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Mutual Vulnerability and Intergenerational Healing: Black Women HBCU Students

Writing Memoir

A DISSERTATION

Submitted by

ZELDA LOCKHART

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

LESLEY UNIVERSITY  
May, 2018



Lesley University  
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences  
Ph.D. in Expressive Therapies Program

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**Approvals**

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I hereby accept the recommendation of the Dissertation Committee and its Chairperson.

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\_\_\_\_\_

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This dissertation is dedicated to Black women. I do not approach this with a need to prove or disprove or pontificate about my beliefs about Black women, but to let them speak, as I have so often wished to speak and to have what I know be respected only to find that other peoples' assumptions of me stand as the knowledge base of my experiences above my own voice. I wish through this process to listen to them, and learn about myself through who they tell me we are as Black women. My wish is to respect these women's voices, and like putting a weight on a scale that needs balance, to privilege their voices as an authority on humanity above any other.

I am grateful to my daughter Alex and my son Travis who grew up traversing the beautifully scenic and rocky terrain of my career as an artist and a teacher, this dissertation was but another destination with varied stops along the way. I am also grateful to my community of friends who endured long walks where the theme was research puzzle solving, my cohort who helped provided creative community, and my professors at Lesley University who provided the building blocks for this study. I greatly appreciate the pointed guidance and resources of this study's peer reviewer, Dr. Tamara Butler, the work ethic, wisdom, and intelligence of my committee chair Dr. Robyn Flaum Cruz, the steady patience and guidance of my external committee member, Dr. Maya Corneille, and the belief in and encouragement of Black Girl Magic provided consistently by my internal committee member Dr. Sidney Trantham. Most of all, I am grateful to my students, whose courage runs deep and wide.

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study sought to gain insight into the unique experiences of Black women students who were writing memoir toward the goal of self-definition in a Black feminist learning environment at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU). Two teaching methods included personal plot (an extension of expressive writing that offers writing prompts for emotional closure), and biblio-fusion (a combination of expressive writing and bibliotherapy) (Lockhart, 2017a; 2017b). Interviews were conducted with six Black women participants and triangulated against their personal essays and online journal responses. Personal plot, a form of narrative analysis was used to construct paragraphs on what each personal essay was about, and a data driven analysis of narrative was conducted on the online journals and interview transcripts. Findings revealed that participants faced obstacles of *racism*, and *sexism* and internalized these oppressions through *conforming to stereotypes of Blackness, colorism, sexualization of Black women, and assimilation*. To counter these obstacles, participants utilized *survival and success strategies*. Notable among these strategies was *mutual vulnerability* with their classmates and their teacher as the catalyst for transcending fears and stereotypes of Blackness. Also notable was *healing transformation* and *intergenerational healing* where participants wrote and spoke of re-gifting their new awareness to the next generation. These results bear implications for expressive writing and other expressive therapies, and prompt further inquiry into teaching and research methods that emphasize Black women's ways of learning and healing.

*Keywords:* Black feminist theory, Black feminist pedagogy, womanism, othermothering, expressive writing, bibliotherapy, expressive therapy, personal plot, biblio-fusion, HBCU.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were established after American slavery as an initiative of Reconstruction. Among the early HBCUs were Howard University (established in 1867), and what is now known as Hampton University (established in 1868) (Wiggan, & Scott, 2015). These institutions were designed to educate the Black population previously prohibited from seeking education (Cantey, Bland, Mack, & Joy-Davis, 2013). Early HBCUs were founded by White missionaries and headed by White presidents and therefore the missions of HBCUs conformed to Christian European standards of higher education (Wiggan, & Scott, 2015). Coinciding with Black insurgencies after World War I and continuing through the Black power movement of the 1960s, HBCUs shifted their missions to offer a culturally enriching environment, a place for Black students to flourish separate from the ideals of a White dominant society (Cantey, Bland, Mack, & Joy-Davis, 2013). Currently, HBCUs are considered to offer Black students an environment in which to self-define and identify with ways of knowing, specific to their unique social, cultural, and political perspectives (Wiggan, & Scott, 2015). In this study, Black is defined as persons descended from Africa.

Black feminist theorist Patricia H. Collins (2000) concurred that intentional communities, including the educational environments of HBCUs, offer a safe place for discourse around self-definition and personal transformation. Collins also acknowledged that these spaces may stifle Black women's voices as they are often places where forms of internalized racism examined by Pyke (2010) as colorism, sexism, classism, and

homophobia have subsisted despite attempts at nullifying oppression in these institutions. This, suggests that Black women students in HBCU environments require tools for self-definition that honor their ways of loving, knowing and socially engaging. Expressive writing, bibliotherapy, and the amalgam of the two, *biblio-fusion* are therapeutic tools that offer this guidance for self-reflection (Lockhart, 2017a).

In fact, studies have shown that writing to express difficult experiences has the potential to be cathartic for college students (Barclay & Skarlicki, 2009; Lumley & Provenzano, 2003), and has the potential to mitigate trauma resulting from recent or previous traumatic events (Meshberg-Cohen, Svikis, & McMahon, 2014; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Sanousi, 2004). Upon closer investigation of expressive writing methods, cathartic writing has been shown to have short-term negative effects on well-being before resulting in long-term benefits (Barclay & Skarlicki, 2009; Meshberg-Cohen, Svikis & McMahon, 2014). These results, call for research that extends expressive writing methods to include methods that offer emotional closure for difficult or traumatic life experiences.

One technique designed to help individuals create emotional closure through an artistic process is *personal plot* (Lockhart, 2017a). This writing method is similar to emotionally cathartic expressive writing (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), a therapeutic writing method which involves writing about difficult or traumatic life events in order to decrease their negative psychological impact. Personal plot goes beyond the expression of the difficult or traumatic event to include writing prompts that spur revelation about the impact of those life events and emotional closure as literary outcome.

Regarding tools for self-reflection, studies have also shown that reading literary works toward healing and self-exploration known as bibliotherapy has the potential to increase well-being for college students (Wang, Lin, Kuo, & Hong, 2013). Few studies to date combine expressive writing methods and bibliotherapy as biblio-fusion, though studies point to the potential benefits of combining both modalities towards well-being (Manier & Esbitt, 2009; Sanousi, 2004).

Rooted in African customs of the oral tradition, the exchange of stories created and listened to offer a call and response that the combination of expressive writing and bibliotherapy as biblio-fusion mirrors. Biblio-fusion (expressing stories using personal plot as the call and reading or listening to stories that contain personal plot as the response) may act as a culturally practical vehicle for exploring Black feminist pedagogical theories. This call and response nature of creating from a Black feminist framework and reading literature influenced by a Black feminist framework is not new, but because it is considered to be ingrained and rote in the practices of many Black women educators, it is taken for granted and under examined for its transformative components (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). Therefore, the present qualitative phenomenological study is designed to gain insight into the unique experiences of Black women students who are writing and reading creative non-fiction toward the goal of self-definition in a Black feminist learning environment at an HBCU.

Participants in this study engaged in a 16-week coeducational creative writing non-fiction course at an HBCU. The coeducational classroom acted as a microcosmic environment of the larger HBCU campus environment. Participants wrote personal

essays utilizing personal plot, and engaged in biblio-fusion by sharing these written essays with their peers, and reading personal essays by established authors.

Participants also engaged in a series of online journal responses in the form of a discussion board where they responded to the published writings and offered responses to their peers on connections to and experience with these works. Personal essays and online journal responses were triangulated against the analysis of the interview transcripts to better understand participants' experience of writing creative non-fiction in a coeducational Black feminist learning environment at an HBCU.

The outcomes of this study may inform and expand upon current themes of Black feminist pedagogical theory particularly around Black women's ways of self-defining and expressing in the HBCU setting. Outcomes may also expand upon theories relevant to the scant research on effective methods of applying Black feminist theory in the classroom. Therefore, outcomes of the study also intersect with expressive arts therapies, and inform current literature around Black women students who use expressive writing and bibliotherapy toward self-guided methods of healing and transforming. Thus, the outcomes of this study may also be relevant to student and academic services on college campuses.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

#### **Black Feminist Pedagogical Theory**

The present study was grounded in Black feminist pedagogical theory, which has its foundations in Black feminist theory and encourages group interaction, community building, respect, self-reflection, and emphasizes Black women's ways of knowing, teaching, and learning (Collins, 2000; Jackson-Lowman, 2014; Jacobs, 2013; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). The Black feminist movement of the 1970s was birthed out of a need for Black feminist to distinguish their social and political issues from the Black power movement and the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

During the Black power movement, Black women were not acknowledged for their roles as political organizers. Issues of sexism and financial discrimination that affected them disproportionately were pushed to the background in order to prioritize the issue of racism. The feminist movement on the other hand acknowledged all women's position in society as bearing the burden of gender, political, and economic inequities, but did not acknowledge the specificity of Black women's intersecting social issues of race. Unified with their white sisters in the feminist movement, Black feminists and Black lesbian feminists often endured racial discrimination, homophobia, and invisibility within their feminist alliance.

In 1973, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) was formed by a collective of Black women who gathered in New York to address the need to differentiate their struggles from those of the feminist movement. This initial effort to highlight the uniqueness of Black women's sociopolitical issues and the unique forms of activism

necessary to address those issues continued to gain momentum from NBFO members who branched off from the organization. In 1974 Black feminist organizers Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier met in Boston and spear headed the formation of The Combahee River Collective, named in honor of Harriet Tubman's victory with the Union Army at the Combahee River, which resulted in the freeing of 750 slaves.

The Combahee River Collective had as their intent, to provide space to discuss the issues of race, class, gender, sex and sexual orientation politics as compounding factors in the lives of Black women and women of color. The Collective and its members were responsible for a series of gatherings and political actions in cities across the North East and Mid-Atlantic United States, which empowered many Black women to take up forms of political and social action for the sake of their own liberation. The Collective disbanded in 1980. Among the legacies of The Collective are a series of Black women centered presses and publications by women of color and queer women scholars like Audre Lorde, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Gloria E. Anzaldúa.

Of particular importance is a statement created by The Combahee River Collective, which offers guidance on fulfilling the long-term desire to distinguish the uniqueness of Black women's sociopolitical issues and to acknowledge Black women's unique perspectives as valuable to the annihilation of oppression. Among these declarative statements are the following:

- Black women are inherently valuable
- Our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's
- The only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us



- The most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity
- The liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. (Eisenstein, 1978)

The Combahee River Collective statement is the foundational text that defines and establishes the intent of Black feminist theory as a social theory that seeks to acknowledge the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexual politics as factors in Black women's development. Black feminist theory also seeks to empower women through awareness of these factors toward self-definition, and self-liberation.

With these guiding principles in mind, scholars have identified themes of Black feminist theory in Black women's writings and archived experiences since the Transatlantic slave trade, which marks the beginning of Black women's struggle for liberation in the Americas and Europe. Among these themes Collins (2000) noted: family, dominant images, sexual politics, love relationships, motherhood, activism, self-definition, and double consciousness, which indicates a state of being where one or more of one's identities are internally conflicted, and further where this conflict is caused by pressure from outside forces (DuBois, 1903).

The educational environments of the classroom, the kitchen table, and the beauty shop have long been places where Black women and girls discuss these themes as everyday life struggles, because these spaces are for the most part safe from oppressive forces that might obstruct the transference of knowledge. In these spaces, Black women

and girls have the capacity to shift their self-awareness, awareness of their environment, and therefore their access to personal and financial empowerment and freedom.

The transference of Black women's survival knowledge in the classroom has a rich legacy, but the study of the richness of Black women's teaching as pedagogical method is limited. Black women educators like Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Septima Clark, Mary MacLeod Bethune, and Marva Collins instilled social consciousness, community, and pride in their students. Their practices of teaching are only recently being examined. Johnson-Bailey and Alfred (2006), for instance reflected on the legacy of these educators and call upon the need for Black women teachers to lean on their communal upbringing to inform their teaching spaces and practices, but also spoke to the taken-for-granted components of Black women's ways of teaching that with further consideration may expand upon Black feminist pedagogical theory.

In order to understand the extent to which Black women educators' philosophies and political stances on race, class, and gender impact their teaching, Dixon (2003) conducted interviews and classroom observations with two Black women elementary school teachers in the Midwest. The interviews were semi-structured, conducted over eight months and triangulated against interviews with parents and colleagues. Dixon used an emergent analysis approach grounded in Black feminist theory and the following five themes arose: Teaching as a Lifestyle and a Public Service, Discipline as Expectation for Excellence, Teaching as Othermothering, Relationship Building, Race, Class, and Gender Awareness.

These themes are consistent with the dominant themes of Black feminist pedagogical theory and suggest that at the elementary school level, Black women

teachers engage in practices specific to Black women's ways of gaining and imparting knowledge. It should be noted that one classroom was 1<sup>st</sup> grade with a children-of-color population of 23.5%, and one classroom was 3<sup>rd</sup> grade with a children-of-color population of 39.1%, and the specific percentage of Black children being taught within each classroom was not specified.

Othermothers as defined by Collins (2000) are "women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" (p. 178). The theme of othermothering in teaching is reflected in the research of Beauboeuf (1997), Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002), Case (1997), and Collins (2000), and merges themes of motherhood, community building, and activism as integrated in the Black feminist classroom. As a construct of othermothering, for instance Beauboeuf (1997) considers Black teachers' interpersonal and political engagement with their students as acts that build community around their parallel development with their students.

Case (1997) echoes this sentiment, by concluding that Black women teachers who act as othermothers offer Black children skills on how to survive the severe political circumstances they were born into, and models for them ways to extend mothering to their communities. Community as regarded by Collins (2010) and Edwards (2000), is so central to disenfranchised groups, such as Black women, that it has been overlooked as a political force, because of the diminished political power of those who find it central to their development. Collins further emphasized that, "the construct of community may lie at the heart of politics itself" (p. 10).

Toward this need for teaching and research models specific to Black females and understanding Black females' experiences in the classroom, Henry (1998) conducted an

ethnographic study and analyzed video recorded classroom observations, journal writings, photography, and questionnaires from three 11-year-old Black females enrolled in an independent Black nationalist school in Illinois. The researcher's field notes were also analyzed. After comparative and data driven analyses of the various data collected, Henry found that within the coeducational Black classroom, the girls were passive and less likely to give voice to their thoughts, but outside of the classroom environment were "womanish", a term coined by Walker (1983) to describe with affirmation young Black females who are boldly expressive, self-possessed, and willful.

Henry's (1998) study is useful in considering the specific needs of Black females in educational environments designed for the safe exploration and expression of Black culture, social norms, social expectations, and political thought. This study though foundational, does not offer information that can be fully applicable to Black women students, whose social development and social awareness goes far beyond that of Black girls.

To that end, Lane (2017) who leaned on the earlier writings of Henry (1998), and Mogadime (2000) conducted an auto-ethnographic study aimed at understanding the impact of Black feminist pedagogical approaches on Black young women students' identity development. The researcher reviewed two years of qualitative data gathered from students involved in a youth empowerment program designed by the researcher. The 27 participants were 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade girls in high school and considered to be under-achieving. Participants were observed through 35 hours of video footage where they engaged in dialogue about social and other critical issues that impacted their identities. Sessions took place during their lunchtime.

After a critical discourse and grounded theory analysis of video footage, field notes, curriculum materials, student artifacts, and short interviews with seven participants, Lane (2017) found that participants experienced “a more empowered sense of self” as they were given the power, freedom, and authority to express about and read about issues relevant to their identities. Lane also found that the participants experienced “a more positive orientation towards school,” largely due to the collective community environment of the group. Lane stated that the supportive group environment countered the competitive educational norms participants experienced in the educational environment outside of the group.

Lane’s (2017) findings suggest that Black women students’ identity development benefits from the community building and self-reflection inherent in Black feminist pedagogical environments, but also suggests that this sense of self-empowerment transfers to environments beyond the safe space of the Black feminist classroom. Though Lane’s research was conducted with high school young women students, this research offers insight into the experience of Black women students during the few years before they enter the college environment and is thus valuable as a foundation for further research on Black women students in college.

As Lane (2017) noted, “Black feminist perspective on contemporary schooling inequities magnifies the visibility of systematic educational injustices imposed on African American female students, it also assists in developing practicable and effective methods toward creating liberatory learning environments for these youth” (p. 15).

Though Black feminist pedagogical theory offers the scaffolding for current studies that honor the perspective of Black females, the need for more studies that

illuminate the specific elements of Black women educators' ways of teaching and Black women students' ways of learning voiced from their perspective are needed to advance Black feminist pedagogical theory and its methods of delivery. As Amoah (1997) made clear, "in constructing a theory which is to be applied to and understood by a particular part of society, the theory should be infused with that particular group's experiences" (p. 85). Considering this point, Jackson-Lowman (2014), and Ogbonnaya (1994) suggested models of Black women's identity development that are not derived from Western models but based on Black women's lived experiences and ancestral roots. Mogadime (2000) further suggested that Black women's ways of community mothering be incorporated into educational environments as a part of Black feminist pedagogical theory.

Among culturally sensitive methods for advancing Black feminist theory in educational spaces, Amoah (1997) promotes narrative methods as grounded in Black people's ancestral ways of caring for and educating in their communities. Johnson-Bailey (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006) supports this claim, and recalled learning about how to be safe as a Black youth in the segregated South from stories told by female relatives. Johnson-Bailey also recalled that her transformation as a Black feminist scholar was influenced by the slavery era and the Harlem Renaissance narratives. This call and response mechanism of taking in stories and imparting stories was found by Johnson-Bailey, Mogadime (2000), and others to be culturally embedded in the habits of Black women educators. Narrative call and response are also elements of biblio-fusion (expressing stories using personal plot as the call and reading or listening to stories that

contain personal plot as the response) and may serve well as a method for exploring and advancing themes of Black feminist pedagogical theory.

### **Expressive Writing**

The therapeutic benefits of expressive writing have been studied for more than a century (Breuer & Freud, 1895/1966) and utilized as adjunctive therapeutic interventions by psychotherapists since the 1920s (Ramírez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2006). Simply put, expressive writing is the process of using writing for one's physical or emotional well-being (L'Abate & Sweeney, 2011). Though studies to test the efficacy of expressive writing were yet to come, in the 1980s teachers and social workers initiated foundational inquiries into the potential therapeutic uses for poetry and fiction as expressive therapies for children (Gladding & Hanna, 1982; Mazza, Magaz, & Scaturro, 1987).

As a result of these earlier inquiries expressive writing was examined in several studies by Pennebaker (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986) modeled after Freud's (1904/1954) and Breuer's and Freud's (1895/1966) cathartic methods. Pennebaker's approach to expressive writing offered writing therapy in addition to talk therapy as the cathartic activity, and was studied for its potential impact on mental and physical health (Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Pennebaker & Francis, 1996).

