussed in Chapter 3.

From April-June 2018 I advertised the New Narrative self-recovery groups, utilizing a variety of venues. The group was advertised at a Women in Ministry Consultation lunch hosted by the African American Pannell Center and was featured in the Pannell Center monthly newsletter for three months. I also passed out flyers and sent digital information to Black women from the churches I had connections with and a few

⁴⁰ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 222.

local groups for Black women as well. I personally invited women I knew as well as women who attended monthly brown bag lunches for WOC. Women were encouraged to invite others who they believe would benefit from the group. Interested individuals were directed to my website to find additional information and to sign up.⁴¹

The New Narrative self-recovery group was open to Black women over the age of 18, who self-identified as Black and Christian residing in the Los Angeles county. Of the nine women who signed up to participate in the group five committed to joining the 8-week group. Three women were between the ages of 40 and 49, one was between 20 and 39 years old, and one was over 60. The individuals were also asked if they were: working, in school, a parent, married, in a relationship, single, or bi-vocational. The women could choose any of the descriptors that applied. Within the group, two were in school, and three were working. One individual was a parent and married, one was in a relationship and two were single, and one did not disclose their relationship status. The participants resided in the following cities in Los Angeles County: Pasadena, Altadena, Hollywood, and Compton. Those who were working or attending school, worked in a variety of settings such as non-profit and attended schools at mostly predominately White institutions.

In looking for the location space for the recovery groups to meet, I wanted it to be accessible to women who lived throughout Los Angeles County, which spans over 4,000 square miles, includes 89 cities, and 140 unincorporated areas. I decided to host the groups in Pasadena, since it was accessible by freeway and public transportation. The

⁴¹ Tracey Stringer, "A New Narrative," accessed August 22, 2020, <https://www.sqvcc.com/special-events>.

group was held on Fuller Seminary's Campus in the William E. Pannell Center for African American Church Studies.

The Pannell Center is in one of the historic converted houses on campus, providing a homelike atmosphere that did not give the appearance of a school setting. The meeting space also needed to be a private place so the women could feel free to share and express themselves through laughter, tears, shouts, or other forms of verbal communication. The Community Room in the Pannell Center was the chosen location because it met both needs.

Since representation matters it was important to select a location where Black women could see themselves and their culture reflected and in places of prominence throughout the space. The art displayed through the center included women dancing as well as other images of Black people experiencing freedom. As the women came into the community room during the first week they commented on the art and beauty they saw displayed within the community room.

In the weeks that followed, as the group gathered and music played in the background the women walked throughout the space taking in the various art pieces and commented on it to one another. Although we did not discuss the artwork within the context of the group meeting, the group members expressed an appreciation for the space. Another way I created a hospitable environment was to include an element of table fellowship within the group meetings. I provided snacks and drinks for the group. In the last session we shared a potluck meal together.

Group Meetings

The first session of the group began with a pre-assessment using the ProQOL, Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory, and a self-care assessment. The ProQOL is a profession quality of life burnout assessment, and looks at compassion satisfaction, compassion fatigue, and secondary fatigue, for those in caregiving professions.⁴² Since Black women are often in caregiving roles, I believed this would be a beneficial tool to self-assess each person's level of burnout. While the ProQOL can be used for research purposes, I used it primarily as a way for participants to self-monitor and identify their personal level of burnout, which is one way the assessment is encouraged for use.⁴³

Of the four people who turned in their pre-assessment packet all had a score of 43 or less, giving them a low compassion satisfaction. One person had low burnout, two people had average burnout, and one person had high burnout. Lastly, regarding secondary trauma, two had low levels of secondary trauma and two had average levels of secondary trauma. Group members were told the assessment was for their own use and information and a way to self-assess. Additionally, they were encouraged to come back to the assessment at the end of the 8-week group as well as to keep it as way to self-monitor.

Secondly, they took the Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory, which measures the level of stress experienced as it relates to forty-three life events. While not all the events were negative, they were life events that had the potential to bring some form of stress. The higher the propensity for stress received a higher score, while minor events were given lower ratings. One person had less than 150 points, indicating a relatively low

⁴² For additional information on this assessment see <https://proqol.org/Burnout.html>

⁴³ <https://proqol.org/FAQ.html>.

amount of life change and stress and susceptibility to stress-induced health problems. Two were between the ranges of 150 to 300 points, which implies a 50 percent chance of major stress-induced health problems. Lastly one person was in the range of 300 or more points, where it indicates an 80 percent chance of experiencing a stress-induced health problem.

These two assessments were helpful for me to get a gauge of where each participant was in regarding their level of burnout and stress. This was helpful in determining how much time needed to be spent where throughout the weeks. However, it was primarily used as a self-assessment for each woman to think about the various levels of stress and burnout in which they were experiencing. The women were also asked to complete a self-care assessment. This was also for personal reflection for individuals to understand the ways they were currently implementing self-care in their lives and gain ideas to incorporate in the future.

In addition to the assessments, the group members wrote a brief narrative identity. According to Jonathan Alder narrative identity is the “internalized, evolving story of the self that each person crafts to provide his or her life with a sense of purpose and unity.”⁴⁴ The story, however, is one that continues to evolve, giving the person the ability to pull together events from the past, present, and anticipated future. For people to develop agency over their own narrative it is important that they continue to revisit it over time. Participants were given a document with a definition of narrative identity and asked to

⁴⁴ Johnathan M. Adler, “Living into the Story: Agency and Coherence in a Longitudinal Study of Narrative Identity Development and Mental Health Over the Course of Psychotherapy,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 102:2 (2020): 367.

spend time at home writing about their narrative. These narratives were revisited and updated throughout the group sessions.

Each group meeting consisted of a few elements: prayer, reflection, teaching/activity, discussion, and soul care. Each group began with prayer coupled with some form of spiritual discipline, such as mindfulness or meditation on Scripture. While we practiced mindfulness using instrumental sounds, we also used mindfulness using a variety of Gospel music. Additionally, we did several deep breathing and body awareness activities to help the group members be attuned to their bodies, where they sensed stress, and how to potentially release those areas of tightness by contracting and releasing the areas where they were holding tension.

