Still Waiting to Exhale:
An Intergenerational Narrative Analysis of Black Mothers and Daughters

DISSERTATION

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By

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Abstract

This dissertation consists of a nine month, three-state ethnographic study on the intersectional effects of race, age, gender, and place in the lives of fourteen Black mothers and daughters, ages 15-65, who attempt to analyze and critique the multiple and competing notions of Black womanhood as “at risk” and “in crisis.” Epistemologically, the research is grounded in Black women’s narrative and literacy practices, and fills a gap in the existing literature on Black girlhood and Black women’s lived experiences through attention to the development of mother/daughter relationships, generational narratives, societal discourse, and othermothering. I argue that an in-depth analysis and critique of the dominant “at risk” and “in crisis” discourse is necessary to understand the conversations that are and are not taking place between Black mothers and daughters about race, gender, age, and place; that it is important to understand the ways in which Black girls respond to media portrayals and stereotypes; and that it is imperative that we closely examine the existing narratives at play in the everyday lives of intergenerational Black girls and women in Black communities. Through a multi-genred methodology of portraiture and playwriting, Black women and girls are not only calling for their stories to be told, but for them to be told in ways that are representative of the vast dynamics at play in our intersectional lives.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to the Black mothers and daughters of T-town, Capital City, and Sunnyside.

Thank you for sharing your lives.

And to Connie, who welcomed my focus group into her home, and died one month later.

Thank you for seeing such great purpose in this work.
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I am a firm believer in the African proverb, ‘I am because we are; and because we are, therefore I am.’ In my many villages of life, numerous people have helped bring me to this place in my career. There is not enough space to individually name and thank each person, so I will only highlight a few, but know that I am eternally grateful for each of you.

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Introduction

As a child, I was never likened to my mother. She was thin; I was curvy. She was casual and comfortable; I needed the latest fashions and accessories. She woke up at 4:30 every morning. I always needed 10 more minutes of sleep. She had perfect handwriting; I was completely against the idea of cursive. She prepared a green vegetable every night with dinner. I spit out lima beans and peas when she wasn’t looking. She was quiet and reserved, never wanting to upset anyone. I was opinionated and bossy, never wanting to be silenced. Though we were opposites in so many ways, I desired a bond with her—a closeness that never seemed attainable in my youth. I wanted to know her. I wanted her to let me in. I wanted to be the only one who was able to decipher her silences, to exchange secret looks that no one else could understand. I wanted people to meet me and say how much I reminded them of her. To her credit, my mother focused much of her energy into the upbringing of my brother and me. She washed and ironed clothes everyday, prepared three meals, cleaned the house, assisted in homework and projects, all the while being a full-time elementary teacher. I knew my mother loved me. I never doubted that. But I wanted to learn the lyrics to her love. I wanted her to teach me.

I experienced the effects of pregnancy at the age of thirteen. When my best friend at the time told me she was pregnant, I made the mistake of telling my mother, which established our relationship for the next five years. I learned very quickly that my body
was not truly my own. It was an investment that my parents made from my conception. Being raised in a small, predominately white city, my father, the principal at the only predominately Black high school, was, and remains, the equivalent of a red carpet celebrity. There was not a place we could go where current and former students, staff, parents, grandparents, community members and leaders, and Black police officers weren’t yelling, “Hey Doc!” As an elementary school teacher in a city populated with Black female teachers, my mother’s reputation wasn’t as widely celebrated.

In the Black community, my father was praised for his unwavering desire to help Black students succeed. Not only did my parents work in the community, we lived there. My brother and I attended all Black public schools for our entire k-12 career. Growing up, it was rare for Black educators to live in the Black community and send their children to Black schools, but my father believed in supporting and being amongst our people. As a product of a two-parent, graduate-school educated household, it was not a secret that our family didn’t financially struggle, but my father raised us to believe that if one of our people struggles in any way, we all struggle. Because Doc was such a prolific figure, our family was known as extensions of him. While most P.K.’s were known as Preacher’s Kids, I was a different variation--the Principal’s Kid, Doc’s Daughter, or “Lil Doc.” Along with the title came an excessive amount of responsibility.

Though I hadn’t even experienced my first menstrual cycle at the age of thirteen, my friend was pregnant, and by telling my mother, it was immediately assumed I was interested in sex. In lieu of a conversation about sex, menstruation, or boys, my mother handed me the What’s happening to your body book for girls and an intense lecture on how she and my father had been saving money for my college expenses since conception.
She explained that a pregnancy would make the front page of the news, cause utter humiliation for them, and ruin any opportunities I would have at a future. She also added that none of the money they were saving would be used on a baby. Since the majority of my extended family was in the south and I had daily fights and arguments with my brother, I had no one with whom I could share these frustrations. I was too embarrassed to tell my friends that I was such a late bloomer; so, for years, I would pretend to have monthly cramps when everyone else complained of theirs. In my relationships with boys, I stuffed my shirt until I was 14. Though I was considered cute, I didn’t have the body that went along with the face. Because I was too afraid to have sex, I didn’t have to worry about them finding out that my “breasts” weren’t real. It didn’t take long for me to equate my self-worth with what other people thought of me.

My father didn’t involve himself in any aspect of my matriculation into womanhood. He felt that was my mother’s responsibility, and instead, poured the majority of his energy into the daily occurrences at the high school. Two years later, when my cycle finally did begin, my mother performed monthly checks (for the remainder of my high school career) of the trashcan to ensure their financial investment was in tact. Since I couldn’t claim my body as my own, it was very important that I maintained my “cute girl” status. I had the long hair that I would often put over my eye like Aaliyah¹ and my clothes were always the name brand that was in style at the time. Very quickly my identity transitioned from “Doc’s Daughter” to “That’s Doc’s Daughter with the pretty hair who be dressed cute.” From the countless books my father read and shared on Black history, struggle, and simply being a part of the Black community, I was

¹ A now deceased Black pop singer and teen sensation, known for her great performances and good looks.
well aware of the “good hair v. bad hair” issue, and though I never used the phrase, I bought into it. I had to at the time. I didn’t know who I was without it. Even as my body began to develop, the pressure was even more intense to fit the societal view of the teenage Black girl growing up in Saginaw, Michigan. In order to be noticed, we had to have the biggest butt and chest, wear the latest name brands, keep a fresh hairstyle, and be sexually active or willing to become active. I was in a constant battle between suppressing my sexual desires for fear of parental embarrassment and being the free, uninhibited Black girl I dreamed about.

It’s been 15 years since my first menstrual cycle and that timid little Black girl remains a part of me. I don’t fear parental embarrassment anymore, but I still want to make them proud, especially my mother. Though our relationship has strengthened and I’m able to make all of my own decisions, something inside still seeks approval.

Statement of Problem

Three locations have been pivotal to my growth and development through the years--Capital City, T-town, and Sunnyside. Each of these places hold very vivid memories of some of the most beautiful and painful experiences of my life. My journey into self-discovery, self-pity, and self-preservation were actualized in each location. In every city, I’ve either had Black women to guide me, been the Black woman providing guidance, or longed for a Black othermother when I didn’t feel comfortable talking to my own mother or friends. In my community mentoring work with Black teenage girls in

2 Traditionally, for Black women, “good hair” has been defined as hair free of kinks and naps. Hair was good if it was curly, wavy, or required very little manipulation, as opposed to textures that needed the use of a hot comb.
3 Names of cities have been altered to maintain anonymity.
Capital City, I’ve consistently noticed similar themes as mine within the Black girl narrative and the Black mother/daughter dynamic. Much research on Black girls focuses on the “at risk” and “in crisis” social discourse, specifically in relation to images of scantily-clad Black female bodies in music videos, body image and obesity, rising rates of teenage pregnancy, and alarming statistics of HIV infection. Though media portrayals of young Black girls pay particular attention to sexualized behaviors, my relationships with and research on Black girls led me to explore the “crisis” narrative in detail.

With “girl power” as the dominant commercial narrative of the nineties that excluded Black female voices, and contemporary commercial representations of Black girlhood and womanhood as sexualized celebrations of Black masculinity and patriarchy, how are Black girls and women able to speak back to prevailing discourses that have demanded our silence? Namely, as a historically embattled group who has endured multiple crises surrounding our multiple identities, the crisis narrative of social discourse fails to account for the multilayered Black girl and woman. Our narratives are not merely comprised of statistics, yet we are mainly rendered visible to serve the needs of furthering dominant discourse. Who “will sing a Black girl [woman] song” (Shange, 1975) if not us? As a Black feminist/womanist committed to the intellectual work and activism in the lives and literacies of Black girls and women, I argue that an in-depth analysis and critique of the dominant “at risk” and “in crisis” discourse is necessary to understand the conversations that are and are not taking place between Black mothers and daughters about race, gender, age, and place; that it is important to understand the ways in which Black girls respond to media portrayals and stereotypes; and that it is imperative that we
closely examine the existing narratives at play in the everyday lives of intergenerational Black girls and women in Black communities.

This research consists of a nine month, three-state ethnographic study on the intersectional effects of race, age, gender, and place in the lives of fourteen Black mothers and daughters, ages 15-65, who attempt to analyze and critique the multiple and competing notions of Black womanhood as “at risk” and “in crisis.” Coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality examines the multidimensionality of experience in marginalized people. Developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s from critical race studies, intersectionality pays close attention to the “various ways race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s experiences” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). As a critical tool in theoretical and political discussions of antiracism and feminism, intersectionality works to destabilize race/gender binaries by exploring differences within the broader categories of women and Blacks. Nash writes, “Ultimately, intersectionality seeks to demonstrate the racial variation(s) within gender and the gendered variation(s) within race through its attention to subjects whose identities contest race-or-gender categorizations” (Nash, 2008). Drawing on Crenshaw, 1991; Pyke & Johnson, 2003; and Nash, 2008, I contribute to analyses of intersectionality as more than just additive displays of oppression, but examinations of multiplicity within Black women’s experience. Nash (2008) argues that Crenshaw’s depiction of intersectionality fails to attend to processes of mobilization in Black women’s identities, particularly in categories beyond race and gender. Lack of attention to the role of sexuality and class, for example, as part of the social processes of Black women’s race and gender narratives fail to provide an inclusive analysis of multiplicity. Nash says questions like, “do black
women use their multiple identities to interpret the social world or do they deploy one at a time?” are fundamentally essential in understanding the fit between intersectionality and lived experiences of identity (p.90). This study attends to agency of intersectionality within the lives of Black mothers and daughters, with particular attention to intergenerational variations and similarities in the discourses of Black women’s age and place narratives. Namely, I explore the ways in which race, place, age, and gender are simultaneously produced through and inform one another (Wing, 1990).

With much discussion surrounding the social construction, economics, and power of race (DuBois, 1940/2000; Winant, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; et al), this study is embedded in the daily social, cultural, and historical dynamics at play in the lives of my participants. Driven by oral and written narrative, I examine Blackness as a “living process of building and rebuilding… so that we might see ourselves and each other more clearly, of learning to accept and love those parts of ourselves which society has deemed unacceptable, of gathering up the pieces of the past, unfolding and reshaping them into recognizable and workable forms for the future” (Tarpley, 1995, p.10).

Attention to race as a social construct affords opportunities to discuss Black girl’s and women’s discourse practices, knowledge construction, and relations of power beyond phenotype. The idea of reformulation, or reshaping customary beliefs and definitions is also pertinent to my examination of gender and the roles we, as Black women, place upon ourselves, along with those that have been forced upon us. My interest in exploring the intersection of gender with race is found in the Combahee River Collective’s (1982) ‘A Black Feminist Statement’:
Black women are inherently valuable, our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s but of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. (p.15).

A study of Black mothers and daughters engaging in life-sharing on the multiple jeopardies (King, 1995) of being Black girls and women in our respective communities allows for the commonalities, and lack thereof, of experience to be coupled with the politics of the Black woman throughout history, in an effort to work toward our liberation.

Engaging in research surrounding oral and written narrative with Black girls and women ages 15-65 affords close attention to the intersection of age. Through the co-constructions of race, place, and gender, age allows a generational analysis of the experiences of mothers and daughters to be examined as historical and contemporary frameworks. Rooted in Black feminist epistemology that articulates the expression of narrative for and by ourselves, attention to age positions Black mothers and daughters to understand and critique our intergenerational ways of knowing.

Finally, Haymes’ (1995) concept of a “pedagogy of place,” or how “individuals and collectivities make and take up culture in the production of public spaces in the city, with particular emphasis on how they use and assign meaning to public spaces within unequal relations of power in an effort to ‘make place’” (p.3) addresses the need to
critically examine place within the social, cultural, and historical tenets of race and
gender. Namely, I, along with the participants, explore place as sites of knowledge
formation, community activism, and social change, while simultaneously balancing
systems of racial and gendered oppression that challenge collectivity and self-definitions.
Metaphorically, our intergenerational and intersectional work is a “resting place” in
which we discuss, unwind, and release our burdens upon one another, knowing there’s
more work to be done, and more fight within us to complete the journey.

While there have been separate studies on Black women and girls, specifically,
the relationship between Black mothers and daughters concerning academic achievement
(Kerpleman, Schoffner & Ross-Griffin, 2002; Thomas & King, 2007); the silencing of
Black girl voices in the classroom (Fordham, 1993/1999; Evans-Winters, 2005); the
personal lives of Black girls via letter writing and narrative (Chambers, 1996; Carroll,
1997; Jacob, 2002), and the depictions of Black women in the media (Morgan, 1999;
Pough, 2006; Valerius, 2008) the existing literature does not examine the
intergenerational interconnected effects of race, gender, age, and place in the lives of
Black mothers and daughters of different ages and backgrounds. In order to address these
gaps, I contribute to Collins’s (1991a/2000) existing discussion of Black feminist thought
as “those experiences and ideas shared by African-American women that provide a
unique angle on self, community, and society…and acts as a critical social theory of
empowerment within the context of social injustice” (p.22).

Likewise, womanism, women acting as agents of social change, who are rooted
and committed to the development of themselves and the entire Black community
(Walker, 1983; Smitherman, 2006a), informs my examination of the intersectional
dynamics at play in the lives of my participants. Epistemologically, this work is grounded in Black women’s narrative and literacy practices (Hull, Scott & Smith, 1982; Walker, 1983; Lorde, 1984; Bell-Scott, et al, 1991; Phillips, 2006, et al). In order to create space for the narratives to develop, the participants and I set up focus groups, phone and Skype sessions for nine months to share and learn about our various experiences with being Black and female in our respective cities. The collaborative engagement of Black women sharing narratives of trial and triumph is fundamentally essential to the tenets of Black feminist thought.

Significance and Relevance of Project

The purpose of this project is to add to the scholarship on Black girls and women by incorporating an intergenerational discourse into the existing body of work. The need for this discourse is great in that narratives of Black lives often fail to include Black women’s lived experiences. This research would interest scholars of Black and hip-hop feminism, Women’s Studies, writers of narrative, parents, adolescent and adult women, community activists, and educators. From a social justice pedagogical perspective, the narratives of Black girls are crucial in engaging students at looking for strategies to challenge oppression. Discussing one’s experiences with oppression, particularly in the academic setting, can be emotional. Using those emotions to explain and describe the impact of their experiences can be an effective way to inspire others to participate in resistance movements and work toward creating understanding and respect. Similarly,

4 In the spirit of Alice Walker’s (1983) first definition of womanism as “a Black feminist or feminist of color,” I will use the terms interchangeably to support and encourage the beauty of Black women’s agency in combating oppressive societal forces while remaining deeply committed to the Black community.
incorporating a foundational knowledge of the tenets of Black feminism and womanism into the classroom may assist in the appreciation of the various cultural dynamics Black girls bring, and work against many of the stereotypes surrounding them.

Outside of academic settings, this work will be extremely beneficial to the relationships of Black girls and women across generations. Whether biologically related or not, a certain level of understanding and an openness in communication between Black mothers and daughters is an overarching goal of this project. Situating media portrayals against the ways Black girls and women speak and write back to these stereotypes calls for the emergence of a new narrative in the depiction of Black women’s bodies and experiences. The significance of this narrative is that it creates opportunities for intergenerational communication between Black mothers and daughters across shared experience; it fosters an understanding and appreciation for the historical trajectory of Black women’s oppression; and it unapologetically declares the beauty, frustration, and optimism in the daily intersectional lives of Black women and girls.

Theoretical Orientation

There was, and still remains, an inherent need for the narratives of girls of color to be heard, discussed, and critiqued, but often, this narrative gets skewed amongst assumptions surrounding the general meaning of what it means to be an adolescent. Adolescence is typically defined as the space between childhood and adulthood (Rogoff, 2003; Intrator & Kunzman, 2009). A myriad of stereotypes associated with adolescents and popular culture (social and behavioral actions and disorders) are often part and parcel to many people’s definitions. For example, images of adolescents as rambunctious,
moody, and partakers in dangerous habits such as smoking are rampant in the media. Thus, adolescence is often viewed as a negative period in the life of a young person (Klein, 1990; Christenbury, 2009). Adolescence is also likened to unbecoming character traits in many adults, often called, “acting young” or “acting like an adolescent.” This definition doesn’t place adolescence as a part of life associated with age, but behavioral actions. Christenbury et al.(2009) contend:

Adolescence is not just a chronological time, often reduced to the span of the teen years, 13-19, with some leeway on either side, most commonly extended as 11-20. Adolescence is also not simply a developmental stage, with its centerpiece as puberty and one of its major psychological tasks independence from adults, particularly individuation from parents. It is also not a temporal zone of sorts after childhood and before adulthood. And, looking at the individual, adolescents are not all the same, nor do they share identical characteristics. (p.4).

Recently, theorists and scholars have argued that simply understanding the development of adolescents isn’t enough. Attention to peer pressure, character traits and behavioral actions was not sufficient, especially because these developmental studies were not inclusive of adolescent youth of color, particularly girls of color (Ladner, 1971; Leadbeater & Way, 1996; Sutherland, 2005; Gaunt, 2006; Brown, 2009, et al). Ladner’s (1971) groundbreaking *Tomorrow’s Tomorrow* was among the first academic texts to
challenge traditional notions and stereotypes of what it means to be a Black girl in the inner city. Her four-year study in St. Louis, collecting narratives from Black girls and women on their perspectives of race, class, hair textures, relationships with parents and significant others, pregnancy, etc allowed the reader to juxtapose the media portrayals of Black women with what they thought of their own lives. One of Ladner’s overarching goals was to exemplify the normalcy and resourcefulness of Black womanhood. She writes, “What other scholars had traditionally viewed as weaknesses and pathology, I chose to view as strength and coping strategies in dealing with stress” (p. xii). Ladner says her own upbringing as a Black child in the segregated south caused an immediate connection with her participants. She was used to the high level of scrutiny and typecasting resulting from her race, gender, and socioeconomic status. To use a phrase from Black feminism, Ladner brought her lived experience of “multiple jeopardies” to her research.

Black Feminist Thought calls for a critical (re) examination and deconstruction of the historical, political, and cultural representations of Black women and girls. As critical social theory, the structure and interpretations of knowledge claims have been dominated by white men; thus, leaving the oppressive truths of Black women’s daily experiences distorted or not told at all. Daily core themes such as motherhood, work, sexual politics, and family are often difficult for many Black women because of these distorted images, resulting in Black feminist thought being described as subjugated knowledge (Collins, p. 251). In light of these overt oppressive forces, Collins (1991a) says Black women have always had access to an epistemology that is grounded in collective experiences based on our history--an epistemology that challenges the knowledge claims that have tried to
erase and distort our realities—a Black feminist epistemology. She identifies four core themes of this epistemology: Concrete experience as a criterion of meaning; the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims; the ethic of caring; and the ethic of personal accountability. Each theme emerges in the data through conversations with the participants.

**Concrete experiences as a criterion of meaning**

As Collins contends, “For most African-American women, those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences” (p.257). Thus, one’s lived experience connotes a certain level of expertise. People of color and others who are marginalized must speak for themselves about their experiences. This does not suggest that White people cannot speak about or against the oppression of people of color; rather, it suggests that their perspective on its impact and meaning cannot be seen as the major perspective. Therefore, in conducting research with and about Black women and girls, narrative is crucial in the framing of these experiences to make intersectional connections.

**The Use of Dialogue in Assessing Knowledge Claims**

Collins (1991a) acknowledges that the connectedness of African roots is essential to dialogue and the knowledge validation process. (p.260). These roots are embedded in oral tradition, part of history that has “served as a fundamental vehicle for gittin ovuh. That tradition preserves the Afro-American heritage and reflects the collective spirit of the race,” (Smitherman, 2000, p, 199). The use of such Black vernacular discourses as call-and response and signifying is part and parcel to African/African American history in
general, and Black female discourse in particular. Drawing on Etter-Lewis (1996), Troutman (2001) underscores the importance of cooperative-collaborative speech among Black women highlighting several characteristics—one of which is the reliance on group membership to aid interactions (pp. 214-215). Collins further argues that this connectedness through dialogue promotes a sense of community that humanizes those involved.

*The Ethic of Care*

Collins (1991a) develops three interrelated components of the ethic of care—individual uniqueness, appropriateness of emotions in dialogue and the capacity for empathy. Individual uniqueness suggests that creativity and the ability to express one’s self has primacy over “looking like everybody else.” Appropriateness of emotions in dialogue makes it acceptable for a speaker or participant in a dialogue to become “emotional” when expressing her thoughts on a particular issue or the validity of an argument (p. 263). The capacity for empathy is the third component in the ethic of care. Within these components, centrality of emotions is central to my work with Black women, especially in light of what Joan Morgan (1999) calls the “strongblackwomen” credo—the idea that “no matter how bad shit gets, handle it alone, quietly, and with dignity” (p.90). This tactic of survival, rooted in slavery, where Black women were expected to handle the most painful and tragic ordeals while maintaining the daily demands of life, has been crafted into what Wallace (1978) deems, “the myth of the superwoman.” In this myth, mental, physical, and emotional distress suffered by Black girls and women is minimized, while attention to their presumed strength acts as a shield against expressions of humanity and victimization. The myth of the strong Black woman,
as both dominant and variable forms of consciousness amongst Black women and girls, “serves as a constructive role model because black women draw encouragement and self-assurance from an icon able to overcome great obstacles” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 184). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) says much of the acclaim embodied in strength is deceiving and undermines its real function: “to defend and maintain a stratified social order by obscuring Black women’s experiences of suffering, acts of desperation, and anger” (p.2).

*The Ethic of Personal Accountability*

Finally, the ethic of personal accountability encompasses the previous three tenets. As Collins states, “not only must individuals develop their knowledge claims through dialogue and present them in a style proving their concern for their ideas, but people are expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims” (p. 265). While experience, dialogue, and emotion are essential to a Black feminist epistemology, accountability is fundamental to social justice pedagogy. Collins believes in resisting the “truth” of how the Black woman has been defined, while simultaneously remaining critical of the process of defining ourselves.

Through the exploration of these key themes that articulate Black women’s experiences and standpoints, the use of Black feminism is directly aligned with the tenets of African American female literacies. According to Richardson (2002/2009), African American female literacies “refers to the constellation of African American cultural identities, social locations, and social practices that influence the ways that members of this discourse group make meaning and assert themselves sociopolitically in subordinate as well as official contexts” (p.755). The use of literacy as plural, specifically in relation
to the multiple discourses at play in the lives of Black women underscores literacy as a social act.

**What is literacy?**

When many speak of literacy, one’s ability to read and write is often the first set of skills that come to mind. Another one of the traditional definitions of being literate, while similar to reading and writing, is being knowledgeable or competent in a certain task (Santrock, 1993; Takanishi; 1993; Christenbury, 2009, et al.). For example, the terms ‘computer literate’ or ‘media literate’ have pervaded discussions of literacy. These terms, however, result in dissension from educators and specialists on what constitutes a proficient reader and writer. Street (1984/1995) argues that traditional theorists like Resnick and Resnick (1977) hold an autonomous view of literacy, one that takes literacy out of the social and cultural context. “As an autonomous skill rather than cultural practice, literacy can be measured through the sorts of tests that we find so troublesome and that still constitute the basis of reading assessment in the United States. As a cultural practice, literacy becomes intertwined with a host of other variables that require fine-grained, small-sample research of the sort that is impossible to test through large scale assessments” (Christenbury, Bomer & Smagorinsky, p. 7). Street considers the autonomous view of literacy reductive because it fails to pay attention to the cultural contexts at play in readers’ attempts to be engaged in texts. The alternative, an ideological model, demonstrates how literacy acts as a social practice, not at all a neutral skill. This model argues that reading and writing are derived from forms of knowledge, identity, and being. Thus, literacy is always a social act.
According to Street (2005), all models of literacy are ideological in that they are invested in social arrangements that feed into what constitutes literacy and how it is acquired (p.418). Though Street’s position was applauded for its attention to the social and political nature of literacy, it was not without opposition. Brandt & Clinton (2002) suggest that Street’s model “veers too far in a reactive direction, exaggerating the power of local contexts to set or reveal the forms and meanings that literacy takes.” (p. 338). They’re neither for the autonomous model nor against the ideological. They believe that “literacy is neither a deterministic force nor a creation of local agents.” Instead, Brandt & Clinton call for new analytical approaches to literacy that “function to delocalize or even disrupt local life.” (p. 338). Their call for hybridity and multiplicity in the agentive processes of literacy does not discredit Street (2003/2005). In fact, it illuminates the need for various ways to examine text. This examination of multiplicity in literacy is necessary for my exploration into the crisis discourse in that it highlights the need to uncover how Black mothers and daughters arrive at their own definitions and understanding of identity and knowledge formation.

*From literacy to Literacies*

Gee’s (1989) conception of Discourse v. discourse is rooted in the social construction of literacy. Discourses are “ways of being in the world” while discourses are the “connected stretches of language that make sense.” (p.6). Thus, discourses are always part of Discourses. Gee argues that literacy is “the mastery of or fluent control over secondary Discourses. Therefore, literacy is always plural: literacies (there are many of them, since there are many secondary Discourses)” (p. 9). The combination of Street (1993/1995), Scribner & Cole (1981), Heath (1982) and Gee’s (1989/1990) critiques of
autonomous models of literacy, in favor of social and cultural approaches, inform the concept or theory of multiliteracies. The New London Group (2000) coined the term “multiliteracies” to include extended definitions that were indicative of the ideological, cultural, and economic presence of literacy in people’s lives. Operating under a sociocultural framework, the notion of multiliteracies “implies that meaning making occurs in multimodal settings where written information is part of spatial, audio, and visual patterns of meaning.” (Rhodes & Robnolt, 2009, p. 156). The New London Group hoped to achieve two literacy learning goals with multiliteracies: 1) creating access to the evolving language of work, power, and community and 2) fostering the critical engagement necessary for people to design their social futures and achieve success through fulfilling employment (New London Group, 1996).