So widespread were studies with Pennebaker as the primary researcher that expressive writing and the Pennebaker method were used interchangeably. Researchers in the medical field such as Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz, and Kaell (1999) used Pennebaker's method and conducted a randomized controlled trial with an outpatient sample of asthma and rheumatoid arthritis patients ( $N = 112$ ). The researchers found that 47.1% of the experimental group showed improvement in symptoms compared to 24.3% of patients in

the control group. Additionally, in a randomized controlled study, Low, Stanton, Bower and Gyllenhammer (2010) conducted expressive writing exercises with women ( $N = 62$ ) with Stage IV breast cancer. Results showed that participants writing about their emotions regarding their cancer had no impact on their diagnosis but did alleviate emotional symptoms.

Researchers in the psychiatric field also used Pennebaker's methods. For instance, King, Neilsen, and White (2013) conducted a phenomenological study with 11 male and female adults receiving services for mental illness in Australia who met with a professional writer in three, group sessions. The researchers found that participants were highly engaged because they were treated like writers as opposed to mental health patients, a finding that offers possibilities for expressive writing to extend beyond the clinical environment. Other studies offered a more expansive examination of the emotional impact of Pennebaker's method. For instance, Meshberg-Cohen, Svikis and McMahon (2014) conducted a randomized trial with women ( $N = 149$ ) who were majority African American (70%) in residential treatment for drug addiction to see if three to five 20-min sessions of expressive writing exercises reduced symptoms of trauma. The control group ( $n = 67$ ) was offered neutral topics while the expressive writing group ( $n = 82$ ) was prompted to write about stressful life experiences. Expressive writing participants showed negative responses immediately after each writing session. From baseline to the two-week follow-up, the experimental and control group were compared using three measures: Posttraumatic Stress Diagnostic Scale (PDS), the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), and the Pennebaker Inventory of Limbic Languidness (PILL). There was a significant interaction for condition and time on levels of trauma at 2-week



follow-up,  $F(1,149) = 5.8, p < .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ , which showed a significant decrease in trauma symptoms from baseline to two weeks in the expressive writing group. Researchers therefore concluded that expressive writing might decrease the intensity of emotional stress experienced by women recovering from drug addiction.

These same expressive writing methods transferred to studies of college-age students as was seen in a randomized controlled study conducted by Barclay and Skarlicki (2009), who used Pennebaker's methods with subjects ( $N = 100$ ) from a North American university who were majority women (75%) of an average age of 23 years and an average work history of 5 years. Racial demographics for the sample were not provided. The study sought to investigate the impact of expressive writing about emotions, thoughts, and unjust treatment in the workplace compared to a control group of participants who wrote about trivial topics. Participants rated their well-being on a 7-point Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree in response to statements like, "In most ways my life is close to my ideal." Results showed significantly higher psychological well-being between the two conditions; for emotions and thoughts at the conclusion of the intervention related to the emotions only condition ( $d = .69$ ), and the thoughts only condition ( $d = .79$ ). The researchers concluded from their findings that this was the result of cognitive processing as part of the writing as opposed to writing exercises that were arbitrary or trivial where the venting of emotions did not have a component for processing those emotions through the writing.

A limitation of the Barclay and Skarlicki (2009) research was that the increase or decrease in well-being was measured with a single-item scale, which may not have

offered participants sufficient choices for nuances in their reporting on well-being after the expressive writing sessions. Nevertheless, this study offers a significant extension of Pennebaker and Beal's (1986) initial research, which did not examine whether the type of writing was significant to outcomes. Barclay and Skarlicki concluded that writing beyond venting to gain emotional insight is beneficial.

Taking into account the aforementioned studies, Lumley and Provenzano (2003) conducted a randomized controlled trial with college students ( $N = 74$ ) who were 70% female, 36.5% African American, and an average age of 19. The study sought to test if writing about life stressors outside of normal academic stressors impacted students' GPAs. Students were divided into a test group ( $n = 37$ ) that wrote about stressful life circumstances such as identity, personal finances, or long-term family issues, and a control group ( $n = 37$ ) that wrote about academic stress, such as time management and plans beyond college. There was no significant difference in baseline measures of GPA and number of credit hours attempted for each group before the expressive writing intervention.

At the end of the semester, Lumley and Provenzano (2003) found a significant group by semester interaction; the emotional disclosure-group students maintained their GPA from the writing semester to the following semester (2.69 to 2.72) whereas the controls showed a substantial drop in GPA from the writing to the subsequent semester (2.86 to 2.34), resulting in a net group difference of 0.55 of a point.

One of the limitations of this study is that some students were not monitored when writing and were allowed to write off-site for the allotted time and number of days and report that they had done so. A number of potential variables might have confounded the

findings. Nonetheless, one of the interesting findings was that the test group varied the topics of stressful events they wrote about, and though their GPAs improved in the long-term, their moods worsened over the course of the semester in which they were disclosing. Similar to findings by Barclay and Skarlicki (2009) and Meshberg-Cohen and colleagues (2014), this would suggest that though writing about personal stressful events show long-term improvement in stress levels and academic performance, participants may require extended writing on one topic to see that stressful event through to emotional closure.

Comparable findings also resulted from a qualitative study conducted by Prater (2016) who sought to understand the therapeutic value of creative writing as a form of expressive writing for Black women. Seven Black women age 23 – 27 who claimed to engage in creative writing to relieve stress participated in individual interviews with the researcher for 35 – 70 minutes. A grounded theory data analysis of interviews revealed four categories: ways in which writing is helpful, details of the writing process, the importance of sharing one's writing, and ways in which writing is not helpful. Though participants felt that expressive writing was therapeutic as a way to put their thoughts outside of themselves for reflection (cathartic), they also felt that it did not offer solutions, resolutions, or new ways of dealing with their problems. These results mirror those of the three afore mentioned studies, which suggested that expressive writing methods be extended over a period of time, and that they include some form of emotional closure (solution, resolution) to increase therapeutic value.

Overall the literature shows that expressive writing has an impact on the emotional well-being of individuals including college students who encounter a number

of life stressors associated with personal and social factors, but no studies to date have been designed to specifically explore the effects of expressive writing for Black women college students whose stressors are unique, often due racial factors and compounded by gender and class factors (Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003; Collins, 2000).

### **Bibliotherapy**

Bibliotherapy was first used by Crothers (1916) around the turn of the 20th century and in the mid-20th century as administered by librarians for pedestrian use by people seeking to engage in self-examination (Monroe & Rubin, 1974). The term has since been defined as using literature to assist in coping with life challenges and personal growth with the goals of creating awareness about self and others and providing a means of communicating difficult issues (Pardeck, 1994). In recent years bibliotherapy has gained credibility as an arts-based therapy, first in the medical field as utilized by nurses and physicians to aid in the recovery process for patients (Cohen, 1992; Kaptein & Lyons, 2009; McClaskey; 1970).

For instance, McClaskey (1970) built on the foundation of libraries as bibliotherapy centers and sought to improve on library services for hospitals. In a randomized controlled study, McClaskey recruited patients ( $N = 96$ ) from two Washington State mental hospitals. Test groups were given didactic literature and creative literature as an adjunct to psychotherapy treatment, while control groups engaged in other activities such as games, puzzles, and listening to music. The Wittenborn Psychiatric Rating Scale, which is an observer-rating scale, was administered blind by a certified clinical psychologist to measure behavior and attitude changes in the patients.

The study found that both didactic and creative literature were effective in improving the behavior of mental health patients suffering from emotional disturbances, although a Duncan's New Multiple Range Test, which requires a value of 7 to show significance, showed neither approach as more effective in improving patients' mental states ( $R_2 = 5.26$ ).

One shortcoming of the McClaskey study (1970) was that the control groups were offered music as an adjunctive psychotherapy treatment, which, like creative literature is a form of art consumption. A more accurate measure of the effectiveness of the literature therapies might have resulted if the control group was not given music, an art intervention, much like the test group who was given bibliotherapy, an art intervention. Nonetheless, this study established a base for increasing the use of bibliotherapy in hospital settings.

Bibliotherapy is also increasingly utilized as a tool for school-aged counseling supported by the research of Shrodes (1950; 1955), whose theoretical dissertation study focused on the benefits of reading and concluded that children read and accept or reject elements of the literature based on their perception of themselves. Gladding and Gladding (1991) offered one of many articles in the education and psychology field on the benefits and limitations of bibliotherapy for use in schools, which pointed to a lack of training among school counselors as an obstacle to widespread implementation of this approach.

In a more recent study, Betzalel and Shechtman (2010) conducted a comparative correlational quantitative study with 79 adolescents ( $n_{male} = 43$ ;  $n_{female} = 36$ ) between the ages of 7 and 15 years living in a residential treatment facility in Israel in order to

determine if cognitive or affective bibliotherapy was more effective as a treatment for anxiety. Participants were separated into three groups: cognitive bibliotherapy ( $n = 26$ ), in which participants read self-help books on anxiety, affective bibliotherapy ( $n = 26$ ), in which participants read fiction with characters who experienced anxiety, and a control group ( $n = 27$ ) in which participants received treatment as usual. Participants in both bibliotherapy groups read and responded to literature in eight 45-min sessions. The study found a significant reduction in anxiety symptoms with the greater reduction in the affective bibliotherapy group  $F(2,69) = 6.74, p < .01, \eta^2 = .16$ , from pretreatment to posttreatment. This suggested that symptom-relevant stories are an effective anxiety reduction intervention.

These studies on bibliotherapy for patients and school-aged children made a case for expanding the research across other measures. To that end, two meta-analyses resulting from doctoral research are often referenced within the literature. Marrs (1995) conducted a meta-analysis; 79 comparative studies ( $N = 4,677$ ) were isolated and analyzed to determine the efficacy of bibliotherapy compared to traditional psychotherapy for an average of 57 adult subjects in each study of an average age of 30 years. Subjects presented with problems such as anxiety, depression, studying problems, and weight loss. The group mean of the traditional therapy groups was subtracted from that of the bibliotherapy groups, and the difference divided by a pooled standard deviation. The overall effect size was small ( $d_{++} = -0.080$ ) suggesting no significant difference existed between the two interventions.

In a more recent meta-analysis of 29 outcome studies to determine the effectiveness of cognitive bibliotherapy as a treatment for depression compared to

psychotherapy, Gregory, Schwer Canning, Lee, and Wise (2004) found that the effect size ( $d = .77$ ) for cognitive bibliotherapy as treatment was comparable to that of psychotherapy treatments for depression. The sample size for each study was at least five subjects, though the total number of subjects was not reported. The researchers also compared the effect size of individuals in group-bibliotherapy to self-guided bibliotherapy and found no difference in effect size (0.989 and 0.983, respectively). This was seen as a relevant finding for individuals who cannot afford psychotherapy or whose cultural traditions find therapy stigmatizing. These benefits of self-guided bibliotherapy may transfer to non-clinical environments, such as educational settings.

Therefore, though earlier studies with bibliotherapy were specific to the health care field and school-aged children, these became the foundation for more recent studies focused on college students. For instance, a case study conducted by Wang, Lin, Kuo, and Hong (2013) focused on a 22-year-old Taiwanese woman college student who utilized self-guided bibliotherapy, which the authors defined as “a cost and time-saving alternative to irrational thinking and negative emotions, without contacting any counselors or therapists” (p. 256). This definition was a modification of *self-management bibliotherapy* coined by Frieswijk, Steverink, Buunk and Slaets (2006) who sought to increase autonomy for older clients with physical disabilities by offering access to psychotherapy without the physical and mental burdens of visiting a therapist’s office. Wang et al. (2013) found that reading helped the informant process familial abuse and reduced suicidal feelings. These studies regardless of varied sample size and setting offer a cumulative understanding of the viability of bibliotherapy, but do not offer an understanding of the efficacy of bibliotherapy for Black women college students.

Nieves (1976) compiled a multi-modal literature review on the efficacy of self-help bibliotherapy on improving the attitudes of minority college students who were specified as predominantly Black students attending Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The review was aimed at offering resources to educators and staff at PWIs who guide minority students through self-help reading to manager responses to their minority status. Though not specific to Black women students, this literature review offered foundational studies and further established the need for research on the efficacy of bibliotherapy for Black women college students.

### **Biblio-fusion**

Biblio-fusion, a term coined by Lockhart (2017a), provides individuals consuming stories with the author's personal expression of their journey while expressing their own personal story through to outcome. This expressing of one's story from impactful event to revelation and outcome is referred to as personal plot, a method and term also coined by Lockhart (2017a).

Poetry therapy, has been used both as an expressive art therapy (writing or speaking autobiographical poetry) and receptive art therapy (reading autobiographical poetry) (Mazza, Magaz, & Scaturro, 1987). Therefore, poetry therapy can be considered as a form of biblio-fusion, though it has not been studied for the effectiveness of combining these expressive and receptive qualities. Recently, researchers have considered combining modalities of expressive writing therapies and bibliotherapy. This fusion currently exists in the form of papers and articles that discuss the potential for such a fusion. Manier and Esbitt (2009) presented a paper as research-in-progress on a mixed methods study conducted with 131 students ( $n_{Hispanic} = 50\%$ ,  $n_{African American} = 40\%$ ) in New



York to determine if stressors associated with students' adjustment to college were impacted after bibliotherapy and expressive writing interventions. Students were randomized into four groups, and over the course of three sessions received the following interventions: group one read about cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), applied CBT principles to excerpts of previous student's emotional disclosure writing, and engaged in emotional disclosure writing; group two was a control bibliotherapy group that read about mundane topics; group three engaged in emotional disclosure writing with no bibliotherapy; group four was a control group that wrote about mundane topics. Results showed a greater reduction in stressors and depression symptoms for participants who engaged in bibliotherapy and expressive writing. However, this research was a work-in-progress with no published final research as of yet. It therefore remains inconclusive, which points to the need for further research on the efficacy of combining expressive writing and bibliotherapy.

In an article on the effectiveness and lack of evidence in the writing and literature therapies, McArdle and Byrt (2001) included a discussion on bibliotherapy in the form of workbooks that combine writing therapies and reading as self-guided methods for individuals. An example is Kaufman's (2007) workbook, which guides participants to write poems to express their inner most feelings and to read and discuss their connections to the poems. This fusion of expressive writing and bibliotherapy goes unnamed as such in the text.

Inadvertent fusions of expressive writing and bibliotherapy can be found in the literature, for instance, Morawski and Gilbert (2000) conducted an inductive qualitative study using feminist methodology to explore the experiences of students at a Canadian

university. The students listened to poetry and prose read aloud by the instructor as part of a course on women and gender. Researchers analyzed the students' journals and responses to open-ended questionnaires about the method. Two themes emerged related to feminist pedagogical theory: individual learning, and group learning outcomes. This suggested that the process of listening to literature, writing in journals, and responding through group sharing fostered respect for difference and individual growth.

Other instances of the casual use of biblio-fusion appears in an article by Evans (2015) who noted healing for community members who were reading poetry and writing poetry, and Sanousi (2004) who found that a participant writing about literature also found therapeutic value in the content of the literature. It is also noted that in the aforementioned study by Lane (2017), young Black women students verbally offered their personal experiences as the sharing of oral stories while reading the works of Black feminist authors, though this fusion was not highlighted in the method.

An intentional use of biblio-fusion as a method can be found in a phenomenological pilot study conducted by Lockhart (2017a) on the experience of students attending a HBCU who were consuming and creating personal experience-based literature in a 16-week undergraduate creative writing course. The 10 participants ranged in age from 19 to 26 with the exception of one student who was 47 years of age. Participants consisted of six Black women, two Black men, one Mediterranean woman, and one White woman.

The study utilized both expressive writing and bibliotherapy methods and results of a focus group revealed a dominant theme of "community", which suggested that group learning impacted students' experience with the methods. These results prompted further

inquiry into the role of community building and transformative learning experiences specific to Black women who made up the majority of the study and make up the majority of HBCU populations (Sleeter, 2007).

Currently, no other studies are known that intentionally combine expressive writing and bibliotherapy as one method and scant literature exists on the modalities separately to advance the well-being and development of Black women college students. Through continued examinations of themes of Black feminist pedagogical theory, it is likely, as Johnson-Bailey and Alfred (2006), and Amoah (1997) predict, educators will expand upon methods like storytelling in order to uncover viable methods for applying Black feminist pedagogical theory.

The aforementioned studies point to an interest in combining these modalities and the need for more research on the potential for expressive writing, bibliotherapy and biblio-fusion as methods that support self-definition, self-reflection, and community building. Thus, these methods may be valuable for understanding the tenants of Black feminist pedagogical theory through the lived experiences of Black women students.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methods

#### **Purpose Statement**

This qualitative phenomenological study was designed to gain insight into the unique experiences of Black women students who were writing creative non-fiction toward the goal of self-definition in a Black feminist learning environment at an HBCU. Black women students' experiences are underrepresented in all areas of education including research on the efficacy of Black feminist approaches to their education and development. Even in educational environments like HBCUs that are designed to support their development, Black women students' voices are missing as contribution to the expansion of theories and structures established for their well-being (Collins, 2000). Therefore, this study is grounded in Black feminist pedagogical theory (Collins, 2000; Jackson-Lowman, 2014; Jacobs, 2013; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006) as an extension of feminist pedagogical theory (hooks, 2002), and transformative learning theories. Further, the study utilized expressive arts methods of personal plot and biblio-fusion, approaches designed by the researcher to pull forward and prioritize personal experiences. The results of this study may also be useful to individuals seeking methods for applying the tenets of Black feminist theory or seeking writing and healing methods specific to the needs of Black women students in college and university settings.

#### **Researcher's Positionality**

I have excerpted the following from the introduction of *The Soul of the Full-Length Manuscript* (Lockhart, 2017b), which was the writing guide used by the

participants in this study. It is the narrative of what drives me to be curious about writing, its ability to transform, and what aspects cause this transformation. In short, writing and reading, and the reverberation of that process have an ecology and a nature to them that I wish to better understand, especially specific to their impact on Black women who are surviving and thriving in societies that do not privilege or support their survival.