The Black Women's Health Study (BWHS), which collected information on Black women's health for twenty years, points out the importance of not just empowering self-definitions for individuals but also reshaping the narratives that have been embraced regarding the overall well-being of Black women. *Index Us*, provides an analysis of what Black women are doing for self-recovery. Efforts such as these help us to understand the value of self-recovery but also provide new narratives of Black women's wellness that have previously been unseen and unnamed, making it seem out of reach. In *Index Us*, Linda Blount notes that:

Despite the constant narrative that something is wrong with us, Black women see ourselves quite differently. More than 50 percent of the women in the BWHS view their physical and mental health as very good or excellent. That is something to celebrate! Black women exercise, we eat healthy, we're educated and we work hard. It's time to change the narrative. It's time for our story to be told in a way that shows who we really are when it comes to our health. We do not see ourselves as broken—stressed, yes, but not broken. We are inherently strong,

resilient and passionate about our health. We are not defined by disease, obesity or poverty.⁴⁵

Hearing these stories from *Index Us* can also be can also provide hope for women on their journey.

The groups also had times of teaching and group discussion. In several of the group sessions we studied Scripture using an adaptive-inductive Bible study technique that allowed the women to talk back to Scripture. We each spent time reading the passage aloud and took time to observe what we saw in the text. We then moved to interpretation—what did we think the passage may mean—and ended with application of how it connected to our lives.

Another aspect of our group time included several activities from time-to-time such as understanding the lies we believed, post-it note roles exercise, understanding the 12-steps of recovery for Black women, and creating a self-care plan. These activities were helpful in looking at a variety of aspects key to the formation of Black women.

Near the end of the sessions, we engaged in storytelling and affirmation. Each woman in the group was given the opportunity to share our story and discuss the impact of the StrongBlackWoman on our lives. Additionally, we were free to share about our family of origin, various levels of pain they experienced, and the impact that race, class, and sex had on their identity. At the end of each storytelling time, we gathered around the woman who shared and spoke words of affirmation to her and ended in a time of prayer

⁴⁵ Linda Goler Blount, “What’s Right About Us,” *IndexUs: What Healthy Black Women Can Teach us About Health*, 2016.

for her. The storytelling time enabled us to see one another more fully beyond the StrongBlackWoman armor we each have worn at some point in our lives.

As a co-journeyer, I made it a practice to complete any activity or sharing time first, unless I sensed others had something to share. As Walker-Barnes points out it is critical for the pastoral caregiver to be one who is also on the recovery journey as well. While in some ways leading from this paradigm can be risky and vulnerable, it is necessary in creating sacred space for Black women.

Curriculum Development

During the Summer of 2018 I began work on developing the material needed for the group. In preparing the curriculum I also needed to determine how the content would be delivered. I believed it would be important to use a dialogical-pedagogical approach in preparing to facilitate the groups based on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.⁴⁶ This created space for Black women to be active participants in the learning and teaching process. This also meant that although I created outlines for each of our sessions and facilitated the groups, I needed to create space and to be able to hear and learn from the community as we interacted together with the material presented. This is a tricky dance that requires the facilitator to cultivate a collaborative group environment that fosters dialogue. At the beginning of our time together, I encouraged this type of dialogue, noting my role as co-journeyer, not expert. This was also to recognize that within each of us had the tools for healing as well.

⁴⁶ For additional information see Chapter 3 where Freire explains this approach at length.

Session 1

At the start of the session group members completed intake paperwork. We discussed informed consent and group format. Before any sharing took place, we established ground rules and created a group covenant, then spent time introducing ourselves a bit more. I briefly shared the purpose for the group and provided space for group members who wanted to share to indicate what brought them to the group. They were also asked to share, as they felt comfortable, their hopes and fears about participating in the group; this allowed me to have insight into potential unspoken expectations.

Next, the session moved to a brief teaching time on the StrongBlackWoman. I shared about the myth of the StrongBlackWoman and the characteristics she exhibits. I also shared with the group the various ways I internalized the StrongBlackWoman and the impact I realized it was having on my life a few years ago. After spending time discussing this, we moved into the impact this was having on the emotional, spiritual, physical, and relational well-being of Black women. I provided information on the state of Black women's health to highlight the problem of the StrongBlackWoman.

As a group we discussed the various impacts of stress on Black women and the different ways it manifests. We discussed the ways that stress and re-traumatization impact us and the need to have a sacred space to recover. This allowed space for us to think about the assessments we completed as well. Throughout the time I made sure to create space for questions and thoughts from the group. We ended the time in prayer.

Session 2

Session 2 began with a prayer and a check-in. The check-in was a time to ask the group how our previous week went. Group members were asked to think about a high and a low over the last seven days. Each person answered as they felt led. The group moved into discussing how they felt about the previous sessions and any questions they continued to have, as well as how the narrative reflection exercise was for them.

The session then moved into a study of Genesis 1 and 2. In looking at these passages we focused on what it meant to be created in the image of God as well as the natural rhythms of work, rest, and play seen in the narrative. We then discussed what it means to have a sabbath, the importance of sabbath rest, and the obstacles for us resting. The group discussed the various challenges they encountered in finding time for sabbath rest due to busyness in life.

Session 3

In session 3, I introduced the concept of mindfulness and we then practiced this as a way to open the session. We then spent time looking at the story of Hagar through a womanist hermeneutic. We discussed what it meant to be seen and heard by God. Additionally, we discussed the struggle of what it means that God sent Hagar back and the implications of her wilderness experience for her and Ishmael.

Session 4

Session 4 spent time looking at Hannah using a womanist hermeneutic. We discussed the impact internalized roles have on our well-being as seen in Hannah's story.

After spending time doing this, we did a post-it exercise regarding the roles we played. The women were given post-it notes to write the different roles they have or had inhabited. As we looked at this, we identified common themes and discussed how many of the roles placed us in positions to be care-giver versus care receiver. This led into a conversation regarding the need for relationships with mutuality. I encouraged the group to continue to think of ways to expand their community to aid in their sense of belonging and well-being. Additionally, we discussed at length the impact of isolation and the perpetual caregiver.

Session 5

Session 5 spent time in prayer with a mindfulness exercise. During this session we talked about the tension of our already but not yet theology as we grappled with the reality of evil in our world, death, and loss. Also, the group needed to process the Brett Kavanaugh hearing as it brought up personal trauma for a few women. This led to a conversation on vicarious trauma and the impact re-traumatization continues to have on us. We also spent time discussing what it means to begin to name the lies we have believed about ourselves and the importance of creating empowering self-definition.

Additionally, we began to look at the 12-step recovery process and how it could be used. The session ended with storytelling. I provided the group with an outline on how to tell their story but did not require that they stick to the script. The time ended in prayer and affirmation.