Though terms like multiple literacies, situated literacies, community literacies, digital literacies, and the New Literacy Studies (NLS) were becoming common (Alvermann, 2009), meaning making through social and cultural approaches had always been part and parcel of Black women’s everyday lived experiences. Sojourner Truth’s often quoted, “You know, children, I don’t read such small stuff as letters, I read men and nations” (Royster, 2000) is indicative of the sociocultural presence of language and literacy as a complex system of decoding in which the social becomes paramount in meaning making. While Truth was considered illiterate, her ability to both understand and critique the dominant oppressive systems at play provided foundation for theorists after her to situate literacy as a space to analyze the word and the world.

Unlike the traditional hegemonic conception of literacy as autonomous and value-free, African American female literacies, as part of New Literacy Studies, examines the
multiple, situated, and ideological nature of language and literacy in repressive locations where being a Black woman and girl, in a small town, for example, are often underexplored. In the same vein, the concept of multiple literacies, taking into account the ideological, cultural, and economic aspects of making meaning in the world, results in opportunities for participants to bring their own social practices and lived experiences to bear on the reading, discussion, and production of text. Two key concepts within NLS are literacy events and literacy practices. Heath (1982) defines a literacy event as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes” (p.50). Literacy events typically occur once, such as writing a poem in class. According to Barton and Hamilton (2000), literacy practices are “what people do with literacy…this includes people’s awareness of literacy, construction of literacy and discourses of literacy…literacy practices are more usefully understood as existing in the relations between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals” (pp. 7-8). The communication of these literacy practices through oral and written narrative is not only significant as a central component to Collins’ core epistemological themes, but also to the ways in which intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) influences the multiple consciousness of Black mothers and daughters.

In examining the intersections of race, place, age, and gender, I must make it clear that the narratives of Black mothers and daughters cannot be retold in totality through these frameworks. Indeed, factors such as class, sexuality, religiosity, and paternal connections are equally vital to the narratives. While some of these factors will be addressed, my attention to intersectionality is significant in that it highlights the need for
multiple notions of identity surrounding Black mothers and daughters of various ages and geographical backgrounds to be situated against prevailing narratives. The use of intersectionality within oral and written narrative allows for the development of a form of multiple literacies I call intergenerational literacies, or the collective critical engagement of multiple ways of knowing and experience across various degrees of intersectionality in the lives of Black mothers and daughters, toward a (re) articulation of our experiences for ourselves, by ourselves, and the survival of one another and our community(ies). As epistemological and methodological contributions to the field and lives of Black mothers and daughters, the significance of intergenerational literacies lies in both the expressions of multiple ways of knowing across generations and how these narratives are displayed. Intergenerational literacies calls for collaborative engagement within various ways of narrative expression; thus, centering the researcher and participants as co-constructors of data. Intersectionality is key to intergenerational literacies in that it positions Black women as agentive figures in the social processes of life, particularly in relation to variations and similarities of our historical, social, and cultural multiplicities.

Discussion of Methodology

As a creative writer, my natural inclination is to tell stories—to create memorable characters, develop a worthwhile plot full of climatic moments, and to engross my readers in language and dialogue. In an attempt to keep my mind engaged and will to write alive, I constantly look for different ways to tell stories. From taking all of the elements involved in the compilation of a novel and compacting it into a haiku⁵ to turning

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⁵ A Japanese poetic form consisting of 17 syllables, divided into lines of 5,7,5 respectively.
data transcriptions into poetry and collaborating with participants, I’m always in search of innovative and inspirational ways to represent data and the beauty of language.

_The use of portraiture_

To that end, in this dissertation, I experiment with portraiture and playwriting as alternative forms of representation and data analysis. At its core, portraiture involves the drawing and shaping of images in developing narrative. While I appreciate the art form and its methodological implications, my work captures the intersectional essence of Black mothers and daughters and situates their existing and formulated narratives within a genre of art that speaks to me—creative writing, specifically playwriting. Working both within and against traditional forms of writing qualitative research, my journey into intergenerational intersectionality within Black mother/daughter relationships led me to intertwine portraiture and playwriting.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) define portraiture as a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions— their authority, knowledge, and wisdom (p.xv).

For Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997), the blending of art and science through portraits shaped by dialogue between portraitist and subject acts as counterpoint to the
“dominant chorus of social scientists whose methods and goals have been greatly influenced by the positivist paradigm…and whose audiences have been mostly limited to the academy” (p.xvi). Developed through a phenomenological lens, portraiture seeks to illuminate the inherent goodness in participants. While much discourse surrounding Black women’s lives and experiences is rooted in deficit, portraiture challenges dominant narratives and states:

It [portraiture] is an intentionally generous and eclectic process that begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections…[Portraits] are not designed to be documents of idealization or celebration. In examining the dimensionality and complexity of goodness there will, of course, be ample evidence of vulnerability and weakness (p.9).

The attention to balance in the search for goodness is critical in my work with Black mothers and daughters in that expressions of vulnerability and weakness are not often celebrated or encouraged, resulting in the personification of the strong Black woman. Portraits seek to capture the origins and beliefs surrounding prevailing narratives such as this in an attempt to understand the “myriad ways in which goodness can be expressed, and tries to identify and document the actors’ perspectives” (ibid).

Nestled within the portraits of Black mothers and daughters is attention to physical setting. Portraiture calls for the reader to feel as if he or she is part of the landscape of place. Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis contend that “a feeling of
embeddedness in the setting, and a forecasting of values and themes that [help] shape the narrative” are central and warrant attention both in observational notes and actual portraits (p.45). As place is one of my intersectional frameworks, the use of portraiture provides a creative opportunity to highlight the multitude of factors at play surrounding the participants’ physical location.

Validity

The use of portraiture is directly aligned with Black Feminism and womanism in that there is never a single story to be told. The multiplicity of struggle and triumph in the daily lives of Black mothers and daughters allows for thematic connections like the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, the ethic of care, the ethic of personal accountability, and concrete experience as a criterion of meaning to tell their stories. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, “for the portraitist, there is a crucial dynamic between documenting and creating the narrative, between receiving and shaping…The effort to reach coherence must flow organically both from the data and from the interpretive witness of the portraitist…portraiture admits the central and creative role of the self” (pp.12, 13).

While the role of researcher or portraitist is crucial to the methodological co-production of text, issues of validity undeniably surface. Questions concerning the romanticizing of voice and the use of researcher ‘I’ are consistently debated. However, portraiture calls for thematic connections and framing of subject narratives in multiple contexts, resulting in opportunities to examine voice with participants (e.g., member checks, interviews, and searching for disconfirming evidence). Further, while voice is highly mediated, there is no way to remove myself, particularly in working with Black
women. Charting my own investments of privilege and struggle not only benefitted me in the reflection process, but also allowed participants to feel comfortable sharing their narratives because mine was on display. As Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1994) state, “I am the inquirer who asks the sometimes difficult questions, who searches for evidence and patterns. I am the companion on the journey, bring my own story to the encounter, making possible an interpretive collaboration” (p.12). Establishing and maintaining validity is necessary in portrait development and is fundamental to the goal of transferability.

*The use of playwriting*

After spending nine months in three states, exploring the race, place, age, and gender narratives of fourteen Black mothers and daughters, including myself and my mother, I knew early on that the traditional method of dissertation writing wouldn’t fit or honor the lives and experiences of our group. With so many elements of story embedded in each woman’s portrait, I needed an alternative form of representation that would allow me to “blend the curiosity and detective work of a biographer, the literary aesthetic of a novelist, and the systematic scrutiny of a researcher” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, p. 15). The art of playwriting allows the portraits to be situated amidst the backdrop of geographic location, while simultaneously building upon thematic connections and intergenerational, intersectional conflicts and breakthroughs. Since the narratives of each participant are not the same, the “painting” of their portraits will include a variety of literary motifs, from vignettes\(^6\) to sonnets\(^7\), creating a multi-genred collection of narrative...
that allows for a range of exploration inside our intersectional lives. In the same vein, I, as researcher and participant, am able to address the reader in an unconventional way—through an age-old theatrical convention called asides that Elizabeth St. Pierre (2000) defines as a space to “speak to the reader without the rest of the text hearing me” (p.271). Essentially, the asides are opportunities to engage in the search for disconfirming evidence as well as a space for additional elements of narrative to support ongoing scenes, portraits, and critical reflexivity. In lieu of chapters, this dissertation will unfold as a three-act play, comprised of six scenes, intermissions, asides, and a conclusion.

Organization of dissertation

Following the dramatic structure of the traditional Greek play, Act One is the Protasis or exposition. In order to ground the reader in my epistemological footing, I revisit the theoretical and methodological frameworks, followed by a discussion of data collection and analysis. Climax into the second act occurs through detailed descriptions of the “cast” and settings, research questions, and synopsis of major themes and issues. Act Two is the Epitasis or complication. As the middle act, it is the longest as climactic moments in the data are developed, themes surrounding race, place, age, and gender narratives are exposed, and portraits become clearer through multi-genred representations of data. Act Two is divided into six scenes, which allow for the intersections of three locations to be thoroughly addressed, along with Asides (*****) included throughout. Here, Intermissions serve as a space for data analysis, using Black Feminist Thought and womanism interchangeably, along with African American female and community literacies. Placing analysis in the intermission allows each scene to be visually attended to through descriptions of geographic location and portrait development. Thus,
intermissions occur after two scenes of portraiture are complete (unless a scene is particularly long). Finally, **Act Three**, the Catastrophe or resolution, is the space to detail the participants’ final feelings concerning their narratives in relation to the dominant social discourse along with conclusive statements surrounding data analysis. The Implications section follows with limitations of study and next steps for further research.
Chapter One: Theoretical and Methodological Connections

Act One: Exposition

Situating this study within Collins’s (1991a) Black feminist epistemology allows for a thematic analysis of Black women’s standpoint within the larger framework of Black feminisms. After conducting a close reading of the literature, categories within the epistemological themes emerged: historical foundations of Black women’s oppression, character development in narrative, and othermothering in the essay. Each of these categories allows for an extension of the theoretical frameworks as well as an opportunity to broaden the methodological approaches to narrative.

**Historical foundations of Black women’s oppression**

In order to understand the essence of my theoretical frameworks, I had to read a variety of texts that personified the work of Black women trailblazers throughout history. While each of the categories is rooted in history, these were pivotal to my understanding of Collins’s first epistemological theme: concrete experience as a criterion of meaning. Each of these texts (though not an exhaustive list) speaks to the beauty of the Black woman’s lived experience and how these authors use history—both public and private—to argue in favor of social justice.

One text that embodies the Black woman’s plight from slavery to present day is hooks’ (1981) *Ain’t I a woman: Black women and feminism*. Not only does she detail
how Black women have been “slaves of slaves” since institutionalized slavery, she chronicles Black women’s oppression through decades, beginning in the 1920s, to show how the matriarchal myth has pervaded the minds of Black women and furthered our divide. hooks argues for a feminist revolution, but says it looks bleak because women aren’t unified. She says we have to acknowledge that we live in a racist, classist, sexist society, but have to rid ourselves of negative socializations. This unified movement, hooks contends, can only occur once women, all women, discontinue the hostility that has kept us divided through the years. Debatably, this collective movement is problematic in light of the turbulent relationship between Black and white women throughout history and current day. Though the charge for collectivity is questionable, the beauty of this text is in the author’s ability to highlight the lived realities of so many Black women and showcase the battle and brilliance of their struggles.

A second piece that furthers the historically significant aspects of Black women’s experiences is Guy-Sheftall’s (1995) anthology, *Words of Fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought*. Readers are exposed to the phenomenal Black women whose stories never make it into classroom textbooks—women like Anna Julia Cooper, Frances Beale, Sadie T.M. Alexander, Paula Giddings, June Jordan, Deborah K. King, and Michele Wallace. The beauty of this anthology, in similar fashion to hooks’ work, is in its chronology. Guy-Sheftall, however, expands history beyond dates and events. She uses the works of prolific and often unmentioned Black women writers to chronicle the history of politics of the body, academy, the Black church, etc. The chapters are written with such honest emotion that history no longer becomes rote memorization. The reader
becomes an active participant in the fight for women’s liberation and is able to feel the anger behind the battles for racial and sexual equality.

The final text in this section makes historical and contemporary connections between hip-hop and Black feminism through everyday, conversational language. In *When chickenheads come home to roost: A hip-hop feminist breaks it down*, Morgan (1999) acknowledges the fights for women’s equality, but says that today’s Black woman has to come to terms with her strengths and weaknesses, in spite of how difficult it is to do so, and seek empowerment on all levels—mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual.

The beauty of this text for my study is that by working with Black women of different ages, the trajectory surrounding the defining qualities of the Black female will be vast and varied by experience. Combining these generational Black feminist texts allows me to thematically analyze historical and contemporary elements of Black feminisms that appear in the narratives.

*Character development in narrative*

Having a foundational understanding of the Black woman’s historical plight affords an opportunity to read for the various ways the Black woman’s story is depicted and developed through narrative. Berger’s (2004) discussion of creative narrative informs my approach as “…narratives, sometimes vignettes, or episodes picked over and worked on, sifted through time and awareness, re-attuned for precise moments by respondents and myself…oral narrative allows me to give closer attention to the ways in which women construct meaning from the everyday events of their lives, and to highlight the constructed performance aspects of the interview process” (p.79). The art of narrative inquiry is a direct result of the researcher paying attention to the “gendered context of
language—or how women talk—and the diversity of their speech…” (p. 80). Oral narratives allow the reader to feel so connected to the research participants that it often feels like reading about the lives of characters in novels. Through the telling of narrative, emotions and individual uniqueness of research participants are developed from dialogue.

Though written outside of traditional academic discourse, Ntozake Shange’s (1975) critically acclaimed choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, is a creatively inspiring example of the transforming power of narrative. Without using traditional dialogue to express emotion, Shange’s piece resonates with readers through her ability to create relatable, everyday Black woman characters who experience common struggles with relationships, body image, and an incessant need to feel alive. Shange’s work speaks to the deconstructive beauty of Black feminism. Brock (2005) says Black feminism allows a space to delineate the painful truths [of oppression] in a linear fashion without suggesting their removal, but instead, an understanding of them. Shange deconstructs these truths unabashedly through her choreographed poetics, resulting in a tenet of Black feminism that Smith (1994) and Beale (1995) argue has remained constant: Black women believe in their right to tell and critique their own stories about their own experiences.

Character development is central to Gwaltney’s (1980), *Drylongso: A self portrait of Black America*, and also serves as a perfect example of the blending of Collins’s themes. In this text, Gwaltney, an anthropologist and folklorist, examines core Black culture through the narratives of men and women across a dozen northeastern urban communities. Through these very candid portraits, the reader not only becomes knowledgeable of the participants intersectional realities, but also of the ways in which
they interacted with him. The author is very open about the participants’ distrust, affection, curiosity, and yet overall willingness to help a Black male academic. These attributes are evident by Gwaltney’s attention to detail in each character portrayal.

Similarly, Ladson-Billings’ (2005) *Beyond the big house: African American educators on teacher education*, provides a personal approach to character development in narrative through the lens of portraiture. Ladson-Billings takes seven well-known African American teacher educators and provides the reader with intimate portraits of their lives, all the while making connections to prominent figures in the African slave and African American tradition. By using the Big House as a symbol of power status, similar to the Academy, the author calls for stepping outside of the academic walls of comfort in order to reach those in the fields, or communities. The portraits of teacher educators are indicative of those who have achieved successful academic achievement, but also remain true to their roots and the needs of the communities they work in. Although teacher education is not the theoretical base of the present study, *Beyond the big house* provides a very hands-on, relatable example of portraiture.

*Othermothering in the essay*

Othermothering, according to Stanlie James (1993), “has its roots in the traditional African world-view and can be traced through the institution of slavery, developed in response to an ever-growing need to share the responsibility for child nurturance” (p.45). Signithia Fordham (1993) says othermothering is an example of “fictive kinship” or a connection between women and daughters/sons who may or may not be legally or biologically related, but reciprocally share a cultural, political and humanistic concern and support for one another. The role of othermother is central to
Black feminism and can be found in many essays on the Black woman. Many authors of the essay assume the role of othermother with the reader through mood and tone, as if to form a connection beyond factual evidence, into the more personal, or emotional element of story.

Alice Walker (1983) approaches othermothering through a combination of the previous themes, with particular attention to Black women’s historical oppressions. *In search of our mothers’ gardens* is a collection of essays that detail various movements in American history: the Civil Rights movement, the antinuclear movement, and the Black feminist movement, or as she defines it, womanist movement. This womanist movement coined by Walker is defined as acting grown up or like a woman, a woman who loves women and men sexually and/or nonsexually. Walker pays particular attention to the works and lives of literature legends Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer and frames a feminist/womanist pedagogy around their stories. She pays homage to the lives of writers/artists, in general, but these two in particular. Both writers were often criticized for their private lives and the lives of the characters they wrote about. However, Walker’s essays serve as a tribute to their struggles as well as the struggles Blacks have endured for generations. She finds beauty in the midst of oppression and takes great stride to present as much information on Black writers and poets as possible because she was not privy to this information as a student. In many ways, this text serves as a reminder of the power and beauty of the essay, and to the beauty of fictive kinship through literature. In the spirit of othermothering, Walker invites the reader to be a part of her ongoing relationships, and welcomes us into her family.
Othermothering as fictive kinship is evident throughout Lorde’s (1984) *Sister Outsider*. This collection of essays and speeches calls for the unification of Black women in the fight for social justice. Throughout the text, Lorde makes the reader feel angry, confused, hopeful, shameful, and comforted. She addresses the reader from a position of love and genuine concern for the state of the Black woman. Like an othermother, the reader knows Lorde truly wants the best for us, but it is up to us to become the change we so desperately seek. One of the most beautiful elements of this text is in the second to last essay, “Eye to Eye: Hatred and Anger.” Here, Lorde exposes the reader to a bit of her own life story and experiences with Black women in an attempt to highlight the need for us to move beyond anything that causes division, and instead, concentrate on the things we need to change in ourselves. Just like a mother, Lorde challenges the Black woman to take control of our own definitions and portrayals and begin to mother ourselves. We can’t continue to blame other people for the work we can be doing in our own lives. This is a text to re-read whenever a reality check is needed, knowing that each essay is rooted in love.

Finally, the practice of othermothering is highlighted in the edited collection of essays, *All the women are white, all the Blacks are men, but some of use are brave* (1982). In this text, multiple authors examine a curricular need and call for Black Women’s Studies in the academy. Through an intersectional framework around the various facets of Black women’s lives, the authors of these essays demand an introspective read into the complexities of the Black woman. While rooted in such pivotal moments in history like The Combahee River Collective and Black women’s literary tradition, this collection, like Ladson-Billings’ piece, pushes for the work of the academy
to become the political, social, and gendered movements in the community. Though the theme of othermothering doesn’t seem as prominent as in Lorde’s work, the mere act of taking knowledge and developing it in others who may not have opportunities to have the same academic advantages speaks to the core of this thematic and categorical framework. The women in this compilation push for Black Women’s Studies, but not for name alone. If the efforts of such pioneers as Barbara Smith, Mary Helen Washington, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson are only taught within the ivory towers, their work hasn’t served its true purpose.

Reading and analyzing these texts have afforded me the opportunity to better understand the need to create and build upon thematic categories through playwriting and portraiture. In an effort to further my epistemological and theoretical frameworks, I return to the literature for a more detailed analysis of Black feminisms.

Black Feminisms: The Ground on which I Stand
The study of feminism and feminist theory is often categorized as a metaphor of waves that depict the evolution of feminist thought. The first wave encompasses the nineteenth century women’s suffrage movement that resulted from the abolitionist movement. The second details the activist movement for women’s rights in the 1960’s that developed out of the Civil Rights Movement. The third wave, situated within theoretical underpinnings of hiphop culture, embodies agendas of equality from its foremothers of the first and second waves. While these waves are often customary to the discussion and understanding surrounding feminism, Kimberly Springer (2002) argues that the model of waves fails to account for the race and gender-based movements that preceded them;
movements that were spearheaded by Black women. While historians and teachers of feminist theory often include the stories of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth as pioneers of the fight for Black women’s rights, there is little mention of Maria Stewart, the first Black female lecturer to speak in front of men and women as well as the first Black woman to publish a letter on women’s rights in *Freedom’s Journal*, the first Black newspaper.

Likewise, the story of Frances E.W. Harper, a devout feminist and prolific poet and lecturer in the anti-slavery movement is rarely included in the historical analysis of the first wave. In the wake of massive amounts of lynching and sexual abuse, Black women like Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells used their gifts of activism, written and spoken word to defend the rights of Black people. The establishment of the Black women’s club movement as a force of resistance and protest against the unfair treatment of Black women and Black people provided Wells and Terrell with much needed support in the struggle for Black liberation.

Anna Julia Cooper’s 1892, *A Voice from the south*, presented a global account of racism, colonialism, Black women’s education, and Black male sexism (Sheftall, p.43). Cooper (1995) takes a feminist stance on the need for Black women to attain higher education and become economically independent, and to strategically work toward these goals. She addresses the dilemma of the “colored woman” as both a question of gender and race, and says that being colored and female bears much significance and possibilities, but women have to have the strength and morality to fight for their equal positioning in the world (p.47-49). These nineteenth-century Black women attest to
issues of both race and gender through their activism and must be included in the stories of the first wave movement.

**Second wave feminism**

Rooted in the Combahee River Collective’s (1974), Black Feminist Statement, that viewed Black feminism as the “logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face” (p. 232), Black feminism became the critical theory that furthered the Collective’s desire for a Black women’s movement as well as the pivotal element of the second wave movement. Though active in political, racial, and liberatory movements such as Civil Rights and the Black Panther Party, Black women had a desire to develop their own antiracist and anti-sexist movement. Their efforts evolved into the National Black Feminist Organization. As part of the political agenda of second wave feminists, Black women collectively fought for abortion and lesbian rights, led protests against the abuse and rape of women, all the while providing information on women’s rights to those in need. While the Collective was comprised of Black women, both lesbian and heterosexual, there was still an allegiance to Black men. They write, “We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men against sexism” (p.16). Instrumental to the development and furthering of second wave Black feminism were activists like Angela Davis and bell hooks who examine the trajectory of racist and sexist oppression of Black women from slavery to present day.

Davis (1981) and Paula Giddings (1984) argue that one cannot properly explore Black feminism, or gender roles for that matter, without paying homage to the Black woman. Not only were slave women forced into a life of field labor, they were forced
into a life of sexual coercion with the slave master. They were victimized and controlled, sold and exploited, and all the while expected to generate the same amount of revenue as slave men. Beale (1995) says

The black woman in America can justly be described as a slave of a slave…Her physical image has been maliciously maligned; she has been sexually molested and abused by the white colonizer; she has suffered the worst kind of economic exploitation, having been forced to serve as the white woman’s maid and wet-nurse for white offspring while her own children were more often than not starving and neglected. They have suffered from the cruelest assault on mankind that the world has ever known (p.148).

Harriet Jacobs’ (1987) narrative, *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*, poignantly illustrates these horrendous acts of abuse. hooks (1981) contends that the horrific treatment of Black women during slavery is one of the overarching reasons why the rape of Black women has received very little attention in comparison to white women. Black women have historically been viewed as “sexually permissive” and constantly available to men, both black and white. This permissive symbol resulted in Black women becoming labeled as jezebels, whores, and sexual temptresses (hooks, p, 49). While slavery was cruel and unjust to both Black men and women, women bore a double portion of the burden.

With the rise of abolition came the right to vote and the continuation of sexism. White women abolitionists like Lucretia Mott and Sarah Grimke praised Frederick Douglass for introducing women’s rights to the Black liberation movement and for being
such an enthusiastic supporter. Douglass was frequently called “the women’s rights man” (Davis, 1981). Certainly, white abolitionists and Douglass were in favor of women’s rights, but hooks (1981/1984) says that fighting against the sexual exploitation of Black women was not on their agendas. In fact, she argues that many white abolitionists contributed to Black women being labeled prostitutes. hooks argues that Douglass refused to fight for the rights of Black women if it meant he would lose favoritism in the eyes of white abolitionist women. At the time, Black men readily aligned themselves with white women. hooks states, “The enslaved black woman could not look to any group of men, white or black, to protect her against sexual exploitation…White women held black slave women responsible for rape because they had been socialized by 19th century sexual morality to regard [Black] women as sexual temptresses. Fellow slaves often pitied the lot of sexually exploited females but did not see them as blameless victims” (pp 36-37).

Even after slavery ended, the Black woman’s sexually exploited stigma remained and she was constantly seen as inferior and devalued. In many ways, one of the goals of second wave Black feminism was to document the stories that the first wave failed to include. These stories are not indicative of a call for separation between Black men and women though the response from Black men toward feminism has been negative (Combahee River Collective, p. 19). The Collective says this negativity is a direct result of Black men’s fear of losing their allies in the struggle and the realization that their sexist oppressive ways have to change. According to the Moynihan Report, the deterioration of the Negro in society is in large part due to the undoing of the Negro family and the reality that men suffered more than Black women during slavery.
Moynihan says the image of Black women in matriarchal roles is humiliating and completely contradictory to the scientific dominating essence of the male species (Giddings, 1984).

Lorde (1987) and hooks (1981, 1984) believe the hierarchical and patriarchal relationship between Black women and men has to include the white woman, with special attention to race. To quote Lorde at length:

It is easy for Black women to be used by the power structure against Black men, not because they are men, but because they are Black. Therefore, for Black women, it is necessary at all times to separate the needs of the oppressor from our own legitimate conflicts within our communities. This same problem does not exist for white women. Black women and men have shared racist oppression and still share it, although in different ways…white women face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power. This possibility does not exist in the same way for women of Color. The tokenism that is sometimes extended to us is not an invitation to join power; our racial “otherness” is a visible reality that makes that quite clear (p.118).

Thus, Lorde’s often quoted statement, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” is cautionary in the midst of being revolutionary. Lorde cautions women, specifically Black women against becoming comfortable in hierarchies with Black men
and white women. Black women have to engage in visionary thought and action in order to enact revolutionary change.