*When I was a child and it rained in the summer time, I watched from the open window. I could smell the way the dry concrete absorbed the first drops and how much that smell was like the smell of chalk. Then I would watch and wait until the rain stopped and would go out into the yard. Even on the West Side of St. Louis, the rain refreshed the parched streets and vacant lots and brought back the brightness in the color green. I would go to the bulging green milkweed pods and watch what one could only watch in early summer after a rain. The drops rolled down, resisting the tight green skin of the pods, and in each drop, there was a universe.*

*When I was done observing what the rain had created, I found a good puddle, went to my stash of jelly jar tops near the basement door, and made a full spread of mud pies. I was five years old and this is how I survived the secret molestations inside the ironic safety of my childhood home. Nature was a safe place that held the lessons of life, and was my inspiration where I created mud pies and other metaphorical foods.*

*What does all of this have to do with writing? As I grew older, I explored other cycles of inspiration and expression that shared one container. Inspired by nature, I created in nature; and eventually inspired by reading poetry and fiction, I wrote poetry and fiction. But, this transformation didn't fully happen until my college years.*

*As an undergraduate, I was a math and computer science major. I wrote programs while dreaming, and felt like a puzzle-solving queen. One semester, I took a literature class, and it was as if someone dropped those milkweeds of childhood on the ground and inside was more than a universe, but several universes. No one told me that inside of the minds of Black folks were all of the same kinds of good days, bad days, joys, and pains that I had experienced; that inside the expressions of women's words were the programming codes of the emotional stress of being female in a world hammered on by men. How brilliantly Zora Neale Huston, Richard Wright, and Alice Walker told their truths.*

*My computer science professors cringed when I said I was changing my major. My English professors cringed when they saw the first poems that I was inspired to write. Well, I cringed too; something was missing.*

*During the first semester of obtaining my master's degree, I was reading my poetry in a class taught by visiting writer Toi Derricotte. When I was done, my classmates clapped vigorously, but Toi just stared at me. She said, "Well, that was clever, but what is the story behind the cleverness?" I was pissed off, but it brought out the poem "Untitled," which was later titled "Granmama's Funeral."*

*I still hear her voice whispering  
in my three-year-old ear,  
"You're my baby, 'cause you were  
born here and love my greens and  
rutabagas."  
She died that summer.*

*I kept eating greens and  
rutabagas and eventually  
turned four.*

*I'd see her on her knees doubled  
over a tub full of water  
that turns into a tub  
full of blood, my stomach turns.*

*Every night when I was  
nine I thought she'd come  
take me from  
beneath the black chest wedging  
me into the bed.*

*She would rise  
up and smite him, smack  
him hard, and he'd  
disappear forever. Then  
her daughter would be  
able to love her baby  
girl.*

*Still waiting.*

*Each night became  
more silent,  
the weight of his body  
crushed me,  
cut off my air  
and my mother,  
a quivering shadow  
leaned across the floor,  
just beyond the  
door not letting me out.*

*Now  
no chest  
crushes me,  
but dark clouds hover  
over me.  
I whimper,  
I hurt,  
and grandmother still  
does not come.*

*Last night I dreamed my  
grandmother died.*



*She was lingering in the air  
not strong, but weak,  
creating silence.*

*No one would ride to the  
funeral with my father, so  
to keep my grandmother's peace,  
I did, he was a  
pallbearer and helped to  
carry grandmother's stretcher,  
her covered corpse down the  
cold hard steps of the church.*

*Her white sheet, the contour  
of her "head-to-foot"  
contrasted the grey clouds.*

*I woke the same age  
as in the dream,  
Twenty-one-years  
after grandmother's death,  
the morning  
after grandmother's death.*

*She would never  
 rise up over the dark cloud  
 that hovered over me, that  
 pushed down on me. She  
 would never smack him hard.  
 (Lockhart, 1990, p. 25–27)*

*I was twenty-four years of age at the time, and this expression was like pulling a string in a blanket. The whole façade of cleverness unraveled in poetry, performances, short stories, and eventually a first novel. The missing ingredient in my other poems was the emotional truth of what it is like for Zelda to live this human life, but once I used the work to tell truth, I was making art, connecting with others.*

*The works of writers like Sharon Olds, Lucile Clifton, and Galway Kinnell continuously inspired me, but to stay in the ecology of that creative gift giving, I had to continue to tell the truth in my creations so that others could be inspired to tell their truths. I did not know at the time that I was twirling around in a biblio-fusion ecosystem: inhaling stories of someone's metabolized joys and pains as food, medicine, and kinship, and then exhaling story through writing, which becomes my own and others' healing.*

*Those years ago, Toi Derricotte's writing workshop inadvertently and slowly became a holding environment for me to express the unexpressed, to bring up from the deep consciousness and put on the outside my feelings so I could examine them in a way that gave me power over my own life (pp. xiii – xvii).*

It is with this base of experience and development that I conducted this study. I was expressly curious about the following questions.

### **Research Questions**

This dissertation sought to explore the following overall question: What is the experience of Black women students who are writing and reading creative non-fiction toward the goal of self-definition in a Black feminist learning environment at an HBCU?

Further, more in-depth questions included:

- What is the Black woman students' experience with utilizing personal plot as a vehicle for self-exploration?
- What is the experience of these Black women students' writing and reading (biblio-fusion) toward self-definition and transformation?
- How does a coeducational classroom as a microcosmic reflection of the larger HBCU campus environment influence the participants' experience with self-definition through writing and reading?
- How does Black feminist pedagogy influence these Black women students' identities as individuals, students and members of other collective identity groups?

### **Research Paradigm**

Consistent with the intent to explore personal experiences of a particular population, this study was designed as a phenomenological qualitative study. The study explored Black women students' experiences through a Black feminist pedagogical lens, which encourages group interaction, community building, respect, self-reflection, and

emphasizes Black women's ways of knowing, teaching, and learning (Collins, 2000; Jackson-Lowman, 2014; Jacobs, 2013; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006).

Whereas feminist pedagogical theory considers the negative impact social oppression may have on marginalized individuals (hooks, 2002), Black feminist pedagogical theory considers the empowering impact societies and communities may have on marginalized individuals and further considers ways of knowing that are not just specific to women, but specific to Black women (Collins, 2000; Jackson-Lowman, 2014; Jacobs, 2013; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). Therefore, Black feminist pedagogical theory was most suited as a philosophical framework, because of the aims of the study to gain insight into the experience of Black women students who were writing their personal experiences in an HBCU classroom.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of 12 students who were Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors at an HBCU in North Carolina between the ages of 20 and 42. Participants consisted of six Black women who were the primary participants, and five Black men, and one Mediterranean Woman who provided online journal responses as triangulation. All participants were enrolled in the researcher's 16-week creative non-fiction course.

### **Design**

Black feminist theory considers the beneficial and detrimental impacts the macro-cosmic society (school, church, classroom, etc.) has on Black women's micro-cosmic societies (relationship with self, relationship with family, etc.) (Collins, 2000). In other words, Black feminist theory considers how one's community impacts the way they self-define. Therefore, this study was designed to analyze the experiences of Black women

students as a subgroup of a community of learners by analyzing their online journals and the responses their classmates had to their journals, and further to consider how the identities of a subgroup of Black women participants might be influenced by this community and by personal plot, and biblio-fusion methods by analyzing their personal essays and focus group responses. Because the method of personal plot used to examine participants' experiences with writing is highly specialized and developed by the researcher, the researcher conducted the creative non-fiction writing course through which the methods of the personal essays and online journals were administered, and measures were taken through the design of the study to increase the validity of this design.

**Informed consent.** During a segment of one session of the course near the end of the semester the researcher offered a description of the research project, which was approved by Lesley University and the researcher's institution. At this time, students completed and signed anonymous consent forms (see Appendix A). Students were assured that their participation or decision not-to-participate would not in any way impact their grades. Additionally, a space was provided on the consent form inviting a subgroup of Black women participants to attend a focus group designed to gain insight into Black women's experiences in the course. Students folded the completed consent forms to conceal their names, and the consent forms were collected and placed in an envelope by a research assistant who informed the researcher of the number of students who consented but did not inform the researcher of the names of the students. The envelope was then sealed and submitted to the department chair for safe keeping. The researcher retrieved the envelope from the department chair after final grades for the course were submitted.

Therefore, throughout the teaching semester, the researcher did not have knowledge of which participants consented and which declined participation.

**Technique for creating personal essays.** As a tool for self-examination and self-definition, throughout the semester, several sessions were devoted to writing the first draft of a personal essay using personal plot method through “The Mirror Exercise” (see Appendix B). With personal plot, individuals are encouraged to construct a personal story based on events of their development. These events included (1) a wounding event or a loss; (2) a want motivated by that wounding event (3) agents that helped fulfill the want (4) obstacles that got in the way of fulfilling the want (5) a revelation or change in attitude about the wound (6) an outcome to the journey (7) and an outcome action or new practice to sustain the outcome (Lockhart, 2017b).

In order to ease the participants into the process of writing about difficult life events, they were first led through community building writing exercises like "The Relationship Museum" (see Appendix C) where they built a grid and wrote in objects that they possess that remind them of certain pivotal relationships in their lives. Participants then traded these museums used the objects as writing prompts. At the end of the writing exercise students relayed to each other the similarity or irony of how they related to the objects in writing. Such exercises stimulated connection in the classroom and warmed up the participants to the idea of writing and sharing personal stories.

The Mirror Exercise first prompted participants to write a scene when their positive characteristics, what they consider to be their gifts or special internal attributes were present. Students were then prompted to write a scene about a current life event where they are having an issue with another individual or entity. Through the next three

prompts they were asked to write scenes about similar times in the past where they wanted the same thing that they want in the current issue. The "want" was utilized through the prompts to help the participants slowly (over the course of several weeks) locate the first time that they wanted what they currently want. The "want", equivalent to the motivation in literary plot, is the motivation for the main voice's behaviors. Once they wrote the scene of when they first remember wanting what they want, they labeled this scene as the initial impactful event that caused them to seek out what they are currently wanting in relationships. Subsequent scenes were written where participants considered the positive attributes of their external obstacles, and where they practiced writing to prompt new ways of looking at their wounds and wants. For example, participants wrote a future scene where they release others from blame and used their gifts to achieve their wants.

In response to findings that expressive writing about stressful events can in the short-term increase stress (Meshberg-Cohen, Svikis and McMahon, 2014), personal plot is designed to offer closure (revelation and outcome) in writing about stressful life events, an expansion of findings by Barclay and Skarlicki (2009) which concluded that writing beyond venting to gain emotional insight is beneficial.

As part of community learning, at the end of each session, students who wanted to share from their writing were allowed to do so for a maximum of two minutes for each participant. As part of this teaching and learning style, students also had time for open discussion to reflect on and connect to the personal essays of their classmates. Also, as part of community learning, throughout the semester, students worked in smaller rotating

peer editing pairs and submitted a draft of their personal essays twice during the semester to the instructor, and a final draft at the end of the semester.

**Online journal responses to Black feminist literary themes.** To extend community learning and self-reflection, students applied biblio-fusion and wrote short biographical paragraphs in online journals in response to the accompanying reading of each unit. Over the course of the semester, students read from autobiographical essays that offered the overall personal plot or elements of personal plot and reflected on themes of Black feminist theory. Essays included, "Beauty When the Other Dancer is the Self" and the definition of "womanist" in Alice Walker's (1983) *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. This essay and the accompanying definition offered the participants the Walker's self-definition that is extended from personal experiences to include others in a broader social context. Participants also read, "A Place Where Everybody Knows Your Name" by Hannah Giorgis (2015). In this short personal essay, the author writes about the significance of her name, of being named, and of self-defining through her name. Participants also read excerpts from larger collections of autobiography and autobiographical essays like excerpts from *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey* by Toi Derricotte (1997) accompanied by a video of Derricotte (2010) reading from her autobiographical poem "Blackbottom." This memoir and the accompanying autobiographical poem offered participants the perspective of a Black woman poetry teacher grappling with life-long issues of double consciousness as well as her own race, class and gender struggles, particularly colorism and classism as forms of internalized racism. To explore the theme of othermothering, participants read Kiese Laymon's (2013) essay "How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America", which offered Laymon's



struggles as a young Black male in the American South and the ways he survived via the harsh and gentle mothering and othermothering of his mother and grandmother. This was coupled with excerpts from Edwidge Danticat's (2007) memoir *Brother I'm Dying*, in which she shares the othermothering and community parenting provided by her uncle in the absence of her parents who moved to the US from Haiti to pursue a better life for their family.

These readings consisted of essays written by Black women of multiple ages, and from different, cultural and social identities in an attempt offer a broadened perspective on Black women's ways of knowing. The reading by Laymon (2013) a Black male author was selected in an attempt to offer contrast for the impact of Black mothering and othermothering not just on Black women, but on Black men. These reading were also selected and designed to stimulate reflection on dominant themes of Black feminist pedagogical theory self-definition, double consciousness, and othermothering (Collins, 2000).

In their online journals, students were asked questions regarding their connection or ability to relate to the essays they read by published authors, and to relate to the voices and experiences in each other's writing. For example, after reading the essays by Hannah Giorgis (2015) and Alice Walker (1983) on the theme of self-definition, students were offered the following reflective writing prompt that encourages a personal plot approach to their narrative:

Write a short autobiographical paragraph of an event/moment with time, place and sensory details that was inspired by some aspect of how you connect with these readings and involves you self-defining. Perhaps there

was an obstacle (something getting in your way) that caused you to self-define, or perhaps there was an agent (something helping you out in life) that helped you to remember who you want to be in this world. Tell us about a moment of self-definition in your life.

Through the online journals students explored elements of Black feminist pedagogical learning through the call and response nature of biblio-fusion that is not only life stories written, but life stories read and heard. For a complete list of online journal questions, see Appendix D. After writing their responses to the online journal prompts, students went back into the discussion board and responded to each other's short essays.

**Focus group.** After grades were submitted, the researcher was given access to the informed consent by the research assistant. After seeing which students consented to the study, the research assistant invited the Black women participants who consented to attend a focus group conducted and audio recorded by the research assistant. The research assistant was trained throughout the semester by the researcher on informed consent and open-ended interview techniques. In order to reduce the potential for response bias and social desirability bias, the invitation stated that the researcher would not attend the focus group.

Participants expressed discomfort with meeting in a focus group without the instructor present. A subsequent email was sent letting the participants know that the instructor would be there to set up and would be nearby in her office if need be. Participants continued to ask questions that showed apprehension attending a focus group with the research assistant, who had not been part of their experience in the course.

None of the six Black women participants who signed up for the focus group attended. The researcher emailed and requested to conduct individual interviews with the participants which would cover the focus group questions, and each responded offering an available time.

The researcher believes that the method, in this case a focus group conducted by an outside researcher, though intended for the purposes of increasing credibility, was contrary to the design of the course, which promoted a sense of community and trust among the participants and their instructor. The philosophical base of the research, Black feminist pedagogical theory and its rich traditions of community building was in conflict with the data collection method for the participants' experience. Lindsay-Dennis (2015) predicted Black women researchers attempting research through a Black feminist-womanist lens while upholding the constructs of traditional empirical research would face these sorts of clashes between theory and method, but this proved to be true in a nontraditional phenomenological approach as well.

Therefore, to gain the information that the study sought, the researcher conducted interviews with the participants. Noted in the results of this study, participants considered the instructor as an "othermother", mentor, and reflection of themselves as Black women. The researcher had gained the participants' trust as teacher and othermother, and that trust and comfort was central to the goal of collecting information on their perspective and experience as Black women taking the course.

### **Data Collection**

Consistent with the intent to explore individual experiences, this study was designed as a phenomenological qualitative study. Phenomenology is intended to study

“things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience,” and therefor considers “the subjective or first-person point of view” (Smith, 2016). Thus, the methods of data collection for this phenomenological study was through narrative methods for two data collection sources: the personal essays, and online journal responses, and through the interview method in lieu of what was originally intended to be a focus group.

**Narrative method.** The narrative method of sharing experiences through personal essays and online journal responses, which use personal plot was chosen, because of the cultural-appropriateness of the narrative method for Black students and for its appropriateness as a method that allows participants’ experiences to be the main source of information. The traditions of narrative storytelling are “deeply rooted in African-American culture. It is a tradition based on the continuity of wisdom, and it functions to assert the voice of the oppressed” (Amoah, 1997, p. 84). The narrative method also served the researcher’s goal to “incorporate research methods that most effectively complement the worldview and lifestyles of persons who come from a specific cultural and linguistic population” (American Psychological Association, 2002, Guideline #4). As Amoah (1997) believes, narrative methods should be the mode of inquiry into Black feminist theory, because “sharing stories creates a network. The strength of the network stems from an understanding that human experience is the basis for Narrative, and that Narrative is, in turn, a credible basis for theory” (p. 85).

**Personal essays.** Over the course of 16 weeks, participants wrote, edited, and submitted a preliminary and a final draft of a 10-15-page personal essay using The Mirror Exercise (see Appendix B). This served as a source of triangulation for the main data

source, the interviews. In similar teaching experiences with this method the researcher found that students were able to integrate the deep introspection necessary for personal writing by working on one essay throughout the semester. This allowed time for students to reflect on similar emotions and processes in the published personal essays they consumed, and the essays shared by their classmates. The researcher also chose to have students write one personal essay throughout the semester, because findings on expressive writing with college students by previous researchers revealed the need for students to write on one topic for an extended period of time to increase the potential for emotional closure (Barclay & Skarlicki, 2009; Lumley & Provenzano, 2003; Meshberg-Cohen, S., Svikis, D., & McMahon, T. J., 2014). Therefore, students wrote one personal essay, and wrote autobiography as opposed to fiction as a way to deepen the self-reflection, and the benefits of revelation and outcome writing.

*Online journal responses.* Throughout the semester biblio-fusion was utilized as a data collection method. Students participated in three online journal responses as creative writing assignments that offered an opportunity for them to reflect on and respond through personal stories to the personal essays read in the course that were authored by established writers, as well as those shared as works-in-progress by their classmates. This offered participants an opportunity to have a call and response dynamic with stories read, which inspired stories written. This also offered participants an opportunity to interact through the discussion board in a call and response manner with each other. These online journal responses were discussion forums that remained open through the semester and were monitored by the researcher to ensure that the discussions

followed the same group etiquette, community building, and respect that was fostered in the Black feminist classroom environment.

**Interview method.** Consistent with Black feminist methods that decentralize power, the interview method was chosen. Interviews with the researcher and instructor for the course allowed the participants control over the continuity of a community they co-constructed.

*Interviews.* Interviews were conducted and audio recorded via Zoom once participants consented via email as an extension of their consent for the focus group interviews, which they did not attend. Interviews lasted between 12 and 37 minutes. The participant Ashana had the flu and needed to reschedule, and at the second attempt began her interview, had not fully recovered and was not able to participate beyond the sound check, because of laryngitis. The interview questions were open ended, and regarded the experience of the participants with writing, reading and sharing stories in a Black feminist learning environment. Questions were also designed to gain information about participants' experience with group interaction. Because self-definition was a prominent element of this inquiry, participants were also asked about their experience with personal plot and writing personal stories from a wounding or impactful events, through to revelation and outcome. Additionally, questions were designed to gain insight into the experience participants had with reading memoir and personal essays from published authors. Further, questions focused on their experience of engaging in this writing process as Black women on an HBCU campus, in a coeducational classroom. Participants were invited to share any other experiences that the questions did not prompt. See Appendix E for a complete list of interview questions.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through a Black feminist pedagogical lens, which emphasizes Black women's ways of knowing, group interaction, community building, and respect (Collins, 2000; Jackson-Lowman, 2014; Jacobs, 2013; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). Dominant themes of Black feminist pedagogical theory include self-definition, othermothering, and double consciousness (Beauboeuf, 1997; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Case, 1997; Collins, 2000).