Session 6 and Session 7

Session 6 and session 7 contained a similar format as session 5. Each session began with a form of prayer and mindfulness meditation or body awareness exercise. We also did a time of check-in, each group member sharing the ways we put ourselves first in the preceding week by practicing acts of love and self-care to ourselves. We allowed two women to share their story in each session and then spent time affirming them based on our time together and what we heard in their story. Additionally, we prayed a prayer of blessing and hope for each woman as they continued in their recovery journeys.

Session 8

In the last session we spent time going over the self-care assessment. After they completed the assessment, they were each asked to identify three-to-four areas they will begin to incorporate into their lives. We then discussed how to create a maintenance, emergency, and “days like this” self-care plan. The members wrote the one-to-two things they needed to have in their life daily in order to care for themselves well. They then identified goals for the self-care. At the end of the session we created space for individuals to revisit the narrative identity they wrote at the beginning of the session and add anything to their document. Many shared with the group how this changed over time or stayed the same. The rest of the time was spent in table fellowship.

Assessment and Evaluation

After the conclusion of the group, members were asked to complete post-group survey on Google forms. The post-group survey consisted of three parts. Part 1 -

Evaluation of helpfulness of the group in 10 different areas. They were asked to rate the following questions responding on a 5-point scale, with 1=Not at all Helpful; and 5=Very Helpful.

1. How helpful were the scripture studies in helping you to reshape how you see yourself?
2. How helpful were the scripture studies in helping you to reshape how God sees you?
3. How helpful was it to share your storying in affirming who God says that you are?
4. How helpful was the overall New Narrative small grouping in positively influencing your understanding of your own story/identity?
5. How helpful were the group discussions in helping you to process your experiences with race, class, and gender?
6. How has this group helped you to look at the various levels of trauma you've experienced in your life?
7. How helpful were the mindfulness/centering exercises in helping you to become aware of yourself?
8. How helpful was it to receive the affirmation and prayer after you shared your story?
9. How helpful was beginning to walk through the 12 steps of a StrongBlackWoman?
10. How has this group helped you to begin to deal with the different levels of stress in your life?

When asked how helpful the scriptural study was in helping to shape how they saw themselves and God, members rated it between 3 (helpful) to 5 (very helpful).⁴⁷ It seemed that the group discussion that created space for members to process their experiences with race, class, and gender were the most helpful, with four rating it 5 (very helpful) and 1 giving it a 4.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ One participant rated it 3, two rated this a 4, and 2 participants rated this with 5. For a complete result see appendix.

⁴⁸ Four participants rated it with 5-very helpful and one participant rated this with 4.

Part 2 consisted of reviewing aspects of the self-care activities. Although all the members indicated they knew how to create a self-care plan only 60 percent indicated they had created a plan. When asked what the barriers were the response was “complications in life.” Part 3 of the assessment asked a series of questions regarding topics that were helpful or not helpful as well as their interest in future groups or retreats. Four indicated they would recommend the group and one left this question blank. All indicated they would be interested in further groups and/or retreats.

The general interest to continue the groups indicated the groups were meaningful for the women. The feedback also provided insights on areas of improvement for the future. Overall, the New Narrative self-recovery group went well. At the same time, it is important to look critically at each aspect of the project to see how it can be improved moving forward and what lessons were learned along the way. In the next chapter we will take a closer look at areas to improve and next steps.

CHAPTER 5

CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

The idea that “Black don’t crack” is often said to point out the ways Black women appear to be ageless as they retain their youthful appearance. Yet, this phrase also reveals another insight into the psyche of Black women. Since cracking up on the outside and inside is something White folks do, Black women have been able to hide their internal brokenness with an ageless StrongBlackWoman mask.

Black women are strong and resilient and have developed a variety of coping mechanisms to allow them to manage their lives while navigating a variety of challenges. Joy Harden notes that, “As a general rule, that is true, but only part of the story. Black women have all the stressors other women have, as well as the additional effects of systemic racism to deal with.”¹ In looking at the long-term health effects of socioeconomic and family stress coupled with the impact of dissemination and acculturation on Black women, we can see the crisis Black women encounter, as we are slowly moving to an early grave. The Soujourner syndrome and the Superwoman Schema

¹ Joy Bradford, “Joy Harden Bradford Wants Black women to Embrace Psychology,” accessed August 22, 2020, <https://www.apa.org/members/content/bradford-embrace-psychology>.

(SWS) which is the “phenomenon of early onset of morbidity among African American women in response to persistent chronic stress and active coping associated with meeting day-to-day demands and having multiple caregiver roles.”² The StrongBlackWoman often exhibits excessive emotional strength/regulation, caregiving, and independence in ways that inhibit her ability to fully live. As Black women we must center our well-being before we can begin to seek liberation for our community.

A social analysis revealed the historical and societal factors that contribute to the misrecognition of Black women. By utilizing the controlling narratives of jezebel, mammy/matriarch, and sapphire, Whiteness has sought to control what happens in and to Black women’s body. These controlling narratives are created in opposition to the cult of the true White woman that highlights piety, purity, submission, and domesticity. Each of these controlling narratives seek to paint Black women as less than to take away her humanity, dignity, and womanhood. The impact of misrecognition often has led Black women to embrace the myth of the StrongBlackWoman which becomes another controlling narrative in it of itself.

As Black women continue to navigate their intersectional realities, they put on the armor of the SBW as well as implore other shifting techniques to mitigate the impact of the controlling narratives on their overall wellbeing. However, both the armor and various shifting techniques can have unintended consequences such as Black women losing their true identity as they wear the armor of the SBW. For Black women to remove the armor it is important for us to begin to an identity formation and self-recovery

² APA, “Health Disparities and Stress,” Fact Sheet, accessed February 28, 2019, <https://www.apa.org/topics/health-disparities/stress.pdf>.

process that will allow us to examine the impact of the controlling narratives on our identity.

Many Black women have embraced the SBW armor not realizing the ways it places them in a sunken place where they still are being controlled and defining their self in opposition to the gaze of Whiteness. Turman's womanist ethic of incarnation provides an example of how Black women activate agency, identity formation and self-recovery as they reach, stand, and sway that prioritizes what is happening in the body before beginning to examine what is happening to the body. This moves beyond the notion of double consciousness but seeks a holistic recovery of identity.

In addition to recovering metaphors that make God accessible to Black women it is important to have living metaphors as well. Douglas' understanding of the Black Christ allows us to see Christ within the face of Black women as they seek wholeness for the community. The Black Christ also helps us to shift the focus on seeing how Christ sustains life versus focusing primarily on the surrogacy and self-sacrifice aspect of atonement which has been used to oppress Black women.