One significant development that led to revolutionary change was the expansion of Women’s Studies to Black Women’s Studies in academia. At its inception, Women’s Studies was designed to incorporate feminist scholarship into core academic curriculum. While the decision to create a separate discipline was met with opposition, it was most notably opposed by Black women who critiqued white Women’s Studies scholars for their lack of intersectional inclusivity along with the development of the discipline as heteronormative. The absence of the lesbian experience was considered counterproductive to the claim of creating a discipline that was centered in emerging scholarship on women and gender (James, Foster, & Guy-Sheftall, 2009). The need to move Black women’s stories and lived experiences from the margins to the center resulted in the Black Women’s Studies initiative. Building upon the work of foremothers like Anna Julia Cooper, Frances Harper, Zora Neale Hurston, and Maria Stewart, a young group of Black women and men, committed to telling our stories of race, gender, and sexuality while remaining rooted in the improvement of the Black community and Black female condition, produced Black feminist and womanist theories along with visual and artistic approaches to scholarship. Their progressive initiative led to the study of Black women in the literary sector as well. Groundbreaking texts such as Toni Morrison’s (1970) *The Bluest Eye*, Maya Angelou’s (1970) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Toni Cade Bambara’s (1970), *The Black Woman*, a foundational collection of poetry and prose by and about Black women, each examined the intersectional inclusivity of race, class, and gender that was ignored in white Women’s Studies.
The establishment of Black Women’s Studies as a field that attends to the lives of Black women across disciplines and within the community resulted in the creation of two critical scholastic texts on Black women: *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black women* that emphasized the importance of studying our global intersectional lives and Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith’s (1982) *All the women are white, all the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave: Black women’s studies*, a seminal piece that explores how white women’s racism and Black men’s sexism left Black women largely ignored, yet fully capable to tell our own stories. According to Hull and Smith (1982), “Black women could not exist consciously until we began to name ourselves…To examine the politics of Black women’s studies means to consider not only what it is, but why it is, and what it can be” (p.xvii). Standing on the shoulders of Black female pioneers who have redefined and reclaimed Black women’s place at the center, Collins’s (1991a/2000) *Black Feminist Thought* (BFT) furthers the call to fight oppressions of race, class, gender, age, and sexuality as we work toward liberation.

According to Collins, “the overarching purpose of U.S. Black feminist thought is to resist oppression, both its practices and the ideas that justify it…As a critical social theory, BFT aims to empower African American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions” (p.22). Collins argues that being Black and female in the U.S. exposes Black women to a set of common discriminatory situations in the workplace and home. In reading Black feminist thought from a historical lens, many wonder what has really changed for the Black woman since slavery. She continues to be oppressed, marginalized, stigmatized, and victimized. Certainly,
experiences vary by individual but, by and large, the image of Black women being considered a slave of a slave remains.

BFT argues that “in contrast to the dialectical relationship linking oppression and activism, a dialogical relationship characterizes Black women’s collective experiences and group knowledge…a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness” (Collins, p.30). hooks (1989) says positioning Black women at the center was not an act of exclusion, but a call and challenge to those who view Black women as inferior to hear us speak. BFT suggests that if that challenge is not heard or met we, as Black women, owe it to ourselves and foremothers to acknowledge the past, and collectively engage in unified activism toward the writing of a new chapter in the history books.

This notion of unified activism is directly aligned with Walker’s (1983) various descriptions of womanism that, while visionary, remain rooted in the historical experiences of the Black woman. Adding to the working definition of womanism as “a Black feminist or feminist of color,” Walker’s (1983) various explanations of the term are indicative of its ever-evolving commitment to social justice, “survival and wholeness” (p.xi) in the midst of all forms of oppression. Derived from the Southern Black folk expression “you acting womanish,” Walker (2009) suggests the womanist view is purposefully Black and says she found no interest in prefacing the term with Black as it is directly extrapolated from our culture: “Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface feminist with the word white, since the word feminist is accepted as coming out of white women’s culture” (p.11). With similar
beliefs and vested interest in a collective agenda toward the freedom of Black people, Collins (2009) asks “What’s in a name?” She says:

Perhaps the time has come to go beyond naming by applying main ideas contributed by both womanists and Black feminists to the over-arching issue of analyzing the centrality of gender in shaping a range of relationships within African American communities...keep[ing] in mind that the womanist/Black feminist debate occurs primarily among relatively privileged Black women... especially those in the academy...[It is important to identify] what the large numbers of African American women who stand outside of higher education might deem worthy of attention...A commitment to social justice and participatory democracy provide some fundamental ground rules for Black women and men concerning how to relate across differences...

Whether labeled womanism, Black feminism, or something else, African American women could not possibly possess a superior vision of what community would look like, how justice might feel, and the like (pp.66-67).

No matter the name, activists like Barbara Smith and Gloria Hull (1982) believe the quest for liberation is not enough. There has to be a level of commitment for community building with Black people of all backgrounds who are willing to engage in emancipatory work. Smith (1983) writes, “Since the 1960s few groups have been willing...
to do the kind of Black feminist organizing that the Combahee River Collective took on…It is not surprising that Black feminism has seemed to be more successful in the more hospitable environments on campuses than on the streets of Black communities…” (p. xvi). Michele Wallace (1982) agrees with Smith and adds that the historical achievements and sacrifices of Black women in the first and second wave movements will remain on the pages of Black authors’ work. It can be argued that there is a need for young Black women and men to become active in the politics of Black feminism in order to further the fight. Hiphop feminism enters as the contemporary vehicle for raising the level of political consciousness developed and carried out in the first and second waves of feminism.

*Third wave feminism*

The third wave of feminism is fairly new and came to be known publicly through Rebecca Walker’s Third Wave Foundation in 1992. Third wave feminism credits the previous waves and women who were active participants in the racial, gendered, and classed fight for social justice (Morgan, 1999; Springer, 2002; Pough, 2007; et al), but Hiphop feminism (HHF), as part of third wave, expands these feminist/womanist epistemologies through examinations of hiphop. Pough (2007) defines HHF as “women and men who step up and speak out against gender exploitation in hip-hop…A hip-hop feminist is more than just someone who likes to listen to rap music and feels conflicted about it. A hip-hop feminist is someone who is immersed in hip-hop culture and experiences hip-hop as a way of life. Hip-hop as a culture, in turn, influences his or her worldview or approach to life” (pp. 80, 82).
As related to the first wave and BFT, HHF acts as an extension. Just as race, gender, sex, and class were analyzed through the oppressive construct of slavery, hiphop feminism, is designed to further the work of Moraga & Anzaldua, 1981; Smith, 1983; Lorde, 1984; and Anzaldua, 1987 in the fight against silencing and forced definitions of self, particularly in the lives of young women who participate in hiphop culture. Brown (2009) says HHF “not only acknowledges Black girls as experts on their own lives, but more than that, hip-hop feminism makes it possible to articulate a complex understanding of Black girlhood” (pp.34-35). HHF calls for the centering of Black girls’ voices in the critiques of misogyny and sexism in hiphop. Operating in tandem with BFT to “name our realities and bridge the contradictions in our own words: We are the colored in a white feminist movement, We are the feminists among the people of our culture. We are often the lesbians among the straight” (Moraga & Anzaldua, p. 23), HHF continues to speak back to dominant systems of oppression. According to Aisha Durham (2007) an “emphasis on popular culture representations to engender a feminist politic” is the distinguishing feature of HHF (p. 307).

Though popular culture encompasses a wide range of subjects, in discussions of hiphop music, focus often centers on the depiction of Black women in song lyrics and rap videos. While many “second wavers” pay close attention to the misogyny in hiphop and use these depictions as rationale for their distaste and frustration with members of the third wave for not being critical enough of these representations, “third wavers” argue for a larger, more holistic analysis of the entire hiphop culture (Peoples, 2008). Discrepancies between second and third wavers over the lack of “true” or foundational feminist practices and beliefs amidst claims for sexual agency in the representations of
Black woman’s sexuality in hiphop, seemingly results in a generational divide. Guy-Sheftall (2002), however, contends that while the fundamental feminist principles of these waves are cross-generational and relevant, “perhaps the most difficult challenge for older and younger feminists is hearing the truths of our respective lives and not rushing to judgment about our differing conceptions of women’s paths to empowerment” (p.1094). Though the language of Black feminism may change, Guy-Sheftall reminds supporters of the wave model to be particularly cautious of handling their various interpretations with care. Though differing perspectives on the generational necessity of the third wave arise, hiphop feminists maintain a commitment to the survival of Black people, and Black girls in particular.

Where I Enter

While the pluralism of Black feminism through the depiction of waves speaks to the necessity for the collective truths of Black women and girls to be told, my work specifically brings together Black mothers and daughters across place, age, and experience to document and discuss our various realities and speak back to the prevailing narratives surrounding us. Though there are many after-school programs that serve as spaces for female empowerment, this research is foundational and situated in the home so that Black mothers and daughters are privy to the challenges and triumphs one another face and collectively engage in the fight against oppression. Even as the debate surrounding “What’s in a name?” continues, the fundamental tenets of Black feminism and womanism as epistemological footing for the exploration of oral and written narrative in the lives of Black women and girls remain purposeful for this project.
The present intergenerational narrative analysis on the intersections of race, place, age, and gender in the lives of fourteen Black mothers and daughters, including myself and my mother, occurs across three locations—Capital City, T-town, and Sunnyside. Each of these locations has been pivotal to my own evolution into womanhood, and I revisit each city to discover how Black girls and women define and describe the state of the Black woman, with particular attention to the “at risk” and “in crisis” discourse. Choosing a homogenous sample (Patton, 1990) of fourteen participants in three cities was purposeful in that it allowed access to in-depth information of a small population through focus group interviews. Since I’d formed relationships with the participants prior to the study, exploring the intersections of place, age, race, and gender allowed for a critical examination of the mother/daughter dynamic. In my attempt to fill a gap in the literature, it was important to not only include mothers and daughters, but to also conduct research outside of school and school premises. Since all focus group interviews were conducted in the home, access was key and beneficial. It must be noted, however, that though I’d formed prior relationships with the participants, I had no knowledge of their intersectional narratives, including my own mother’s. The fourteen participants are made up of mothers (single, divorced, and married) and daughters, and othermothers with varied socioeconomic and educational statuses.

Discussion of Data Collection

Over the course of nine months (January 2011-September 2011), I conducted four focus group semi-structured interviews in T-town and Capital City and 26 individual and mother/daughter Skype, in-person, and phone interviews in all three locations. These
interviews were tape recorded and ranged from 15 minutes to three hours. Additionally, observations of each participant ranged from four to 20 occurrences in the home, recreational, or work environment. Each observation lasted from thirty minutes to five hours. The number and duration of observations and interviews were dependent upon participants’ schedules. All reflections were handwritten in my field log.

When inside the home, I observed mother/daughter verbal and nonverbal forms of interaction. Often, during arguments, both mothers and daughters would ask me to settle their disputes, with facetious remarks like, “Look at your notes and tell her when she was gettin’ smart with me,” followed by laughter. I always remained neutral, reminding them that I was not dictating their dialogue, but merely making note of their interaction. For further proof, I shared my field log. In these instances, I knew the participants were joking and never believed they questioned my authenticity, but being observed in the home while trying to maintain normalcy was daunting. I quickly learned to transition from observer as participant to participant as observer (Glesne 2006). When a researcher is an observer as participant, there is minimal interaction because observation is key. Participant as observer, on the other hand, allows the researcher to be very hands-on in the everyday experiences of the subjects. Therefore, I became an active participant while simultaneously conducting observations.

Recreational observations of the girls in both T-town and Capital City occurred during visits to local eateries, preparations for after school functions, and shopping trips. I paid particular attention to topics of conversation amongst one another. From being on punishment and boys to the latest fashion trends they were unable to afford, they actively sought my opinion and encouraged me to be a part of their conversations. For the
participants in T-town, I was “Miss Jamila,” a form of address I continuously tried to
denounce, asking them to simply call me Jamila. However, their training in southern
manners and traditions insisted on the title before my name. Nevertheless, they still
allowed me to be part of their circle of blossoming sisterhood, often asking for fashion
and collegial advice.

MawMaw was the only participant I observed at work. I made note of her
interactions with customers at the Community Book Center (CBC) and how these forms
of communication incited intergenerational fictive kinship. Glesne’s participant as
observer was certainly enacted at the CBC as I was quickly indoctrinated into the
workforce. From answering phones and assisting customers with books to helping
MawMaw with computer software, making runs to the local Black-owned eatery for the
chicken we all found addictive, and prepping for poetry readings and community forums,
I was no longer just the PhD student collecting research; I became part of the CBC
family.

Lincoln & Guba (1985) define persistent observation as “those characteristics and
elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and
focusing on them in detail (p.304). Spending over 20 hours as both participant and
observer of MawMaw and the daily culture of the CBC allowed me to establish
relationships and trustworthiness. In the beginning of data collection, MawMaw informed
me that many students come to interview her, but never return after getting the story they
need. Despite the fact that I’d known her for years prior to data collection, I still needed
to prove a balance of both intense involvement in the book center and interview sessions
for my research.
Prolonged engagement through personal visits, assistance with homework and on-site work, and monthly communication via phone and Skype to simply converse about our daily lives outside of, and in addition to the research allowed me to maintain open dialogue and refuted any pre-existing barriers of mistrust.

**Interviews**

I made four trips to T-town, interviewing participants as a group twice, with the remaining trips for sessions as mother/daughter pairs. Interviews were conducted at my cousin’s house, participants’ homes, and local eateries. Eight Skype and phone sessions were conducted as individual interviews. Though I came to know the girls through an after-school educational program a family member coordinated in T-town for years, the girls were adamant about not wanting our discussions to occur on school grounds. They were eager to engage with one another and their mothers and wanted our conversations to be as comfortable as possible. Each of the T-town girls knew one another from middle and high school. They identified as friends, but not “close friends.” Their mothers were familiar with one another from living in T-town and activities their daughters were involved in, but never communicated outside of dialogue related to extracurricular activities.

Likewise, I made four trips to Sunnyside, observing MawMaw as part of the cultural climate of the CBC. Although I lived in Sunnyside for four years during college, I came to know MawMaw during a return visit to the city in 2008. As a city full of Black history and culture, I’ve always loved the energy of Sunnyside. After one of the deadliest hurricanes destroyed the city in 2005, I returned to find a much different Sunnyside. Landmarks shifted, homes were boarded, and many people homeless, but the spirit of
culture in the city remained in tact. While some were unable to return due to severe home
damage and lack of resources, many Blacks stayed to rebuild. MawMaw and the CBC
decided to stay. As she is not a biological mother to girls and was unable to join the focus
groups in either T-town or Capital City, attention to othermothering occurred through
observations. Follow-up discussion took place during four individual interviews via
Skype and phone. I funded the majority of trips to T-town and Sunnyside. During the
latter part of data collection, I received a travel grant, but was unsuccessful in
coordinating a trip for participants to converse as a large focus group due to their
educational, job, and family commitments. Instead, I used the money to fund additional
solo trips to T-town and Sunnyside for follow-up data.

Since I live in Capital City and Tanisha was my mentee in an unrelated program
for adolescent girls, access was not an issue. Shavon and Tanisha are friends and I came
to know her through Tanisha. Of all the mother/daughter pairs, Mama T and Mama S
communicate the most as they attend the same church and their daughters have been
friends since middle school. However, they shared that they’d never discussed any
personal topics concerning their intersectional narratives prior to this project. Due to its
central location, our focus group interviews occurred at Mama T’s house. My mother
traveled to Capital City to be a part of these sessions. She lives in a neighboring state.
Two additional interviews occurred in pairs at Mama T and Mama S’s homes,
respectively. Ten individual interviews occurred at eateries, in the home, via Skype, and
phone.

In each state, interviews were conducted around dates and times that worked with
the participants’ schedules. This approach was helpful for the participants because they
never had to disrupt their routine for my work, but it was also limiting in that I was never able to coordinate schedules across states. Homework, job commitments, errands, internet failure, after school activities, and simply forgetting about our online and phone sessions were recurring roadblocks in my desire for intergenerational communication between participants in various locations. Whether online or in-person, a large focus group gathering never occurred, but I was able to anonymously discuss each group’s progress and findings with the other. This tactic was helpful to feelings of intersectional commonality across location. The use of Skype as a methodological tool for data collection and analysis was not only beneficial as face-to-face communication in long-distance dialogue, but it also allowed for exploration into the intergenerational use of technology. For the mothers of T-town and Capital City, Skype was a feature set-up for them by their daughters. They were not interested in learning its features or setting up their own account, viewing it as technology for young people. As a 60-year-old woman, MawMaw was fascinated in her ability to see the person she was speaking with. In fact, she preferred our conversations to occur via Skype and created her own tag line message: “Never shoulda showed me Skype” as indication of her continuous use of this feature of social media. As a sociocultural framework, multiple literacies explores meaning making in multimodal settings where written information is also part of spatial, audio, and visual patterns of meaning. As an intergenerational methodological tool, the use of Skype creates an opportunity for the examination of digital literacies as part of intergenerational literacies.

Though I never had formal interview questions for the participants to answer, our sessions were semi-structured in that they were developed from questions I created
and transitioned into journal writing topics (See Appendix A). The questions were used to support and further the dialogue during our sessions. In preparation for focus group sessions, I communicated via Skype or phone and asked participants to journal about the following topics: representations of being a Black girl/woman, descriptions of place/personal definitions of community and your role(s) in these communities, personal definitions of being at risk and in crisis, and descriptions of your mother/daughter relationship. Each topic was explicitly detailed and any questions from participants were thoroughly addressed. No page length requirements were applied. Initially, some of the participants were hesitant to write for fear of outside readers critiquing their grammar. I assured them that their journals would not be seen by anyone other than me, and that I wanted to capture the free-write of the narrative, so attention would not be on grammar. For each topic, I asked them to include examples of personal experience, questions they wanted to ask one another, and any emotional developments that occurred while writing.

Then, I spent the next couple of weeks coordinating our schedules to conduct a focus group session the following month. Once travel arrangements were made, I followed up with the journal activity via Skype or phone to get initial feedback from their writing. We discussed the overall direction of the focus group session and addressed any concerns they had about sharing their stories. There were only two instances where two of the adolescent participants had reservations about discussing something they’d written for fear of parental punishment. In these cases, as detailed in the data, I redirected the conversation during our group sessions to general dialogue instead of specific discussion of their writing. Focus group sessions began as hour-long conversations, but as participants became comfortable discussing their lived experiences with one another, they
would last up to three hours.

Triangulation involves the use of multiple methods to collect and analyze data while maintaining trustworthiness. As such, I performed multiple techniques of triangulation throughout the research process. During data collection, I followed each focus group session with a written reflection piece from the participants and myself that we often shared during our next session together. This tactic allowed us to hear the effects of group communication. Additionally, I performed individual informal member checks of all participants throughout the interview process to explore any questions or concerns about the structure and topics discussed in our sessions. Lincoln & Guba (1985) suggest member checking “is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility because it allows the researcher to test data, interpretations, and conclusions with the stakeholders from whom the data were originally created (p.314). As a result of member checking, additional intersections were introduced through discussions of the journal topics. For example, dialogue about being Black girls and women transitioned into relationships with boys, being a strong Black woman, father/daughter dynamics, sex, and desire. Within two weeks of returning home, after data was transcribed and coded from focus group sessions, I arranged individual and mother/daughter sessions to continue our dialogue on these expanded elements of intersectionality. This pattern of focus group sessions, reflection pieces, and member checks followed by Skype and phone communication produced bountiful data for analysis and maintained trustworthiness between all participants and myself.
Discussion of data analysis

Ethnography is the foundation of the study, with particular attention to participant observation. The participants and I engaged in collaborative development of discourse through the creation and analysis of our intergenerational narratives. After spending multiple weeks in each city for nine months, including over 50 hours in observation and interviews and 30 hours transcribing and coding data, I became immersed in the culture of my participants. From home interactions to community involvement, using a tape recorder, hand recorded field notes, distributing journals, and conducting semi-structured interviews, the intergenerational effects of race, place, age, and gender emerged.

Data analysis occurred as a three-step process. During interviews, the participants and I engaged in oral and written work, resulting in large amounts of data to transcribe. I read through each interview and journal entry three times. The first reading was a blind one with no writing. During the second reading, I developed a codebook (See Appendix B) and used a pencil to underline key phrases and passages that seemed to align with the codes. The third reading was more analytical, allowing me to bring the theoretical frameworks to bear on the data, in search of grounded theory. Each interview was transcribed within two days of our sessions (using Express Scribe software and a foot pedal), allowing me to go back and ask follow-up questions while the topics were still on the minds of the participants. Following each interview, I penned a reflection piece to help me process the session and unpack my emotions.

The second step included member checks in which I shared my codebook, field notes, and transcriptions with the participants, letting them make corrections as they saw fit. The participants were given the option to keep the material to make changes during
their own time, but each of them wanted me present to talk further about the data. They wanted to discuss how their perspectives on certain topics shifted as well as the growth of their mother/daughter relationships since beginning the study. These conversations allowed me to see the need to reduce my codebook from 44 codes and, instead group them into three categories—Being Black Girls and Women, Descriptions of Place, and Mother/daughter, Othermother relationships. These themes were central to the data and revealed the need to include sub codes within each theme.

The final step, peer debriefing, allowed me to share data and analysis with fellow graduate student colleagues who were accessible and have vested interest in Black culture. The first person is a Black man at my university who conducts research on culturally relevant pedagogy in gender-specific schools. He, too, examines narrative and community. With similar methods of data collection and analysis learned in our research courses, we were able to share coded interviews and offer suggestions for additional questioning. The second person is a Black woman who attends a separate university and frames her research in Black Discourse practices and African American female literacies. We often present together at conferences and are very familiar with one another’s research. Her knowledge of discourse analysis is an invaluable tool for dissecting the literacy narratives of Black women and girls.

Nestled within the portraits that frame their race, place, age, and gender narratives and the theories that envelop this study is an undeniable pulse, a force that drives the participants and myself into becoming—becoming vocal about the process of unpacking our intersectional narratives, becoming honest with ourselves and one another through oral and written exercises on our relationships as mother and daughter, becoming aware
of the ongoing societal stigmas at play in our everyday lives, and becoming open with sharing that though this was often an exhilarating and exhausting process, doing and being a part of this research is necessary for our growth as Black women.

Building Climax (Research Questions)

1. How does geography and community influence Black womanhood?

2. What is the intergenerational relationship between second and third wave feminism?

3. How do Black mothers and daughters account for “at risk” and “in crisis” phenomenon in their daily lives?

4. How do the four epistemological themes (concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, the ethic of caring, and the ethic of personal accountability) emerge in the study through narrative?
**Cast**:  

**Tanisha**: 17, turned 18 during data collection, heterosexual, high school senior, department store worker, youngest of 2 girls, lives in Capital City, product of two-parent military household, loves dance and poetry-writing. Doesn’t feel like she can truly talk to her mom about issues she’s dealing with because she doesn’t want her mother to feel like she’s failed. She does describe their relationship as “close,” but admits that she has to put a lot of parameters around the things she tells her, though she does share a lot. In the beginning of data collection, Tanisha admits to having low-self esteem and says that she tells herself she’s ugly or not worthy of certain things when good things happen to her. She feels like, Why me? She says self-esteem and body issues definitely plague Black girls, and believe most girls put up a façade like they’re okay because other females will judge or react negatively to their emotional state. She says she wouldn’t take the time to share her feelings with other girls because she feels her emotions would be picked to pieces: “I’ve stifled Tanisha so much that I don’t even know who she is.”  

**Mama T**: Tanisha’s mother, 47, married, college-educated at a predominately white institution, self identifies as “somewhere in the middle of working class to poor.” Though she would like to identify as middle class, she feels like her socioeconomic status is up in the air in this economy. She is heterosexual, mother of two daughters, member of a Black Greek letter organization, works as a sales rep for a highly reputable computer corporation, and travels a lot on business. Mama T does not feel that the job she is in utilizes all of her talents and gifts, but as a mother and wife, she feels her responsibility is to sacrifice for the well being of the family. She considers her relationship with Tanisha “close” in that they share a lot of issues. Community is of great importance to Mama T and she talks about how she had a dynamic community in a different midwestern state, but hasn’t felt any sense of community in Capital City. She doesn’t think Black women have a shot at a revolutionary movement, large or small, because there’s too much animosity, lack of trust, and strife amongst us.

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8 Names of participants have been altered to protect and maintain anonymity.
**Shavon**: 18, heterosexual, high school senior, greeter at restaurant, product of divorced parents and a blended family, born and raised in Capital City. Shavon is angry, very angry about being in a blended family. She barely speaks to her stepfather and has frequent fights with her stepsister. She blames both of her biological parents for her anger, but most of it is directed at her mother. Shavon believes her mother chose her husband over her. She thinks that from they time they’ve all lived together (since Shavon was 6 years old), her mother hasn’t put her first. She is all too anxious to leave for college, and states, “I’m tired of being in an incomplete household and not getting what I want, so when I get out I’m looking forward to doing what I want to get what I want.” She refers to herself as being “smart-mouthed” and says that she has no intention of changing—that she knows how to control it, but she believes it is simply part of her personality. She describes her relationship with her mother as “close” in that they can talk openly about all aspects of her life (school, boys, shopping), but when it comes to discussing family, Shavon shuts down and instantly becomes angry.

**Mama S**: 47, married, heterosexual, Shavon’s mother, administrative assistant at a law firm (though she was laid off toward the end of data collection), high school graduate, born in a northeastern state and product of a military family, self-identifies as “definitely working class to poor. Really. Seriously.” Mama S describes herself as a doormat. She says she’s allowed people to walk over her all of her life. Mama S says she’s not as insightful as Shavon, even now at her age. She feels that she learns a lot from her daughter, but wishes Shavon wouldn’t be so quick to anger. Mama S blames herself for a lot of Shavon’s attitude because she didn’t “check it” when she was younger. She didn’t know how to make things right for her daughter. She agrees that their mother/daughter relationship is strong in that they share a lot about their lives, but she doesn’t know how to help Shavon’s anger. Mama S feels like she’s constantly torn between choosing her husband or her daughter. She’s very religious and tries to uphold the teachings of honoring her husband, but it is often at the expense of her relationship with Shavon. She says she’s constantly sad, but holds it in. Mama S has a big financial concern about Shavon going to college, as her father is said to not be contributing, and her husband’s daughter is attending college at the same time as Shavon.
Jamila (Me): 29, researcher, graduate-school educated, heterosexual, single, born and raised in a small Midwestern city. As the only girl, Jamila was truly a “daddy’s girl,” a title that often put a strain on her relationship with Mama C because she was often afforded privileges that were not reciprocated onto her brother. Jamila always desired a close relationship with Mama C—one on in which they could openly dialogue, but Mama C’s no-nonsense approach in parenting created a distance or void in their relationship. After researching various aspects of the Black female dynamic, Jamila has returned to the homes of mother/daughter pairs to share in their narratives of race, place, and gender in hopes of co-constructing intergenerational dialogue and critique.