After submitting final grades for the course, the researcher was given access to the informed consent by the Department Chair, who verified that grades had been turned in for all students who were enrolled in the researcher's creative writing course. At this point, the researcher began the process of analyzing participants' personal essays, online journal responses, and transcribing the interviews as the primary data source. The number of participants was 12 of the 24 total students in the class, which consisted of six Black women, five Black men, and one non-Black woman.

**Data reduction.** The purpose of collecting the online journal responses for the non-Black, non-female was to analyze their response strings to the Black women participants' short essays written in the online journals. Of the six non-Black, non-female participants, few responded to the Black women participants. Upon examination of all responses, this was because their responses were spread across the entire class population of 24 students, meaning their frequency of responses to the six Black women participants was low. These collected responses consisted of less than a page of text. Therefore, this data source was eliminated, which also eliminated the need to consider non-Black, non-female students' responses to the Black women. Information on the Black women

participants' experiences as members of a class where there were non-Black, non-female students was derived instead of solely from the Black women's words and writings. Considering the objectives of the study to underscore the Black women students' experiences, this reduction of data was appropriate.

**Pseudonyms.** As a first step in the analysis process, the researcher coded each participant with an anonymous name. The researcher was the sole individual with access to the naming key, and no other individual was, nor will they be granted access or permission to the key in the future or at any time. After creating the naming key, all participant data files were named based on the pseudonyms. Within each file, names were changed to match the pseudonyms. For instance, if a participant quoted someone in their journal who greeted them by name, "Hi [name]", the change was made to the corresponding pseudonym, "Hi Yolanda."

**Online journal responses.** As a second step in the analysis process, the researcher read the six Black women participants' online journal responses. The six Black women participants' responses were placed in data folders for each of the themes of Black feminist theory that students were prompted to write about in the online journals. These were self-definition, othermothering, and double consciousness. Responses were analyzed using data driven analysis of narrative. The non-Black, non-female participants' responses to the six Black women participants were placed in a data file for separate coding.

***Data driven analysis of narrative of online journals.*** Polkinghorne (1995) drew from literary analysis approaches outlined by Bruner (1986) and considered analysis of narrative as "studies whose data consist of narratives or stories, but whose analysis



produces paradigmatic typologies or categories" (p. 5). Analysis of narrative was used to analyze participant's online journals.

The researcher imported each of the three folders of participant responses for self-definition, othermothering, and double consciousness into Nvivo software for analysis. Bryman's (2004) data driven analysis method, and Boyatzis' (1998) method were utilized to highlight key words and phrases and create thematic nodes based on these words and phrases. Similar thematic nodes were combined under more encompassing parent nodes to create major meaning units. For example, "self-determination", "self-defense", and "speaking out and speaking up" were combined under the parent node, "survival strategies" since in each occurrence, the participant was expressing a means by which they survived a difficult time.

**Personal essays.** As a third step of analysis, the researcher analyzed the personal essays of the Black women participants. To analyze the personal essays, the researcher used personal plot analysis as a narrative analysis method in order to understand what the personal essays were about. Polkinghorne (1995) explained narrative analysis as "studies whose data consist of actions, events, and happenings, but whose analysis produces stories (e.g. biographies, histories, case studies)" (p. 6). Personal plot is a form of narrative analysis developed by the researcher, which allowed the researcher to analyze data by creating a story of what the data was about (Bryman, 2004).

The researcher synthesized the Black women participants' personal essays based on plot structure recommendations from *The Soul of the Full-Length Manuscript* (Lockhart, 2017b). These recommendations involved answering questions about the seven pivotal scenes of the personal plot method (see Appendix F). Consistent with

Bryman's (2004) narrative analysis approach, the researcher read each essay a minimum of two times to gain insight into what the essay was about, and by answering the questions about the seven pivotal events of the personal plot, the researcher composed a paragraph. For example, the participant Sharon's essay produced the following narrative analysis paragraph:

This essay is the story of Sharon, a young woman who is sexually assaulted at 13 years of age. Having lost her innocent outlook on life she begs for answers to her questions, "Why was I targeted? Why did God allow this to happen? Why didn't my mom stop him?" Through her mother's coaxing, she goes to church and receives the sermon, which was "It's Okay to be Mad at God." Over time she struggled with regaining her sense of beauty through adorning herself with beautiful clothes, and then losing that sense of beauty through poor treatment from her mom and from men in romantic relationships. In the end, she reinvests the love lost through in her life into love for herself. It is through this act that Sharon is able to open herself up to healthy relationships and eventually marriage.

Each participant's paragraph was set aside and served as a means of triangulation for what emerged in the analysis of the interviews.

**Interviews.** As a fourth step in the analysis process, the researcher analyzed the interviews. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim in order to incorporate pauses, repetition, and dialect. The pseudonyms were incorporated into the transcript from the naming key that only the researcher had access to.

Each transcript was formatted into a table, which contained four columns: time, interview question, interviewee's response, and the researcher's comments. The interviews were read through once, so the researcher could become familiar with the interviews again. Upon a second read through and listen, reoccurring words and concepts were highlighted. The researcher's reflections and responses were recorded in the comment column. Attention was given to connections each interviewee made with their experience as a member of a Black feminist learning environment, her personal journey through personal plot, references to biblio-fusion, to themes of Black feminist theory, and particular attention was given to any tension that arose for her during the course. This provided texture and understanding of the interview narrative as a whole story and provided understanding of their narratives in context of themes of Black feminist theory as well as the inquiries of this study.

*Data-driven analysis of narrative of interviews.* A data driven analysis of narrative of the interviews was conducted. Interview transcripts were imported into Nvivo and coded for themes.

### **Peer Review**

The initial results of the data analysis, which constituted derived themes from each data source was submitted to Tamara Butler, assistant professor of English and African American and African studies at Michigan State University. Butler and the researcher met via Zoom and via email. Butler reviewed the methods used to collect data, the analysis of the data collected, and the initial analysis and found the methods and analysis appropriate to the research questions. Butler also reviewed the initial results and found these to be a clear assessment of the data collected and analyzed. Butler, further

advised that the researcher add tables to show the results in clear succinct visuals. Butler also suggested that the researcher add a section on the researcher's positionality, and that the theoretical foundations of Black feminist theory be extended by the addition of more Black women scholars who draw upon Black studies, and Black girlhood studies. Butler provided for instance, Lindsay-Dennis' (2015) article on Black feminist-womanist approaches to research focused on Black girls. This was a relevant resource for contextualizing the data collected within the frames of Black feminist theory.

### **Member Check**

Participants were offered time to meet one-on-one with the researcher on the campus of the university where the study was conducted. Participants were sent an email inviting them to this additional member checking meeting (see Appendix H).

Danika, Trisha, and Yolanda responded. During brief 15-minute individual sessions in the researcher's office each read through the sections that highlighted their essays, journals and interview analysis. Danika read through interpretations of her writings and interview quotes and had no changes. Trisha chose to bracket some of the quotes from her interview in order to clarify her meaning. For example, Trisha wished to change the wording in this interview response, to correct her grammar: "The main way is me realizing that I couldn't be surface because it wasn't fair to the rest of the class that [was tapping into] deeper levels." Trisha also recognized an instance where the researcher used the wrong pseudonym to identify her quote.

Yolanda chose to change one of the words the researcher used in the analysis of narrative paragraph of her personal essay. The researcher stated that "the story follows Yolanda's attempt to reconcile her desire as a Black girl wanting attention with her fear of

being a Black girl exposed to unwanted violations by men and boys." Yolanda requested that the words "violations by" be changed to "attention from" to more accurately depict the conflict of her desire for attention from men.

Member checking extended the participants' control over the representation of their voices in the analysis of the personal essays, online journal responses, and the interview transcripts. This also offered the researcher a more rich and complex understanding of the data from the participants' perspective.

## CHAPTER 4

### Results

Participants included six Black women, five of whom were an average age of 22, and one participant who was 42 years of age. One of the women identified as Dominican, and one identified as Jamaican. The following is a summary of results first from participants' creative writing (personal essays and online journals) where they wrote about their lives. The results of their writing offer the outcomes on the methods used to advance self-definition through writing. These also serve as an introduction to the participants through their written accounts of their lives in their families and larger societies beyond the classroom. These results are followed by results from their interviews, which serve as the primary source of information on their experience within the classroom including the teaching method and the teaching environment. The writing prompts for producing their personal essays and online journals, as well as the teaching environment were designed to advance the goals of Black feminist theory to help them self-define as a means of gaining control over their lives in a society where racism, sexism and residual impacts of these dual oppressions attempt to underpin their development.

#### Personal Essays

Black women students wrote 10 -15-page personal essays, based on prompts designed to draw out a story about the participants' life-wounds, wants, agents, obstacles and revelations as Black women. The following narrative paragraphs are arranged based on plot structure recommendations from *The Soul of the Full-Length Manuscript* (Lockhart, 2017b). Each narrative paragraph answers central questions about a wounding

event in their lives, the resulting want that emerged from that wound and agents and obstacles that engaged in fulfilling that want (see Appendix F). The purpose of these paragraphs, though a synopsis of the personal essays, is to provide context about the participants' lives as Black women, and serves as an introduction to each of the participant in the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

**Sharon.** This essay is the story of Sharon, a young woman who is sexually assaulted at 13 years of age. Having lost her innocent outlook on life she begs for answers to her questions, "Why was I targeted? Why did God allow this to happen? Why didn't my mom stop him?" Through her mother's coaxing, she goes to church and receives the sermon, "It's Okay to be Mad at God." Over time she struggles with regaining her sense of beauty through adorning herself with beautiful clothes, and then losing that sense of beauty through poor treatment from her mom and from men in romantic relationships. In the end, she reinvests the love lost in her life into love for herself. It is through this act that Sharon is able to open herself up to healthy relationships and eventually marriage.

**Lauren.** Lauren was born in St. Croix to her Dominican mother and her White American father, an "avid cocaine user and a drunk." When her mother leaves him, he makes no effort to see Lauren outside of her birthdays. On her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, Lauren visits his "grand white villa . . . something out of a Spanish soap opera," where he tells her he is moving back to the States. She spends her teenage years seeking him out, and for college, she moves to his city of residence in the United States, only to find from an obituary that her father has long since died of cancer. The obituary mentions her mother, but does not mention her, "his only child." Lauren finds herself in a series of relationships with men

who violate and abuse her. One day, she becomes fed up, and speaks out for herself, vowing to never let anyone violate her again.

**Danika.** Danika struggles to find someone to advocate for her when others violate her privacy and disturb her peace of mind. Over time, she puts up with these transgressions from her brother, her 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, her middle school classmates, and her college suite mate. Her mother seems to be the only person to step in and speak for her, but Danika begins to immerse herself in "dark and supernatural" reading and writing. Her mother grows concerned and criticizes Danika's literary choices. It is through Danika's writing and reading that she finds solace, and it is also through writing that she is able to be her own best advocate and turn villains in her life into characters whose movements she can control.

**Yolanda.** Yolanda tells the story of losing her sense of beauty as a young girl who wants to perform and be on stage. One day she is in the spotlight at a spelling bee and misspells the very word she is trying to embrace as a Black girl, "beautiful." The story follows Yolanda's attempt to reconcile her desire as a Black girl wanting attention with her fear of being a Black girl exposed to unwanted attention from men and boys. She metaphorically describes this double consciousness as an ancestral struggle of hiding gifts to dissuade persecution: "The blanket my great grandma sewed together with different pieces of fabric collected overtime was so heavy and warm. . . . The red square was my favorite. Red is sassy and so was I." This struggle is present in her parenting and romantic relationships, and is a spell undone only when she adorns herself in "white wife beater, jean body shorts, and red pumps," and despite fear of criticism sings and recites her poetry to a crowd of screaming girl fans.



**Ashana.** As a child Ashana's parents wanted her to become a doctor or dentist, but she wanted to go her own path. By the time she is in high school, she is confused and isn't sure what she wants to be anymore. Her school guidance counselor asks her to think of what makes her happy, and she thinks of the child she provides childcare for, and her times teaching him academics and life lessons. As she grows into a young woman, she finds herself teaching even her boyfriend and his child. It is when she receives a "B" on a college exam that she is able to parent herself and not be hard on herself the way her parents were hard on her. In this moment, she realizes that she has a philosophy of teaching that includes nurturing and faith. Through the difficult challenges of college studies Ashana finds solace in her religion. "Everything will work out if you put your faith in God." Years later, Ashana finds herself in a position to impart her philosophies to others as the principal of an elementary school.

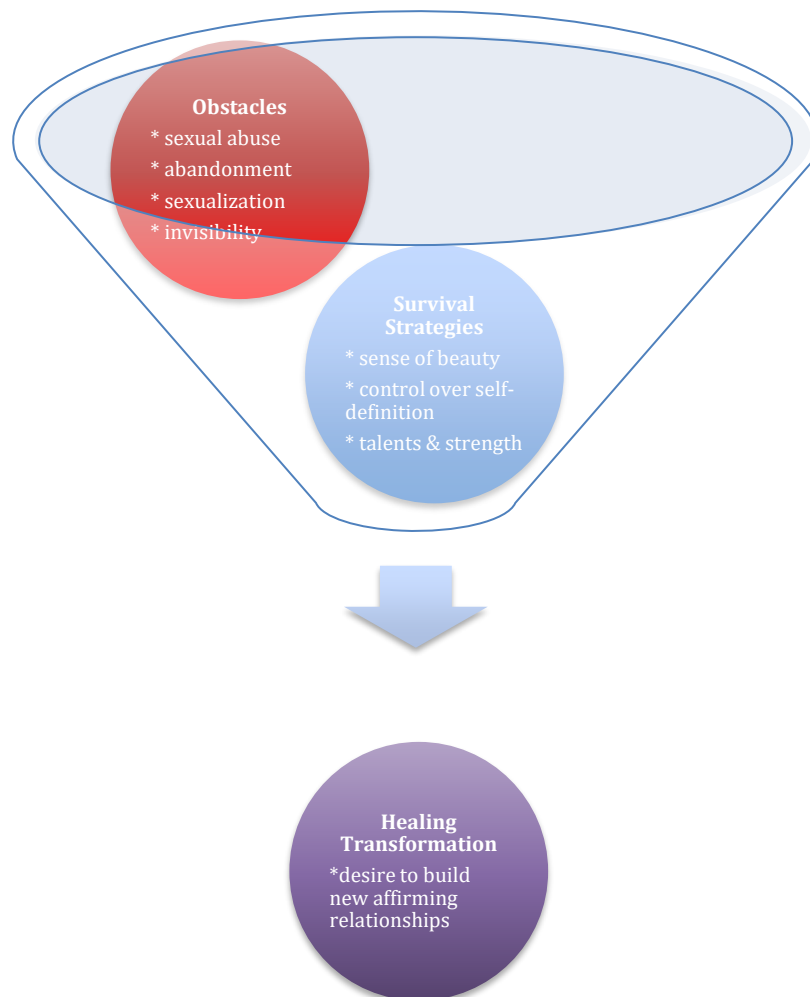
**Trisha.** When Trisha is young, she feels invisible and unacknowledged by her parents for her ability to contribute and to speak for herself. On the one hand, she is glad that others, like her Dad, stand up for her. On the other hand, Trisha feels the cumulative impact of being discounted: "I started just letting people talk for me. I didn't have an opinion on what my friends and I should do on the weekend I just went." This internalization of her inability and invisibility translated to her young adult sexual relationships where Trisha felt that her voice "was completely lost in these experiences." Trisha gains a voice and affirmation to speak for herself through a mountain retreat where 40 young adults are guided to claim their space if they are uncomfortable and take up less space if they are fully comfortable. In the end, Trisha feels healed by community "I

became a 'we' with 40 other strangers who treated me with love and listened to what I had to say in a world that I was often ignored and/or spoke for."

Personal plot prompts follow an action and reaction relationship between events, agents, obstacles and revelation/outcome. Therefore, the categories of obstacles and survival strategies and healing transformation as outcome are listed here in bold with the subthemes in italics. Collectively the personal essays depict Black girls who grew into Black women while enduring **obstacles** of *sexual abuse, abandonment, sexualization, and invisibility*. To traverse these obstacles, they employed **survival strategies** of *a sense of beauty, their ability to utilize their talents and strengths, and take control over their self-definition*. They experienced **healing transformation** by realizing they can use their *talents and strengths* as the tools with which to have this control over sculpting their realities and *building new affirming relationships*. The action and reaction visual of these results is depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Personal Essays – Action & Reaction: Resilience Themes in Black Women

Students' Lives



### Online Journal Responses

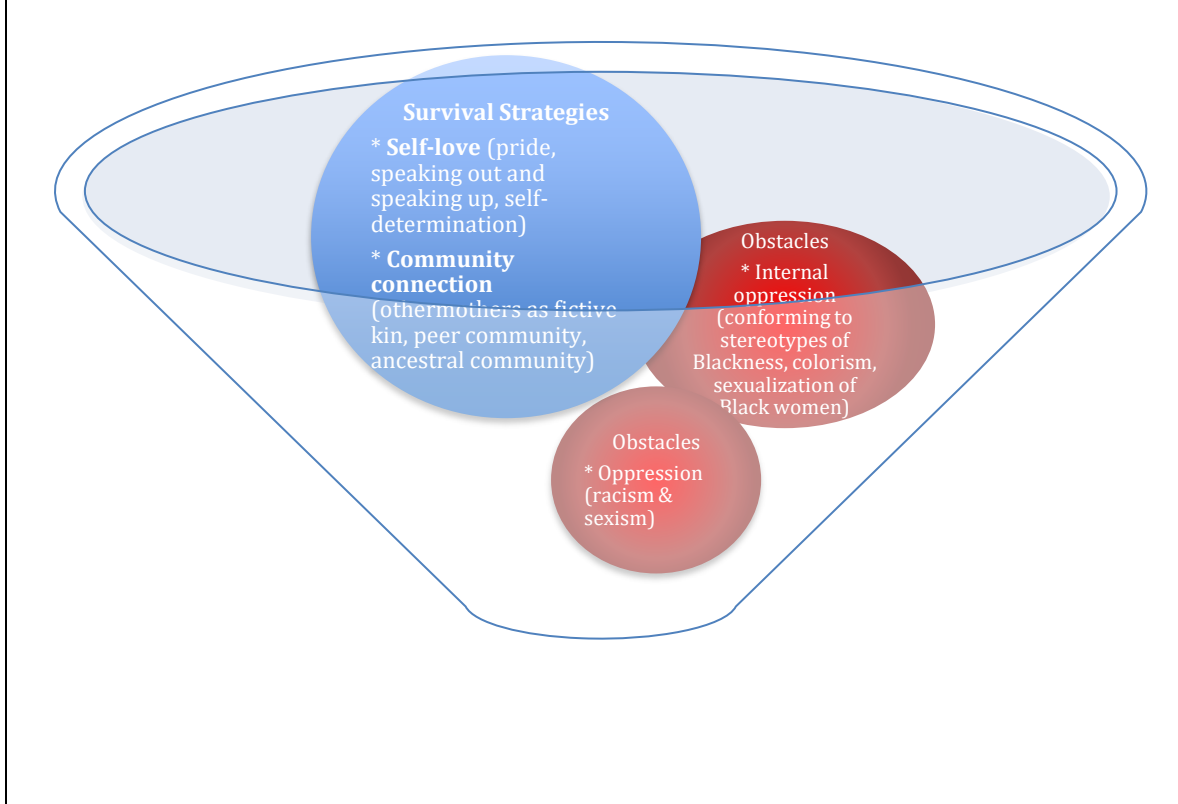
The online journals responses were short personal responses to essays from published authors. Participants were asked to write a short memory as a personal plot scene with an event, agents and/or obstacles, and an outcome based on themes of self-

definition, double consciousness, and othermothering that did or did not show up in their lives as a response to these themes in personal essays by published Black authors.