A womanist methodology and theology provided resources to create and structure a self-recovery group. The New Narrative self-recovery groups drew on the work of bell hooks and Chanequa Walker-Barnes as they provided a framework and a posture of the co-journeyer during the identity and self-recovery process. Over a three-month period, I journeyed with five Black women as we began this process of forming a New Narrative.

Areas of Improvement

In looking at the initial project, I see the limitations in the project and areas for improvement. While eight weeks seemed like a good amount of time for busy women, it was not enough. After completing the group I realize that the concepts raised needed not only additional time to process, but time for members to reflect more deeply on what we discussed. I believe the groups should be done over a nine-to-twelve-month period. Additionally, I would like to see the New Narrative self-recovery group and curriculum to be used in a variety of settings such as the local church, non-profit, and university.

Since the group did not include a diversity of women from different SES, it would be ideal to think of alternative locations to run the group. Two options could be beneficial moving forward: local churches and local non-profits that work with women. A few organizations in my area that I will look to partner with in the future are Union Rescue Mission's Hope Gardens, Downtown's Women Center, Homegirl Cafe, Door of Hope, or Elizabeth House. Each of these organizations work with Black women who have experienced chronic homelessness, abuse, incarceration, pregnancy while homeless, or involvement in gang activity. Additionally, it will be important to include low-cost childcare in doing the groups in the future. While this was not a concern for the mother in the group, it is important to make sure barriers to participation are taken into consideration.

Another area of improvement would be to incorporate coaching throughout the group. While I believe the groups were helpful in creating a sisterhood, any recovery involves a sponsor of sort. The group then becomes a place of support to process and

work through the recovery steps, receive affirmation in one's progression, and also to have a safe place to share about the impact of race, class, and gender on their well-being. The group provided this sacred place for the members; however, there needed to be more time allotted to dive deeper into the individual needs.

Coaching “involves listening to others, asking questions to deepen thinking, allowing others to find their own solutions, and doing it all in a way that makes people feel empowered and responsible enough to take action.”³ This can be a useful tool in the recovery process. Coaching also is “facilitating discovery rather than delivering content.”⁴ In a similar way that Walker-Barnes advocates for a co-journeyer, a coach does not set the agenda but rather walks with the coachee on their road to discovery. As a personal development life coach and pastor I often make sure to create space for the Holy Spirit to participate in the dance of formation that is taking place within the individual. As appropriate and with the person's permission this can also be a space for inner healing prayer as well.

A coaching session can also be helpful in working with individuals in the self-recovery process. It should be noted that coaching or pastoral counseling cannot take the place of mental health, and as such, the coach must know their limitations and create a network of mental health professionals whom they may encourage their coachee to see.⁵

³ Keith Web, *The Coach Model: For Christian Leaders: For Christian Leaders* (Bellevue, WA: Active Results LLC., 2012), 19.

⁴ Terry Walling, *IDEA Coaching Pathway* (La Jolla, CA: Leader Breakthru, 2015), 67.

⁵ If you do not have a network of mental health professionals this national directory of therapists who seek to work with Black women may be helpful, <https://www.therapyforBlackgirls.com/therapist-directory/>.

At the same time coaching has been beneficial to help individuals begin to work through a particular problem they are experiencing. This gives space for a coach or pastoral care leader to journey with Black Women as issues arise in a group setting that may require additional time for reflection, introspection, and discernment in similar ways as a sponsor would in the recovery community.

One of the other aspects that I believe is necessary is teaching more about the pain and peace cycle as it relates to their ongoing recovery process. Sessions will be added to expand on this in the self-recovery groups using a portion of the RelateStrong curriculum. I also do not believe I spent enough time discussing the 12 steps to the point that it was something they could be used as a tool to help in the recovery process. In the future this will be introduced earlier in the process and revisited throughout the sessions so we can see what it may mean to work through the steps throughout the nine-to-twelve months. Additionally, I will introduce the self-care toolkits earlier on so that we can continue to revisit and work on it throughout our time together.⁶

Expanded Topics and Timeframe

Moving forward I see the need for longer group time. These groups would have a cap of eight individuals. The group commitment time would be over a nine-to-twelve-month period. These will be divided in 3-4 quarters that will have 11-week sessions with a 2-week break at the end of each quarter. The first and last session of each 11-week

⁶ University of Buffalo, School of Social Work, “Developing Your Self Care Plan,” accessed August 22, 2020, <http://socialwork.buffalo.edu/resources/self-care-starter-kit/developing-your-self-care-plan.html>.

quarter will include an element of table fellowship or fun activity. During the 2-week break there will be an opportunity for half a day or a full day retreat of silence.

After the last quarter the group would end with a 3-day retreat. Lastly, the narrative identity prompt will be revisited at the end of each 11-week session and updated in this process. By having the groups spread out over nine-to-twelve months it will also allow for deeper space for reflection and engagement on the topics raised. Based on reflection and the feedback received, the curriculum will be redeveloped into six topics discussed over the 3-4 quarters.

Seeing Ourselves and God

The first topic would center around the Lives of Black Women in America and LA. Initially prior to beginning the groups, I completed a social historical analysis looking at race, class and gender. However, after the groups I realized that there were areas that were not covered. I expanded the focus to include a social-historical analysis that allowed me to examine the lives of Black women in LA using an intersectional lens. When these groups are done again, I will make sure I incorporate untold stories of Black women to help Black women see how they are connected to a larger tapestry of women.

Although we talked about the controlling narrative of the StrongBlackWoman at length, the groups did not discuss the other controlling narrative of jezebel, mammy/matriarch, and sapphire. My additional study after the groups helped me to understand the concept of misrecognition more clearly as I began to engage with Patricia Hill-Collins and Melissa Harris-Perry's work. While the initial groups focused on the

armor of the SBW, it did not create space to deal with the controlling narratives that lead to wearing the armor.

This was an oversight in the initial group as my focus was primarily on removing the armor of the SBW. However, by not addressing why Black women wear the armor it could create a disconnect. In further iterations of the group we will then examine the impact of controlling narratives on the identity of Black women and how have coped including by wearing the StrongBlackWoman armor and Shifting. Throughout these sessions we would have additional time to share and process the different types of trauma we have encountered in our lives. The 12-step process will be introduced during time so that it can become incorporated throughout the remainder sessions.