Mama C: My mother, 65, married, graduate-school educated, heterosexual, retired teacher, mother of two, grandmother of three, born in a southeastern state, lived during segregation and the Civil Rights movement. Mama C is the oldest participant in the group. She believes her life is just starting at 65. She feels more aware of herself and what she wants out of life. Growing up in the Deep South, she had first hand experiences with racism and segregation. She talks about riding in the back of the bus and Civil Rights Activist, Stokley Carmichael, visiting her house to discuss racial injustices in the town. Her mother, my grandmother, was very strict and no-nonsense about sex with her daughters. She carried this same parenting style into her relationship with me. Interestingly, she says she sees so much of her mother in me. She calls me strong, no-nonsense. My mother says she wishes she were like me at my age. Growing up, Mama C was very hands-on. She made sure we had 3 meals a day, washed and ironed every day, worked full-time, came home and graded her students’ papers, checked over our homework, prepared dinner, and readied herself to start the routine over the next day. She often took a backseat to my father and her children’s successes. As the elder in the group, Mama C reassures the other mothers that life doesn’t stop for them at their respective ages.

Tyra: 15 turned 16, heterosexual, born and raised in T-town, sophomore, turned junior during data collection, product of married parents, youngest of 2 children, frequently
takes care of her brother’s 3 girls. Tyra says she spends a lot of time by herself because girls bring too much drama. She had a lot of issues with girls in middle school and during her freshman year, so now she’s committed to staying out of drama. She says that skin complexion is a big issue amongst girls in high school—light-skinned girls feel like they’re “better” than dark-skinned girls. Tyra doesn’t concern herself much with pop culture and trying to emulate the personalities/styles of celebrities. She feels like if a girl from T-town leaves home and becomes successful, she will be her role model because that girl is more relatable than a celebrity. Tyra’s relationship with her mother is self-described as “close.” She says their relationship has strengthened now that she’s older. She doesn’t fear pregnancy because she says she isn’t having sex, so her mother doesn’t have anything to worry about. She definitely wants to leave T-town; she’s tired of the small town and everyone knowing each other’s business. She’s also tired of the racial issues present in T-town. She says she experiences racism from teachers, students, police officers, etc. T-town is very racially divided and she longs to go to a bigger city where she doesn’t feel she will face as many issues.

**Mama Ty:** Tyra’s mother, 46, heterosexual, married 23 years, hair stylist and owner of salon operated out of her home, self-identifies as working class, high school graduate and two years of community college. Mama Ty doesn’t mind living in a small town. She doesn’t like the drama either, but says she spends a lot of time in church, so that helps her stay focused and grounded. Mama Ty agrees that her relationship with Tyra has significantly improved through the years, though she says Tyra still has a difficult time with her “whatever” attitude. She says her daughter “doesn’t really listen at times or do what she needs to do in a timely manner because her attitude is ‘whatever.’” But, Mama Ty says she does see improvement and maturation. Unlike her daughter and many of the other participants, Mama Ty does believe in the possibility of a new black female movement and states that she went to an event for Black women in T-town where they talked and shared issues. The session went so well that the meeting will be turned into a club called “Me and My Sisters.” The purpose is to bring the women and community together. Mama Ty sees the club as a wonderful opportunity to connect with and meet other women in the community.
Morgan: 15, turned 16 during time of data collection, heterosexual, very involved in school activities, member of ROTC, product of a single mother, born and raised in T-town. Morgan is highly confident about who she is and the direction her life is headed. She has an extremely vocal relationship with her mother, who knew about the hardships of being a young mother. Morgan has a very strong religious and faith base. She says that she bases the majority of her actions on what God and her mother will think. She also discusses the amount of racial tension in T-town and how it fuels her drive to leave after high school. She doesn’t feel that the town has much to offer, and like Tyra, girls who have left and become successful motivate her. She speaks of the high rates of teenage pregnancy in T-town and knows that she will do everything in her power to not add to the statistics.

Mama M: Morgan’s mother, 38, registered nurse, mother of two teenagers (boy and girl), single, heterosexual, single parent, college graduate. Mama M smiles when she talks about Morgan. She is most proud of her accomplishments, but most of all, that she is a sweet and respectful young lady. She is very candid with her children about the struggles of being a young parent and works very hard to make sure they don’t experience similar fates. Mama M says that T-town isn’t what it used to be when she was growing up. The amount of violence, racial tension, and lack of adolescent guidance infuriates her. She wants more for her children and all the youth. She says she feels trapped in T-town and she desperately wants her children to leave because there’s nothing to look forward to. Mama M works a lot as a RN and often feels like she doesn’t have any time for herself, but she says it’s a sacrifice she made by having children, so she doesn’t complain.

Kandace: 16, heterosexual, very involved in extracurricular activities at school, product of married parents, born and raised in T-town. Like the other T-town girls, Kandace is ready to leave. Talking about the racial tension and disrespectful young Black males brings her to tears. She has an older brother in the armed forces who lives in Miami. She talks about possibly going to school there. Though there is a considerable age gap,
Kandace doesn’t feel like there is anything she can’t tell her mom and calls their relationship more like sisters than mother/daughter. She says she isn’t sexually active and has no interest in becoming active anytime soon. She also states that there is a lot of drama amongst girls in high school, but she stays out of it. She does have a close group of friends, but socializes with everyone. She does feel like Black girls are in “crisis” because they feel like they need a boyfriend to complete them. She thinks their situations would be better if they had strong female figures in their lives.

**Mama K:** Kandace’s mother, 56, factory worker at the mill where she works the flat sheet line, married, heterosexual, mother of two, high school graduate, self-identifies as working class poor. Mama K is warm and funny and lets it be known from the beginning that she finds great value in this project. She says her bond with Kandace is so tight because she was close with her own mother. She never wants Kandace to not be able to talk to her about issues she’s facing. She doesn’t think that there is a lot to offer in T-town, and like Mama M, says that the town has drastically changed since her childhood. She feels like the racial tension will continue to divide whites and blacks and she wants Kandace to leave before it gets worse. Mama K is tired. She’s been raising children all of her life—from her siblings when her mother became ill, her own children, and some of her siblings’ children. She said all she knows how to do is mother. She desires a break and some time for herself, but doesn’t know if that’s possible or where to begin. She’s been doing for others so long that she doesn’t even know what she would want to do.

**MawMaw:** Community othermother, 60, married, heterosexual, book center manager, philanthropist, community activist, three years of college completion, born and raised in Sunnyside, mother of 2 boys. MawMaw is known throughout the city as a lover of people and literature. MawMaw honors the historicity of Sunnyside and believes that if more young people truly understood the history of their city, family, and community, their worlds would be different. They would have no use for guns, fighting, separation, etc because they would understand the need for unity. She defines the book center as a space where people of all ethnicities, ages, and backgrounds come together to discuss historical, sociopolitical, emotional, educational, and philosophical truths. She says the book center
isn’t just about selling items, but a place in the community where people feel they are part of the community.

**CBC**: Community Book Center in Sunnyside, popular site for community meetings, book clubs, social gatherings, story time. Books are ordered for private consumers, prisons, universities, and book clubs. This is a space where community is ongoing. Though the manager and owner act as othermothers, the book center itself is the place where people come to learn, fellowship, disagree, socialize, eat, etc. While the city is still in the rebuilding phase after suffering a major tropical storm, the CBC remains viable and necessary for the people of Sunnyside, those who come to the city to visit, conduct research, or need book orders. You enter the CBC and know that you are amongst family. It feels like home.

**Setting**

**Capital City**- As the capital and largest city in this Midwestern state, Capital City has a population of 800,000. According to the 2010 census, the racial composition was as follows: White: 61.5% (Non-Hispanic Whites: 59.3%), Black or African American 28.0%, Native American: 0.3%, Asian: 4.1%, Native American or Other Pacific Islander 0.1%, Hispanic or Latino (of any race): 5.6%. There were 301,534 households, out of which 28.0% had children under the age of 18 living with them, 36.1% were married couples living together and 14.5% had a female householder with no husband present. The average household size was 2.30 and the average family size was 3.01. The median income for a household in the city was $37,897, and the median income for a family was $47,391. Males had a median income of $35,138 versus $28,705 for females. The per capita income for the city was $20,450. Due to its demographics, which include a mix of races and a wide range of incomes, as well as urban, suburban, and nearby rural areas, Capital City is considered to be a "typical" American city, and has been used as a test market for new products by retail and restaurant chains. Overall, Capital City was ranked

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9 Though most would include the Community Book Center in Setting, I purposefully examine it as a character. The Center acts as an active participant in the lives of people who frequent or simply visit and becomes a source of fictive kinship. During my time in the field, I found myself longing for the Center, to simply be in its presence and among the people.
as one of the top 10 best big cities in the country in 2010, according to Relocate America, a real estate research firm. It is home to two public colleges, one of which is the largest college campus in the United States.

**T-town:** Located in a southeastern state, 65 miles from the state’s capital city, with a population of 9,000, T-town was incorporated on June 11, 1825. In 1863, President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation declared slaves in this rebellious state free. However, word of this freedom did not reach T-town slaves of Upson County until 1865 with the end of the Civil War. In 1866, the freed Blacks held an emancipation celebration, which has continued every year since. Celebrated in May, it is the country's longest continually run commemoration of freedom from slavery. According to the 2010 U.S. census, the population of T-town was comprised of 41.1% Black, 54.8% White, .5% Asian, .2% American Indian and Alaska Native, and 3.2% Hispanic. The median household income was $21,056 with 31.8% people of all ages living in poverty. 65.7% of population 25 and over are high school graduates and 9.9% hold Bachelor’s degrees or higher. According to the 2000 census, 37.0% of the population was married couples living together and 21.4% had a female householder with no husband present. The 2010 census indicates 55.8% of the population has a female householder with no husband present. Industry in the city is driven primarily by manufacturing, which makes up 36.5%. The second largest industry is educational, health, and social service comprising 21.0%. The third largest industry is retail trade at 11.6% of the total industry in T-town.

**Sunnyside:** As a major United States port and the largest city and metropolitan area in this southeastern state, according to the 2009 United States census, Sunnyside and its metropolitan area has a population of 1,235,650. Located in the Mississippi River Delta, about 100 miles from the Gulf of Mexico and south of Lake Pontchartrain, Sunnyside is often noted as a city famous for its cuisine, music, art, and annual festivals. Beyond entertainment, Sunnyside is steeped in Black history. From being a principal port in the Atlantic slave trade to the site of the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, the plight of U.S. race relations has significant ties to this city. Likewise, the amount of hurricanes the city experiences, with the most notable one in 2005, is often said to be a direct result of the city’s failure to repair floodwalls in poor Black communities. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the population of Sunnyside was 343,829, comprised of 60.2% Black, 33%
white, 2.9% Asian, 5.2% Hispanic or Latino. The effects of the last natural disaster significantly reduced the percentage of Blacks able to return and rebuild in Sunnyside, though the white population has increased. The median family income from 2005-2009 was $36,258 while the percentage of people of all ages living in poverty was 23.4%. 51.6% had a female householder with no husband present and no reported percentage of married couples. Health care, education reform, housing, jobs, and gentrification are highly debated and controversial topics in today’s Sunnyside, resulting in many Blacks feeling undervalued and unseen. While the money from tourism continues to pour in, allowing target and affluent areas of the city to be rebuilt, many poor Black people in Sunnyside are simply trying to maintain community.
Chapter Two: Complication

Act Two, Scene I: How does it feel to be a problem?

*****January 1, 1863. In the midst of the Civil War, President Lincoln has declared slaves in rebellious states or parts of states should be then, thenceforward, and forever free. Slaves in T-town’s southeastern state were included in Lincoln’s proclamation. Though many believe his executive order freed slaves, it did not render slavery illegal. The liberation of hundreds of thousands of slaves in this southeastern state continued well into 1865. With the Confederate surrender in April, the emancipation of slaves in Upson County’s T-town and surrounding areas was officially declared on May 29, 1865. By December of this year, the 13th Amendment, officially outlawing slavery, was adopted into the United States Constitution. There is no known reason as to why May 29th was chosen for the declaration of emancipation, but it is most closely linked to President Johnson’s amnesty proclamation of May 29, 1865 that declared each ex-Confederate could only reclaim U.S. citizenship by swearing an oath acknowledging the freedom of slaves.

An article from the local town newspaper dated June 4, 1937, states “Several large planters brought their old slaves to town on May 29 and told them they had been set FREE. Many of them had heard this before, but did not know for sure that it was really true. Many of the old darkies shed tears and wept bitterly that they had to give up their ‘old marsters’ or masters; the younger negroes shouted for joy and were hilarious.”
William “Bill” Guilford, a former slave, had come to town during this time and was elected the county’s Representative soon after the Civil War ended. Through his efforts in organizing the Black community, May 29, 1866 was officially declared Emancipation Day in T-town. The first celebration fell on a Tuesday. Working people did, and continue, to take the day off work whenever May 29 occurs during the workweek. Great crowds from local and adjoining towns, numbering around 5,000, came out to partake in the annual festivities of freedom. Celebration activities included (and remain) a parade through T-town, an official program of singing and prayer, a speech by a local community member, and reading of the Emancipation Proclamation—all held at Lincoln Park, named after the president. Early accounts of the May 29th celebration, also known as 29th of May, or simply, 29th, tell of a cannon that fired one solitary salute in celebration of the anniversary of emancipation. This is the only detail that is noticeably absent today.

Since its inception, 29th of May remains the oldest continually run emancipation celebration in the United States. Though T-town slaves were not freed from their masters until 1865 when the U.S. Army published orders enforcing their emancipation, citizens of T-town consider 1863 as the year of their freedom as it was stated in Lincoln’s executive order. Through the years, 29th of May has attracted many nationally known officials including Congressman John Lewis and Ralph David Abernathy. Each year, the Emancipation Celebration Committee tries to make the parade bigger and better, hoping to draw the interest and participation of younger generations. Community members faithfully commit to maintaining the upkeep of Lincoln Park and surrounding facilities. Fundraising is key for the construction of floats, advertising, payment for speakers. Local businesses, churches, and civic organizations band together to ensure the continuation of
this historic event. In 2009, the Emancipation Proclamation Committee held a dedication ceremony for a sign that now appears along the local highway that reads, Home of the Historical May 29 Emancipation Proclamation Celebration.

As the birthplace of my paternal lineage, I have experienced 29th as a reunion of sorts--an opportunity for my father and his siblings to reminisce and debate with high school friends and elders over the changes to Lincoln Park and the best 29th speaker through the years, for people I have never met to call me “Cuddin” (cousin), squeeze my cheeks and say, “You every bit of Junior daughter,” and to find normalcy in passersby stopping by my uncle’s house after leaving the park for a plate of food, bottle of beer, and random outbursts of biblical scripture. Growing up, T-town was my introduction into family extending beyond biological kin as we all shared in the historical significance that brought us together. In the months leading up to its most recent 148th celebration, I experienced a different narrative of 29th and life in T-town. Stories of racial and gender oppression surrounding place result in Black mothers and daughters feeling an overwhelming desire to leave and never return. *****

**Sunday, April 16, 2011. 2:00pm.**

We meet at my cousin Connie’s house. Her house is in a central location for all the participants. Tyra and her mother are unable to join us. Though early afternoon, it is already 85 degrees outside. Connie prepares glasses of lemonade and chicken strips. As a T-town native, she finds great value in this project. “These girls need something like this,” she says. “They’re really lost nowadays and T-town doesn’t have a lot to offer young people. Working with their mothers is good because at least the mothers will know what their daughters are going through.”
Doorbell rings. Connie answers and directs Kandace, Mama K, Morgan, and Mama M to the sunroom where I am adjusting the volume on the recorder. I stand and greet each of them and offer the food and drinks. Mama K takes a glass of lemonade.

**Mama K:** It shole is hot out there.

*She grabs a napkin and wipes the back of her neck.*

**Kandace:** I didn’t know this was your cousin’s house.

**Mama K:** I remember when your uncle was alive and lived here.

**Me:** I didn’t know you knew my uncle.

**Kandace:** Everybody know everybody around here.

**Morgan:** And everybody business.

*Kandace looks at Morgan, cocks her head to the side, and says Oh-kay! in agreement.*

**Mama K:** Everybody in town knows the house cause of the big red door. I remember ya’ll always used to have alotta folks over here during 29th. You coming back next month?

**Me:** I’ll be here. Will ya’ll be in town?

**Kandace:** Unfortunately.

**Morgan:** I’m on a float in the parade this year, Miss Jamila. Me and Tyra.

**Me:** Really? You know I’ll be shouting for ya’ll.

*She smiles.*

**Me:** But, why did you say unfortunately, Kandace?

**Kandace:** I guess cause I’m not excited. It’s so boring here. I’m just ready to leave.

**Mama M:** I understand how she feels. A lot of young people feel the same way. When I was their age, T-town had more to offer. Now it’s nothing to look forward to educational-wise, recreational-wise, job-wise, and I think that it being so limited, our young people are the ones that are suffering because they don’t have anything to look forward to, so as they prepare to graduate from high school, you don’t ever expect them to come back home except to visit.

**Mama K:** That’s what my son said. He said, Ma, I’ll visit, but that’s about it. He would never come back here. Even if something happened to me, he would send for Kandace to come live with him in Miami before he came back here to raise her.
**Mama M:** There’s nothing to come home to and T-town did not use to be that way. And, also too, like there’s still a lot of racism going on. It’s not Blacks have to use this door and whites use this door—now it’s more mental. As far as not being fair and being equal and in some ways, that’s still slavery and, you know I don’t want my children to continue to have to deal with that. I want them to get out, explore life, see what life has to offer and live full, prosperous lives. And T-town is not that place. I almost feel like I’m trapped—I’m not young, I’m not old either, but I also feel like I’m trapped cause there’s nothing to look forward to.

*Morgan looks down and shakes her head. Connie mumbles a faint UmHmm as she walks by. Kandace grins.*

**Morgan:** Well, I guess T-town to me, when I look around I see nothing in it. It’s just a reminder to me that I have to do better than the next person. Even in our school, to really be successful you have to really do stuff on your own cause the teachers not gonna…

**Kandace:** Help

**Morgan:** Right. I mean, some of the teachers will, but most of ‘em just try to get through their day. They don’t really care if you get it or not.

**Kandace:** I agree with Morgan. When you get to school, people socialize, but there’s still segregation. You have the Blacks together and whites together. Sometimes they mix up. But the teachers, half of the time they be fussin at the bad kids and you can’t get your education. It’s just sad. And then the white people…you know how in segregation they called us Nigger and all that?

**Me:** Yes

**Kandace:** It’s like some of them still do. They act like they playing, but it still gets to you.

*She begins to cry. I grab tissue from the restroom and bring it back to her.*

**Mama M:** I’m sorry, sweetie.

**Morgan:** You okay, Kandace?

**Mama K:** What’s really goin on? Somebody called you nigger?

**Kandace:** NO! But it’s like I still hear other people being called nigger and it’s not…

**Mama M:** It’s not fair.

**Kandace:** Yeah!
Mama K: I know it, baby.

Mama M: The other day, well Monday I went to the school because of something that was wrong with my son in school and there was a white guy talking to the secretary and she was asking him how was the prom. And he said it was nice, it was just segregated. He didn’t realize, I guess he didn’t notice me at first sitting there and he turned to me and said, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but the black kids were closer to the speakers with that loud ghetto music and the white kids were further away” And I’m like Okay, and what’s your point? He had the nerve to tell me that maybe our kids get in so much trouble because of that type of music.

Mama K: You should have said that even if the Black kids were by the speakers, most of the students who got locked up was white and were drinking and getting drunk.

Mama M: And that’s how it is. Even when our kids aren’t at fault, they always try to find ways to make Blacks look bad and it’s hard for our young people to really prosper.

Mama K: They don’t want the Blacks to get the credit they deserve. They don’t want the Blacks to stand out over the whites, when it’s really some high quality Black students who don’t get the recognition they’re supposed to.

Mama M: It’s so hard for our young people to really prosper here.

Mama K: And it’s sad because it didn’t use to be like that here, but now the white man tryna run everybody out.

Everyone: Ummhmm

Mama K: Even though it’s our history and legacy, they wanna cut out the 29th of May. They went in the park where everybody gets to go and listen to the preacher and already cut down some of those trees down so there won’t be any shade. They know it’s too hot to be out there without shade and folks will wind up not coming out the house. They just try to make it hard for Blacks. These white people waiting for us to mess up, just so they can say Black folks can’t have nothing. And even though we come together to raise the money to keep it going, it’s hard to go out to Lincoln Park without shade. So, now, a lot of people go to the parade and go home.

****Early reports from the local town newspaper:
June 2, 1899: “The colored people celebrated Monday as their Emancipation Day. It was one of the best-humored and most orderly crowds ever congregated. Their good behavior is evidenced by the fact that not a single case was docketed in the police court. The town was never better policed.”

June 1923: “The celebration by the colored population on Emancipation Day which occurred in T-town on Tuesday, May 29, passed very quietly. Those who came were very orderly and peaceable and there was practically no disorder.”

June 1924: “The crowd was as large as usual and the behavior was good. There was very little disorder and the crowd was well behaved for so large a gathering.”

June 1928: “Only a few arrests were made and the behavior was good considering the number of negroes here.”

Mama K: The white people done just ‘bout killed T-town, cut everybody out. I mean, it can’t be that bad nowhere else like it is here.

Sun dims. Mama K reaches her arm around her daughter’s right shoulder, squeezes tightly, and whispers, “It’s gon be okay.”

Fade to black.
Scene II

Behind the Shadows

Lights off. Mothers and daughters of T-town sit together. Spotlight shines on each of them as they share their monologues on race, gender, place, and the mother/daughter dynamic.

Tyra: I wanna be a pediatrician, but I can’t even lie, I’m not that good at science. I mean, it’s okay, but it’s not my favorite subject. You know why I wanna be a pediatrician? Cause they make a lot of money and it’ll guarantee that I never end up back here. A lot of girls my age want bodies like Nicki Minaj and Beyonce, but I don’t really pay attention to people like that cause I know their life ain’t nothing like mine. They got a lot going on with them and they rich and famous. They ain’t gotta live the way I live to try and make it. Things that I want, I know my parents have to work hard for. I don’t get it right then when I want it, but these celebrities got money; they can go out and spend it all kinda ways. People here, we gotta watch how we spend it. We just can’t go blow money like that like they can. I mostly look up to…like when I see an older girl here in T-town who went on and did something with her life, that’s somebody I look at instead of somebody on tv. Cause I feel like they can’t relate to me as well as somebody who came from the same places I have. But it’s a lot of girls here who take what these celebrities say to heart. Rappers talk about having sex and these girls go out and do it and what happen? They wind up pregnant. Now me, I take one look at my brother and his girlfriend and their 3 kids and how they stuck here and that’s all the birth control I need.

Mama K: There ain’t NEVER no Me Time. I be lookin’ for that me time, but I can’t have it, cause every time I be getting ready to have it—BAM, there go Kandace. Needing
something. Wanting something. And yeah, people say at least you got a man in the house. Child, please. Yes, I am married and that’s just it. We have a marriage in name only. I spend most of my time with Kandace. All these young girls out here worried ‘bout havin’ a man and keepin’ a man and being down for they man. But the real issue is why can’t they be as worried about themselves as they are about some man. And are their mamas somewhere worrying over their daughters as much as their daughters worrying over a man?

Now, I’m not sitting up here saying Kandace can’t or won’t mess up. I don’t want her to be like a lot of young girls around here with a baby, but I wouldn’t turn my back on her if she got pregnant. I’ll help her, but believe me; she will know what it’s like to get up in the middle of the night to deal with a crying child. I didn’t get to go to college because my mama died and I had to raise my siblings. Then, when they had children, I helped raised them. Then, I had to raise my own. I just feel like I’ve been raising somebody my entire life. I’ve never had time for myself. I don’t want that for her. If that means I gotta work in the factory for the rest of my life so she won’t have to give up her dreams, I’ll do that. And if there are other girls from here who were able to leave and not come back, I want her to follow them.

Mama M: Who am I? What is it that I like? What is it that I want? I’m tired. It’s like a lot of times I give so much to my family and to my job, it’s like who’s gonna give to me? I get exhausted, emotionally exhausted, but I have to keep moving and keep going. That’s where the strength of the Black woman comes in—even though there may be needs, like emotional needs that don’t get met, we can’t stop. Our family still needs us and depends on us, so we still have to work or do whatever. And because we are forever having to
push our emotions aside to take care of our responsibilities, we just deal with it. Here, in the south, from my upbringing, I was told to keep your house clean, take care of the kids, keep yourself up as a woman, and just do the basic responsibilities of being a mother. I was telling Morgan that my mother worked me all the time, but it helped because when I was a mother I knew how to cook, clean, and be that person my children needed me to be. So, as women, as Black women, we just have to keep moving, and keep moving, and keep moving.

**Morgan:** I don’t want it to seem like I do that, cause I don’t, but you hear people talking about sex, and you wonder about it, but I don’t want my mama to think that I’m trying to do it, cause she has enough on her plate to deal with just being a single parent raising two teenagers. I just keep my questions and feelings inside cause it’s better to keep it in than to face the consequences that I see a lot of boys and girls facing now. The 16 and pregnant stuff is real. And here, it’s even younger.

**Kandace:** I don’t need a man in my life, cause when he’s gone, I don’t wanna be miserable over him, can’t do my job, thinking ‘bout him all the time. If he’s gone, I want him to stay gone, but if he wanna come back, I’ll reconsider or something. If I have confidence in myself, I can always go and get someone new. It’s a word for that—for women who make the rules on their own terms. Feminist? Yup, a feminist. That’s me.

*Fade to black.*
Intermission: Data Analysis

Scene I

The title of this scene, “How does it feel to be a problem?” an oft-quoted phrase from W.E.B. DuBois’s (1903/2003) essay, ‘Of our spiritual strivings’ illuminates the struggle of the Negro in America:

This double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity…He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows (p.9)

The idea Dubois calls double-consciousness also addresses intersectional oppressions at play in the participants’ place narratives. While this depiction of Negro strife is gender specific, Black feminists argue that DuBois’s separation of suffering is problematic and have critiqued him for the erasure of Black women’s contributions in the fight for racial equality (James, 1993). hooks (1981) writes,

No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have Black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from Black men, or as a present part of the larger group “women” in this culture. When Black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgment of the interests of Black women; when women are talked about racism militates against a recognition of Black female interests.
When Black people are talked about the focus tends to be on Black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women (p.7).