Personal plot prompts follow an action and reaction relationship between events, agents, obstacles and revelation/outcome. Though online journals and personal essays share the purpose of drawing out lived experience, participants were not directed to write a revelation for these short scenes as they were with the full plot of personal essays. Therefore, the categories of obstacles and survival strategies are listed here in bold (no category for revelation/outcome emerged). Subthemes of obstacles and survival strategies are represented in italics.

Results of a data driven analysis revealed themes that showed how the participants faced **obstacles** of *oppression (racism, and sexism)* and *internalized oppression (conforming to stereotypes of Blackness, colorism, and sexualization of Black women)*. In the face of these obstacles, participants employed **survival strategies** of *self-love (pride, speaking out and speaking up, and self-determination)* and *community connection (othermothers as fictive kin, peer community, and ancestral community)*. Figure 2 shows how participants talked about utilizing innate and acquired survival strategies in life to manage and reduce the impact of their life obstacles.

**Figure 2.** Survival Strategies to Manage and Reduce Impact of Obstacles in Black Women Students' Lives



**Obstacles.** The online journals contained accounts of *oppression* (as *racism* and *sexism*), and *internalized oppression* (as *conforming to stereotypes of Blackness, colorism, sexualization of Black women, and assimilation*). These stressors were endured by the Black women participants during childhood, and as young adults.

**Oppression.** Participants wrote about racism and sexism as dual penalties of being Black women. Though their responses about these external forces were minimally written about compared to the internalized effects, the internalized oppressions existed because of these external forces.

**Racism.** Sharon recounted as moment in childhood when her teacher privileged her own perspective of Sharon's origins over Sharon's definition of her race.

I will never forget the biggest argument of my life, and surprising it was with my white teacher. We were in class on a Friday right before summer break, and when I was asked what I was doing for it I gave a simple answer. "Going back to my home country," and my teacher responded, "which part of Africa are you from?" and I explained to her that I am Jamaican. She stood in my face and said it was the same thing, and she did not understand why I was offended.

*Sexism.* Among the external obstacles that appeared were responses about males blocking their progress, and feeling violated by unwanted male touch and attention. Responses included for instance, Sharon journaling about "growing up with other siblings that were brothers and being told that "you're not strong enough to play football." Yolanda recounted an instance of unwanted male touch, "He slid his middle down the middle of my left palm. I snatched my palm away."

*Internalized oppression.* When considering obstacles to their goals, participants described how external factors of racism and sexism complicated their interactions with other Black people and with themselves as these internalized behaviors became obstacles to getting what they wanted.

*Conforming to stereotypes of Blackness.* Among the negative stereotypes of Blackness is the misconception that Black people are more likely to be criminals and to sell drugs (Kleider, Cavrak, & Knuycky, 2012). Negative stereotypes of Black Americans are used to legitimize social abuses and when internalized hold in place these social abuses. Yolanda began to sell drugs as a young woman living in New York city, and

stated that on the one hand she felt by selling drugs, she was killing her people, but on the other hand, said "I didn't stop because I felt wrong. It was my norm."

*Colorism.* Preferring skin tone that is closer to White skin tone, keeps in place notions of White superiority (Pyke, 2010). In the following passage Ashana tried to guide a group of Black girls away from the negative impact of colorism:

Many of the beautiful chocolate girls from ages 7 to 8 years old that were in my group preferred to play inside as they would say to me that they were "already too dark" my heart hurt as they uttered these words to me. I used? to be the same little girl that was afraid to get darker from the sun because I was "black enough."

Ashana had lived the impact of this form of self-hatred and wanted to steer these girls, away from that pain, but wrote further that the girls were not willing to listen.

*Sexualization of Black women.* The selling of African women into American slavery, and the myth that African women needed to be tamed and Christianized fueled stereotypes of Black women as hypersexualized. In contemporary society this stereotype, perpetuates the sexual mistreatment of Black women. Lauren shared a childhood experience of being silenced by her fellow Black classmates who sexually demeaned women of her Dominican origin:

Santo, is the slur used for Dominicans in St. Croix. "I bet she be on her back all day long, my momma said that's the only thing that they're good for", [my female classmate] said. I was appalled, and anxiety started to grip at me, the day seemed hotter than it was, but I didn't say anything, knowing that if I spoke up I would be the next target.

In this passage not only do her fellow Black female classmates extend the oppression of colonial sexualization of Black Caribbean women as a form of dehumanization (Kempadoo, 2004), but in Lauren's account, this internalized racism was passed down from mothers to daughters.

*Assimilation.* Participants submitted to blending or silence as a survival strategy, which is coded here as internalized racism, because the participants make it clear that assimilation was not sustainable as a survival strategy. Though some survival strategies like camouflaging identity as assimilation or silence may work as temporary short-term emergency measures for survival, when applied long-term, they become forms of self-sabotage, and internalized hatred that perpetuate the goals of an oppressive force (Canaan, 2016).

Lauren, wrote, "I spent long periods of time practicing my American accent in bathroom mirrors and avoiding social interactions. This was to prevent people from asking, 'Why do you talk so funny? Why do you talk like you have nothing higher than a 3rd grade education?'" In the long run, this resulted in a crisis. When asked who she was, Lauren felt blocked: "This question repeated itself over and over in my head and I finally realized how much of my culture I have suppressed in order to prevent ignorance to be spewed at my feet."

This level of self-awareness in participants' writing was prompted by personal plot exercises from The Mirror Exercise (see Appendix B) and The Relationship Museum Exercise (see Appendix C). These prompts encouraged participants to look beyond external constructs obstructing their path and consider internal obstacles and the connections those obstacles have to: external forces, wounds in their past, and current



relationships in their lives. The level of commitment to making these connections between obstacles, wounds and relationships is exhibited in their journal entries.

**Survival strategies.** Black girls learn strategies for surviving racism, sexism, and economic oppression from their mothers, othermothers, spiritual leaders, and other community members who offer intergenerational knowledge (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015) The theme *survival strategies* did not exist in isolation but as action and reactions to the external and internal obstacles faced by participants. The first writing prompt for The Mirror Exercise was The Vanity Mirror. Participants were asked to consider their strengths, and positive attributes. Some participants described having difficulty writing their positive attributes, but later in the semester described having an easier time recalling these attributes as they wrote in their journals about personal strengths. These strengths manifested in their journal writings as survival strategies for coping with life obstacles, and consisted of: *self-love* (as *pride, speaking out and speaking up*, and *self-determination*), and *community connections* (as *othermothers and fictive kin, peer community*, and *ancestral community*).

**Self-love.** Five of the six Black participants defined and defended themselves by expressing their *self-love*. This self-love included *pride, speaking out and speaking up*, and *self-determination*.

**Pride.** Sharon for instance talked about her pride as a Jamaican girl and her desire to play college sports. "I was the Jamaican girl that was too proud. I couldn't help that my dad was a proud Jamaican man, and those proud genes were passed to me." She goes on to say, "I wanted to go and play division one sports in college as well as get an education to better myself."

Trisha offered a scene where her sense of pride and self-love was bolstered by other Black women. In this, passage she is exuberant as she is cheered on to love her Black woman self.

"I love being black" we repeat "I love being black" she screams louder "I LOVE BEING BLACK" we match intensity and repeat "I LOVE BEING BLACK" she continues "It's the color of my skin, it's the skin that I'm in" she sings while simultaneously jiggling. . . . I feel so powerful. I feel so black. I feel so woman.

The expression of pride in their Blackness, their womanishness, and their nationality, suggests that when difficult situations occur, expressions of self-love and pride in who they are arise as a reaction of survival.

*Speaking out and speaking up.* When faced with the obstacle of unwanted male touch, Yolanda recounts using the strength of her voice to ward off her assailant, "You fuckn' pervert. An eleven-year-old can turn into a 21-year-old cursing sailor in a blink of an eye if violated." Her classmate Trisha also recounts using the force of her voice to be heard, in this case when her contribution to problem solving was being ignored by her parents, "i busted into tears and scream 'LISTEN TO ME I'M A PERSON'." Sharon, also wrote about using her voice in a difficult situation, in this case, she corrected her teacher, and spoke her truth regarding her identity: "I explained to her that I was not born in Africa, and neither were my parents or grandparents. She took it as me being smart, but she simply didn't understand." In each case, the participants wrote from moments in childhood when adults were in positions of power over them, but their voice was the tool they used to assert themselves.

*Self-determination.* Participants showed self-determination as a way of dealing with challenges to their personal goals. Sharon, for instance, stated, "I knew that by putting in the time and the long hours in the weight room, doing study hall . . . I was exactly where I wanted to be, and I was getting better." Sharon also wrote, "I told myself I wanted to go and play division one sports in college as well as get an education to better myself." The participant Danika for instance, responded that she wants to "be a technical writer" and "go into teaching."

*Community Connection.* Another means through which participants survived and thrived on their journeys of obtaining their goals was through their connection to community where they leaned on *othermothers and fictive kin*, their *peer community*, and their *ancestral community*.

*Othermothers and fictive kin.* Othermothering and fictive kin are described as roles that members of a family or larger community take on in the care of children who are not biologically theirs. This type of fostering is often fierce for the survival of the larger family, culture or race (James & Busia, 1993). Yolanda told of working with other Black women to start an organization for their empowerment. She looked for guidance in her community from a woman with internet acclaim, who quickly became family: "So, we asked her to move to [our town] to run our movement. She responded, 'hell yeah...'. Her pay is free room and board and she takes care of us." This sort of "it takes a village" dynamic showed up in Lauren's journal, and Ashana's journal as well.

Lauren, though a young adult is tasked with becoming a mother for her teen brother when he moves from the Virgin Islands to join her in America. She exhibits tough

love, when she cannot get him to respond to her sisterly guidance: "I will let him crash and burn and learn from his mistakes."

Collins (2000) states that "even when relationships are not between kin or fictive kin, African-American community norms traditionally were such that neighbors cared for one another's children" (p. 179). Ashana shared such a story in her journal when she is about to step in and babysit for her neighbor whose mom has gone into labor, but Ashana must pass inspection from the child's bus driver first, a woman she knows well, but who feels an obligation as collective community for the child. "Ms. Lane looking over her glasses at me. Ms. Lane is the bus driver and if you don't look familiar she will do some investigating before she pulls off with her bus. I love that about Ms. Lane."

Ashana shares another instance where she wishes to care for the next generation by conveying her new-found awareness by instilling color-pride in the Black girls who like her thought they were "too dark." Yolanda, Lauren and Ashana's stories of collective community and their desire to mother family members, classmates and the next generation reflect multiple forms of othermothering as a means of collective community survival.

*Peer community.* Participants also journaled about finding this sense of belonging among peers who share a similar identity. Trisha wrote an entry about going on retreat with other black youth, "I'm rocking side to side with the biggest smile on my face, sun illuminating my brown skin and the other 40 students chanting with me. We all look so beautiful."

*Ancestral community.* Community was expressed by the participants as family or extensions of family, but also as ancestral. Ogbonnaya (1994) drew on Afrikan centered

understandings of identity to design a model for understanding Black identity. In this model, the self is made up of a community of selves: past, present, and future. The past or ancestral self is an integral part of internal community and one's whole identity. This is reflected in one of Sharon's journal entries, when she talks about identifying herself as Jamaican via her ancestral line: "My grandparents, mother and father were all born in Jamaica." This is also seen in one of Lauren's journal entries where she wrote about drawing on her ancestral connection when trying to make decisions about keeping or discarding her Dominican accent: "My dialect and pronunciations weigh heavy with the voices of ancestors who burned down plantations for my freedom."

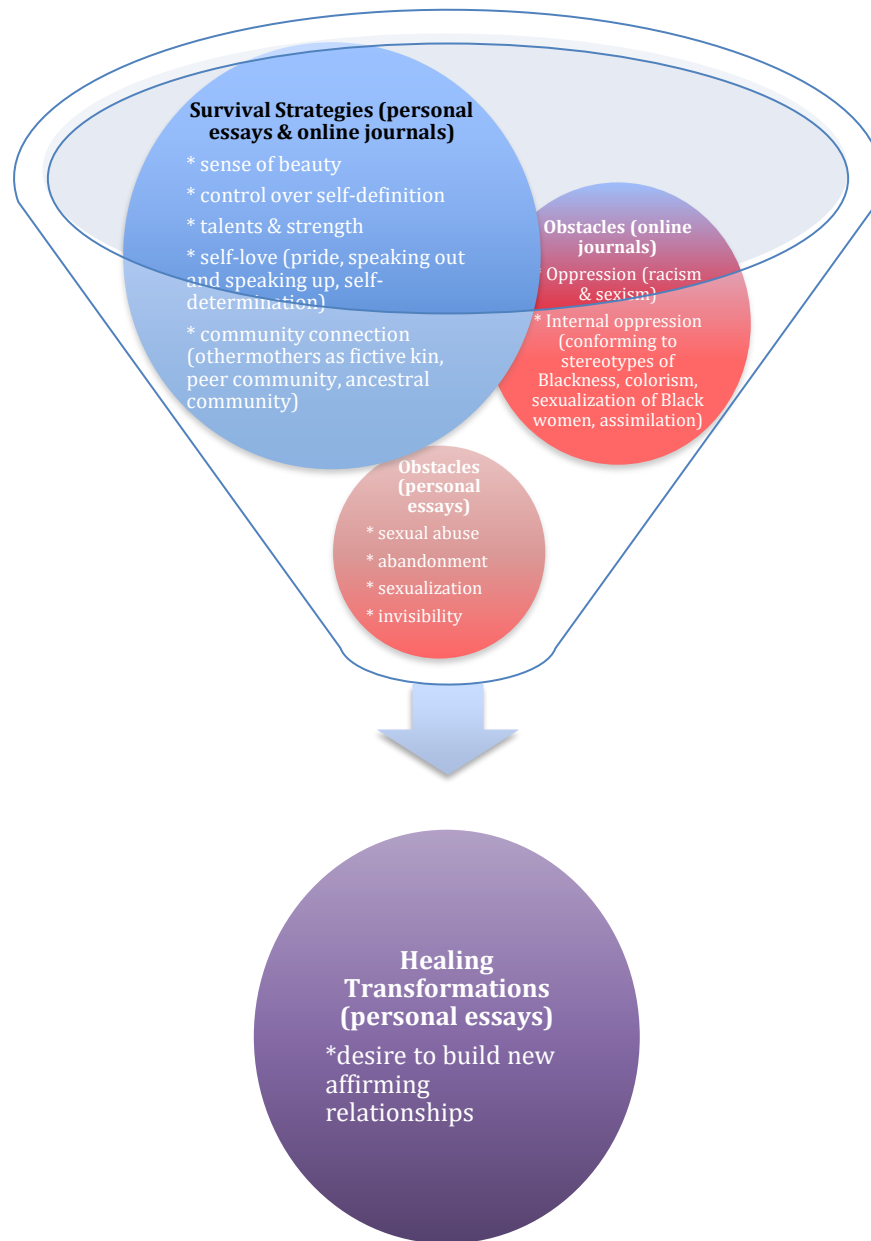
In a Black feminist/womanist context of survival the aforementioned survival strategies are learned through socialization, which "constitutes the indirect and direct messages transmitted from one generation to the next that contribute to identity formation. Mothers, grandmothers, and other mothers teach/show Black girls how to use these strategies to navigate through multiple spaces" (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015, p. 511). The online journals revealed that these survival strategies were transmitted to the participants as *self-love (pride, speaking out and speaking up, and self-determination)*, and through *community connection (as othermothers and fictive kin, peer community, and ancestral community)*.

Based on the data analysis of the online journals, Black women participants in the course used survival strategies for overcoming obstacles to their goals and growth. Two *obstacles* were identified: *oppression (as racism and sexism), internalized racism (as conforming to stereotypes of Blackness, colorism, sexualization of Black women, and assimilation)*. To combat these obstacles participants spoke of *survival strategies* they

used. Two survival strategies were *self-love* (as *self-definition*, *self-defense*, and *self-determination*), and *community connection*.

With the online journal writings, participants were directed to write scenes, which may have an outcome, but not necessarily a revelation as the plot of a larger essay would. With the personal essays, participants were directed to write their plots through to revelation or outcome, which produced transformation as the revelation. Though the online journal scenes written as personal responses to the published writings contained accounts of life obstacles and survival strategies, none of the journal writings produced revelations/transformations as part of the scenes. Figure 3 shows the action and reaction results of personal writing in both the personal essays and online journals combined to offer an overall picture of themes that emerged as participants wrote about their lives as Black women outside of the class and in their family and greater society environments.

**Figure 3. Personal Writing - Action and Reaction: Resilience Themes in Personal Essays, and Online Journals**



## Interviews

The results of the participants' interviews revealed their overall experience with the course, which was designed to advance particular goals of Black feminist theory: self-definition and community building. These objectives were met through personal plot prompts that yielded personal essays, through assigned readings of memoirs of published Black authors, and through activities that encouraged writing with their peers in a group setting. Major categories are represented here in bold and their subthemes in italics.

Participants reported a discomfort with sharing personal stories early on in the semester. They expressed that this discomfort with sharing out seemed an obstacle though necessary to their desire to write authentically. They described this discomfort as dissipating as a result of time in the classroom experiencing mutual vulnerability, which helped foster *community connection with their classmates* and *connection to their teacher*. Participant's also reported that this sense of community was the catalyst for *healing transformations* they experienced as a result of taking the course. These results are presented in Figure 4, which offers a visual of the evolving relationship of these four primary categories: *discomfort with sharing personal stories*, *community connection with the class*, *connection to the teacher*, and *healing transformations*.

**Discomfort with sharing personal stories.** Three of the Black women students, Trisha, Lauren, and Yolanda talked about feelings of *discomfort with sharing personal stories* in a classroom setting early in the semester. Trisha, for instance said she could see the value in sharing, but that knowing this did not make her more comfortable. "I feel like being forced to do that with a classroom made me extremely uncomfortable because that's just something I don't like to do even though I feel like it's necessary it's just



something I don't like to do." Similarly, Lauren shared, "I wrote about abuse that I went through. . . . I think you called on me to read. . . . At first, it was a bit uncomfortable to talk about."