After the study on Hagar and Hannah, I realized we needed additional ways to not just see how God sees us but new ways of understanding how we can see God. The second topic will be spent focus on Rediscovering God. This section will spend more time rediscovering the Black Christ and the implication of the Black Christ in our lives and understanding a womanist incarnation ethic. As we address this topic it will also be critical to discuss importance of identifying with Christ in life. This will require dealing with aspects of the atonement that focus on surrogacy and move to the power of Jesus' redemptive work that took place in his life, not death. This will create space to discuss the ways Black women have been regulated to backbone ministry in the church and address the concept of self-sacrifice. It will also be critical to look at how women are often made invisible in Scripture and rediscover these women named and unnamed.

During the initial New Narrative project, we did not discuss these theological concepts in depth but they were raised as we studied both Hagar and Hannah. This led me to spend additional time studying a womanist methodology and theology to ground my theology of personhood, Trinity, and incarnation. Although these aspects are included in Chapter 3 of this project in greater depth they were incorporating after the completion of the group. Additionally, I will make sure I continue to utilize metaphors about God that affirm the identity of Black Women not just in scriptural study but also in prayers and how we talk about and refer to God.

Navigating the Times

Topic 3 will focus on the Already but Not Yet. This section will spend time dealing with theodicy and the Kingdom of God. It will focus on the tensions of living in a world that is still free to commit unnecessary violence against humanity and creation. It will draw on both womanist themes to help women see what it means to access agency in a world that often takes it away. In looking at the life of Jesus there will be a focus on discovering his new visionary ministry and its implication in our current lives.

Topic 4 will turn to Self and Soul Care. This will also be a place another space of embedded 1-on-1 coaching sessions with group participants, to help them continue to unpack the pain that exists and hinders them from forming a new narrative. Additionally, this will create more space for learning and understanding the Pain and Peace Cycle as a tool within our recovery process. For those interested, they will be encouraged to attend inner healing prayer sessions. This will be a time focused more deeply on the aspects of a

self-care plan, introduced earlier. Attention will also be given to practical ways of caring for one's soul by incorporating a variety of spiritual disciplines.

The BREATHE Model

The process of becoming is a lifelong process that will have ups and downs. This process is one that requires time, energy, and effort. As such it will be important to have tools to support Black Woman on their lifelong journey once the group ends. In noticing the need for more concrete tools for women after the groups end, I turned to the Black Women's Health Initiative (BWHI) which advocates for Black women to learn to BREATHE as an effective life-long sustained way of thriving. During the topics of Soul and Self Care, I will also introduce the concept of the BREATHE method as a helpful way for sustaining the work begun in recovery groups. The BREATHE model consists of seven aspects that have been found to be beneficial to the overall well-being of Black women based on the research conducted in the Black Women's Health Study. The first three strategies focus more on internal and personal aspects while the last four shifts towards strategies that require others.

The first strategy is Balance which requires that Black women begin to learn the value and importance of purposeful engagement. This requires prioritizing their well-being in order to move towards a "psychological homeostasis to increase possibilities for social equilibrium, where all facets of the self are honored without increasing stress."⁷

⁷ Stephanie Y. Evans, Kanika Bell, and Nsenga K. Burton, "Learning to BREATHE: Towards a Balanced Model of Black Women's Wellness," *Black Women's Mental Health: Balancing Strength and Vulnerability* (New York: State University, 2017), 4.

This takes work and time and the ability to divest oneself of the SBW armor that would compel Black women toward excessive care of others at the cost of themselves.

The second strategy is Reflection. It is important to dedicate intentional time to contemplate what is happening in our lives as well as to examine the how we are processing and feeling about our daily and weekly reality.⁸ Incorporating meditation, mindfulness, or other similar practices can be a helpful tool in creating the space needed for reflection. Energy, the next strategy focuses on setting intentional, reinvigorating, and realistic goals. This allows Black women to direct their Energy towards activities that are life-giving. These should be both short- and long-term goals, to allow for wins in their daily life.⁹ When Black women win in big and small ways, they must also learn how to pause to celebrate these successes.¹⁰

The last four strategies proposed are: Associations, Transparency, Healing, and Empowerment. While they focus on the individual well-being, they also require a great deal of interdependence. BWHI sees the importance of Black women maintaining healthy associations through social networks that both promote and affirm wellness.¹¹ Transparency, can take place in the context of healthy associations. It requires intentionally resisting the urge to remain silent, especially about painful experiences.¹²

⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 6.

By creating sacred spaces where Black women can be transparent, Black women can begin the next strategy of Healing. Healing is an ongoing process of recovery and nurturing of one's well-being.¹³ Healing is not limited to physical health but should include our mental, spiritual, social, emotional, and relational as well. Lastly, Empowerment is a reminder that Black women still have agency over their own lives and wellness.¹⁴

Forming a New Narrative

The fifth topic would be focused on Forming a New Narrative, and will spend time looking at the narratives of others. This will be a time spent in Scripture looking at a variety of stories of women who encountered God. This will include but may not be limited to: Hagar, Esther, Hannah, Mary Mother of Jesus, Elizabeth, Mary and her sister Martha, the women in Jesus' ministry, and the prophet Deborah. In addition to looking at the narratives and stories of women in Scripture, we will spend time looking at Black women past and present, particularly those within LA. We will also compare and contrast Michelle Obama and Beyoncé to discuss the various ways each of these women publicly showed their ongoing self-recovery process in two different and unique ways. As well there will be an examination of the use of various literary books to help discuss Black women's experience.

The last topic will focus on Storytelling and Affirmation. Using the post-it-note timeline exercise we will begin to process how and where we have seen God over the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

course of our lives. We will look at themes and process queues that are helpful in our formation.¹⁵ This section will end with giving space for women to share their timelines, their stories, and to receive affirmation and prayer from women within the group.

The recovery group will end with the self and soul care 3-day retreat. The retreat will be a space for us to integrate the various teachings and activities we went through over the course of the year. This would include times of learning how to cook and shop healthy through a food demonstration. Since we are embodied beings, we will have time and space for Yoga, Zumba, and dance. The retreat will also create space for solitude and rest with a half-day retreat of silence. Additionally, we will look to incorporate a space for art. The retreat will take place at a retreat house located near the San Gabriel Mountains. This gives space and time for women to connect to nature in a variety of ways. Additionally, there will be time to laugh, eat, dance, and pray together. The retreat will end with a time of testimony sharing, prayer, and table fellowship.