What DuBois calls double consciousness is likened to what Frances Beale (1995) defines as the double jeopardy of being a Black woman. By stating that the Black woman can justly be described as a slave of a slave offers that our race and gender narratives have always forced us to see ourselves through the eyes of others, specifically white women, white men, and Black men. For instance, the Black woman has endured the sting of the lash and the rape and molestation of bodies by white men; served as domestics and wet-nurses for white women; and once Blacks were afforded rights, forced to watch this privilege granted to men. So, in addition to being seen as Niggers, we were also mammy, jezebel, and sexual temptresses. This is not to deny or minimize the Black man’s oppression, but rather to emphasize the differences implicit in the race and gender narratives of Black womanhood.

Over time, the plight of the Black woman has been extended to include the triple jeopardy of class and fourth jeopardy of heterosexism and homophobia. Deborah King (1995) argues that this numerical framework assumes these discriminatory relationships are simply additive (e.g., racism + sexism = Black women’s experience), and fail to portray the dynamics of multiple, or several simultaneous forms of oppression. King suggests a multiple jeopardy model, or the equivalent formulation of racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism. She states,

The importance of any one factor in explaining Black women’s circumstances thus varies depending on the
particular aspect of our lives under consideration and the reference groups to whom we are compared. In the interactive model, the relative significance of race, sex, or class in determining the conditions of Black women’s lives is neither fixed nor absolute, but, rather, is dependent on the socio-historical context and the social phenomenon under consideration (pp.297-298).

Through intersectionality, Crenshaw et al, further King’s analysis of simultaneous systems of oppression at play in the lives of Black women. Crenshaw argues that though multiplicative oppressions are ongoing, they do not exist in isolation. The use of the intersection personifies a melding of forces Black women consistently have to navigate in the fight for survival. While intersectionality examines the multidimensionality of experience in marginalized people with particular attention to race and gender, Nash’s (2008) critique of Crenshaw’s work offers an examination of the Black woman’s mobilization in the midst of struggle. Nash’s call for attention to additional intersections in the lives of Black women to produce variances in lived experience is aligned with this study. Extending intersectional analysis beyond race, class, and gender to include age and place allows for an uplift of variances and similarities that are occurring between young women and their mothers. For example, the intersectional multiplicity of being Black, working class, late fifties, and from a small town, are ongoing struggles deeply rooted in the historical racial climate of T-town. Collective engagement in these experiences is central to epistemologies of Black girlhood and womanhood. In this scene, Collins’s (1991a) core themes, concrete experience as a criterion of meaning and the use of
dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, are embedded within the multiplicity of
discrimination and daily life in T-town.

*Concrete experience as a criterion of meaning*

Collins says the use of practical images in concrete experience as a criterion of
meaning is key to Black women’s narrative. From Sojourner Truth’s symbolic
representation of labor and loss to argue in favor of women’s rights and Shange’s (1975)
depiction of rape, love, and abandonment in the lives of women of color across multiple
locations, to the mothers and daughters of T-town who use their narratives of race, age,
gender, and place as markers of meaning for their desire to leave, Black women have,
throughout history, used the daily experiences of life to assess knowledge claims. For the
women and girls of T-town, the ongoing frustration with these experiences results in their
desire to leave.

Mama M says there’s nothing for young people to look forward to in T-town,
which positions mothers to not expect them to return for more than a visit. She mentions
the T-town of her childhood being nothing like the current state; in many ways, it’s
worse. Mama K grew up experiencing overt racism through segregation. She and Mama
M say the current effects of mental slavery and inequality, result in feelings of
entrapment. When Mama M states, “I’m not young, I’m not old either,” she alludes to the
pain of being in the middle. She’s not young enough to feel carefree to move around as
she pleases, but as a 38-year-old, she also doesn’t feel old enough for T-town to become a
permanent residence. However, as a single mother of two teens preparing for college, she
understands that uprooting their lives is not feasible. So, she remains trapped.
Kandace highlights the reality of segregation still present in her school experience with the separation of whites and Blacks sitting together, coupled with hearing Blacks being called Nigger by whites. Stories of racial profiling like Mama M’s example of a white man assuming that because Black students were located near speakers that played music he deemed ghetto, it was in some way connected to incidents of violence. However, responses like Mama K’s to documented arrests of underage intoxication by white students on prom night are often overlooked, resulting in continued negative portrayals of young Blacks. Embedded in Kandace’s lack of enthusiasm for the 29th is a frustration with celebrating a victory when she still feels embattled. This oppression is especially difficult for Kandace’s mother who thought she endured aspects of formal segregation so that her daughter would not have to. The solution for these mothers and daughters is not to fight against white supremacist domination, but to flee and not return.

Listening to their narratives, I began to wonder about the lack of zeal to fight against the white patriarchal norms and restore elements of the T-town of old that the mothers so desperately miss. Namely, how do these women and girls reconcile their desires for emancipation in a town steeped in their own histories as well as Black American history? hooks (1990) argues that Black people desire a homeplace, a “space of care and nurturance, where all Black people can be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation” (p.42). For Blacks of T-town, multiple forms of oppression that result from fixed perceptions of their identities often overshadow the desire for homeplace; thus, rendering the need to leave. I returned to T-town for 29th to see if the racial climate had indeed affected the annual celebration of history. The following is a portrait from my field notes:
May 29, 2011 11:00am

North Bethel Street. Crowds are lined up on both sides of the street and in people’s yards waiting on the parade to begin. It is 93 degrees. My family and I stand across from Macedonia Baptist Church—a pivotal landmark of Black history in T-town. Men drape white towels over their heads to shield the sun. Women fan themselves with items they’ve retrieved from purses. Children use their shirts to wipe sweat from foreheads. People who have driven walk back and forth to their parked cars to retrieve bottled water for family members and liquor disguised in red cups for themselves. Though it is extremely hot, a sea of Black people in various colored shirts, many in shades of red, black, and green to represent the collectivity of African people, wait in great anticipation of the parade. Children stand perched on the street curb, wanting to be first to catch the candy that will soon be tossed from cars and floats. The beating of bass and snare drums can be heard in the distance, followed by the crashing of symbols. The parade is about to begin.

11:30am

A police motorcade signals the beginning of the 148th Emancipation Celebration parade. Behind it, two community members stand on either side of a banner that reads, ‘Emancipation Committee of Upson: Celebrating the Community. Emancipation Proclamation Celebration 1863 Originally Organized by William Guilford 1866.’ Councilmen and women walk behind the banner, shaking hands with people on the street. People on floats advertising the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) Future Leaders and NAACP throw beads and candy. Some throw foam visors. Parents rush to grab them so their children will have protection from the sun. Various bands, emphasizing the drum section, play cadences. One in particular stands out—a group of
white boys on snare with a Black girl on the bass drum. A Mardi Gras float appears. The
crowd gets excited as various colored beads are thrown to them. People complain of the
intense heat. Elders move their lawn chairs to the shade. People on the backs of trucks
and floats hop off to hand out fliers for churches, youth groups, restaurants, and other
businesses. They pass out gum to children who run after them for more. Morgan and
Tyra’s float is next. I immediately yell to them. They yell back, handing me candy for my
younger cousins. Trucks with huge rims, blasting the latest rap songs immediately get the
attention of the young people. There is a lot of dancing in the street. The corvette club
follows with hydraulics added to their cars. They drive fast, music blaring to the beat of
the hydraulics. The young people cheer. Elders in the crowd shake their heads. “That
music is too damn loud,” they say. The parade ends as it began—with a police motorcade.

2:30pm

My family and I arrive at Lincoln Park just as the worship service is beginning on the
speaking grounds. A woman announces the 148th celebration and a young man stands
next to her, reciting Lincoln’s proclamation. There is not an empty seat on the grounds
and many stand along the fence and in the grass. Visitors from various states are
acknowledged. A large group traveled from California. They receive a round of
applause. The choir sings a popular gospel song, ‘God has smiled on me’ and the
audience joins in. Vendors selling chopped chicken, hot dogs, chicken wings, funnel cake,
fried fish, seafood, frozen lemonade and ices, fries, bbq, jewelry, shoes, airbrushed
shirts, sunglasses, etc wait anxiously for the service to end in hopes of attracting
business. A few of the workers comment that attendance is low this year. They’re
accustomed to people both walking through the park purchasing food and listening to the
worship service. They say the crowd is mostly visitors. Passersby comment on the intensity of the heat and lack of shade. They talk of returning home because, “ain’t nobody tryna be out here without shade.” Though there is no official record of trees being removed in Lincoln Park, Mama K’s statement about citizens of T-town not wanting to be in the park without shade is certainly coming to light. It has seemingly affected this year’s attendance and business opportunities.

I did not see Kandace. Later, she told me she came out to the parade for a little while, and then went home--that she simply, “wasn’t feelin’ it.” From elders complaining about a portion of the parade that in essence became a car show and vendors commenting on the low attendance and lack of shade, to Kandace’s aloofness coupled with an overall disdain from all participants for life in T-town, it is clear that the traditional 29th where thousands gathered in celebration of freedom and to hear the speakers deliver words of hope and prosperity has changed. Certainly, there were people who enjoyed 29th. Children jumped for candy and danced to the music at the parade, adults reunited and reminisced with friends and family, and travelers came from far west to share in the celebration. Yet, an undeniable void seemingly attributed to white patriarchal control of this pivotal element of Black and T-town history, was victorious. Just as in the early reports from the 1920s, the crowd was well governed.

For the mothers and daughters of T-town, 29th of May is only one on a long list of daily oppressions they endure. While these multiple jeopardies of being Black girls and women, of a particular age, working class, and from a small town are embedded in concrete experience, the use of dialogue furthers the knowledge validation process.
The Use of Dialogue in Assessing Knowledge Claims

The use of dialogue promotes a connectedness between participants that is embedded in Black oral tradition and Black women’s ways of knowing. Sadly, the intersectional cultural norms present in Black women’s lives are also marginalized in language research (Morgan, 2002). However, the use of African American female literacies (Richardson, 2002) examines how “ways of knowing and acting and the development of skills, vernacular expressive arts and crafts, help females advance and protect themselves and their loved ones in [an intersectional] society” (p.680). In this scene, the mothers and daughters employ verbal and nonverbal forms of Black language and discourse practices to convey their emotional connectedness to life in T-town.

Upon arriving to my cousin’s house, Mama K states that she remembers the home belonging to my uncle. When I replied that I didn’t know she knew my uncle, Kandace and Morgan exchange dialogue that insinuate the town is so small that everyone’s business is widely known. Following this, Kandance cocks her head to the side and says “Oh-kay!” in agreement. The tilting of one’s head and statement of the affirmative as exclamation is popular in Black women’s discourse practice. It suggests a mutual understanding between conversation participants and implies that once this affirmation has been reached, nothing more needs to be said. Often syllables are separated or stressed for added effect. Other examples include, “You knoow?!” and “See what I’m sayinmn’?!”

Likewise, my cousin Connie’s faint mumble of “Ummhmm” after hearing Mama M talk about feeling trapped as a Black woman in T-town along with the collective response of “Ummhmm” after Mama K speaks of the white man not wanting Blacks to
enjoy anything, functions as call-and-response discourse in Black language and literacy practices. Discussing the Black woman’s plight and comparing the T-town of old to the current issues they’re experiencing produced heightened levels of emotion, resulting in a collective response. This response, as rooted in the Black oral tradition, is often minimal in comparison to the call, and is meant to encourage or support the speaker’s statement. Thus, when Mama K receives her response to the statement about the white man’s control, she then feels encouraged to further her statement with the example of removing trees for shade in Lincoln Park.

Experience with various injustices in T-town has resulted in heightened levels of protection for their daughters. When Kandace begins to cry after recalling instances of hearing her peers called Nigger by whites, her mother asks, “What’s really goin on?” The emphasis on really is not to suggest that she doesn’t believe Kandace, but rather to underscore her frustration with the effects of oppression her daughter still has to encounter. In the spirit of African American female literacies and connectedness through dialogue, the mothers of T-town stand together, in extreme protection of their daughters (and vice versa, as will be developed in later scenes).

In light of the repressive forces these participants argue are at play in their daily intersectional lives, the question of how they reconcile their desires for emancipation in a town steeped in so much history remains. Why would these mothers and daughters choose to flee instead of fight? And what happens to the next generation of Black mothers and daughters who experience the same (or worse) injustices? When Mama K says “It can’t be that bad nowhere else like it is here,” she also states that all the history of T-town and fighting Black people have done since slavery won’t change the white
people’s ways. She says she and the other mothers can only worry about their children and help them the best way they know how. She thinks for a minute and adds, “Maybe it would help if we had more groups like this where mothers and daughters could talk and we knew what they were dealing with,” she says. “If we knew what other girls and mothers were feeling and maybe then we could do something about the problems here. It’s small, but it’s something.” Audre Lorde (1984) finds usefulness in anger, and says it’s important for Black women to tap into their anger as fuel for empowerment.

The desire for furthered dialogue is aligned with Collins’s ethic of care tenet that has historic roots and contemporary implications for work with Black mothers and daughters across experiences of multiple jeopardies, specifically the prevailing “at risk” and “in crisis” discourse. Though it will be developed in Scene II, the ethic of care will also be used to highlight connections between participants in each of the remaining locations.

Scene II

In this scene, I took sections of dialogue from focus group and individual Skype sessions with the participants of T-town that depicted the three categories of codes (See Appendix B) and wrote them as monologues. In the spirit of this literary device, each of the participants is able to individually address the listener in an imagined setting where a spotlight is cast as they speak. The use of single-person expression is purposeful in that the mini narratives surrounding the coded themes of Being Black girls and women, Descriptions of place, and Mother/daughter relationships can be fully attended to without the interruptions that typically occur in traditional dialogue.
Additionally, selecting snippets of conversations afford opportunities to demonstrate how transitioning from various types of semi-formal questioning allowed for further communication into the intergenerational connections between mothers and daughters. As researcher and portraitist, I am both visible and invisible in the monologues. Though my voice isn’t present, I become what Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) call “voice as witness,” a stance similar to participant observer in that my involvement occurs on the edge, “systematically gathering the details of behavior, expression, and talk, remaining open and receptive to all stimuli” (p.87). Positioning these portraits as monologues allows me to hear, see, and analyze the dynamics of intersectionality more closely. Though written as individual oral excerpts of narrative, this scene portrays the intersectional multiple consciousness of Black females in relationship with one another and their community.

*Societal Stigmas*

Seemingly, the aim of the oppressive social practices and rituals in T-town is to distort Black girls’ and women’s ability to see themselves outside of societal stigmas and stereotypes. This theme of distortion reappears in Tyra’s monologue during a focus group discussion of ‘The Souls of Black Girls’-- a documentary that seeks to discover if Black girls are suffering from a self-image disorder as a result of trying to maintain standards of beauty depicted in the media. ‘The Souls of Black Girls’ began as a 15 minute news piece for Daphne Valerius’ Master’s thesis and developed into a 50-minute documentary, featuring interviews from such African American celebrities and pioneers as actresses Jada Pinkett Smith, Regina King, Juanita Jennings, Amelia Marshall, moderator Gwen Ifill, cultural critic Michaela Angela Davis, 106 & Park producer Darlise Blount, Essence
fashion editor C’Nay Hines, and screenwriter Kenyetta Smith, among others. Public Enemy rapper and philanthropist Chuck D and historian Dr. Lez Edmond were the only males represented in the DVD. Valerius includes commentary from her initial high school student focus group, but images of popular culture and reactions to the media by the above artists dominate the piece.

While watching, I lost count of the number of times these celebrities kept referring to Black adolescent girls as “troubled,” “at-risk,” and “in crisis.” Michaela Angela Davis, Regina King, and Jada Pinkett Smith were adamant about the need for society, particularly African American women, to rescue the young Black girl before she destroys herself. There was a sense of ownership that they embraced for the increasingly large percentages of teenage pregnancies and negative portrayals of young Black women in rap videos. They believe that self-esteem, or lack thereof, is the catalyst for the Black girl adolescent in crisis.

I open the discussion by asking the participants to simply discuss their thoughts on the video clips of scantily-clad Black women in rap videos and the commentary from young Black and Brown girls and celebrities concerning the state of the Black girl. Tyra immediately situates her response within a narrative of place. To be sure, the traditional response from young people concerning their future occupational desires often include doctor and lawyer, but for Tyra, becoming a pediatrician is a goal rooted in desperation. She acknowledges her limitations with science, but still sees the profession as an undeniable opportunity for financial security and life away from T-town. Therefore, she disagrees with the statements surrounding Black girls’ desire to achieve a life of celebrity, stating that she doesn’t buy into prevailing discourse surrounding Black girls in
popular culture because their lives aren’t matched. She finds no interest in achieving a physique often described as ideal, such as that of hiphop and R&B sensations, Beyonce and Nicki Minaj. When place is added to the intersectional frameworks of age, race, and gender in popular culture, the crisis discourse becomes two-fold. In the documentary, the major argument supporting Black girls in crisis surrounds a self-esteem disorder, but Tyra rearticulates the crisis through the daily multiplicative intersections she has to navigate. For Tyra, the narrative of place does not exist in isolation. Generational analysis of teen pregnancy, financial hardship, and racial injustices as ongoing challenges contribute to her distance from prevailing narratives of Black girl adolescents. Though crisis is present, it is not one she feels can be understood by the celebrities Black girls are assumed to (and often) mimic. Tyra’s crisis is all consuming-- affecting her career aspirations, sexual decisions, and daily life in T-town.

Majors, Kim, and Ansari (2009) argue in favor of social readings and believe they can provide “situated contexts for engaging youth” in both traditional and social conceptions of literacy. Social readings aid in the development of all students, particularly African American students, and open spaces that allow them to deal with real life situations. Similarly, Fiske (1988) suggests mediated discourse allows viewers to invest attention in messages that are consistent with their social allegiances. For the young ladies of this study, reading themselves into the documentary allowed them to affirm their own self-valuation, which, according to Collins (1986) “stresses the importance of Black women’s self-definitions—namely, replacing externally derived images with authentic Black female images (p.17). Tyra’s statement concerning idolizing a Black girl who left T-town and became successful enough to not return was a sentiment
echoed by all of the participants, including the mothers. She continued discussing this young lady who is now in dental school with no children. “She got a boyfriend,” Tyra says. “But he still in college and she ain’t letting him hold her back. I appreciate that.”

While celebrities are most known for their financial stature and physical appearance, Tyra’s definitive stance on not identifying with individuals in the media, and instead, following and valuing the choices of one of her hometown peers, personifies the importance of speaking back to prevailing narratives in the lives of young Black girls.

Tyra’s mother identifies as working-class, a financial status that is of no secret to her fifteen-year-old daughter who sees the life of celebrities as far removed from her own, stating, “they ain’t gotta live the way I do to try and make it.” Likewise, seeing the financial hardships her brother and his girlfriend endure as high school educated parents of three allows her to use their struggle as her internal method of contraception. The level of success her hometown peer has achieved while maintaining a relationship with her boyfriend affirms Tyra’s values. She desires educational success in college away from T-town while simultaneously maintaining male companionship. Seeing one Black girl from T-town make it on her own terms is indicative of Tyra’s ability to revise the controlling narrative of at risk discourse.

During our session of popular culture discourse, the participants acknowledge the power of media, the pressures of sex, and the paralyzing effects of Black womanhood in T-town, and that they can’t give into these societal and cultural influences because it could be at the expense of their futures. Tyra has witnessed her brother’s girlfriend give up her college aspirations when she became a teenage mother. She believes the lack of motivation to make it in spite of her circumstances resulted in two additional children.
Though many of the mothers don’t want their daughters to engage in sexual activity as adolescents and are quite vocal about not helping them raise a baby, Mama M and Mama K demonstrate concrete experience as a criterion of meaning and the ethic of care as they explain their rationale and introduce additional complexities of Black womanhood.

*The ethic of care and the strong Black woman*

Controlling patriarchal images of Black women as jezebel, sapphire, chickenhead, video vixen, ho, and others have historically reduced us to distortions of our true selves. The alternative symbol, the strong Black woman (SBW) that has also long pervaded African American female literacies and is rooted in slavery with the selling of children in front of their Black mothers and the mothers being forced to maintain their usual work ethic, has been used to affirm our superhuman abilities to handle any task, alone, and with a smile. According to Melissa Harris Lacewell (2001) “in her contemporary form, [the controlling image of] the strong black woman is a motivated, hardworking breadwinner. She is always prepared ‘to do what needs to be done’ for her family and her people. She is sacrificial and smart. She suppresses her own emotional needs while anticipating those of others. She has a seemingly irrepressible spirit unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection” (p. 3). Kandace’s mother, like many Black women juggling the complexities of life without complaining, personifies the strong Black woman. She has shouldered the responsibility of raising generations of children at the expense of her own desires and does not know how to enjoy life because she is constantly consumed with the happiness of others.

The concept of “raising” is central to the historical aspect of the African American woman’s discourse and literacy tradition. The Black woman has, throughout
history, raised her children, the master’s children, relative’s children, and children of fictive kin, often with little to no pay or gratitude. For Kandace’s mother who has been raising children for the majority of her life, the desire for her daughter to leave T-town has additional meaning from the other mothers. Just as she has endured racial oppression for much of her life, she has also endured the constant battle of giving up her dreams. The role of superhuman strength and ability within strong Black woman discourse is often perceived as good Black womanhood or reflective of a “good woman,” but also comes at the expense of personal health and well-being. Gillespie (1978/1984) writes, “It’s almost as if one were judging a performance instead of empathizing with her life. [Too often, the strong Black woman is] placed on a pedestal to be admired rather than helped” (p.33). Ultimately, the SBW becomes a model for emulation instead of a symbol for protection and understanding (ibid). Audre Lorde (1984) asserts that Black women have to move beyond the stereotypical representations of who we should be and begin to mother ourselves; to affirm our own self-worth by committing to our own survival and refusing to “settle for anything less than a rigorous pursuit of the possible” (p.173). This is a difficult task for Mama K as the survival of others has been her sole responsibility for most of her life.

Though she injects humor at the beginning of her monologue with punch lines like, “BAM, there go Kandace,” to reinforce her desire for alone time, Mama K also enjoys the amount of time they share because she does not find fulfillment in her marriage. Conversations with Kandace about sex and pregnancy reveal Mama K as empathetic to the plight of the young Black teenage mother, and states that though she wouldn’t turn her back on Kandace if she did get pregnant, she would rather work in the
factory for the rest of her life to ensure her daughter’s dreams of life outside of T-town are actualized. In an attempt to de-emphasize her marital frustrations, desire for personal time, and the collective oppression she feels as a Black woman in T-town, Mama K adds another layer of struggle to her “script of strength” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005) by stating she will continue to work at a job she finds no pleasure in as a sacrifice for the realization of her daughter’s dreams. Raising children is certainly central to Mama K’s narrative, and she is willing to continue sacrificing herself, with no complaints, in order for Kandace to escape that narrative.

Of all the mother/daughter pairs of this study, Mama K is the most vocal about sex and desire with Kandace. They have open communication about hormones, contraception, and sexual acts. Though Kandace is very headstrong about her relationship with boys, Mama K likes to “cover all the bases, putting it all out there so she’ll never feel like she can’t come to me.” However, when I asked Mama K who she is able to confide in and unburden with, she replied,

Nobody. I mean, I talk to Kandace, but I don’t want to put all this on her. She shouldn’t have to deal with her stuff and my stuff too. She needs to enjoy life. That’s why I want her to get out of T-town. How things are with me is how it’s always been. And it’s probably how it’ll always be, for us as Black women anyway. I do want it to be different for her though. She sees what I deal with in my marriage with her dad. I want better for her. And I want her to want better for herself.
Certainly, the open dialogue between mother/daughter around sex and desire is beneficial to intergenerational communication and sexual health, but as a Black woman experiencing daily multiple intersectional oppressions, the SBW credo affords no space for expressions of pain and vulnerability. Within the ethic of care, attention is placed on appropriateness of emotion and feelings of support and validation. Mama K states that our sessions are helpful and she enjoys hearing she’s not alone in the daily struggles of life, but because she abides by the SBW credo, she never consistently feels supported in her emotions. Instead, she internalizes her pain, agreeing with Mama M that, “as Black women we just have to keep moving.”

Jones & Shorter-Gooden (2003) call this internalization “shifting,” and state, “Black women endlessly compromise themselves to put other people at ease, counteract the misperceptions and stereotypes, and deflect the impact of those hostilities on their lives and the lives of their mates and children” (p.63). When confronted with race and gender stereotypes, Harris-Perry (2011) offers an analogy of Black women standing in a crooked room, trying to figure out which way is up. “Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion” (p. 29). In an attempt to fit all her various roles, Mama K is often left unsure of how to stand upright.

These mothers share a capacity for empathy, another component in the ethic of care. They have compassion for one another’s plight, but simply feel that their stories won’t change, though they want to instigate change for their daughters. Narratives surrounding lack of attention to self amongst Black women are often generational. The attitude Mama M embodies is one ingrained by her mother to “keep the house clean, take
care of the children, and keep yourself up as a woman,” with little to no complaints. Both Mama K and Mama M have become accustomed to masking their emotions. They’ve been socialized into finding strength in any situation that arises. As Mama M states, “Even though there may be needs, like emotional needs that don’t get met, we can’t stop.”

While the “at risk” and “in crisis” discourse developed in “The Souls of Black Girls” pays particular attention to influences of popular culture on young Black girls, Mama K and Mama M repackage the crisis narrative through another controlling image of Black womanhood--the strong Black woman. Though they, like many mothers, desire a better life for their daughters, I often left our sessions frustrated with this notion of generational strength at the expense of emotional stability. As Beauchoeuf-Lafontant (2009) contends, “My questioning of strength ties into the indignation I have felt toward the requirement made of people of color and women generally to always rise above the socially orchestrated unfairness placed upon us” (p.17). Through my experience of the SBW crisis with participants of T-town, I witnessed how easily care for self gets diminished in their daily intersectional lives. These mothers work overtime to fight against prejudiced societal norms that are often affirmed as just. In an attempt to reframe societal depictions and maintain “good Black womanhood,” they live a life of silence.

Maintaining appearances of a copacetic outward existence while trying not to expose a cry for help, “believing that by sole virtue of my race and gender, I’m supposed to be the consummate professional, handle any life crisis, be the dependable rock for every soul who needs me,” is an existence Joan Morgan (1999) says needs to be retired (p.87). However, Harris-Perry (2011) suggests we learn to appreciate the struggle:
“Sometimes black women can conquer negative myths, sometimes they are defeated, and sometimes they choose not to fight. Whatever the outcome, we can better understand sisters as citizens when we appreciate the crooked room in which they struggle to stand upright” (p. 32). Though Mama K experiences a life of suppressed pain, she also has immense joy through her relationship with Kandace. While many Black women’s critique of the myth of the strong Black woman calls for her removal, Mama K is simply trying to maneuver in her crooked room—a space she finds less debilitating by knowing she’s not alone in the struggle.