Though participants volunteered to share during the semester, and were told that sharing was optional, Trisha said she felt "forced" and Lauren said, "I think you called on me to read ." This suggests that they both felt a level of community pressure to share out from their peers and their teacher. In contrast, Yolanda, the eldest participant, spoke about a need to share the truth as a priority in her life that overpowered her fear of judgement or discomfort:

I was uncomfortable, but so I felt like I needed to add, I needed to say out loud, no matter how I felt, no matter what anybody in the class could look at [me] like, 'Scarlet letter? . . . She did what?' Because, I needed ta, ta, ta put that truth out there, no different than any other truth I thought I had. You know, I didn't want to cheat myself [or] them, and just the order of life.

**Community connection with the class.** The interviews revealed several sub-themes that were reflections of a larger theme of *community connection with the class* (*mutual vulnerability with the class, othermothering of classmates, and assignments as community building*). During the interviews participants talked about the sense of community they felt with the class, and how this was largely due to the mutual vulnerability of sharing difficult parts of their life stories and due to othermothering of their fellow classmates. Participants also responded that particular assignments in class helped to facilitate a sense of community.

*Mutual vulnerability with the class.* Participants expressed that sharing out from their personal stories brought them close as community. "We almost built our own little community within the classroom and created like a space for everyone to be vulnerable, and to not be afraid of sharing their stories." This sense of safety came with an ease and comfort in sharing, "it's definitely more comforting" and this made their personal issues feel less isolating and offered the type of kinship that creating and consuming personal stories (biblio-fusion) can offer. "There's been a lot of times where I feel like I'm the only person . . . there are other people who have gone through it as well, it puts me at ease."

Though three of the five interviewees shared that this level of vulnerability in expressing their wounds and wants was initially difficult, they also shared that time spent in the class and mutual vulnerability with their classmates helped them share out through the personal plot process of building an essay. For example, Lauren shared, "When we first shared out the wound scene was very difficult for me . . . but as time went on, it got easier to talk about." Trisha stated in this passage that mutual vulnerability was the primary catalyst to her classmates being vulnerable, which created community.

The main way is me realizing that I couldn't be surface because it wasn't fair to the rest of the class that [were tapping into] deeper levels to really write about something intense and serious and I couldn't just write about something surface that wasn't bothering me but something that I didn't feel easy about writing about. I had to dig in deep and figure out who I was and what I was going to write about and what influenced me as a child and how did change me.

Some participants also attribute this sense of comfort to the dynamic of having classmates who were willing to make themselves vulnerable first, "We all influenced each other, because it just took that one person to take the initiative to express, and then everyone started to open up as a class." Though participants' discomfort with vulnerability seemed to include community pressure from their classmates and teacher, they also expressed that this group influence and pressure was beneficial to their ability to open up and transform.

*Assignments as community building.* Three of the interviewees stated further that their sense of community in the classroom was connected to the assignments as catalysts. The online journals and peer edits were designed to have students interact as classmates, and in turn helped them to self-define. Trisha shared, "I believe through writings and through the peer editing it [builds] community and made us all closer together, and I feel like through that getting closer with one another people started to define themselves." Danika on the other hand stated that the peer edits were confusing, "sometimes I didn't understand what they meant by something they said . . . that was somewhat strange," yet offered a level of connection though less intimate than community, "Even if I wasn't friends with them it made me have sort of like a connection with them even though we don't have the same aspirations. It was like getting to know people without necessarily having to get to know them." Danika's response suggests that not all Black women students desire the level of intimacy that community building assignments promote, and that learning from peers might be an unfavorable match for their learning style.

With that said, Sharon and Yolanda saw the assignments as a catalyst to connecting across identity differences. Sharon for instance stated, "it [the course

assignments] showed me that even though we come from different homes and different backgrounds, we all have similar goals and we all doing similar things." Yolanda spoke of the assignments as connecting across racial and gender identities in the classroom:

I just felt like you gave us really honest writers' words to read, um, your book, I mean you gave us honest remnants of your own life, and I didn't look at that as a Black or White thing, um, I looked at it as a real thing . . . because your classroom is mixed, I never heard somebody say that they didn't relate, I mean even reading our threads [online journal responses], no matter if it was man or woman, or even the ones that were white, they understood where you was comin from.

As seen in Yolanda's comment, there was overlap with the responses that participants had regarding the catalyst for their sense of connection and other comments in the interviews that spoke directly to their relationship with the teacher's identity as a Black woman.

**Connection to the teacher.** In the interviews, the participants also spoke about their *connection to the teacher* (*teacher as othermother, teacher as fellow Black woman, mutual vulnerability with the teacher, and future self through the teacher*) as a major factor in their development. The teacher was also the researcher in this study who wrote with the participants during the semester and chose to share out from parts of her writing where it might encourage students to share or encourage trust. Participants experienced this as mothering from a fellow Black woman who had endured similar life circumstances and who stands as a projection of their future selves.

*Teacher as othermother.* Sharon and Lauren attributed the sense of community to the mothering role of the teacher. Sharon stated, "It [community] played out in the classroom, because you played the mothering role, and made everyone wonderful, and helped each one to be able to open up and express beyond what we usually would." Lauren spoke of mothering from the teacher as a cultural norm in her Dominican upbringing: "That was always the kind of classrooms that I've been a part of back home in the Virgin Islands. . . . I'm used to teachers becoming almost like second mothers."

*Teacher as a fellow Black woman.* Yolanda explained that she connected with the instructor as a Black woman teacher, because of her pride in Black peoples' ingenuity: "I mean honestly, we roll, like, we create the culture, I mean like everything stems from what we're doing, and so I think we have that power to be the um, the, whatcha call it? the medium? Like, we are always setting the standard, so if we pick it, it's gone always be right." Sharon ascribed her connection to the teacher based on their shared identity struggles: "being led by another Black woman, kinda made it, maybe easier for me to relate to."

*Mutual vulnerability with teacher.* Within Sharon's comment was overlap with her shared Black woman identity with the teacher and the teacher's reciprocity with the students, "being led by another Black woman, kinda made it, maybe easier for me to relate to, and like you were able to tell your story pretty much allowed me to connect with you off of some things that you said." Danika also explained, "you brought your own personal story . . . and you read it out loud and that was pretty cool to see."

*Future self through the teacher.* Throughout the interviews, participants shared ways that they felt the teacher's identity as a Black woman mirrored their own identity

and helped them to see themselves in the future. Lauren, for instance, struggled to explain this phenomenon, "It was almost as if I was just seeing myself in the future in you in a kinda way. I almost saw myself in you, in like the future tense if that makes any kinda sense." Trisha, pointed out specific aspects of the teacher's identity that brought about connection and allowed her to see her future self through the teacher, which also allowed her to view the possibilities of who she can be as a Black woman:

It's kinda like how I saw myself like how far I can go, like I seen someone who we have like similarities and parallels and like I can get that far. I can be a teacher. I can teach in college classes if I want to, but I can also have a life as a writer and climb mountains, 'cause I remember you told us when it was the solar eclipse you went up the mountain and saw it. Just the whole you being as a person kinda inspires me to like what I can be and how I can have multiple identities and be multifaceted

Danika also experienced a connection with the teacher as a forecast of her possible self, "It shows you what you may experience as you may grow older if you haven't yet experienced it before."

In their interviews, there were overarching themes of community, but participants cited the main ingredient for creating the cohesiveness of community as mutual vulnerability. Participants mentioned mutual vulnerability as the key to helping them get over the discomfort of sharing intimate details in their writing, and as the key to deepening their connection to their peers and their instructor. They stated that they were less afraid and were able to envision the possibilities for their future, because of the shared experiences. Because of these community

connections, participants said they transformed during the course, and said they witnessed transformation in their peers.

**Healing transformation.** Similar to the personal essays, but in contrast to the online journals, participants also talked about various types of *healing transformation* (*improved relationships with others, emboldened voice, improved self-image, intergenerational healing transformation*). Personal plot contains prompts designed to spur revelation and outcome about previous wounds and wants in life. The transformations participants wrote about in their personal essays was reflected in what they shared in their interviews, where they reported *improved relationships with others, emboldened voice, and improved self-image*. They also talked about ways that the overall experience of the course including the writing and their in-class experience encouraged opportunities for *intergenerational healing transformation* in a "paying it forward" manner.

***Improved relationships with others.*** Participants shared that the introspection of looking back at their past wounds, seeing the weight of those wounds in their current lives, and evaluating their gifts while releasing blame improved their relationships with others. Sharon for instance, acknowledges a shift in her relationship with her family. For years after the sexual assault she survived at age 13, she was distant from her family, but the process of writing her memoir helped a shift to begin:

Pretty much I, I wanna say that I pushed myself away from my family, but I've kinda been like the black sheep, the one that just was there, but wasn't really there. I didn't really interact with them, but now, I'm starting to interact more.

Yolanda shared that having the process of personal plot in the class helped her relate to her son who is also a college student, but who prefers media entertainment to reading or writing: "So, um, it made me, so I talked to him in more of a way where he could offer to his generation so he could offer of his accounts of life . . . [he] could mix in some audio for commercial breaks."

***Emboldened voice.*** Both Lauren and Sharon spoke about the ways the process of writing from wounding event to revelation and outcome helped them to locate their voice again and commit to using their voice to advance their wellbeing. Each, also spoke about this in their online journals as well as in the interviews. Lauren, who felt violated in the past spoke of how she intends to keep others from violating her in the future:

My revelation scene was basically that I will not let anybody walk over me. I am going to speak up for myself. I'm not going to let anybody violate my personal space, and if they do I will speak up about it. And that's not in the past the type of person that I was. I've always been kind of timid, and more introverted, so that confrontation was the thing that I just did not do, and throughout the semester I realized that sometimes confrontation is necessary, for your own sake.

Sharon says that the Black feminist learning environment helped bring out her voice, because it was "empowering, being able to express myself and voice my own opinion and get my perspective opinion out there."

***Improved self-image.*** Through the process of writing their memoirs participants experienced a transformation that resulted in an improved self-image. Yolanda for



instance shared, "this class is two-fold, because it is revelation for me, and then it's also healing. . . . So, I'm getting to see development, and I'm getting to see the identity that who am I without who I have blamed?" Trisha also talked about this shift in self-image as part of a transformation:

I feel like the most impacted by realizing how far I came. I was kinda hard on myself and kinda down feeling like I haven't accomplished anything or grown as a person. And, I actually like seen from the wounded event to the resolution I seen how far I have grown as a person and it realizes how much farther I can go as a person.

***Intergenerational healing.*** Through the process of personal plot, participants turned their attention away from the persistence of the wound and toward re-gifting their new self-awareness to others, thus regenerating and passing to others what was beneficial from the wound. Therefore, re-gifting showed up in the personal essays and online journals. In the interviews, the eldest participant Yolanda spoke about her desire to re-gift her new-found awareness to others.

For instance, as part of her transformation, Yolanda stated that she repurposed her previous obstacles and negative behavior of seeking attention into stage presence that would help her deliver poetic and musical messages of survival to young girls. Hence, a gifting of her journey to the next generation. She also talked about the importance of finding ways to speak to the next generation:

"I coin myself kinda like the bridge of the young and old. . . . This is a new human being I feel like that's been birthed, and then if we don't try to

identify with them we won't be able to talk to them. And, I think that [the assignments] made me see just how extra important that was to me."

Trisha stated that her desire to help others is directly connected to what she understands of Black feminist theory:

Like me being 24 helping other girls essentially helps me as far as like community building which are specific principles for Black feminist, which I'm not aware that they're specific principles for any other discipline. . . . I feel like all those principles are important for building myself and the community.

Much like with the online journal responses, *community* was a major theme that emerged from the interviews. A creative community experience provided Black women participants with a way to ease their discomfort with sharing from personal experiences and actualize *healthy transformations*. In their collective memoir writings (personal essays and online journals), and in their interviews, participants spoke of using their talents and strengths to offer current healing transformation and intergenerational healing to others.

*Community connection with the class* was repeated across the online journal data. *Community connection with the teacher* and some of the *healing transformations* were unique. One unique quality of the theme of healthy transformations in the interviews that differed from the personal essays, was that in participants personal essays they wrote scenes of their future. In these, they showed a desire to build new affirming relationships in the future. In the interviews, they spoke of transformations that they experienced through writing the essay and through the overall experience of the course; they spoke of

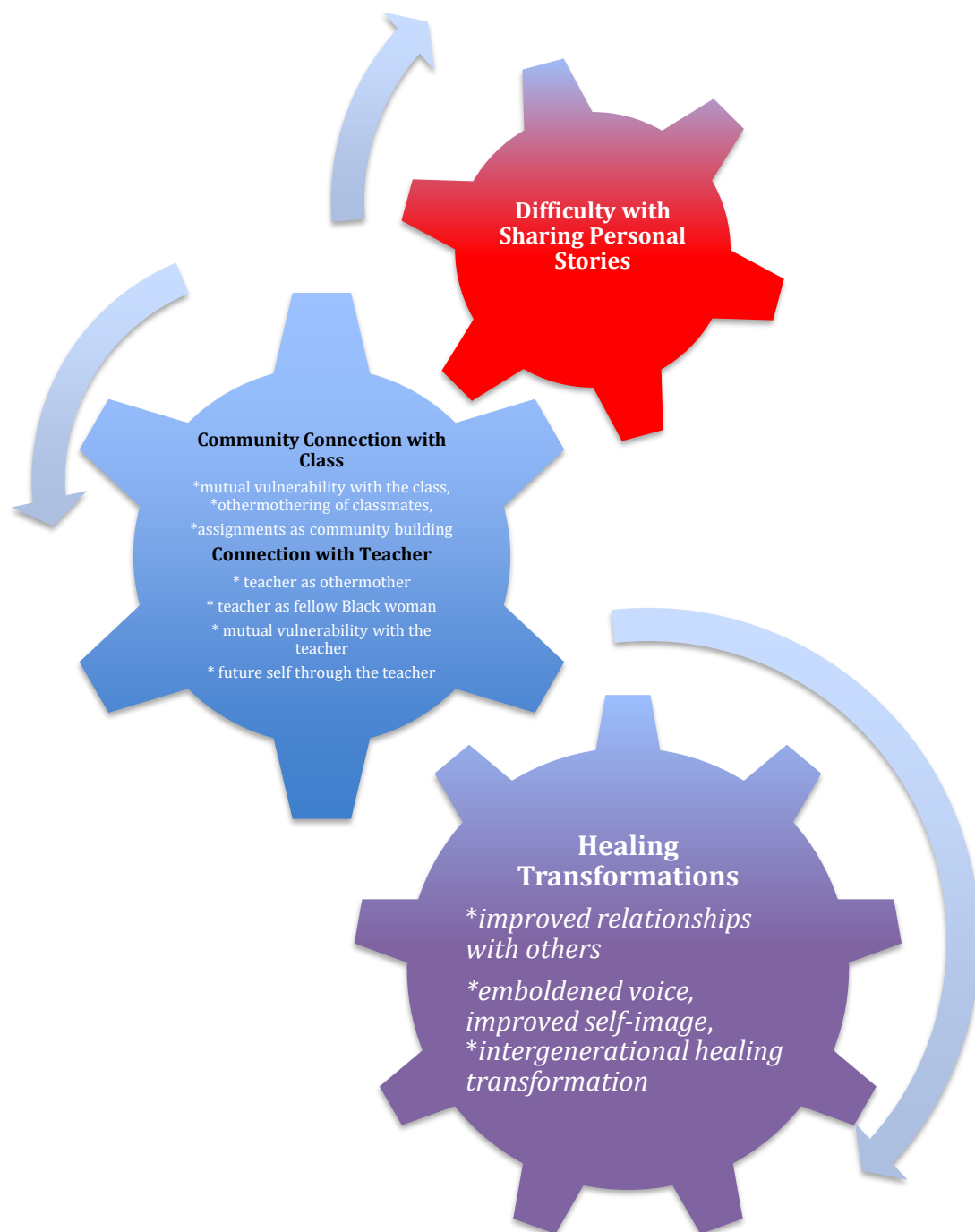
many of their transformations in the past tense suggesting they lived some of what they hoped to experience as transformation by the time they reached the end of the course. Especially interesting was the intergenerational healthy transformation where participants talked about ways they had taken their new self-definition and re-gifted it to their community.

Within the interviews, the participants added to this list of communities they noted in their personal essays and online journals by including the classroom where peers and their instructor became community through mutually vulnerable exchanges of personal stories, and by adding a future extension of community through the intention of sharing personal stories with the next generation. Community learning and healing in Black spaces offer tools for womanhood in a world that is prejudiced against her gender and race. "Black women's centrality in families, churches, and other community organizations allows us to share with younger, less experienced sisters our concrete knowledge of what it takes to be self-defined Black women" (Collins, 2000, p. 260). Through this sharing Black girls also learn survival strategies (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015).

The results of this study show that Black feminist classrooms are a likely addition to the list of community spaces like Black neighborhoods and Black churches outlined by Collins (2000). In these spaces, intergenerational conveyance of self-definition and survival knowledge can occur and lend to intergenerational healing for Black women. Figure 4 shows how participants initially had difficulty sharing their personal stories but were emboldened by the themes of community-building that were promoted in the Black feminist classroom. These community connections helped them to share their stories and ultimately experience healing transformation.

**Figure 4.** Black Women Students' Reported Experience in a Black Feminist Memoir

Writing Course



## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion

This study sought to explore the experience of Black women students who were writing and reading creative memoir toward the goal of self-definition in a Black feminist learning environment at an HBCU. Participants engaged in creative writing (personal essays, journals) that had as its purpose to draw out their lived experiences as Black women in their families and their greater societies. Their writings showed that they experience racial, and sexual discrimination in their lives that is external and internalized. Themes within their writings showed they seek out and create community connections and reach in for self-love and other strengths to dissipate these oppressions. Many of them desire to share their strengths to build new relationships.

After the semester, five of the six Black women participated in one-on-one interviews designed to reflect on their experience with the course's Black feminist objectives of self-definition and community building. They reported having initial difficulty sharing from their personal experiences in a class, but over time mutual vulnerability with their fellow classmates and their teacher caused them to feel community connection that fostered them toward healthy transformations to pass on to other generations.

The emergence of mutual vulnerability as a key element in community building and intergenerational healing transformation provides insight into the primary and secondary inquiries of this study, one of which was to understand Black women students' experience with utilizing personal plot as a vehicle for self-exploration in a Black feminist learning environment at an HBCU. Participants shared that personal plot

method, particularly the revelation and outcome prompts helped them have healthy transformations after acknowledging their wounds and wants, and helped them take their new self-definition and re-gift it to their community and younger generations. This advances research on methods of expressive writing that provide emotional closure and sustained healing.