¹⁵ This was draw from Bobby Clinton's work on Lifelong Leadership Development

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND REFLECTION

When the Israelites left Egypt, they grumbled and complained saying it would have been better to die in Egypt for at least they had food.¹ As the Israelites left their place of captivity their bodies were free but their minds and souls were still captive. When we have lived captive it makes it difficult to imagine a new way of being and doing. In many ways, Whiteness has captivated our imagination making it difficult to dream and envision a new way of being. Literature has been one way to highlight the experience of Black women but also to imagine a new reality. The identity formation and self-recovery process can be seen in the lives of Black women on the literary pages throughout history. Taping into these narratives allows us to begin to recover imagination of what can be.

They Reached, Stood, and Swayed

In book two of the Legacy of Orïsha trilogy *Children of Virtue and Vengeance*, Zelié Adebola must learn how to embrace the ashe (*is-ness*) inside of her. To do so requires that she learn to see herself and love all of who she is. She must learn the lesson that she cannot always use her magic to save others because in doing so could cost her life. In wrestling with this reality, she needed to face her own pain that she put away in order to fight a war with and for her people. Zelié had repressed the hurt for all she had lost and closed herself off to community and others in fear of being hurt further. It was not until she learned to stop shrinking, deal with her pain, dwell in community with that

¹ See Exodus 16 and Numbers 11.

she began to fully comprehend the fullness of her magic and that she was set free. It is only then that she can wield her magic to empower others do so as well. Zelié reached, stood, and swayed.

We cannot stand taller nor shine brighter if we have tilted and distorted ourselves in such a way that we are unrecognizable to ourselves. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* we are invited into the rememory of a Black woman whose body is broken and holy. Baby Suggs, the unchurch preacher, in *Beloved*, shows us how she prioritizes her health, reflects the face of Christ, loves herself and others, and moves her community towards wholeness. Her body represents a site where the divine communions. Baby Suggs in her sermon is able to draw on the slave tradition and highlight the truth about God. Suggs acknowledges the *is-ness* in herself and her community and guides those who gather toward an embodiment of wholeness.

This centering of the Black woman experience by Morrison also allows us to see the way Suggs is prioritizing her health. In the novel Baby Suggs sat, situated herself and prayed even as her community gathered in the clearing. The idea that she situates herself shows that her focus was first and foremost on her own wellbeing. Even though others gathered it was not until she was done and had spent time communing with God for herself that she turns to the community. In the sermon that unfolds in the clearing it is evident that Suggs understand what happens both in/to her body and love herself regardless as she preaches

In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not

love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you! And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don't love your mouth. You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize." Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh.²

After concluding her sermon, she then joined in with her fully embodied twisted hip, that represents the many ways her body had been subjected to oppress. Yet she reached, stood, and swayed.

Personal Reflection

As a Black, Christian woman in America living and leading in a White male dominated patriarchal, capitalistic, misogynoir society, I find myself living on the margins. What I did not realize was I was also living as a shadow of myself. Like Phiona in the *Queen of Katwa* I found myself living as ghost in between the world I was born into and the other America I could not fully be a part of because of my race, class, and gender. While aware of the systemic realities that have shaped my worldview, I did not

² Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987, 2004 reprint), 103-104.

fully realize the implications this had on my emotional, spiritual, physical, social, and mental well-being.

Situational depression was what my White female counselor concluded I was dealing with after listening to my tearful session. She went on to add that with behavioral changes and other lifestyle changes the depression would subside. In hopes of encouraging me she pointed out the incredible strength and resilience I had, both good coping skills enabling me to survive and function. I recall leaving the session feeling anything but triumph. For surviving by definition is existing in spite of or in the midst of difficulty. I began adjusting my situation, focusing on what I could control, yet my depression did not subside.

In the midst of my breakdown, as Walker-Barnes would call it, when I got at the end of myself and had no intentions of returning, I discovered *Too Heavy a Yoke*. Nearly four years later I have been on the identity formation and self-recovery process, seeking to understand my narrative. Recently, I woke up able to describe who I am using vibrant adjectives instead of roles to articulate who Tracey was. Additionally, what I have found is the importance of being able to love myself and see my belovedness not just as resistance but as an act out of radical self-love.

This has been a challenge as I have needed to make sure that I continue to prioritize naming myself not in opposition of the gaze of Whiteness but out of my belovedness. Additionally, like any addict I encounter triggers that make me want to retreat to the SBW armor at home, work, and just as live and breathe. I am learning there are ways I must wear the armor but must be careful to not allow it to become a part of my

identity to the point where it inhibits my authentic self. I am also making sure I name the systematic issues around me and not internalize them or condemn myself for not meeting unrealistic standards. I am learning how to open myself to receive love from those who have been trying desperately to love me. As I have learned to center my needs and love myself, I have discovered a love not tied to servitude. This has required helping those in my life to readjust their expectations of me as well. I have been excited to see the ways my letting go of control is freeing those in my life to find their own agency necessary to live and discover.

I have continued to work on learning to forgive past hurts and pains caused by others as well as learning to forgive myself and be gracious to Tracey. I am learning to dwell in sweet community even when I wanted to isolate. As I have begun redefining my relationships, expectations I place on myself, and what I will say no to so that I can say yes to me, I have found more joy and meaning. Yet this journey has not been without suffering as I have had to reestablish boundaries and confront unhealthy relationships and ways of being in every aspect of my life. This has meant acknowledging when I must shake the dust off and move on from places and spaces that do not value who I am. I am learning to ask for help and care for myself when I need it, even when it is not convenient for those in my life.

I have tried to garden to connect with nature and have begun bike riding. I have looked to my kids who still have a sense of wonder and together we are learning new things such as baking, making, and playing. I have reconnected to my love of dancing late into the night. With the aid of spiritual direction and on-going study I have learned

the ways in which I need to continue reconciliation to my own body. This is moving beyond body politics but embracing a radical self-love of all of the ways I show up in the world. I am learning to listen to my body, and not push myself beyond my physical limitations. I have given up on the idea of a balanced life and instead am seeking to live into the rhythms of the ebbs and flows of life. The ups and downs, the good and bad, the pain and peace that each day brings as I learn the sacred dance of suffering and joy.