While the prevailing image of the strong Black woman ultimately resides in silence and is damaging to her overall well-being, Kandace and Morgan develop counternarratives to their mothers’ plight. Despite the fact that they’ve witnessed and internalized aspects of the SBW, these daughters now actively work against the controlling discourse. Though they desperately desire relief, Mama K and Mama M’s counternarratives reside in the dreams for their daughters.

*Sexuality and Desire within the counternarrative*

The beauty of intergenerational dialogue resides in opportunities to discuss elements of the Black girl dynamic in one-on-one and focus group interview sessions. This methodological approach allows the participants to explore their narratives in open-ended and in-depth formats, and to hear how responses from one another often alter their decision-making. For example, Morgan’s monologue resulted from an individual interview session in which she wanted to discuss increased rates of teenage pregnancy in T-town, and how so many young girls desperately need guidance. She was very adamant about informing me that she is still a virgin and has no desire to engage in sexual activity.
She makes reference to “16 and Pregnant,” an MTV reality show that highlights the struggles of teenage parents, particularly young girls, and states that though it is on television, it is also very much a reality for young Black girls in T-town. However, embedded within her definitive stance on sex are issues of desire and sexual questioning. Knowledge of her mother’s tribulations as a single parent prevent her from asking questions that could be perceived as desire to engage in sexual activity; thus, resulting in a decision to keep her feelings inside.

Lorde (1984) describes the erotic as a lifeforce of women—a space of empowered energy and reclamation of power that is often confused with “trivial, plasticized sensation or the pornographic” (p.54). Lack of attention to feelings involved in the discovery of self reinstates our powerlessness and denies elements of our human existence through experience. Tolman (1996) agrees that desire is often taken up as negative with adolescent girls due to societal stigmas surrounding sex. She says the social context of sex and desire need to change in order for girls to feel comfortable discussing their feelings. This research furthers Tolman’s claim by adding that the conversations between mothers and daughters around sex and desire need to be expanded and explored in an attempt to fully understand both positions.

One of Morgan’s main priorities is not doing anything to contribute to her mother’s unhappiness. She’s watched her mother sacrifice so much that she would hate to give her anything additional to worry about. So, instead, she sacrifices parts of herself. During this session, I asked Morgan if she would like to share these feelings with her mother. She was initially hesitant, stating that she didn’t want her mother to get upset and accuse her of actions that weren’t taking place, but later agreed once I assured her that I
wouldn’t use her as a direct example. During a separate focus group session, I asked the participants to define sex and desire and how they approach these topics with one another. Almost immediately, Morgan’s mother responded,

For so long I’ve been telling Morgan not to have sex, and don’t get me wrong, I don’t want her to, but after listening to Mama K talk about how she talks openly with Kandace and lets her know that if something happened, she would still be there to help out, I realize that maybe I need to find out how Morgan is feeling too. She knows I don’t want her to have sex, but I’ve never asked how she feels. I’m sure it’s hard for her. The pressure and everything.

In this exchange, a moment of clarity arises between mother and daughter. Mama M realizes that the counternarrative she so desperately wants to write/right for her daughter may be at the expense of their communication. Though she values protection, she does not want it to lead to alienation. In the same vein, Morgan realizes that holding in her feelings isn’t as helpful as she thought. Her mother wants to know about the pressure she’s under and to hopefully help her with the struggles involved in desire. Initially, Morgan silences her emotions in an effort to not burden her mother, but through open communication, realizes her silence was detrimental to her emotional state and the growth of their relationship. Collins (1991) states, “For far too many Black mothers, the demands of providing for children are so demanding that affection often must wait until the basic needs of physical survival are satisfied” (p.55). Communication with other
mothers and daughters allowed Mama M and Morgan to uncover a divide in their relationship—a separation in which multiple jeopardies resulted in multiple silences. This breakthrough helped Mama M uncover a need for balance in her life, in which the well-being of everyone is attended to. While the focus was on making sure her daughter was able to leave T-town, Mama M is now able to see that along with working additional hours to make this dream a reality, she also needs to attend to the struggles and pressure of adolescent life that Morgan endures.

Engaging in one-on-one and focus group interviews allow the participants to dialogue about various life experiences that shape their ongoing narratives, but most importantly, the intergenerational exchange allow opportunities to speak back to prevailing narratives of their intersectional lives. Though societal norms indicate deficit models of sexual desire in Black adolescence and womanhood, the openness and willingness to share in one another’s often uncomfortable situations created space for the participants to continually push against dominant crisis discourse.

*Self-defined feminism*

In the final monologue, Kandace draws inspiration from ‘The Souls of Black Girls’ documentary to declare her feminist stance. Her statement occurred during the focus group session on sexuality and desire. Kandace chose to introduce issues she encounters with young Black girls and their relationships with Black boys. She says that young Black girls try too desperately to hold on to relationships with their significant other and wind up losing themselves in the process. Kandace makes note of the roles Black women play in music videos as accessories to enhance the sex appeal of the song. She finds similarity in daily occurrences at school: “Girls do whatever their boyfriends
tell them. In the videos they get paid for it, but in real life girls just want to be known as the girlfriend. That’s enough for them. That’s a shame.” Hiphop feminist shani jamila (2002) believes a feminist consciousness is needed that “allows us to examine how representations and images can be simultaneously empowering and problematic” (p.392). Kandace personifies this desire through her description of young girls who find pleasure in simply being known as the girlfriend, a trait she describes as shameful; yet, still manages to use for inspiration. Kandace wants her relationship with a man to be a decision she’s in control of, as indicated by the statement, “If he’s gone, I want him to stay gone, but if he wanna come back, I’ll reconsider or something.” This stance is one she feels is supported by her definition of feminism, or “women who make the rules on their own terms.”

Her definition is aligned with ongoing dialogue within the Black feminist/womanist community and arguably furthered by hiphop feminists who believe young girls of color use the culture to speak about their individual and collective truths. Conversation sparked by the documentary that examines commercial hiphop’s effects on girls allowed Kandace to position herself within the current trends and issues. That is, Kandace engages her multiple literacy epistemology through experience, dialogue, and emotion to derive at a self-defined Black feminist perspective. I asked Kandace if her position on males is influenced by the relationship she witnesses between her parents. She replied,

Yeah, I mean I see how my mom is and how she’s unhappy and all that and how she tells me she wants better for me. And I want better for myself. I’m not
saying I don’t want to be miserable over a boy because I don’t care or anything like that, because yeah I’ll be sad, but as long as I have confidence in myself, I’ll be good.

Kandace fully understands how the strong Black woman credo operates in her mother’s life, and she’s made a conscious decision to not suffer in silence. She acknowledges the potential pain of ending a relationship with a boy, yet stands firm in the need to consistently care for herself. Pough (2003) says, “hip-hop feminists need to create a feminism that fits their lives” (p. 237). In the ongoing battle against multiple jeopardies surrounding life in T-town, Kandace has to remain focused on her goal of emancipation. Thus, her feminism forces the naming of realities in the continuous fight against dominant systems of oppression.

Final thoughts

The intersectional multiplicities of being Black girls and women, working class, and from a small town are ongoing struggles deeply rooted in the historical racial climate of T-town. Mothers and daughters employ concrete experience and care to make meaning of the crisis narrative that pervades their lives—a narrative they actively work to rewrite by acknowledging dominant systems of oppression and creating counternarratives to prevailing discourses of Black womanhood, supporting the mother/daughter dynamic through group dialogue, and defining themselves for themselves. Though the historical significance of T-town is great, daily life proves challenging, causing Black mothers to work tirelessly for better opportunities for their daughters. The focus on collective engagement in the fight for survival is essential to Black women’s multiple literacies, and
intergenerational discourse. In the search for a better life and equal opportunity, these mothers and daughters find a homeplace (hooks, 1990) in one another—a space where their feelings and issues are cared for and nurtured, a space where Black womanhood is affirmed.
Scene III

Same game, different name

Three mother/daughter pairs of Capital City occupy separate areas of the stage. Spotlight shines on each pair as their coming of age narratives of Black womanhood emerge.

Mama T: At the age of 3 we moved to a predominately white neighborhood and I had a friend named Kathy. She had blonde hair and blue eyes and her hair was long and flowy. And mine was braided and kinky. I just didn’t understand, especially when we would be outside playing and it would start to rain and I would want to run through the sprinklers and my Mama said “Girl you betta get out that water,” but Kathy could run and her hair just stayed straight. And it was always, “Nope you can’t get your hair wet.” Why not? Kathy can. And then I can remember getting a comb and combing Kathy’s hair cause I couldn’t get a comb through mine. So I think at an early age I learned there was something different about being Black and being female and unfortunately the hair issue was a big deal.

Tanisha: I think it’s a double negative, the fact that we’re female and Black. I think it’s two strikes against us. People talk about being a man and Black is hard, but it’s hard enough to be a woman, regardless of what race you are. But the fact that we’re also Black, I think it’s two strikes against us—getting jobs, school, everything. I think it’s harder on us. And when I talk about it being hard, I think about the book, for colored girls, when she says being colored and a woman is a metaphysical dilemma I haven’t yet conquered. And I do feel like that. It’s a Picasso of emotions. In one way it’s good, but in another way it’s bad because we struggle. Like we try to be this strong person and never break down and mask all these hurts, and juggle all these hats at the same time—I just think it’s a really difficult task.
Mama T: I don’t think it would be so difficult if we could come together, but as Black women, we’re not bonded. Black women are like crabs in a barrel: just when we see somebody achieve, we wanna pull them back down, as if there’s not room for more than one person at the top. And Black women, young and old, are out here fighting over men ‘cause they feel like the woman he leaves you for isn’t worthy or isn’t as good as you. In reality, we need to realize our own self-worth and know that if the man leaves, it was purposeful. But, sadly, with us, it’s always a competition. We’re always pulling at each other, whether it’s to pull somebody down or to pull somebody off our man. As Black women, we don’t see each other as friends; we see each other as the enemy.

Tanisha: I feel like society has us in a modern-day slavery. We’re stuck in a mindset that, like, we’re lost. We don’t know how to be original anymore. Nicki Minaj said she’s a Barbie and then everybody wanted to be a Barbie. Amber Rose shaved off her hair and everybody wants to be bald-headed. Nobody is shining a positive light on these girls. They just wanna be the next hot thing. That’s why I say society has us stuck in a modern-day slavery because we are bound to what they have us believe.

Mama C: I really don’t think young people know what it means to be African American. No one’s teaching them about the struggles of our ancestors and what we endured. And I’m not saying it like I’m perfect because while we preached Black history in our home, I don’t think I’ve shared enough with Jamila about my history and her maternal legacy. That’s why I’m glad to be a part of this project. It’s never too late to share our stories. As mothers, we have to tell our daughters who we are so they’ll have some sense of who they are. I grew up in the crux of segregation. My mother was a divorced mom with two girls and her thing was that she was gonna make sure that her two Black girls were educated in that small town, that they were so-called whatever being in a small town in Georgia meant, she wanted us to have the best of it—in clubs, Girl Scouts and that kind of thing. But she was very, very strict. She was hardworking, very hardworking. She sometimes worked three jobs. She was a teacher, then from her teaching job she would
go to the recreation center and be a leader at the recreation center and then at night she would go from 8 to 12 to work in a shirt factory.

**Me:** I never knew Grandma worked that many jobs.

**Mama C:** Ummhmm. Skin color was a big deal for me. My sister and my mother are very light skinned. And I was more like my daddy’s complexion and I always thought of myself as being the darker one. And I would look in the local newspaper and read the column every week religiously about what the white girls my age were doing. I wanted to be like them, but my mother didn’t know that. She didn’t because she was very much proud of being Black. I’ve seen her go in what we call a drugstore and stare a white man in the face and she would not say Yes Sir or No Sir to him. She would just say Yes and No. And they called her by her first name, Doretha. They never called her girl or gal. But I felt…back then I felt inferior. I did. I felt inferior although she didn’t know that because she was very proud and she made sure that we had the best of everything, but I always felt that—one reason was because I was darker than my sister and my mother and because I was Black. And I wanted to be like those white girls that I saw in the society page.

**Me:** Why didn’t you ever tell me these stories before?

**Mama C:** Well, things were different for you because you had a dad in the house, and although the values were the same about getting an education, your dad was there to really bridge the gap. Other things were similar. My mother always stressed about her girls not getting pregnant, and I indirectly passed that on to you.

**Me:** Indirectly? You were **very** direct.

**Mama C:** Well, that’s true. So, I directly passed that on to you, but I wasn’t as strict, probably because of your dad, but you knew my position.

**Me:** Growing up, there were so many times I wanted to come to you to just talk about things I was going through, but I never felt like I could. I remember very vividly the day my cycle started. It was 10th grade and it happened at school. I went to the bathroom only to find a friend of mine in the bathroom
having a miscarriage, although at the time we didn’t know what it was. She was screaming and I was cramping. The day my body became inducted into womanhood was the same day she was losing life. What’s crazy is it was the same girl I told you was pregnant when I was 13 and you went off about me not bringing a baby home and all that. I was already dealing with the fact that I was gon’ ruin the family and mess up my chances for college if I brought home a baby, so that had me scared of sex, but when she lost her baby, in the bathroom of all places, I didn’t think I could mentally handle sex. And I never came to you about it ‘cause I never felt like I could. I was scared that I would have to pay for her decisions, but even more importantly, you never felt emotionally available. I never saw you be emotional.

**Mama C:** And I never saw my mother emotional. She was no-nonsense. She didn’t tolerate crying. So, I couldn’t go to her about my feelings. I didn’t know how to teach you what I didn’t see. I remember when my grandmother died. My mother moved us into her mother’s house to take care of her when she was ill. She had cancer. That was my sister’s first year in college, and even with all that pressure, Mother never missed a beat. She went to work during the day, came home, we went to our house to get our clothes for the night and we went to my grandmother’s house. She was just driven. She never showed any emotion. She used the space where she would probably show emotion to just get it done. And everybody in the family looked up to her—all her siblings, nieces and nephews, they all depended on her. The only time that I saw her actually, what I consider really enjoy her life was when she had grandchildren.

**Me:** Sounds like the same thing you’re experiencing now with your grandchildren.

**Mama C:** True. But I want the cycle to end. I want you to enjoy life now. I guess I never thought about it in that way before.
**Shavon:** I get mad. Quick. But I don’t cry unless there’s a lot on me and then I just shut down. When I see my mom, I see different. She’s more tolerant. Me, strike 1. Mom, strike 5. I’m not patient. She’s patient.

**Mama S:** I find Shavon mothering me. She’s always like, Aren’t you gonna say something? You just gonna let that happen? I know I’ve been a doormat in a lot of ways in my life. I’m getting better, but I’ve allowed people to walk over me. There’s some stuff that’s not a big deal, but there’s other times when it’s like, now I’m getting upset and it hurts. She sees things a lot earlier than I did. I’m slower. I’m just slow.

**Shavon:** I don’t think you’re slow. I just think you’re accepting people as they are at that time.

**Mama S:** I’ve seen so much. I want you to use your brain and be smarter than I was, more than anything. Cause I really wasn’t. I made some terrible mistakes but I said with you, I’m gonna show you, I’m gonna give you what I can.

**Shavon:** So you know like on a rollercoaster you’re going on you hit the peak you go back down? I’m on the way back up. I think my lack of having a father figure to tell me who I am. I guess I don’t really need someone to tell me, but that extra confidence helps you feel a lot better. I’m at that place where I’m realizing I don’t need my dad to tell me who I am or what he sees in me, but to know for myself. My dad’s stoic, but you can see anger in him. You don’t see him happy; he’s just nonchalant. That’s my ultimate lack of self-esteem. I try to find a guy friend and hold on to him for what I’m missing in my dad. Some girls don’t know that about themselves or don’t see the signs, but not me. I get it. It’s not a healthy thing cause obviously you get hurt a lot. So now I’m learning how to know who I am and not need a man to tell me that anymore.

**Tanisha:** I would like to think that I’m kinda on the incline too. I think it was kinda stagnant for a while. I think I was looking
in all the wrong places for something—self-validation, value, everything like that. Tryna have people tell me, Tanisha you’re great, when really I just need to be telling myself. At the end of the day, the only person that I have is me. I just need to learn self-acceptance and learn to love Tanisha for who she is, flaws and all because that is something that I have not been doing. I’ve been trying to find who I really am and what I really like in a larger group, but I’m trying to find Tanisha. I think that’ll help a lot with my self-esteem issues. When I find myself, I’ll be truly happy.

**Mama T:** I think that we all need to give ourselves compliments and have confidence in what we’ve accomplished in life thus far. Mama C, you may not have made all the right decisions as a parent, but whatever you instilled in Jamila has helped her get to this point in life. Shavon, you’re stoic, but it may be for something you’re gonna accomplish one day. Tanisha, you’re sensitive, but maybe that’ll be needed in your profession. Mama S, you’re trusting, but it’s helped you nurture and protect your daughter. God made each and every one of us, so we should embrace all parts of who we are. I need to be reminded of that myself. As mothers, we just try to do everything for our families and neglect ourselves, but we have to remember that God created us for life as well.

**Mama C:** You know at 65, I think that I’m, I feel that I’m really just getting ready to live. Each day, I seek the happiness and the joy that’s within me. I just feel free.

**Mama T:** See, Mama S, there’s still hope for us!

*Fade to black.*
Intermission II: Data Analysis

“Same game, different name,” embodies what Kynard (2010) calls a “narrative ethnography of sistahood, wherein for these participants, coming-of-age stories act as the catalyst for intergenerational and intersectional dialogue and critique. The title of the scene illustrates similarities in stories between mothers and daughters--narratives that change in name through generations, though the multiple jeopardies of Black womanhood remain the same. As Walker (1983) reminds, “so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother’s stories” (p.240). Methodologically, this scene is situated as back-and-forth conversations that produce a cadence of assertions and warrants for grounded theory. Embedded within a priori theory surrounding elements of voice in portraiture and tenets of Black feminisms, is a notion of multiple literacies I call intergenerational literacies, or the collective critical engagement of multiple ways of knowing and experience across various degrees of intersectionality in the lives of Black mothers and daughters, toward a (re) articulation of our experiences for ourselves, by ourselves, and the survival of one another and our community(ies).

Scenes I and II necessitated the telling of collective truths amidst the historical underpinnings of place in the race, age, and gender narratives of Black mothers and daughters. This scene furthers the call for collectivity in unpacking the thematic connections of mother/daughter relationships and definitions of being Black girls and women. Prior to a focus group session, I’d asked the participants to use their journals and define being Black girls and women. I asked them to include specific examples where their race and gender narratives were either on display in their own lives or in the lives of people around them. During the session, I asked them to simply discuss what they’d
written. This scene depicts a portion of our conversation that highlights personal narrative through oral histories, connections between second and third wave feminisms through popular culture, and building of mother/daughter relationships. In short, this scene reflects intergenerational literacies. In this section of analysis, I situate intergenerational literacies amidst ongoing theory surrounding these themes in order to build upon our various degrees of intersectionality and the continuous need to speak back to prevailing narratives.

**Black girl problems**

Issues surrounding hair are part and parcel to many Black girl’s and women’s narrative. From straightening and chemically processing hair to reduce kinks or naps to wearing wigs and weaves to give an allusion of altered hair texture and length, hair has been and remains a seminal factor in our lives. Dance (1998) writes, “Black women often forego many pleasures that might cause them to perspire, get their hair wet, or in any way destroy a difficult and expensive hairdo” (p. 95). As was the case with Mama T, Black girls learn early on that child-like behaviors such as running through sprinklers is not a luxury afforded us because our Black mothers have no time or interest in restyling our hair. Mama T’s 3-year-old connection to whiteness through Kathy created an internal deficit narrative that led her to view “something different about being Black and being female” as negative. Thus, Kathy’s long, blonde straight hair became the model for unattainable beauty, resulting in feelings of dissonance for her kinky braided hair. Tanisha, who describes being Black and female as a “double negative,” extends this narrative ethnography of sistahood.
Though, algebraically, a double negative is a positive, Tanisha’s development of the “two strikes” narrative supported by Shange’s (1975) work furthers her mother’s depiction of the race and gender quandary. As a senior in a predominately white high school, preparing to enter a predominately white university, Tanisha is aware of the jeopardies currently at play in her life and those she will face in college. Like her mother, she is able to identify something “different” about being a Black girl and connects with Shange’s lady in yellow who feels the dilemma of being colored and a woman is one she has yet to conquer. Though she does find some value in her race and gender narrative, Tanisha revisits Collins (1991), Morgan (1999), Harris-Lacewell’s (2001), et al discussion of the strong Black woman as additional support for her two strikes argument. The idea of simultaneous movement without attention to emotional need and well-being is stifling, difficult, and part of the dilemma she hopes to conquer. As mother and daughter with place narratives in predominately white locations, the impact of race and gender is deeply rooted and often seem unbearable. However, in the quest for triumph, how does struggle get re-imagined for justice? That is, how do Black women and girls use their multiple ways of knowing as fuel in the fight against multiple oppressions?

Enter second and third wave feminisms

In an attempt to support the personal and political histories of young Black girls, hiphop feminism arguably serves as a continuation of feminist activism from its first and second wave predecessors. Ingrained in political and cultural analysis of hiphop and rap music, and broader popular culture, hiphop feminism is designed as a framework for young feminists of color to engage in the controversial and liberating discourse surrounding intersections like race, class, sex, and gender in their daily lives. Peoples
(2008) writes, “in response to what they perceive as an out-of-touch feminism, hip-hop feminism seeks to pick up where they believe second-wave feminists left off” (pp. 20-21). Springer (2002) suggests that third wave feminism is not “reinventing the wheel” or suggesting a paradigm shift. Instead, she says hip hop feminism is simply “rebuilding on the legacy left by nineteenth-century abolitionists, anti-lynching crusaders, club women, Civil Rights organizers, Black Nationalist revolutionaries, and 1970s Black feminists.” (p. 1079).

Hiphop feminists like Jones (1994) and Morgan (1999) agree that the theoretical underpinnings of their scholarship is rooted in the contributions of foremothers’, but say people of color from the hiphop generation needed a language and culture that addressed the current racial, political, gendered, and economic climate. Namely, a force to reignite the passion for generational change and movement, or as Wade-Gayles (1984) puts it, “we dare today to search for sisterhood because our [fore]mothers taught us the beauty of struggle” (p.12). Guy-Sheftall (2002) says feminist principles are cross-generational and relevant, but older and younger feminists rush to judgment about our differing paths to empowerment. Thus, engaging Black mothers and daughters in sharing narratives afford opportunities for generational understanding across age and experience. Though ideal, Mama T and Tanisha remind us that a unified Black sistahood is no easy task.

_Hos be winnin’_

Mama T references the violence that often occurs between Black women over Black men. She says the Black woman is consumed with trying to prove herself better than the other woman who is deemed of lesser quality, when the focus should be on her own self-worth. Thus, engaging in constant battle with fellow Black women is
detrimental to our collectivity. In the essay titled, “Chickenhead Envy,” Morgan (1999) pens a letter to the “chicken,” also known as the side chick, ho, golddigger, or skank, and identifies herself as a “longtime chickenhater” or a well-educated, hard-working, independent Black woman who openly criticizes the chicken for being greedy and incessantly pursuant of successful Black working men. In the letter and essay, she admits that she and many Black women, as “daughters of feminist privilege,” find it hard to admit jealousy of the chickenhead—that we, as college-educated middle-class Black women who did things the “right way” feel more deserving of the luxuries the chicken often receive. Morgan writes, “the hatred we have for your chickenhead asses is in part the mask of bravado we wear to camouflage our fears” (p. 188).

This desire to not relate to the chickenhead for fear of exposing our commonalities is likened to today’s catch phrase “hos be winnin,’” or the idea that no matter how successful independent Black women are, it is no match for the “down for whatever” chick who winds up with the Black man and his money. The phrase is often used during conversations with fellow single Black women who discuss frustration with not being able to attract a “good brotha” (gainfully employed, heterosexual Black man), while women who are believed to find comfort in often being the side chick live the life of luxury. The use of the verb ‘be’ as a rhetorical device in African American language, “does not refer to any particular point in time. Rather, it conveys the meaning of an event of action that recurs over time, even if intermittent.” (Smitherman, 2006, pg. 4). Thus, women who highlight their sexiness, sexual activity, and seeming subordination of intellectual aspects of themselves more often than not win the “good brotha.”
Morgan believes the commonality between the chickenhead and the independent Black sista is that we all want to be loved, attended to, and provided for. Beyond that, the overarching fact is that though supposed chickenheads and non-chickenheads are vying for the same goal, patriarchal control or sexist imbalances of power still reign supreme. While we cast judgment on one another over choices of respect, or lack thereof, and despite the numerous achievements of women throughout history, society is still male-dominated. As long as sexism is in place and power, neither “hos” nor independent women are winning. As Morgan puts it, “while we go ahead and kill each other over one tiny-ass slice of the American pie, the white boys walk away with the lion’s share” (pp. 231-232). Mama T’s analogy of crabs in a barrel reminds us that there is much work to do. Success, no matter how it’s defined, is difficult for Black women to celebrate, because we view each other as the enemy.

“Ass, ass, ass”

Tanisha’s reference to contemporary society as modern-day slavery adds an interesting perspective on the role of popular culture in the dynamics of Black girls and women. As poster children for hypersexualized bodies in mainstream media, Amber Rose and Nicki Minaj have become part of hiphop and pop culture’s definition of beauty through booty. Amber Rose, a former stripper and self-proclaimed bi-sexual, gained notoriety as the baldhead white girl on the arm of hiphop icon, Kanye West. The media became ensconced with the physique (wide hips and big butt) she possessed for a white girl. West furthered this fascination by positioning Rose as a prize of sorts, particularly through notorious photos licking her bald head, squeezing her butt, and song lyrics like,
“She got an ass that’ll swallow up a G-string” (“Run this Town”/Jay Z, Kanye West, & Rihanna). As Tanisha notes, many women followed suit and began shaving their heads.