The study also initially sought to understand Black women students' experience with biblio-fusion (writing and reading) toward self-definition and transformation. All six of the Black women participants stated that hearing and reading each other's personal essays, hearing and reading the teacher's personal experiences, as well as reading the personal essays of established Black authors helped them to acquire new kinship and connection through ways they saw themselves reflected in the experiences of others. Most notably, participants stated that the personal aspect of biblio-fusion created mutual vulnerability that became the safety net and community webbing for their connectedness.

Further, the study pursued answers to the following question: How does Black feminist pedagogy influence Black women students' identities as individuals, students and members of other collective identity groups? This insight can be ascertained from participants' responses that their teacher's mutual vulnerability, her role modeling, and her guidance as a form of mothering allowed the class as a whole to feel safe in exploring intimate life subjects. Insight into this inquiry was also provided by claims that emboldened voice was a result of the teaching method and the Black feminist teaching environment. The fear Black women hold of speaking out, telling, or writing their truths has long sought absolution:

The fear of exposure, the fear that one's deepest emotions and innermost thoughts will be dismissed as mere nonsense, felt by so many young girls keeping diaries, holding and hiding speech, seems to me now one of the barriers that women have always needed and still need to destroy so that we are no longer pushed into secrecy or silence (hooks, 1989, p. 7).

After the experience of the course, Lauren shared, "My revelation scene was basically that I will not let anybody walk over me. I am going to speak up for myself," and Sharon explained that it was "empowering, being able to express myself and voice my own opinion and get my perspective opinion out there."

Both findings on biblio-fusion as fostering mutual vulnerability, and Black feminist teaching as fostering mutual vulnerability, advance the possibilities of methods for applying Black feminist theory and shed light on new areas of Black feminist research particularly the impact of othermothering on the Black feminist teacher. Such inquiries might offer the intentionality of a method (biblio-fusion) that contains built-in reciprocity, which has been identified as taken for granted in Black feminist teaching methods (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). Additionally, further research on Black women teacher's experience with mutual vulnerability and othermothering might offer insight into professional support for Black feminist teachers.

A remaining secondary question within the larger inquiry of this study was: How does a coeducational classroom as a microcosmic reflection of the larger HBCU campus environment influence the participants' experience with self-definition through writing and reading? In the interviews, the Black women participants shared that they felt the assignments and the environment of the class, though centered on Black feminist themes,

was beneficial to all participants regardless of their different identities. They further shared a collective sentiment that, "I gained and grew as a person not just me but all the people that I've been around that have been in these spaces whether they are Black or any other ethnicity or gender."

### **Implications for Expressive Writing Research**

Some participants shared that they experienced discomfort early in the semester when reading aloud in the classroom from their personal stories. These same participants stated that as the semester progressed, they became comfortable sharing from their personal writing as other students made themselves vulnerable and shared from their personal stories. Through this biblio-fusion, participants felt at ease as they experienced a sense of community through mutual vulnerability. Participants also spoke consistently about the revelation aspect of personal plot as being the component of the writing method that caused their healing transformations.

Participants' discomfort early in the process of writing and sharing stories from their personal plot is consistent with findings in previous expressive writing research, which determined that individuals utilizing expressive writing methods are likely to feel worse before they feel better, and that writing methods that extend the process as well as writing methods with closure might be important to increasing the long-term therapeutic value of expressive writing (Barclay & Skarlicki, 2009; Meshberg-Cohen, Svikis & McMahon, 2014; Prater, 2016). The experience of personal plot, from wounding event to revelation and outcome was a form of expressive writing that helped participants to process through difficult life experiences with a sense of closure, and the larger umbrella of biblio-fusion instilled a sense of purpose for their writing, which was to share out and



offer their writing as a phase of the creating process. In this way, through making themselves vulnerable, they were able to transform from victim of the wound to agent in others' healing and transformation process.

This type of healing becomes cyclical like the call and response of biblio-fusion that in this study allowed participants to feed and be fed by shared personal plot. Future research might benefit from a deeper examination of mutual vulnerability as an aspect of biblio-fusion, which goes beyond writing a revelation and outcome, and employs interacting with and potentially impacting the healing and transformation of others.

### **Implications for Black Feminist Theory**

**New methods for applying Black feminist theory.** The use of story-telling to educate and offer messages for survival and healing are age old in all cultures. Amoah (1997) asserts that narrative is *the* method for applying Black feminist theory, because of its African traditions, its capacity to act as a vehicle for Black women's liberation via telling her story, and its capacity to act as a means for Black women to construct theory specific to her traditions and social condition. In declaring the value of narrative, Amoah (1997) mentions the reciprocal quality of not only narrative written or told, but narrative received or read. "Sharing stories creates a network. The strength of the network stems from an understanding that human experience is the basis for Narrative" (p. 85). Amoah speaks to the intergenerational transmission and community building potential of the receptive and expressive quality of narrative, but does not offer specific activities of narrative method that might instruct others in how to advance Black feminist theory.

Biblio-fusion as a method for applying Black feminist theory, employs both the expressive and receptive qualities of narrative. Biblio-fusion was designed for individuals

to identify wounds and the resulting wants, to seek actions to self-fulfill those wants, and to fortify community by re-gifting the new awareness to others. In this study, Black feminist themes of self-definition, othermothering, and double consciousness were explored through the reflective writing, and themes of community building were explored through the receptive reading and sharing of personal stories. This study positions biblio-fusion as a useful method for helping students in a Black feminist classroom to explore difficult topics such as internalized oppression, and abuses against women, and to do something proactive with those explorations by sharing their narratives with their community.

Biblio-fusion might also be a useful method in Black women's spaces for self-guided explorations of narrative. Previous studies consider the impact of Black women's writing and reading circles for their capacity to utilize Black women's narrative for self-guided healing that feels culturally safe (Evans, 2015; Prater, 2016). These studies do not examine reciprocity or mutual vulnerability and their possible impact, though the findings in these studies do point to participants experiencing a sense of community by reading the works of others and being in mutually vulnerable spaces.

Book clubs and writing circles do not typically have a facilitator trained in expressive therapy methods to prevent additional emotional trauma, to create emotional closure for personal writing, to minimize countertransference among group members, and incorporate mental self-care for participants engaged in reflective writing and receptive reading. Though biblio-fusion method does not come with a trained facilitator, its components of shared personal plot contain revelation and outcome and components of reading and sharing the writing as an outcome, which may make it a safer method if

utilized alone or by a self-guided group. Sharing the manuscript of one's writing as an outcome also fulfills the transmission of wisdom from writer to reader, thus promoting Black feminist/womanist goals of intergenerational healing and transformation.

**Intergenerational and multigenerational transmission of Black women's knowledge.** The wounding event in personal plot method is acknowledged for its paradoxical gift of strength-giving properties. Through making one's self vulnerable and sharing the wounds and the resulting gifts, the Black women participants in this study created community in the classroom and expressed the desire to extend their new-found awareness to other generations. This transmission of experiences is a type of Black women's resilience and survival knowledge that "mothers, othermothers, teachers, and churchwomen," pass down to the next generation by "constructing and reconstructing these oppositional knowledges" of resilience and resistance in the face of racism (Collins, 2000). Participants extended the recipients of their resilience-based knowledge beyond the classroom community. For instance, Sharon, Lauren, Yolanda, Ashana, and Trisha shared that the experience of writing their memoirs using personal plot changed the way they communicated with friends and family and that those relationships benefitted from this change. Yolanda, decided to help her son use the tools of personal plot to help him have a better understanding of himself as a young adult and suggested that all young adults go through a similar process.

Participants' comments about their hope of sharing their work with others in order to make for better relationships and in order to teach others how to thrive, complemented current definitions of Black women's intergenerational and multigenerational resilience:

Resilience is a process of reorganization, resignification, overcoming and transcendence in light of the experiencing of a potentially disintegrative context. It accesses personal and collective resources, such as: self-confidence, optimism, high spirits, self-control, flexibility, perseverance, good family and social relationships, good analysis of situations, creativity, social and programmatic support, belongingness, autonomy and meaning of life (Prestes & Paiva, 2016, p. 681).

The idea of one being made stronger by what threatened is ecologically sustained when the strength is transferred to another generation, minimizing the potential of that generation being harmed by the same. The findings in this study speak to intergenerational healing and transformation by gifting this resilience to other generations, a combination of Black feminist and womanist goals that build upon the collective resources of strong family bonds, religious ties, and community (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). Life stories passed down to the next generation of Black girls, like passing down antibodies through the umbilical cord, mean the next generation might benefit from the manner in which the wounds of the previous Black mothers were healed.

**Black feminist pedagogy.** Many Black women become teachers in predominantly Black environments in order to impart knowledge on Black survival, activism, and well-being to a younger generation. Within their daily teaching is a component of othermothering overlooked by Western forms of education (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Dixson & Dingus, 2008). Black women teachers share the reality of the socio-political climate with their Black students and their place in it. What is seldom the inquiry of studies, but frequently mentioned in the results is the reciprocal life-story

sharing between teacher and student (Drake-Burnette, Garrett-Akinsanya, & Bryant-Davis, 2016).

Johnson-Bailey and Alfred (2006) spoke of mutual vulnerability of Black women teachers and students as reciprocity that benefits both: "It contributes to their intellectual growth, to our intellectual growth [Black women teachers], and to improving and invigorating the classroom setting" (p. 53). One of the under examined aspects of Black women's ways of teaching is this delicate balancing of mutual authentic sharing with students so that they can trust and aspire to standards of leadership, while maintaining respect for and confidence in their teacher.

Reciprocity involves the willingness of black women educators to engage in personal critical reflection with the students and evoke the interdependency that makes the process of transformational learning and teaching transparent and synergistic. Our dream for our students is that they use what they learn in our classrooms to become active, informed, and responsible world citizens (p. 53).

It should be highlighted, that much like Johnson-Bailey's and Alfred's (2006) description of reciprocity as used to advance transformative learning, vulnerability in this study was used by the teacher as a means of increasing trust, exemplifying courage and leadership, and encouraging students to write from their authentic experiences. The six Black women in this study also spoke of themselves and their classmates taking the lead and sharing out from the most intimate parts of their story in order to encourage others to do so, thereby strengthening their bond as a creative community. They also spoke of having an appreciation of the published memoirists read in class, because like their

teacher and classmates, the memoirists' vulnerability bolstered their capacity to manage their fears, helped them feel that they were not alone in the world with their issues, and helped them feel hope for their futures.

Future research into the components of mutual vulnerability in the Black feminist classroom might expose the properties of transformation that occur for both the teacher and the student and make them less magical and more transferable to various disciplines and teaching models. Though mutual vulnerability is minimally explored in recent literature on Black women's ways of teaching, even less exists on the impact of this vulnerability and othermothering on the Black woman teacher.

**The impact of Black feminist pedagogical methods on the Black woman teacher.** One of the main outcomes of this study was that participants spoke of benefits arising from the teacher's mutual vulnerability. As previously stated, literature on Black women's ways of teaching has established that this reciprocity, contributes to the growth and development of the teacher and the students in the classroom (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006, p. 53). With that said, this study does not offer insight into the impact of mutual vulnerability in the Black feminist learning environment on the teacher. What was not then included in this study, would be worth exploring: What was the transformative process of the instructor (mother, othermother, teacher, mutually vulnerable leader) in this Black feminist classroom with its Black feminist learning model of mutual vulnerability?

Dixson and Dingus (2008) examined the motives of Black women who enter the teaching field and found their reasons were to continue the legacy of teaching encouraged by their mothers and othermothers, to stay connected to their Black communities by

participating in intergenerational healing, and to respond to a spiritual calling. These reasons make these women cultural torch bearers; and call up a type of cultural martyrdom that can be long-term depleting (Canaan, 2016).

Mawhinney (2011) offers some insight into the impact of othermothering on her life in an autoethnographic study where she uses narrative to chart her responses as a Black woman educator at an HBCU. She questions the efficacy of othermothering and equates it with self-sacrificing. Toi Derricotte's (1997) memoir *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey* chronicles her struggles with racial politics inside and outside of the classroom. These autobiographical accounts of Black teachers offer some insight into under-researched inquiries into the impact of othermothering on Black women teachers.

It is relevant to Black feminist pedagogy to study the impact that communities of learners and the roles of othermothering have on Black women teachers as a way of understanding not only the teacher's influence, but her waxing and waning capacities in the cycle of intergenerational/multigenerational healing transformation. In this study, I, the researcher was the teacher, and was involved in the intergenerational healing that occurred, but what was the impact of this process on me as the teacher?

To spur this inquiry, I offer the following excerpts as reflections from my research notes throughout the semester. Though I designed the study with measures in place to create separation of my roles as teacher and researcher, in my research journal, I wrote freely and did not attempt to separate these roles:

*Funny how I feel drained at the thought of teaching today, not because of my students, they are a creative community of love, but the administrative reality and ways that I struggle to bring all of me with me*

*every day can sure be a challenge. . . . Working hard to live what I teach is making me grow and be less afraid to speak my mind and stand up for myself even if the outcome turns out horrible, at least I will have stayed true to me so that I can stand to walk around in the skin I'm in. . . . I feel like when I'm not being true to my Blackness, my queerness, my womanhood, that my students' eyes can see through me, like hungry toddlers who have a keen sense of where the food is, and when I am hiding it (giggle). . . . Today, I interviewed Yolanda. Seems like everything got in the way of our meet-up, but after 3 hours of waiting, she arrived. So cool that she knew my vegan butt would be hungry. She brought along a Tupperware with yummy quinoa, beans, avocado. She put that Black mothering right back in my lap. . . . Today, I interviewed Trisha. The interview with Danika was really short, with Yolanda was amazingly long and with the others par for the course. Trisha, kept saying things like, you helped us all be able to share, and you sharing your work helped us be vulnerable. Yolanda and Lauren spent a lot of time in their interview expressing the same. Funny, that I found myself in my head shrugging it off, and on the exterior staying professional and moving on to the next question after "um hm." If we weren't in interview mode, I probably would have said a polite thank you or you're welcome, but would have still had that little saboteur trying to shrug it off. I think part of it is a lack of worthiness, and part is that I feel so inspired by their strength. I have to think about why I feel good and bad about myself even though she went on*



*and on about how cool it was to have me for a teacher. . . . When I think about all they have been through in life and how they have overcome it and walk around campus looking bad ass, or cool calm and collected, I feel empowered to get my shit done in life and stop feeling sorry for myself.*

Through an inquiry on the impact of Black feminist learning environments on the Black woman teacher, researchers might gain a better understanding of how to support and offer professional development specific to the needs of Black women teachers. Though they are mutually vulnerable othermothers and intergenerational conduits of caregiving, they teach in systems where they endure social oppression as Black women and are often vulnerable in their teaching methods to the conservative rules of their institutions. They utilize emotional and spiritual resources in the classroom that often are not noted and therefore not professionally revitalized through the supports of their institutions.

### **Limitations**

**Teaching method limitations.** Participants in this study used biblio-fusion where they were both consuming and creating stories where the author had expressed and explored a wounding event, resulting wants, revelation, and outcome. This type of exposure to other's wounds may present specific mental health challenges that extend beyond the capacity of resources in the classroom. Though the teacher was well read and educated on therapeutic facilitation, and the participants in this study did not express facing such challenges and were provided with resources should such challenges arise, participants might have experienced such challenges without the knowledge of the

teacher/researcher. A suggestion to curtail the potential for such challenges is for any teacher adopting biblio-fusion as a teaching method to undergo training on therapeutic arts based facilitation.

Another limitation of the teaching method was that some of the community building techniques in the class like the peer edits and the online journals might have created learning constraints for students who do not learn well by collective community means. The participant Danika for instance, expressed discomfort and confusion with having her peers edit her memoir. For these students, community building techniques in a classroom environment might present obstacles to learning by adding to existing social anxiety.

Lastly, all participants in this study expressed comfort with learning in an environment where they shared racial identity with the instructor, which for Sharon and Lauren had been similar to their educational upbringing, and for the others was in stark contrast to being previously taught by white teachers. What this study does not address is the efficacy of Black feminist methods if the teacher is of European descent. Some questions that arise are, how would Black women students respond to these methods and theories delivered by a White teacher, and can teachers who instruct using Eurocentric models be successfully trained in the delivery of Black feminist pedagogical methods regardless of race? Other concerns that might arise are regarding acquisition of culturally derived methods versus integration of culturally derived methods. Further research into such dynamics of extending Black feminist pedagogical theory are therefore needed.

**Research method limitations.** One limitation of the method was the initial plan to have the focus group facilitated by an outside researcher. The researcher for this study

was also the teacher of the course, therefore having the focus group conducted by an outside researcher was designed to limit social desirability bias in participants' responses regarding the teaching and research methods. Once the participants expressed discomfort sharing the outcome of their experience with someone who had not been part of the community of their experience, the researcher realized that though the focus group was in line with Black feminist theory, the addition of an outside researcher did not match the Black feminist theoretical framework of the class, which emphasized community building. Interviews were consequently performed by the researcher.

Foreseeing the mismatch of method and theory at an earlier time in the research process would have allowed the researcher to build in a more comfortable means for participants who might want to express dissatisfaction with the teaching or research methods. In hindsight, an anonymous survey, in addition to the one-on-one interviews might have fulfilled this level of inquiry into participants' experience.

**Theoretical applications limitations.** All Black women do not teach from a Black feminist pedagogical framework. The theory applied in this study and the themes of Black women's ways of teaching and healing, though generalized within this study and across the literature presented within this study, cannot be generalized across a broader population of Black women teachers and healers. For instance, not all Black women take a maternal stance while teaching, some intentionally avoid maternal reactions to their students as a way of resisting mammy stereotypes.

## **Conclusion**

Black women's ways of healing and transforming have been at the base of Black women's continued ability to survive and succeed in a socio-economic structure that

ignores their wealth of intergenerational/multigenerational knowledge. The aforementioned findings advance research on methods of expressive writing that are culturally specific to Black women students. Findings also shed light on under examined methods for applying Black feminist theory in the classroom, and also illuminate mutual vulnerability as an aspect of Black feminist pedagogy that if further examined may advance Black feminist pedagogical methods, and provide Black women who teach from a mothering foundation with much needed institutional support to sustain their own well-being while sustaining these valuable teaching traditions.

To let a Black woman have the last word conveyed to Black women, I will leave you with this proclamation from Andrea Canaan (2016):

We are the bottom of the heap, brown women. We have the most to gain and least to lose. Straight and lesbian among us, we must fight, learn and grow with, and for, ourselves, our mothers, daughters, and sisters across this nation across this globe and yes, brown women, we must fight, learn, grow with, and for our fathers, brothers, sons, and men (p. 237).

**APPENDIX A**  
**INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT**

## INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

**Informed Consent Form:**

Black Women HBCU Students Creating Memoir in a Black Feminist Learning  
Environment

**Principal Investigator:** Zelda Lockhart. Co-researcher, Dr. Robyn Flaum Cruz,  
PhD program in Expressive Therapies Lesley University

You are enrolled in Creative Writing Non-Fiction. Because of this, you are being asked to volunteer to participate in this study to assist in my doctoral research on Black women students creating memoir in a Black feminist learning environment. The purpose of the study is to gain insight into the unique experiences of students who are writing and reading creative non-fiction toward the goal of self-definition in a Black feminist learning environment at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU). Black women student's experiences are underrepresented in all areas of education including research on the efficacy of Black feminist approaches to their education and development.