At the same time, I am still a Black woman in America living and leading in a White male dominated patriarchal, capitalistic, misogynoir society, living on the margins of society. Trump is still President. People close to me demand unconsciously that I live into controlling narratives. I see daily the way advanced capitalism oppress my brothers and sisters. People still ask of me to be the StrongBlackWoman and fulfill the role they have envisioned for my life even to the point of taking on multiple job responsibilities without compensatory pay. There is unnecessary violence against Black bodies and Black people continue to disappear into the criminal justice system and into the homelessness population. Toxic hegemonic masculinity continues to exist all around me. Since beginning this project I have watched both men and women in my family be impacted significantly by all of the above listed factors.

All of this serves as reminder that I must continue to reach, stand, and sway. I do not believe I have arrived but am no longer living as a shadow of myself. And like any addict must daily confess that I am in recovery and keep working the steps. The work of identity formation and self-recovery is not an easy or quick one.

What I have learned during this project and study is that Black women must stop trying to put on the oxygen mask of others, and remember we also need the breath of God to breathe. When we begin to truly see ourselves, we will see that back-breaking-self-sacrificing-labor is not the work to which we have been called to. When we begin to live fully into the is-ness and our belovedness no longer bound by the armor of the SBW or loss ourselves to shifting we can then begin to thrive.

The Church has a role to play in the healing and restoration of Black women, but it means that it must be educated on the reality of what it means to be a Black woman in America. It means the Church and pastoral care givers will need to be able to see with new eyes as Hagar saw to see the truth of the brokenness and pain that exists in our lives. Black women have sustained and nurtured the Black Church and the Black community at the cost of our own lives and livelihoods. It is time for the Church to be a transcendent community for our healing, which means it must begin to acknowledge the ways it has contributed to the state of Black women today, before it can be a trustworthy, loving community able to provide sanctuary, healing, and restoration. It is my hope that as Black women continue to discover their is-ness they will experience lives of flourishing in the midst of a world in between.

A few years ago, my daughter shared with me how she stopped trying to reach a goal because a friend did not want her to beat her. To do so would require her to stop doing the one thing she loved the most, reading and sacrifice for others. We talked about how good friends spur us on and not tell us to stop. I asked how her other friends felt about her class record, and she told me they were amazed and happy for her. In that

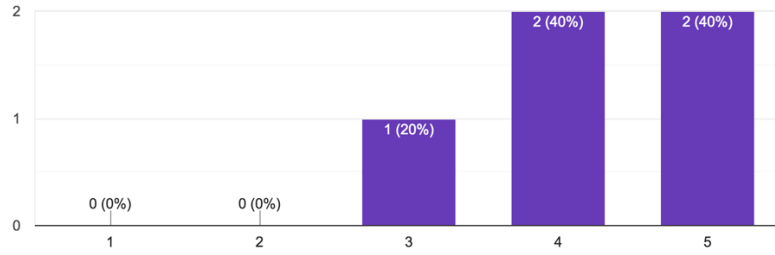
moment I could not help but wonder if my eleven-year-old daughter and her non-Black friend had internalized the narrative that my daughter was not supposed to win, but rather needed to serve the needs of others.

In that moment I realized how my daughter was learning to live in the shadows as she began to embrace a controlling narrative that was not meant for her to possess. As I have gone through my own process, I have learned to take my “sweet pea” with me in whatever age appropriate ways I can. As I come to the end of this chapter in my doctoral project and season of life I recall her words to me in the early hours of the morning as I set off to finish this work: “Mommy, I believe in you.” Her words help me remain hopeful, that as Black Women gather together in community, begin to practice radical truth telling, rediscover the decolonized God of our ancestors, and draw from the wisdom and insight of others that we will rediscover the little girl who lives within them and spur one another on as we believe in each other.

APPENDIX

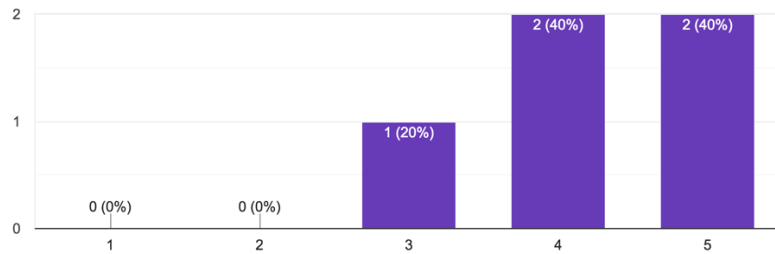
1. How helpful were the scripture studies in helping you to reshape how you see yourself?

5 responses



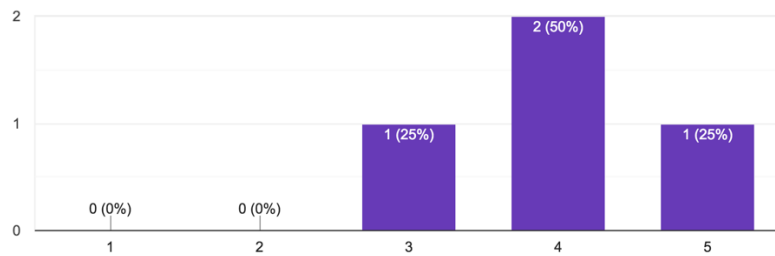
2. How helpful were the scripture studies in helping you to reshape how God sees you?

5 responses



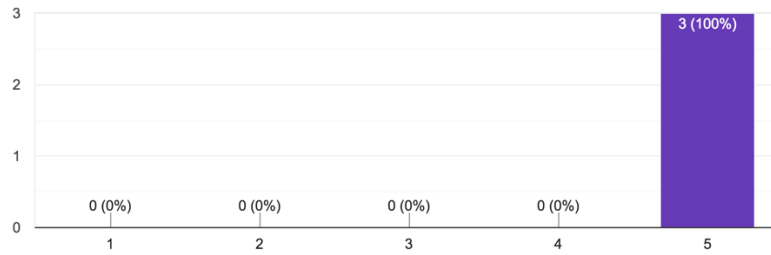
3. How helpful was it to share your story in affirming who God's says that you are?

4 responses



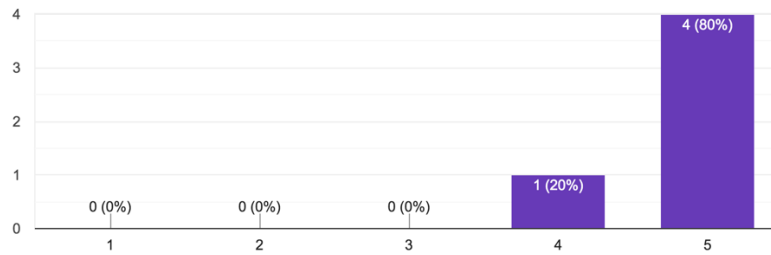
4. How helpful was the overall New Narrative small grouping in positively influencing your understanding of your own story/identity?