Similarly, Nicki Minaj’s fixation with Barbie as the moniker for beauty resulted in fans declaring themselves Barbz and Ken Barbz. Despite much speculation that she underwent surgery to enhance her bust, butt, and permanently shrink her stomach, Minaj’s Barbie arguably refutes the Eurocentric stick figure image and replaces it with the ideal “thick” body in the Black community—a physical trait she shares with Amber Rose. Though many fail to believe Rose and Minaj’s butts are real, the amount of media attention given to these women resulted in a huge craze for butt injections that unfortunately, led to news reports of multiple deaths in women and girls. Minaj’s last name, a play on the French term, Ménage à trois, or the sexual activities of three people in the same household, along with her racy, slightly pornographic lyrics of sexual relations with men and women (Lane, 2011), result in a portrayal of sexuality that is debatably a ploy for male attention in a misogynistic society and industry. Through alter egos of gay boys and highly profiled men, she seeks to counter hegemonic notions of sexuality, gender, and power, while maintaining her overtly sexual persona. Lyrics like the ones that follow presume a bi-sexual persona that Minaj never openly claims, resulting in an assumed exploitation of queer identity:

Ass so fat, all these bitches p*ssies is throbbin’

Bad bitches, I’m your leader, Phantom by the meter

Somebody point me to the best ass-eater.

I tell ‘em p*ssy clean, I tell em p*ssy squeaky
Niggas give me brain cause all ‘dem niggas geeky^{10}.

Sexually provocative lyrics like these infuriate Tanisha:

Nicki Minaj not even gay. I don’t think she a lesbian or bi; I think she straight, and just playing a role to get more attention. It’s kids out here committing suicide because they really are gay and people make fun of them. And Nicki Minaj who has sooooo [emphasis hers] much fame and power is playing a role, and people still go crazy over her. Yeah, people can say she doesn’t have to say if she’s one way or the other cause it’s nobody’s business, but I feel like when you have so many people who worship you and you know it, don’t mess with their heads or their lives just so you can keep being famous.

Though Minaj’s sexually explicit candor is not new for female MC’s in hiphop (Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, et al), her young and adult men and women following is like none other. With 11 million followers on Twitter, a social media website for constant updates of people’s lives, Minaj’s Barbz are loyal fans and deeply invested in her celebrity status. With this much fame, Tanisha argues, should come a level of responsibility that supersedes alleged exploitation of sexual identity. Her reference to alarming rates of recent suicide in young people, particularly surrounding forced or open declarations of homosexuality introduces another critique of the dominant “crisis” narrative. While

^{10} Lyrics from “Dance (A$$)” Remix by Big Sean featuring Nicki Minaj [www.metrolyrics.com](http://www.metrolyrics.com)
media depictions of these suicidal acts target bullying as the catalyst, rendering a crisis amongst adolescents, Tanisha’s statement regarding the presumed lies of Minaj to achieve and maintain a high level of celebrity status while young people fight authentic battles, redirects the crisis as one that should be shared by Minaj. While the crisis of suicide is not to be diminished, Tanisha’s point is that the overt sexual persona of Minaj that is never clearly defined is still celebrated, while definitive declarations of homosexuality in young people regardless of truth, often result in death.

Many scholars of hiphop feminism appreciate Minaj’s sexual openness because it shows young girls they can create a feminism of empowerment through sexuality in the midst of controlling patriarchal norms. Tanisha, a self-proclaimed non-feminist “because feminists get people to listen, and if I’m not a Barbie or something, these girls not listening” says that though popular, the messages embedded in overt sexuality are not positive. She likens them to modern representations of enslavement. She believes young girls are not in control of their bodies by demonstrating sexual prowess, but rather, emulating what they’re seeing in popular culture. Therefore, the slavery metaphor represents societal trickery. Just as Africans were tricked into slavery with promises of a better life, Tanisha finds parallels with young girls who model their sexual behaviors off Minaj’s persona and lyrics. Their attempts to physically achieve Barbie and “bad bitch” status can result in increased societal statistics of teenage pregnancy and sexual diseases, reaffirming the “at risk” and “in crisis” label surrounding Black girls and women. Thus, the trick lies in modeling actions off popular figures that get paid to portray a lifestyle they may or may not embody while fans that buy into it are left to handle the “crisis” alone.
In a visibly patriarchal and misogynistic industry and society, Minaj and her fans are left with a false sense of power that hooks (1981) calls a sad irony in that “black women are often most victimized by the very sexism we refuse to collectively identify as an oppressive force” (p.81). Just as Tanisha’s metaphor of societal trickery as a tactic for brainwashing that ultimately expands the dominant discourse of crisis, delusions of power stifle possibilities of collective engagement in the fight against ongoing multiple jeopardies. Despite her stance on not being a feminist, Tanisha’s bold declarations of discrepancies and glaring contradictions of sexual personas and their effects on the young Black girl consumer directly embody the spirit of feminist resistance. Her awareness of Black women’s oppression in our racial and gender identity allows her to critically examine additional areas of complexity surrounding sexuality in hiphop culture. She believes Black women and girls are too infatuated with celebrity personas and her mother believes Black women’s envy of one another furthers the crabs in a barrel theory; however, their commitment to Black women’s liberation is central to Black feminisms and is a constant factor in their mother/daughter narrative. While societal depictions of Black women’s bodies are certainly complex, the presence of young Black girls and women in conversation and critique of prevailing mainstream discourse articulates urgency for further intergenerational dialogue and heightened visibility of Black girls’ narratives.

*Back to Black*

I grew up in a household of all things Black--Black history, Black culture, and Black pride. For every canonical piece of European literature I had to read for school, I had two texts by Black authors to complete at home. I was involved in Black cultural
groups from church to community, and loved every minute of it. As much as I’ve always gravitated to story about Black people and the Black experience and loved to hear the tales of my father and his siblings’ life in T-town, my mother never shared her narratives. I knew life in the Deep South during segregation was difficult and that my grandmother was strict about education, but I never knew how my mother’s coming of age narratives factored into my grandmother’s life as a single parent raising two daughters, and subsequently, how these factors influenced our relationship as mother/daughter. Growing up, I was only fixated on our distance, not knowing we indeed shared many generational similarities.

Wade-Gayles (1984) offers, “Black mothers are suffocatingly protective and domineering precisely because they are determined to mold their daughters into whole and self-actualizing persons in a society that devalues Black women” (p. 12). In the journal entry on race and gender narratives, my mother’s words support this statement. She writes, “Like my mother who was most often the voice for my sister and me against racial prejudices growing up, I found myself speaking up for my daughter in department stores, at restaurants, and at integrated activities when she was growing up.” Though I was raised in the Midwest in the eighties and nineties, and she the segregated south in the fifties and sixties, my mother and I shared a place narrative of racial small town living. While hers was filled with overt racism and hate crimes, the mental conditioning of Black inferiority was carried out in comments directed toward me by whites. My mother, who saw the unabashed boldness in her mother’s encounters with whites, internalized this same stance in her protection of me.
Similarly, in my maternal lineage, generational disconnection to mothers was fueled by historical socialization into Black female strength. My grandmother’s ability to handle the illness and death of her own mother while helping to raise extended family members along with her daughters was a strength she wanted continued, particularly in light of the racial and political climate of the times. She felt that in order for her daughters to survive, they needed to endure in silence. This pattern of endurance over emotion came at the expense of nurturance and healthy communication in our mother/daughter relationship, but as my mother stated, she could not teach me what she did not know. Current communication into these issues, however, causes my mother to see a need for furthered dialogue with Black women and girls about our many truths—both personal and historical. The need to use our histories to communicate concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, the ethic of care, personal accountability, and the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims benefits the development of an ethnography of sistahood in mother/daughter relationships in the midst of prevailing discourse to the contrary. While young girls in T-town, for example, are aware of their political history as they currently experience similar aspects of their mothers’ racial oppressions, the mothers of T-town try to handle their personal narratives alone. However, the need to combine the personal and political in the communication of intergenerational literacies of Black girls and women is necessary for the enactment of liberatory discourse.

*Self-exposure: Voice as autobiography*

*****Today I shared with my mother and everybody else the story about the day I came on my period. I’m still kinda in shock that I talked about it since it’s a scene I’ve
tried to erase from my memory. Whenever I talk about that day, I only tell the second half—the part that occurred at home. We have two bathrooms in the house that we identify by color. When my dad brought me home, I went to the blue bathroom, but the pads (that had been in the closet since forever, just waiting on this day) were in the yellow bathroom (in my parents’ room). I yelled to my dad to bring me the pads from his bathroom, but he, unwilling to be a part of anything related to feminine needs, yelled back, “Just stay in there ’til your mama gets home. I gotta go to a meeting.” And he left. Convinced that if I got up and got the pads myself, a trail of blood would follow, I did just that—stayed in the bathroom and fell asleep on the toilet until my ma came home.

Whenever stories surrounding menstruation come up with friends or family, that’s the story I tell and we all sit around laughing at the image of me asleep on the toilet. But today...today was different. Today, I needed to be honest and tell the first part of the story too—the part that messed with my mental. I couldn’t ask something of everyone else that I, too, was not willing to do.

In a way, it was freeing. Kinda like I was getting this big secret and weight off. My high school years were so much fun, but also filled with so much pressure. I truly was afraid of sex. The desire was definitely there, but because of what I experienced in the bathroom with my friend, pregnancy and miscarriage quickly became a possible reality. When we were thirteen and she had an abortion, I wasn’t as affected because sex just felt so distant at the time. My body hadn’t started to develop and I simply wasn’t interested in sex. It didn’t feel like pregnancy could happen to me. But to be in 10th grade and hormonal, my narrative around sex and desire changed. Prior to our bathroom scene, each day I prayed for my cycle just so I could experience sex. And after the scene, each
day I prayed for willpower to abstain. My fear of parental embarrassment was multiplied by fear of miscarriage and abortion. I remained a virgin until I was twenty-one.

Honestly, I’m still kinda scared to have a baby. I can’t sit through shows involving childbirth. I always think about that day in 1997 when both of our lives changed. Today, though, I felt a new change. A new connection between my mother and me. We were open in ways we’ve never been before. I saw the same occur with the other mother/daughter pairs. Everybody was just being honest. Emotions were high—a sea of laughter and tears—but it was all worth it. It’s funny how something so simple as a story can be the solution for change to so many problems.

During a reflection on working with women living with HIV/AIDS, Lather (1997) poses the following questions: “How do we come to know ourselves? How do we make ourselves knowable to others? What is revealed and what remains hidden, perhaps even to ourselves?” (p.124). I kept these questions in my journal as a way to challenge and encourage myself toward self-exposure during this process. As we all sat around sharing our various intersectional narratives, knowing mine had to be included, I used these questions as inspiration to share my story with my mother and fellow participants and later write this reflection piece. The questions helped me realize that while this project was indeed fueled by academic interests, it was equally shaped through personal experience. Like Morgan from T-town, sex and desire were at the forefront of my mind during my hormonal teenage years, but were points of contention in my communication, or lack thereof with my mother. Since I didn’t want my friends to know I was such a “late-bloomer,” and many of them were already engaging in sexual acts that I desired, but was afraid to act upon, I internalized these emotional frustrations for years. Even after my
entrance into the world of sexual activity, I never realized how much I’d internalized and
hidden myself through the years until this focus group discussion.

From the opening narrative of this piece, I make it known that my connection to
this research is not free of personal bias. Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis’s (1997) “voice as
autobiography” acknowledges that personal beliefs and experiences are necessary in the
construction and interpretation of narrative, but states that “individual portraitists
working in groups rarely articulate their separate autobiographical voices” because
admitting voice is often daunting (p.118). While certainly daunting, the oral and written
sharing of intersectional experience with other mothers and daughters forces the use of
autobiographical voice as we are all (re)discovering how we’ve come to know ourselves
and one another.

Ethic of personal accountability

As the only participants of a blended family, Shavon and Mama S’s
mother/daughter dynamic is strained. Shavon often talks of feeling as if she comes last,
while her mother feels torn between being there for her daughter and honoring her vows
to her husband. Mama S says the result is often being a doormat, allowing people to walk
all over her. She wants Shavon to see her mistakes and make changes for the better. In
her attempt to have a closer relationship with her daughter, Mama S says being open with
Shavon about the mistakes she’s made is extremely beneficial. Like Kandace’s mom in
T-town, she finds comfort in hearing she’s not alone in the daily struggles of life, but that
the healing comes in sharing her story with her daughter and other mother/daughter pairs.

Shavon’s frustrations with her father are admittedly often misdirected to her
mother. The absence of her father in the house and in particular aspects of her life has
often caused Shavon to seek self-assurance, love, and attention from guy friends. She openly exercises the ethic of personal accountability in her statements, “I try to find a guy friend and hold on to him for what I’m missing in my dad. Some girls don’t know that about themselves or don’t see the signs, but not me. I get it.” She takes ownership of her actions, with full understanding of its unhealthy effects, but says she’s now learning how not to need a man for self-validation.

In a follow-up session with the mother/daughter pair, Shavon expands the unhealthy aspect of her relationships with boys by discussing how sex makes her attachment to boys more complicated. While she and all of the participants, including myself, identify as heterosexual, Shavon has been struggling with identifying a healthy Black female sexuality. Her emotional and physical investment in boys who aren’t as committed to the relationship as she, often leaves her hurt, rendering a self-defined unhealthy state of being. In them, she has been seeking everything she wants from her father, such as telling her she’s beautiful and loved and that they’ll never abandon her.

Morgan (1999) says much societal attention has been paid to the “endangered black male” and the need for Black male role models in their lives, but “precious little attention is paid to the significant role black men play in shaping their daughters’ ideas about themselves and love” (p.123). Over time, Shavon’s desire for fatherly love and attention has transitioned into anger and nonchalance. She doesn’t feel she can express these emotions to her father and finds no attachment to her stepfather. She’s in the process of learning how to rebuild her self-esteem and love herself without any outside affirmation, a process she shares with Tanisha.
Loving the skin I’m in

In the midst of detailing aspects of our intersectional narratives, Mama T reminds us that as much as we discuss areas that need improvement, we should also compliment one another and ourselves. She invokes an intersection of spirituality through our physical creation by God to remind us that perhaps the elements we’re critical of in ourselves will be used for our future benefit. This project, one that she describes as “the first time I’ve really felt part of a community since I’ve been in Capital City,” is not only purposeful in her relationship with Tanisha, but necessary for her own growth. Mama T is part of various communities (work, church, etc), but says women, particularly Black women, don’t get together to share life stories. “It all goes back to the crabs in a barrel thing,” she says. “But that’s why I appreciate these sessions. It’s no competition. We just come together and let it all out.” Known primarily as the city with the largest university campus, Capital City feels very isolating to Mama T. She says all of the various suburbs make it difficult for people to truly feel in community with another. She talks of wanting to find more mother/daughter pairs in the city, from different areas of the city, to communicate with one another. “It’ll be hard though,” she says. “We’re just so used to dealing with our own stuff that it’s difficult to ask for help. We need to get out of that. We need to know our own worth, get together, and help one another.”

While Mama T, and all the other mothers of this study, often discuss how the discourse practice of the “strongblackwoman” informs a critical part of our identities and lived experiences, she calls for a balance of praise for the Black woman’s strength and acceptance of her vulnerabilities. My mother provides additional support through her own life narrative--one she says is really beginning on her own terms at the age of 65. The
mentioning of age is significant for my mother and the other mothers of Capital City as their age narratives are primarily centered around raising children. Like the mothers of T-town, they believe their best years are behind them. However, my mother’s concept of life finally beginning on her own terms as a senior citizen is foreign, yet hopeful for the mothers. The idea of self- (re)discovery with age is a new dimension of their intergenerational literacies these mothers are eager to explore. Though much critique and admiration is given to the independence of the Black woman, we, as a collective group of Black girls and women across multiple locations, display the value of interdependence through group support, sharing of stories, and love.

Following each session, I ask the participants to write a reflection piece in their journals. Tanisha’s piece functions as a literacy event (Heath, 1982), or an occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to group interaction and the interpretive process. Her reflection truly speaks to the energy of celebration for our individual and collective transformations through Collins’s core tenets of Black feminist epistemology. She writes,

I feel like this was an EXTREMELY good session. I am so inspired, and I left liberated as we all spoke and shared stories. It was a beautiful thing to see Black women express their hurts and struggles. Too often we do not do that. I enjoyed seeing the similarities and differences in each of our mother/daughter relationships. I feel like I’ve walked away from this session with a much more positive view on being Black and female due to the AMAZING Black women that sat before me tonight. I feel like just walking up to a Black
girl and giving her a hug. For no reason. Just because I’m inspired to be more open. That’s the only way things will get better with us as Black women. We gotta open up to each other more. I loved every minute of this session.

It was so touching and inspiring. I hope it’s not the last.
Scene IV

The Breakthrough

_Mothers and daughters of Capitol City stand together and recite this poem._

It really struck a nerve with me  
Being Black and female should make me feel strong  
Through all our tribulations, there’s still a boundary  
We fight each day to prove we belong  
In you, I see the strong Black woman like your grandmother  
My role is to help bring out your best  
You are a perfect creation; there will never be another  
The fight for survival is our greatest test  
Too often, I’ve neglected to ask for your assistance  
Shouldering the burden alone, thinking it’s what women do  
Forgetting our bond, being my own biggest resistance  
I need your guidance and wisdom; please know this is true

Our battles are many, our triumphs too  
And through it all, I’ll be standing right beside you.

_Breakdown of the breakthrough_

Utilizing creative writing as an alternative form of data representation and method of inquiry affords an opportunity to examine the process and product of my work (Richardson, 1997). Through the co-construction and reconstruction of data (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), I arrived at a poetic account of our individual and group narratives. Certainly, I was not able to capture all of the data in this fourteen-line sonnet, and some of the ending words had to be reconstructed to fit the usual rhyme scheme of a traditional Shakespearean sonnet (a-b-a-b, c-d-c-d, e-f-e-f, g-g), but in listening for story rather than simply listening to story, I became much more aware of the rhythms and feelings conveyed in the narrative. After spending hours sifting through the transcriptions, paying particular attention to emerging patterns, I was able to extract actual lines and phrases, replace and rephrase sentences to align with the rhyme scheme,
and realign data from various places in the transcription to fully express emotion. For example, the fifth line ‘In you, I see the strong Black woman like your grandmother’ was directly taken from the data along with the first portion of the seventh line. However, in order to complete the rhyme, I took ‘there will never be another’ from a separate portion of the data.

In a methodological process Holge-Hazelton & Krojer (2008) call “condensations,” the researcher aims to capture the emotional experience of participants and “condense them into small drops of text dense with evocation.” (p. 21). Here again, my mode of representation is purposeful in that the sonnet is an opportunity to allow a condensed method of inquiry to extend the analysis and further the collective engagement of intergenerational literacies. In “Same game, different name,” we, as mother/daughter pairs demonstrated similarities in our generational intersectional narratives. This scene, read together, embodies a cohesive identity. Line 9, ‘Too often I’ve neglected to ask for your assistance,’ and line 11, ‘Forgetting our bond, being my own biggest resistance,’ is one shared issue between mother and daughter surrounding communication. Positioning these condensed drops of text as admittance of fault, followed by apology (‘I need your guidance and wisdom; please know this is true), create and increase opportunities for more open dialogue.

Likewise, the imagined setup of participants standing together conveys a communal mood that was felt and depicted in reflection journals. The mood is especially important in the final two lines, or couplets. This portion of a Shakespearean sonnet is intended to summarize the theme of the poem. Thus, the lines ‘Our battles are many, our triumphs too/ And through it all, I’ll be standing right beside you’ are reflective of the
unifying idea of breakthrough. As Tanisha’s reflection piece indicates, our intergenerational communication left her inspired and with a much more positive view of her race and gender narrative. Initially, both she and her mother felt like there was no hope for the state of the Black female due to “chickenhead envy” and societal pressures, but hearing and sharing in the narratives of other Black mothers and daughters resulted in a new outlook.

Being amongst other women and girls who share similar struggles allowed her to break through the often debilitating dominant narrative surrounding our lives and into a new narrative of interdependence—one in which the fight against multiple jeopardies occurs in relationship with other people. Despite the fact that the participants reject the Black feminist label because they don’t believe they possess the unifying power needed for feminism, they certainly embody the feminist ideals of our foremothers (Anna Julia Cooper, Frances Beale, Sojourner Truth, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells, et al) who combined intellectual work and activism for the (re)articulation of Black women’s narrative in the fight for social justice.

Final thoughts

Scenes III and IV provide a very intimate look of the race, place, age, and gender narratives of mothers and daughters within the theoretical frameworks of second and third wave feminism as well as the methodological need to examine alternative forms of data representation in search of grounded theory. Through our “narrative ethnography of sistahood,” using tenets of Black feminisms and our own multiple ways of knowing, the participants and I created intergenerational literacies. The fight against multiple oppressions, particularly surrounding societal stigmas and strained familial connections
within the Black mother/daughter dynamic are often difficult and demanding. However, this set of mother/daughter pairs, furthering the intergenerational communication of participants in T-town, reminds us that meaning making through social and cultural approaches is not only part and parcel of Black women’s everyday lived experiences, but necessary to our collective fight for survival.
Scene V

Injustice repackaged is still injustice

*****Collective engagement through counternarratives, group dialogue, and self-
definitions are liberatory strategies we’ve developed in the fight against prevailing
oppressive narratives. Here, I offer another concept of Black women’s lived experiences
and Black feminist/womanist ideology that serves as additional support for
intergenerational literacies: othermothering. Rooted in the traditional African world-view
of nurturance, othermothering is a form of fictive kinship James (1993) deems necessary
for social transformation. From assisting blood mothers in the rearing of children and
intervening in the sometimes tumultuous relationships between mother and daughter to
assuming the role of nurturer for children outside of biological offspring and serving as
agents of change in the betterment and survival of communities, othermothers expand
traditional notions of mothering.

Enacting a “more generalized ethic of care where Black women feel accountable
to all the Black community’s children” (Collins, 1991, p.49), the title of community
othermother is fitting for MawMaw. James (1993) says community othermothers are
women over the age of 40 who have “exhibited the ethic of care so critical to the survival
and well-being of their communities, [and] have lived long enough to have a sense of the
community’s tradition and culture” (p.47). At the age of 60, MawMaw says her life’s
purpose is to “keep community alive, no matter if it’s in the book center or in the street.
What people really want is to be listened to, so my job is to treat people right and listen to
what they’re saying. That’s how you build and maintain community. Start with the
people.”
Born and raised in Sunnyside, MawMaw has equally experienced the politics of power designed to inhibit the progress of working class Blacks along with cultural celebratory traditions Blacks continue to delight in despite their multiple hardships. She says though life is often challenging, Sunnyside is home and she can’t imagine herself anywhere else. Even after water damage from the disastrous hurricane affected the Community Book Center (CBC), resulting in massive debt from the rebuilding process, moving from Sunnyside has never been an option:

Black people been fighting for our rightful place to be here since they brought us to America. Now that we here, the struggle never ends; it just gets repackaged. The hurricane was no different from *Plessy*\(^{11}\). Separation of Blacks and whites has always been the goal. First, they rip us from our home, bring us over here to America, and tell us now that we here, we still gotta be separated. Then, they throw a couple bones our way, disguised as rights, making us think we all in the struggle together. But one look at the news when the storm hit, and that’ll tell you different. What color faces did you see straddled to rooftops and floating

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\(^{11}\) MawMaw references *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the landmark judicial case upholding racial segregation in public facilities as “separate but equal.” She compares the devastation of Hurricane Katrina to the court case to enforce that just because the Fourteenth Amendment declared legal equality of all people, equal treatment was not implemented then or in the case of people’s lives during or after the hurricane. Her connection to the court case and the hurricane is especially poignant because both events occurred in her home state and are pivotal elements of local and Black history that must be passed down to younger generations.
in the river? Black. Life ain’t gon ever be equal, but as
Black people we gotta learn how to unify and build in
the midst of separation. We all we got. Young people
need to know this history and if they not getting it at
school, my job is to teach it to them.

While the tradition of passing down values is indicative of concrete experience as a
criterion of meaning, it also validates Black women’s “motherwit,” or individual and
collective wisdom rooted in lived experience (Collins, 1991b). As a community
othermother, MawMaw assumes much responsibility in sharing the history and
connectedness from slavery to present-day occurrences.

Whenever anyone, regardless of race, mentions the hurricane and how sad they
are for the people of Sunnyside, MawMaw immediately delves into a history lesson,
reminding the people with faces of sorrow that injustice repackaged is still injustice and
nothing new to the people of the city. True to her charismatic nature, she ends with, “Fix
your face and stop feeling sorry for us. You wanna do something? Buy one of these
books on Black history and read to a child. But don’t just buy one; buy enough for the
class and tell the teacher to make it part of the curriculum.” James’ (1993) discussion of
the role of community othermother is aligned with MawMaw’s disposition and command
of respect. She writes, “the community othermother is able to successfully critique the
behavior of individual members of the community and to provide them with directions on
appropriate behavior(s)” (p.48). Within the ethic of care, MawMaw’s age, knowledge,
and experience allow expressions of love and critique to occur in multiple ways for the
betterment of the community. In this scene, the impact of CBC and MawMaw as
community othermother will be methodologically explored through two detailed observations.

Unlike the previous scenes, these portraits of othermothering and place narratives of MawMaw, Sunnyside, and the CBC are written and analyzed simultaneously. Although I am writing from observations, simultaneous exploration of data and analysis allows me to attend to voice as dialogue, a tenet of portraiture that “captures the dance of dialogue, [wherein] the portraitist purposefully places herself in the middle of the action” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, pg. 103) to convey the rhythm and symmetry of voice between herself and the participant. This methodological technique is also necessary in capturing the ongoing pulse and presence of the CBC. Through vivid displays of dialogue embedded in Black women’s ways of knowing, thematic epistemological connections will be revisited and expanded. ******

It is a hot, muggy, 95-degree August afternoon in Sunnyside. I open the door to CBC. A bell attached to the top of the door rings to alert a new customer. I yell a general, “Good mornin’,” a customary greeting whenever you enter a room prior to 6pm in Sunnyside, even if no one responds or isn’t around. I learned this tradition when I lived here eight years ago. I look up and down the rows lined with books, seeing no one. I walk closer. MawMaw turns around; a big grin matches mine. “What’cha say, boo!” Her greeting is another popular phrase in Sunnyside. The use of ‘boo’ is a term of endearment. We embrace. “Lord, Lil Bit, when you get in here? I ain’t even much hear you, no. That’s cause you so little.” We laugh as she playfully jokes about my height. She walks me over to the couch, hand still around my shoulder, and points to familiar faces seated there. “Look who here, ya’ll!” she exclaims. MawMaw’s sister, husband, and the
owner of CBC look up and yell, “What’cha say, Lil Bit!” “Heeey,” I reply, walking over to kiss each of them on the cheek. “You hungry?” MawMaw asks. “Starving. You cooked?” I ask. MawMaw is known for her cooking and can often be found in CBC’s kitchen preparing food. “Hell naw, she says, laughing. “It’s too hot for all that shit today. We can get some crack (the community nickname for the addictive chicken across the street) if you want that.” Her husband stands up. “Lil Bit in town. Let’s get some crack!” We all start laughing. “I want something sweet too,” MawMaw tells him. “Stop by the store and pick up a birthday cake.” “Birthday cake?” he asks. “Yeah. It’s somebody’s birthday somewhere,” she replies. He shakes his head and leaves.