As part of participation your personal essays and online journal responses will be collected from the regular operations of the class.

Students who identify as Black and female will additionally be asked to participate in a one-hour focus group after the course is over.

Because data will not be accessed for research purposes until the course is over, your grade will in no way be impacted by your participation or decision not to participate in this study.

You will be personally interacting with myself as the principal researcher and Jasmine Bethea as the graduate research assistant. This research project is anticipated to be finished by approximately December, 2017.

I understand that:

- 1 I am volunteering to have my personal essay and online journal responses included in this study.
- 2 My information will be kept confidential and used anonymously only, for purposes of presentation and/or publication.
- 3 I am free to choose not to participate in the research and to discontinue my participation at any time.
- 4 Any and all of my questions will be answered at any time and I am free to consult with anyone (i.e., friend, family) about my decision to participate in the research and/or to discontinue my participation.
- 5 If any problem in connection to the research arises, I can contact the researcher Zelda Lockhart at 919-530-7112 and by email at [zlockha1@ncu.edu](mailto:zlockha1@ncu.edu) or Lesley University or Robyn Flaum Cruz at [rcruz@lesley.edu](mailto:rcruz@lesley.edu).

*You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.*

**a) Investigator's Signature:**

Date	Investigator's Signature	Print Name

**b) Subject's Signature:**

*I consent to participate in this research. I understand that I am free to discontinue participation at any time if I so choose, and that the investigator will gladly answer any questions that arise during the course of the research.*

Date	Participant's Signature	Print Name

**c) Subject's Consent to Focus Group:**

*I identify as a Black female and I consent to participating in a one-hour focus group.*

Date	Participant's Signature	Print Name

*If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the NCCU IRB Chair at [IRB@nccu.edu](mailto:IRB@nccu.edu), or the Director of Research Compliance, [uhoffler@nccu.edu](mailto:uhoffler@nccu.edu), 919-530-5140.*

*There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise. Contact the Committee Co-Chairs [irb@lesley.edu](mailto:irb@lesley.edu) at Lesley University, 29 Everett Street, Cambridge Massachusetts, 02138.*

**APPENDIX B**  
THE MIRROR EXERCISE



## THE MIRROR EXERCISE

### **Vanity Mirror**

- Take a blank sheet of paper, a blank document, or a blank note on your phone, and consider this a vanity mirror. If you are a visual learner like me, you can write your responses in the vanity view mirror in the drawing.
- Now, hold it in your hand and look at yourself. On the mirror, write or type positive characteristics of yourself. I call these Gifts. Be sure to write the positive characteristics of how you see yourself, not how others see you. These may be physical, spiritual, intellectual, social: any internal and external descriptions. Here is what I wrote in my mirror: “Gift: Great mom. Humor. Puzzle Solver.” (Every time I do this exercise, I come up with a different set of characteristics for myself.)

### **Prompt 1: The Vanity Mirror**

- Write an event from your life where the most prominent of these positive characteristics of self was present. What do I mean by “event”? Let us smell, hear, taste, touch, and see. Use time, place, and sensory detail to bring us into an actual moment in your past.

### **Windshield**

- Take another blank sheet of paper, a blank document, or a blank note on your phone, and consider this a windshield. If you are more of a visual learner like me, you can write your responses in the windshield in the drawing.
- Take a minute and think about someone you are currently having an issue with.

- On the right side of the road write down what it is that this person is doing to get on your nerves, or get in your way.
- On the left side of the road, write down what you do in response, how it makes you feel and what you want.
- Caution: many of you have been conditioned to say that you don't have issues with anybody. Throw that thinking out and consider the person who has gotten in your way, gotten on your nerves, stopped up the works for you, taken things that didn't belong to them, argued you down, made a mess. You may find that you have been writing about this person in the other prompts. This is normal, because when something has gone awry in one of our relationships, it is on our minds or in the back of our minds every time we go to take a deep breath and offer a deep expression.

### **Prompt 2: The Windshield**

- Write an event from your life where you and the person in the windshield who you have conflict with are having one of your conflicts. Remember, let us smell, hear, taste, touch, and see. Use time, place, and sensory detail to bring us into an actual moment with this person.

### **Rearview Mirror**

- Take another blank sheet of paper, a blank document, or a blank note on your phone and consider this a rearview mirror. If you are more of a visual learner like me, you can write your responses in the rearview mirror in the drawing.
- Keeping in mind what you wrote in the windshield regarding what you feel and what you want, adjust the rearview mirror and look into the past.

- Jot down another time with some other significant relationship where you felt something similar and wanted something similar.
- Feel free to jot down more than one.

### **Prompt 3 - 5: Writing the Rearview Events**

- Choose the event that feels most related to your feelings and wants in the windshield and write the event.
- Choose another event in the past related to your feelings and wants and write that event as well.
- Go back as far as you can in time to the first time you ever felt this way and wanted what you want and write that event. **This is likely the initial impact or initial wound.**

### **Passenger's Side View Mirror**

- Take another blank sheet of paper, a blank document, or a blank note on your phone and consider this, the passenger's side view mirror. If you are more of a visual learner like me, you can write your responses in the side view mirror in the drawing.
- Consider the obstacle person's gifts and good, positive characteristics. This might not be easy, because these gifts have always been there but might be in your blind spot while you are having an issue with this person. The gifts might exist just outside of the range of what you are willing to acknowledge, or outside of what you have been able to see while the obstacle person's negative characteristics blocked your view. But that's what side view mirrors are for.

### **Prompt 6: The Passenger's Side View Mirror**

- Now, look at the gifts of the obstacle person in the side view and write an event where that person's gifts were present.

### **Driver's Side View Mirror**

- Take another blank sheet of paper, a blank document, or a blank note on your phone, and consider this, the driver's side view mirror. If you are more of a visual learner like me, you can write your responses in the side view mirror in the drawing.
- Consider a combination of what you want and your gifts. Keep in mind that your gifts are things that you already have. Acceptance, and finding some of what we want in what is in our control, is a hard, harsh thing to consider, because we want what we want without compromise. But right there next to us, in our blind spot, is the ability to get some of what we want (sometimes all of what we want) by relying on what's in our control, our gifts.

### **Prompt 7: Driver's Side View Mirror**

- Write an event from your future, one where you fulfill what you want by relying on your gifts. This will require you to take a look back in the vanity mirror at what you wrote down as your gifts. I thought this time about my sense of humor. How will you get what you want? Not by shaking down the obstacle person and making them change their ways, but by using your gifts. In this scene, allow yourself to get what you want from yourself, not from them. Yes, strange to write a revelation when you haven't fully had one yet. Revelation in this book is defined as a moment in your life when you

understand an initial wound or an impactful event, understand what helps with the healing, understand what gets in the way, or understand how to self-fulfill the want caused by the impact.

- As always with your writing, bring us into an event. Though it is an imagined event, still let us smell, hear, taste, touch, and see. Use sensory details to bring us in to a moment in your imagined future.

(Lockhart, 2017b, pp. 46-57).

**APPENDIX C**

**THE RELATIONSHIP MUSEUM EXERCISE**

## THE RELATIONSHIP MUSEUM EXERCISE

Modified from The Relationship Museum Exercise in *The Soul of the Full-Length Manuscript* (Lockhart, 2017b)

In your mind of places (your house, previous places you have traveled to, your job, your car) search through for three objects that represent each of the following relationships:

- Myself
- The person I feel most responsible for
- The person who helps me out in this world (Agent)
- The person who gets in my way (Obstacle)
- My Belief System

Make five columns and three rows for this or more if your need a bigger chart/museum. In the boxes below each column, write the objects that you own that represent that relationship. The black waist-length leather jacket (from my museum below) is the object of significance in my relationship with my brother LaVenson, who is represented in my museum as my agent.

Myself	The person I feel most responsible for	The person who helps me out in this world (Agent)	The person who gets in my way (Obstacle)	My Belief System
		Waist-length leather jacket		

This will produce several raw material writings. Trade museums with one of your peers. Choose one of the objects in your peer's museum. Jump-start and write an event that offers the significance of that object to you. In other words, write a memory, event, scene or poem that tells the emotional significance of the object in your life. Feel free to trade with your peers throughout the semester, and use these as prompt for several ten-minute writes. Remember to infuse the emotional significance of the object in the scene even if the object doesn't appear in the scene.

(Lockhart, 2017b, pp. 41-46).

**APPENDIX D**  
ONLINE JOURNAL QUESTIONS



## ONLINE JOURNAL QUESTIONS

**Online Journal** Alice Walker's "Womanism" and "Beauty When the Other Dancer is the Self" as well, read Hannah Giorgis', "A Place Where Everybody Knows Your Name"

Write a short autobiographical paragraph of an event/moment with time, place and sensory details that was inspired by some aspect of how you connect with these readings and involves you self-defining. Perhaps there was an obstacle (something getting in your way) that caused you to self-define, or perhaps there was an agent (something helping you out in life) that helped you to remember who you want to be in this world. Tell us about a moment of self-definition in your life.

**Online Journal** Toi Derricotte's (1997) excerpt from the introduction of her memoir *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey*. View Derricotte's (2010) video reading from her autobiographical poem, "Blackbottom."

Karen Pyke (2010), a sociology professor at the University of California Riverside has attempted the daunting task of defining internalized racism. In her article, "What is Internalized Racial Oppression and Why Don't We Study it? Acknowledging Racism's Hidden Injuries" she offers that internalized racism is colorism, sexism, classism, homophobia turned in on one's own race that supports the racist ideologies of dominant White society. In Derricotte's (1997) memoir, she self-examines her own struggles with internalized racism.

The term "double consciousness" was coined by W. E. B. DuBois (1903) to define a state of being when one's identities are conflicted and split. The term also involves feelings of confusion and frustration when one's identities or other's expectations of those identities come into conflict. Derricotte experiences this sort of internal conflict on the train and chooses to act based on the Black identity she claims not the White identity others perceive. In her autobiographical poem, she experiences this conflict as Black and middle class, longing for her more soulful Black identity down in "Blackbottom." Have you ever experienced a time when two or more of your identities caused you internal conflict? If so, write a short scene where you found yourself in this state. If not, write a scene or event where two or more of your identities were working in harmony to bring about positive change. Be sure to include time, place, sensory details, and the elements of scene.

**Online Journal** Edwidge Danticat's excerpt from her memoir *Brother I'm Dying*, Danticat's interview on NPR's Fresh Air, and Kiese Laymon's essay "How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Other's in America"

James and Busia (1993) describes othermothering and fictive kin as roles that members of a family or larger community take on in the care of children who are not biologically theirs. This type of fostering is often fierce for the survival of the larger family, culture or race. This is not always taken up by the women, but in Danticat's case by her father and

uncle. After listening to Laymon and Danticat in class you identified reasons for fierce othermothering and fictive kin: sacrifice, protection, community. You also identified themes of othermothering and fictive kin: wisdom vs. resistance, pain at home to prevent pain in society. After completing the read, listen view respond to the following:

Write a scene where you were in a position of acting as fictive kin or othermothering for the sake of maintaining some family, culture, race, religion, community, or etc. If you cannot relate, write a scene where someone acted as othermother or fictive kin for you. In other words, when did you step in and sacrifice in order to pick up the nurturing and discipline in someone's life, or when did someone do this for you? Be sure to include time, place, sensory details, and round it out with all of the elements of scene.

**APPENDIX E**  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. The course was taught from a Black feminist framework and explored themes of othermothering, self-definition, double consciousness, and community building. You wrote about how these themes are manifested in your life through the online journal responses. How if at all did any these themes play out in the actual classroom environment? I'll repeat those themes again: othermothering, self-definition, double consciousness, and community building.
2. How was it being in a class with Black feminist subject matter with male students and students of different racial identities?
3. As a Black woman, what are your feelings and opinions about being in this type (Black feminist) of learning environment?
4. How if at all do you feel my identity as a Black woman educator impacted your experience?
5. You all peer edited each other's work, read your experiences aloud, and responded to each other's journal entries. How, if at all, did that sort of interacting impact you?
6. Were there ways that being a member of the class impact your relationship with yourself?
7. What was your experience with reading the memoirs of published authors?
8. What was your experience with writing memoir from a wounding event through to revelation and outcome? Did you feel changed in any way? Did the personal experience base of the stories you created have any impact on your growth, development, identity?
9. Did the experiences of this class impact any other aspects of your life?
10. Was there anything that came up during the course that made you uncomfortable that you would like to talk about?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share?

**APPENDIX F**

**SEVEN PIVOTAL SCENES OF PERSONAL PLOT METHOD**

## SEVEN PIVOTAL SCENES OF PERSONAL PLOT METHOD

- Who is the story about? (main voice or character)
- What pivotal, difficult, life-changing event happened? (initial wound)
- What was lost, and what did the loss leave the voice wanting? (loss + want = emotional/psychological motivation)
- What helped fulfill the want? (agents and gifts)
- What got in the way of fulfilling the want? (obstacles and internal saboteurs)
- What revelation changed the course of the voice and their wants?
- What was the outcome to this journey?

(Lockhart, 2017b, p. 164).

**APPENDIX G**

**PERSONAL PLOT PARAGRAPHS FROM PERSONAL ESSAYS**

## PERSONAL PLOT PARAGRAPHS FROM PERSONAL ESSAYS

**Collective Plot Paragraph of all Six Personal Essays:**

The Black women student participants have endured sexual abuse, been ignored and at the same time sexualized. They want to regain their sense of beauty, and to take control of defining their lives on their terms, not society's terms. They want to use their talents and strengths as the tools with which to have this control over sculpting their reality. They see themselves in the future as Black women who have the presence and strength of voices to lead themselves and others, and build new affirming relationships.

**Sharon:**

This essay is the story of Sharon, a young woman who is sexually assaulted at 13 years of age. Having lost her innocent outlook on life she begs for answers to her questions, "Why was I targeted? Why did God allow this to happen? Why didn't my mom stop him?" Through her mother's coaxing, she goes to church and receives the sermon, which was "It's Okay to be Mad at God." Over time she struggled with regaining her sense of beauty through adorning herself with beautiful clothes, and then losing that sense of beauty through poor treatment from her mom and from men in romantic relationships. In the end, she reinvests the love lost through in her life into love for herself. It is through this act that Sharon is able to open herself up to healthy relationships and eventually marriage.

**Lauren:**

Lauren was born in St. Croix to her Dominican mother and her white American father, an "avid cocaine user and a drunk." When her mother leaves him, he makes no effort to see her outside of her birthdays. On her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, she visits his "grand white



villa . . . Spanish-style, and resembled something out of a Spanish soap opera," where he tells her he is moving back to the States. She spends her teenage years seeking him out, and for college, she too moves to his city of residence in the United States, only to find out from an obituary that her father has long since died of cancer. The obituary mentions her mother, but does not mention her, "his only child." Lauren finds herself in a series of relationships with men who violate and abuse her. One day, she becomes fed up, and speaks out for herself, vowing to never let anyone violate her again.

**Danika:**

Danika has a keen sense of right and wrong struggles to find someone to advocate for her when her brother, her 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, her middle school classmates, and later her college suite mate break her belongings, violate her privacy, and disturb her peace of mind. Her mother seems to be the only person to step in and speak for her, but when Danika begins to immerse herself in "dark and supernatural" reading and writing, her mother grows concerned and would often, "scrunch up her face in confusion. 'You're writing about that?'" It is through Danika's writing and reading that she finds solace, and it is also through writing that she is able to be her own best advocate and turn villains and heroes in her life into characters whose movements she can control.

**Yolanda:**

Yolanda tells the story of losing her sense of beauty as a young girl who wants to perform and be on stage, but is in the spotlight at a spelling bee and misspells the very word she is trying to embrace as a Black girl, "beautiful." The story follows Yolanda's attempt to reconcile her desire as a Black girl wanting attention with her fear of being a Black girl exposed to unwanted violation by men and boys. She metaphorically describes

this double consciousness as an ancestral struggle of hiding gifts to dissuade persecution; "The blanket my great grandma sewed together with different pieces of fabric collected overtime was so heavy and warm. . . . The red square was my favorite. Red is sassy and so was I." This struggle follows her into parenting and romantic relationships, and is a spell undone only when she adorns herself in "white wife beater, jean body shorts, and red pumps," and despite fear of criticism sings and recites her poetry to a crowd of screaming girl fans.

**Ashana:**

As a child Ashana's parents wanted her to become a doctor or dentist, but she wanted to go her own path. By the time she was in high school, she is confused and isn't sure what she wanted to be anymore. Her school guidance counselor asks her to think of what makes her happy, and she thinks of the child she provides childcare for, and her times teaching him school work and about life lessons. As she grows into a young woman, she finds herself as teacher even to her boyfriend and his child. It is when she receives a "B" on a college exam, and she is not hard on herself the way she previously has been, or the way her parents were. In this moment, she realizes that she has a philosophy of teaching, "They are just grades." Through the difficult challenges of college studies Ashana finds solace in her religion. "Everything will work out if you put your faith in God." Years later, Ashana finds herself about to enter an elementary school on the first day as its new principal.

**Trisha:**

When Trisha is young, she feels invisible and unacknowledged by her parents for her ability to contribute and to speak for herself. On the one hand, she is glad that others, like her Dad, stand up for her. On the other Trisha feels the cumulative impact of being discounted: "I started just letting people talk for me. I didn't have an opinion on what my friends and I should do on the weekend I just went." This internalization of her inability and invisibility translated to her young adult sexual relationships where Trisha felt that her voice "was completely lost in these experiences." Trisha gains a voice and affirmation to speak for herself through a mountain retreat where 40 young adults are guided to claim their space if they were uncomfortable and take up less space if they were fully comfortable. In the end, Trisha feels healed by community "I became a 'we' with 40 other strangers who treated me with love and listened to what I had to say in a world that I was often ignored and/or spoke for."

**APPENDIX H**

**MEMBER CHECK EMAIL**

## MEMBER CHECK EMAIL

January 9, 2018

Hello Women Writers,

I have created summarizing paragraphs of your essays, and extracted quotes from your interviews and your online journals as analysis of the data in the study you participated in.

I would like to offer you one-on-one time to come by my office or to call to review the ways that I have analyzed this data. This isn't mandatory, but assures you have input in the ways I have interpreted what you have shared.

I am available to meet on campus in my office Rm. 312 COM from 12pm - 3pm Thursday, January 11th, Tuesday, January 16th, or Thursday, January 18th. If none of these times work for you, I am able to work something out, or we can meet a Tuesday or Thursday by phone at 919-530-7112.

Thank you so much for your participation in the study, and I am wishing you a Happy New Year.

Peaceful Day,

Professor Lockhart

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