3 responses



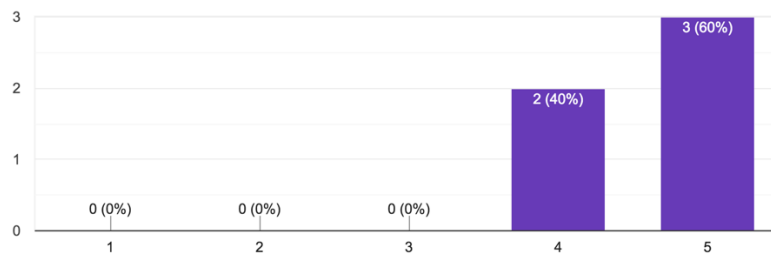
5. How helpful were the group discussions in helping you to process your experiences with race, class, and gender?

5 responses



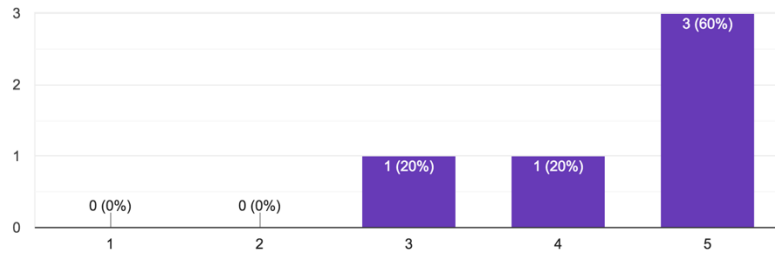
6. How has this group helped you to look at the various levels of trauma you've experienced in your life?

5 responses



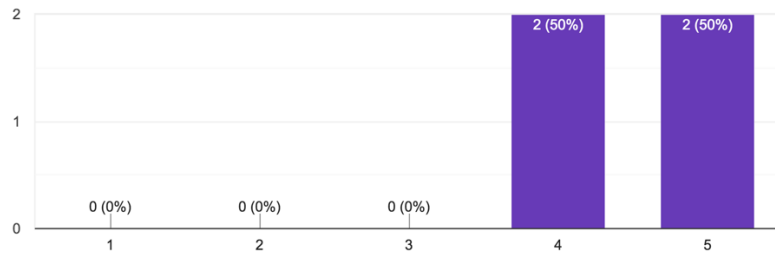
7. How helpful were the mindfulness/centering exercises in helping you to become aware of yourself?

5 responses



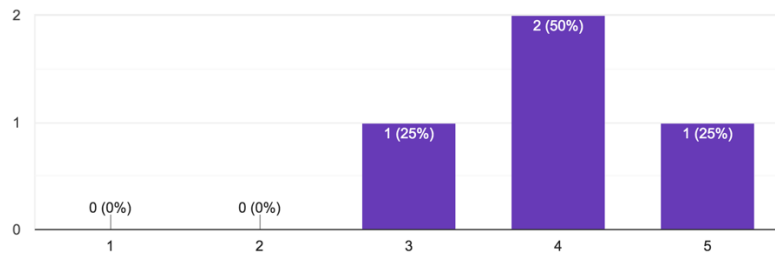
8. How helpful was it to receive the affirmation and prayer after you shared your story?

4 responses



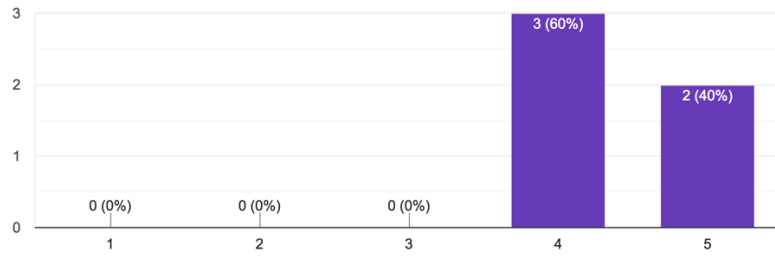
9. How helpful was beginning to walk through the 12 steps of a strongblackwoman?

4 responses



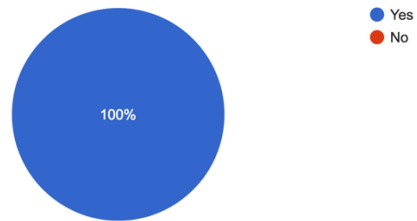
10. How has this group helped you to begin to deal with the different levels of stress in your life?

5 responses



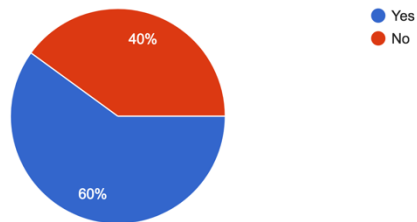
Do you have a basic understanding of how you could potentially create a self-care plan?

5 responses



Have you created a self-care plan

5 responses

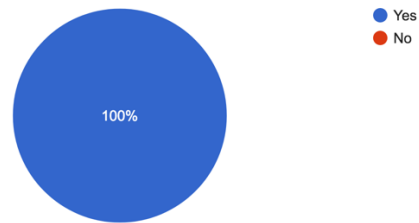


Short Answer Questions

1. What areas/topic was most helpful for you during this time?
 - a. Identifying stresses in my life
 - b. Scripture study and discussion afterwards, creating a self-care plan, plenty time allotted to let us express ourselves without judgement, and fixing.
 - c. Talking about relationships and assumed roles post it note exercise talking about how Black women are perceived and what we have to overcome
 - d. Talking through the scriptures and focusing on a particular woman in the Bible
2. What area/topic was least helpful?
 - a. 12- steps
3. What areas/topics would you wish we could have spent more time with?
 - a. Dealing with trauma
 - b. Scripture study
 - c. Unique challenge Black women face in American society and how to overcome
 - d. More practical application of what we discussed

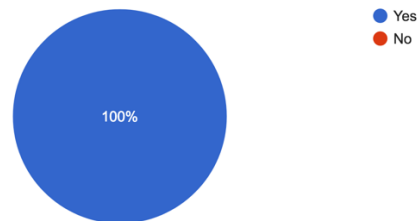
4. Would you recommend this group to others in the future?

4 responses



6. Would you be interested in participating in further groups that continue along the self-recovery path for black women?

5 responses



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