Two customers come in to pick up books they’ve ordered. MawMaw asks them to come back to the book center after they’ve finished reading so she can discuss the books with them. They promise to return. MawMaw loves to host events at the CBC pertaining to creative expressions of the arts. From literature circles to poetry readings, residents and visitors of Sunnyside flock to the CBC to take part in these free events.

A family of three enters. The children head straight to the youth literature section. The father creeps behind MawMaw and kisses her cheek. She turns around. “What’cha say, boo!! I didn’t know you were coming by today.” They embrace. “Where the kids?” He points to the back. “Tell them to bring me a book.” MawMaw plops down on the couch next to me. The man returns with his children. His son who appears to be around eight hands MawMaw a picture book on Barack Obama. She smiles and directs the children to sit in the chairs in front of her. “Do you know who this is?” she asks. “President Obama,” the boy answers. “I love my President,” she says. “You know why?” The children shake their heads. “Cause a Black man being in the White House
made a 60-year-old, old woman like me get educated about politics. Before he became president, I never cared. Never thought it was of any benefit to me. Ain’t know what the hell a debt ceiling was. And even today, the white man still ain’t gon let us off this plantation, but at least we can learn what they doing to us while we on it.” The children stare. “Get all the history you can, little brother and little sister,” she tells them. “All you can.” She opens the book and proceeds to read.

Black woman’s politics

Politics of power encompass much of MawMaw’s race, place, gender, and age narratives. Her psychological and philosophical connectedness to the historical and ongoing oppressions of Black people is deeply personal and one that explores politics beyond governmental affiliations. Historically, dominant discourse of politics did not include the lives and experiences of Black women. As a collective, Black people, particularly Black women have been long-excluded from rights and protection allegedly granted to full citizens (Truth, 1867; davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; et al). Thus, MawMaw’s earlier point of continuous segregation disguised as rights addresses her longstanding disconnection from formal political affiliation. The cloak of equality has never been obscure.

MawMaw’s politics, as a Black woman, have been shaped by a life of intersectional oppressions in the segregated south and an understanding that the verbal and nonverbal discourse of Black women’s politics have been largely ignored. Her struggle for recognition of human identity amidst a society solely focused on national identity (Harris-Perry, 2011) allows her to be always mindful of the politics at work against Black people--an analogy she likens to the plantation. MawMaw says Black
people will never be off the plantation, or out of the watchful, overseeing eye of white patriarchy. However, it was not until the inclusion of a Black man in the White House (an occurrence she never thought she’d live to see), with promises to bring about change to the multiply oppressed that she began to take an interest in the discourse of politics. Fully aware that the presence of President Obama will not eradicate controlling systems of power, MawMaw’s burgeoning formal participation in politics through an understanding of political rhetoric contributes to governmental knowledge that can be passed down to younger generations.

In a follow-up interview, we discussed her newfound political interest. She says very few politicians during election season or in daily life talk about community as part of their platform. “That’s why people don’t go out to vote,” she says. “Not because we don’t care, but because these people aren’t speaking to us. If you don’t talk about community, you’re not talking about the people. And even if they’re just tricking us into believing our vote counts, we gotta start holding them accountable once they’re in office.” She now makes it her personal mission to infuse political discourse into her dialogue with community members. She wants everyone across age to become educated of the political system and make elected officials work on behalf of the people.

As community othermother, her concern is for the welfare of Black people. Therefore, her message is to become equally knowledgeable of governmental politics and the politics of life. Each holds a history that shapes the world and embodies the struggle of Black people. Just as she was unaware of governmental jargon, the children were equally confused by her explanation (as indicated by their blank stares); however, she ends with a message she knows will stick “Get all the history you can, little brother and
little sister. All you can.” In the tradition of othermothering, the enrichment of children’s lives is key. MawMaw’s form of enrichment occurs through lessons she passes down and phrases of empowerment deposited into those she encounters. MawMaw’s intersectional narrative, particularly surrounding the inclusion of age in her racial and gendered experiences, highlights evolution. In her steadfast commitment to social justice and the well-being of the community, she symbolizes an aspect of womanism as one who is still in the making (Phillips & McCaskill, 2006). At age 60, MawMaw remains open to change, and uses her trajectory of experience to build community.

Observation #2

Forty-five minutes later, the feast of fried chicken, fries, and birthday cake begins.

“Lil Bit, your birthday this month?” MawMaw asks, “No, next month,” I reply. She goes around asking other people in the store, but no one has an August birthday. “Well, hell, let’s celebrate Black people Stevie Wonder style.” MawMaw begins singing Wonder’s rendition of Happy Birthday: “Hap-py Birth-day, Black people.” Everyone chimes in.

“Hap-py Birth-day, Black people. Hap-py Birrrrh-day.” MawMaw yells out, “Second verse is for Katrina!” We fall in line. “Hap-py Birth-day, Ka-trina. Hap-py Birth-day, Ka-trina. Hap-py Birrrrh-day.” Suddenly, we turn to one another and begin hugging. No one suggested it; it simply happened. MawMaw raises her arms to signal our attention.

“Ya’ll felt that?” We answer in the affirmative. “That was the spirit of the ancestors reminding us to use any and every opportunity to celebrate being Black and being alive.”

“Lest we forget”

In August 2005, the city of Sunnyside experienced physical, mental, and emotional destruction from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Beginning as a
Category 3 tropical storm in the Bahamas, severe wind exceeding 145 mph and intense rain resulted in its landfall in Sunnyside and a neighboring state on August 28th as a Category 4 storm. On August 29th, it worsened to a Category 5, the most catastrophic of all hurricanes. On this day, the levees (an embankment used to withstand overflow of flood waters) were breached and Sunnyside began to flood. Pockets of town housing poor Blacks were hit the hardest. According to the U.S. Census, 67.9 percent of Sunnyside’s pre-Katrina population was comprised of Blacks, with over one hundred thousand living in poverty. Over ten percent of this population had no access to a vehicle, rendering them unable to evacuate for the storm. Many who live in states with tropical storms are accustomed to staying home and “riding it out” until official, trustworthy evacuation notifications are issued (Gladwin & Peacock, 1997). However, the official governmental order from the mayor came merely twenty-four hours prior to the hurricane’s landing in Sunnyside. Thus, many poor Blacks with no vehicle were unable to get assistance for evacuation. They were trapped.

News cameras zoomed in on people screaming for help from their rooftops, dead bodies floating in water, the faces of children and elders sunken from starvation, and parents holding signs, begging for relief for their families. For days, no help came. With no power, water, food, or shelter, citizens of Sunnyside were left to wonder how and why their federal government failed them. Sadly, lack of attention to the needs of the poor is nothing new; it was just displayed on a much grander scale through the aftermath of the hurricane. Dyson (2005) writes, “the government and society had been failing to pay attention to the poor since long before one of the worst natural disasters in the nation’s
history swallowed the poor and spit them up. The world just saw how much we hadn’t seen it; it witnessed our negligence up close in frightfully full color” (p.6).

Lack of urgency from President Bush and FEMA during this catastrophe incited much local and national discussion of racial inequalities, particularly around the devaluing of Black bodies. The five-day daily in aid treatments and rescue missions became more problematic when U.S. media labeled Black Americans “refugees,” a name that “had the effect of rhetorically removing black victims from national responsibility, as though the consequences of the levee failure were to be endured by foreigners rather than by Americans at the bottom of the same hierarchies of race and wealth that had contributed significantly to the disaster itself” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 12). The addition of military troops to combat these “refugees” provided further evidence of racial hierarchies at play in the midst of a national disaster. Distraught and without adequate resources or health care, many citizens of Sunnyside began taking necessary items of survival from stores. They were not receiving any governmental assistance and needed to provide for their families. Their acts of desperation resulted in criminal charges and labels of gang affiliation. In the media, police officers were heralded as keepers of peace, but Katrina survivors experienced a different narrative of brutality. It wasn’t until April of this year that five former police officers were sentenced up to 65 years in prison for the deadly shootings and killing of unarmed Sunnyside residents in the aftermath of Katrina.

Celebration through the pain

One year later, due to grievances such as psychological duress, lack of housing, and lack of financial security, the Black population of Sunnyside dwindled to 56.4 percent, while the poverty rate increased to 31.3 percent. Many relocated to cities like
Houston or Atlanta, but an overwhelming number of Black people were left homeless or residing in FEMA trailers, unsure of how to start over. Still, there were others, like MawMaw who refused to leave and decided to fight on behalf of those who could not. Despite seemingly impossible financial and emotional barriers, they chose to protect the beauty and historicity of the city they call home. Six years post-Katrina and there is still much rebuilding left to do in Sunnyside. Many who were able to evacuate have returned home to additional battles of oppression in the educational system and job market. In spite of their suffering, Black people of Sunnyside remain united through their Katrina narratives.

MawMaw’s celebration of Black people and Katrina is part of her survival narrative. Through song and connectedness to the spirit of the ancestors, she personifies the essence of “gittin ovuh” (Smitherman, 2000), or the use of the oral tradition in the generational passing down of lessons. She demonstrates how self-preservation is necessary for cultural preservation. That is, her will and determination to focus on survival and rebuilding helped maintain and ignite ancestral presence in the culture of CBC. Initially, it seemed comical to sing birthday wishes to Black people and Hurricane Katrina, but in the moment after the last note was sung, we each realized the power of being alive in Sunnyside, in the month of the storm, six years later. Though I didn’t physically experience the hurricane, and came to know MawMaw and the CBC community post-Katrina, I shared in their narrative of collective survival; a form of Black communication rooted in the oral tradition.
**Final thoughts**

Since 1989, MawMaw has been a staple in the CBC community. Within the ethic of care, her role as othermother is focused on the survival and well-being of the community through the passing down of wisdom for future generations. Community organizing, as part of othermothering, positions members to uphold historical and cultural traditions necessary for intergenerational communication and participation. As a powerful figure and activist in the community, MawMaw doesn’t let age slow her down. In fact, she says she’s just getting started: “There’s so much I want to do with the younger generation. They’re the ones who will further the fight.” The next scene provides additional insight into MawMaw’s feelings of responsibility and accountability for the community.
Scene VI

On Community: A Haiku

*****This scene represents a poetic culmination of MawMaw’s perspective on community preservation in Sunnyside. Taken from a Skype interview, I capture her feelings of accountability and responsibility through haiku—a Japanese form of poetry comprised of 17 sound units, divided into syllables of 5-7-5, respectively. As another alternative form of data representation, haiku focuses on uncovering numerous and different shades of meaning through minimalistic text (Etter-Lewis, 1993). Intended to convey an image or feeling, the telling of this final narrative through haiku, allows for the centering of MawMaw’s passion for community in a succinct format. One of the main functions of haiku is to create juxtapositional structure, or a leap between two parts to express change or realization. For MawMaw, this change occurs in the last line, and is directly linked to her emotional connection to community. *****

MawMaw is seated on a couch, surrounded by members of the Sunnyside and CBC community as she reads this haiku.

Tell me a story.

Who will tell them the stories?

Who’s really asking?

MawMaw was born into story. From hearing generations of Black women in her family act as storytellers, she says she had two options: either take the stories of Black history that were passed down through oral tradition and do nothing with them or carry the stories with her to teach younger generations. “Once children are able to develop language, they gravitate to story,” she says. “Tell me a story, they plead. They thirst for
it.” MawMaw says living in an age of extreme technology has taken the focus off oral tradition because people look to their phones, Ipads, and Kindles to tell them what they need to know. “Nowadays folks turn to Google for everything they need to know. They think the computer has all the answers. And maybe it does if you need to pass a test. But I found the answers to life in the stories of my mother, aunts, and grandmother.”

MawMaw believes the quest for oral narrative is a dying tradition; one that is often introduced by children at a young age through declarative statements for the telling of story. In the second line of haiku she poses the question, “who will tell them the stories?” Here, MawMaw says young people look to technology for the “right” answers, assuming that a search engine holds their historical truths. In our interview she also says responsibility must be placed on teachers. “Many of our children have white teachers who give them the “poor little Negro” story and that’s what they think of themselves. Then, they turn on the television or internet and become whatever they see there. But if only they could be saturated with the truth as much as they feed into the lies, they may not be so confused about who they really are.” Therefore, the question of who will tell them the stories becomes open-ended as young people look to a variety of sources for answers, often resulting in mass consumption of distorted truths.

In the development of this minimalistic approach to data, MawMaw states three key points. First, she describes the initial approach to story, one that is enacted at a young age when children gravitate to oral tradition. Next, she says the zeal for story gets lost in the need for quick answers via technology or narratives of deficit placed upon young people. The final line, or juxtaposition, captures her realization of responsibility that needs to be shared by younger and older generations. The question, “who’s really
asking?” suggests the lack of focus on oral tradition is in part due to lack of requests for it. MawMaw says she often hears and takes part in conversations on how much society has changed for the youth of today. Adults want to know what happened to the community leaders of their generation who engaged them in stories of the Black experience. “I tell them we’re still here. But nobody’s coming to us for those stories anymore,” she says. “We can tell them if they ask, but who’s really asking? I mean, sometimes they ask me because of the role I play, but it’s not enough. We need more young people in conversation with their elders, but we also have to listen to their truths. It’s the only way to truly keep abreast of one another’s struggle. We have to hear it from each other.”

Age is an important factor in the preservation of historical aspects of the oral tradition and intergenerational participation is necessary for the survival of community and the building of interdependent relationships (Smitherman, 2000). Thus, MawMaw’s question, “who’s really asking?” is directed to youth and adults. Just as young people aren’t asking for historical narratives, many elders fail to understand the plight of youth, resulting in the loss of oral tradition as a generational necessity. While age and experience often connotes a wisdom connected to elders, youth knowledge of story and struggle is central to intergenerational communication. Examining these points of contention between youth and adults revisits similar discourse between second and third wave Black feminists. A breakdown of communication surrounding the telling and interpretations of multiple identities of lived experience result in missed opportunities for collective engagement. Intergenerational literacies allow various degrees of intersectionality to highlight the need for shared articulation of oral and written narrative
in the preservation of generational understanding and the (re)building of Black communities and traditions.

The evolution of MawMaw’s perspective through 17 sound units divided into syllables of 5-7-5 is not only important to the methodological variation of structure and meaning (Etter-Lewis, 1993), but also to the overarching theme that collaborative engagement of narrative is essential for collective participation in community. As community othermother, her responsibility is to preserve the historicity of Sunnyside and CBC through the passing down of narrative and tradition, but in order to unify and build community, all participants must feel generationally accepted.

*Final thoughts*

Through the development of data representation and analysis of MawMaw’s role of community othermother in Sunnyside, I began to see intergenerational connections of fictive kin in the narratives of participants in T-town and Capital City as well. Through oral and written discourse of intersectionality, mothers and daughters became othersisters and othermothers to one another. In the face of challenging societal pressures, speaking back to dominant discourse through counternarrative, we became fictive kin, or familial-like sources of support and responsibility. Though MawMaw was unable to join focus groups, she embodies our desire to further intergenerational dialogue through personal and historical truths. While the fight for equality seems an ever-daunting task, MawMaw reminds us that social change is impossible without collectivity, so while we continue to challenge dominant systems of oppression, we must build up one another along the way.
Chapter Three: Conclusion

Act III: The Catastrophe

In this dissertation, I have presented a three-state ethnographic study of oral and written intergenerational race, place, gender, and age narratives of fourteen Black mothers and daughters of biological and fictive kinship. Epistemologically, this work is centered in Black girl’s and women’s narrative and literacy practices. Much research on Black girls focuses on the “at risk” and “in crisis” social discourse, specifically in relation to images of scantily-clad Black female bodies in music videos, body image and obesity, rising rates of teenage pregnancy, and alarming statistics of HIV infection. Though media portrayals of young Black girls pay particular attention to sexualized behaviors, my relationships with and research on Black girls led me to explore the “crisis” narrative in detail. I have framed their intersectional narratives within the dominant discourse of Black girlhood and womanhood as “at risk” and “in crisis,” creating opportunities to speak back to these prevailing narratives.

As Tyra from T-town reminds us, place is central to her race and gender narrative, and she is most adament about redirecting her crisis narrative from one of celebrity idolization to a determination to leave the oppressive life she finds stifling. She states, “A lot of girls my age want bodies like Nicki Minaj and Beyonce, but I don’t really pay attention to people like that cause I know their life ain’t nothing like mine. They got a lot going on with them and they rich and famous. They ain’t gotta live the way I live to try
and make it.” While celebrities are most known for their financial stature and physical appearance, Tyra’s definitive stance on not identifying with individuals in the media, and instead, following and valuing the choices of one of her hometown peers, personifies the importance of speaking back to prevailing narratives in the lives of young Black girls.

Similarly, Mama M and Mama K demonstrate concrete experience as a criterion of meaning and the ethic of care as they explain their rationale and introduce additional complexities of Black womanhood within the crisis narrative. The concept of “raising” is central to the historical aspect of the African American woman’s discourse and literacy tradition. The Black woman has, throughout history, raised her children, the master’s children, relative’s children, and children of fictive kin, often with little to no pay or gratitude. For Kandace’s mother who has been raising children for the majority of her life, the desire for her daughter to leave T-town has additional meaning from the other mothers. Just as she has endured racial oppression for much of her life, she has also endured the constant battle of giving up her dreams. The role of superhuman strength and ability within strong Black woman discourse is often perceived as good Black womanhood or reflective of a “good woman,” but also comes at the expense of personal health and well-being. While the “at risk” and “in crisis” discourse developed in “The Souls of Black Girls” pays particular attention to influences of popular culture on young Black girls, Mama K and Mama M repackage the crisis narrative through another controlling image of Black womanhood—the strong Black woman. While many Black women’s critique of the myth of the strong Black woman calls for her removal, these mothers are simply trying to maneuver in their crooked room (Harris-Perry, 2011)—a space they find less debilitating knowing they’re not alone in the struggle.
As a Black feminist/womanist committed to the intellectual work and activism in the lives and literacies of Black girls and women, I argued that an in-depth analysis and critique of the dominant “at risk” and “in crisis” discourse is necessary to understand the conversations that are and are not taking place between Black mothers and daughters about race, gender, age, and place; that it is important to understand the ways in which Black girls respond to media portrayals and stereotypes; and that it is imperative that we closely examine the existing narratives at play in the everyday lives of intergenerational Black girls and women in Black communities.

Close examination of these prevailing discourses occurred through alternative forms of data representation that honored the intersectional lives and experiences of Black women and girls. I experimented with a multi-genred approach of playwriting and portraiture to build thematic connections and intersectional conflicts while the literary motifs of vignettes, sonnet, haiku, and monologue “painted” the narratives. Similarly, addressing the reader through the age-old theatrical convention of asides, allowed a space for additional elements of narrative to support ongoing scenes, portraits, and critical reflexivity. Essentially, these methodological approaches of analysis and data collection through observations, focus groups, and individual interviews highlighted the complex beauty of intergenerational dialogue within the Black mother/daughter dynamic and core tenets of Black feminisms; explored intersectional narratives in open-ended and in-depth formats; critically examined a need for collective engagement of personal and historical truths; challenged dominant systems of oppression through counternarrative; and created a desire for furthered communication following the conclusion of the study.
Summary of findings

For the women and girls of T-town, the intersectional multiplicity of being Black, female, working class, and from a small town are ongoing struggles rooted in their desire to leave and never return. Collins’s (1991a) core themes, concrete experience as a criterion of meaning and the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, are embedded within the multiplicity of discrimination and daily life. Seemingly, the aim of oppressive social practices and rituals in T-town is to distort Black girl’s and women’s ability to see themselves outside of societal stigmas and stereotypes. However, through counternarrative and open dialogue between mother/daughter, participants of T-town speak back to dominant “crisis” discourse. Though mothers of T-town are unable to see themselves outside of the myth of the strong Black woman, they find comfort in sharing their struggles with other women of similar intersectional oppressions.

Mothers and daughters of Capital City embody what Kynard (2010) calls a “narrative ethnography of sistahood, where coming-of-age stories act as the catalyst for intergenerational and intersectional dialogue and critique. Through a priori theory surrounding elements of voice in portraiture and tenets of Black feminisms, we created a form of multiliteracies I call intergenerational literacies, or the collective critical engagement of multiple ways of knowing and experience across various degrees of intersectionality in the lives of Black mothers and daughters, toward a (re) articulation of our experiences for ourselves, by ourselves, and the survival of one another and our community(ies). Through thematic connections of mother/daughter relationships and definitions of being Black and female, written narrative was instrumental in seeing similarities of intersectionality across age and experience.
These narratives were especially poignant in our discussions of popular culture. Hiphop and Black feminism were instrumental in the analysis of these conversations. In an attempt to support the personal and political histories of young Black girls, hiphop feminism arguably serves as a continuation of feminist activism from its first and second wave predecessors. Ingrained in political and cultural analysis of hiphop and rap music, and broader popular culture, hiphop feminism is designed as a framework for young feminists of color to engage in the controversial and liberating discourse surrounding intersections like race, class, sex, and gender in their daily lives. Tanisha likens societal attention to Nicki Minaj and Amber Rose in hiphop culture to a modern-day slavery. She believes young girls are not in control of their bodies by demonstrating sexual prowess, but rather, emulating what they’re seeing in popular culture. Therefore, the slavery metaphor represents societal trickery. Just as Africans were tricked into slavery with promises of a better life, Tanisha finds parallels with young girls who model their sexual behaviors off Minaj’s persona and lyrics. Their attempts to physically achieve Barbie and “bad bitch” status can result in increased societal statistics of teenage pregnancy and sexual diseases, reaffirming the “at risk” and “in crisis” label surrounding Black girls and women.

Despite her stance on not being a feminist, Tanisha’s bold declarations of discrepancies and glaring contradictions of sexual personas and their effects on the young Black girl consumer directly embody the spirit of feminist resistance. Her awareness of Black women’s oppression in our racial and gender identity allows her to critically examine additional areas of complexity surrounding sexuality in hiphop culture. While societal depictions of Black women’s bodies are certainly complex, the presence of
young Black girls and women in conversation and critique of prevailing mainstream discourse articulates urgency for further intergenerational dialogue and heightened visibility of Black girls’ narratives.

In Sunnyside, MawMaw’s role as community othermother reflects Black women’s “motherwit” or individual and collective wisdom rooted in lived experience and passed down to younger generations. Within the ethic of care, MawMaw’s age, knowledge, and experience allow expressions of love and critique to occur in multiple ways for the betterment of the community. Politics of power encompass much of MawMaw’s intersectional narratives. As a Black woman, her politics have been shaped by a life of intersectional oppressions in the segregated south and an understanding that the verbal and nonverbal discourse of Black women’s politics have been largely ignored. Her struggle for recognition of human identity amidst a society solely focused on national identity (Harris-Perry, 2011) allows her to be always mindful of the politics at work against Black people. MawMaw’s psychological and philosophical connectedness to the historical and ongoing oppressions of Black people is deeply personal and one that explores politics beyond governmental affiliations to include the lives and experiences of Black women and Black people. In her steadfast commitment to social justice and the well-being of the community, MawMaw’s intersectional narrative, particularly surrounding the inclusion of age, highlights a tenet of womanism as one who is constantly in the making.

Limitations of study

While Capital City, T-town, and Sunnyside were pivotal to my growth and development and I’d formed relationships with participants of each location prior to the
study, the coordination of schedules proved challenging. Since the girls of each city knew
one another and were involved in similar extracurricular activities, commitment to Skype
and phone sessions were difficult to maintain as the girls often forgot our planned
meetings or had to simultaneously cancel due to these activities. Likewise, because I’d
established rapport and trustworthiness, I was hesitant about being too persistent of their
commitment to my research for fear of overwhelming them or making them feel
obligated to participate, and thus, disinterested in the study. A mixture of homogenous
and maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990)\textsuperscript{12} might have been helpful for increased
response rates and participation.

Due to various ages of participants and their daily schedules, I was unable to
achieve a balance of observations and interviews. With MawMaw, for example,
observations of her role as othermother were key because her ongoing activity in the
community often made it difficult to find time for individual sessions. Likewise, the high
school seniors of the study often had school and extracurricular commitments that proved
challenging when solidifying schedules. Attempting to divide observation and interview
time between six participants during trips to T-town was often frustrating. Follow-up
sessions occurred online, but again, establishing time commitments was sometimes
problematic.

Similarly, though including three locations was helpful in analyzing intersectional
multiplicity and variation of Black girl and women’s narrative, it was a costly endeavor,
primarily financed by me. Though one of my goals was to create a large focus group of

\textsuperscript{12} Maximum variation sampling captures themes and outcomes across a great deal of participant
variation. Combining it with homogenous sampling that focuses on smaller sample sizes for focus
group research may have provided a greater probability of response rates and increased
interaction across a diverse population.
all participants in one location, sharing our intergenerational narratives, I was unable to finance it. Examining place as an intersection within different neighborhoods of one city would have been more cost effective and would have allowed an opportunity to examine additional intersections within place, such as class through economic and social mobility.

Finally, in analyzing intersectional relationships from a Black feminist/womanist lens, I could have furthered the examination of social responsibility, particularly in the lives of young Black girls. When discussing their historical connections to place, race, and gender, there is not enough dialogue on roles and responsibility in re(building) community. Though unpacking the impact of multiple oppressions, and communication with mothers and other daughters resulted in the written and oral production of counternarrative, there is not enough emphasis on their responsibilities (or lack thereof) to the larger Black community. MawMaw provides a framework and analysis of this discourse, proving that intergenerational dialogue across location would have been helpful in this aspect of the knowledge validation to action process.

Implications for future research

Terry McMillan’s (1992) blockbuster novel and movie adaptation, Waiting to Exhale details the story of four Black women metaphorically holding their breath until they are able to find and maintain committed relationships with men. Their struggles of life and love amidst various intersectional challenges inspired me to consider how the desire for relief still manifests within Black women and girls. Though not a contemporary depiction of Black women’s relationships with men, I titled this dissertation, “Still waiting to exhale: An intergenerational narrative analysis of Black mothers and
daughters” to suggest that while we still wait for reprieve of our multiple oppressions, we can find a “resting place” in one another.

This study establishes the beauty, tension, and necessity of intergenerational communication between Black women and girls of biological and fictive kin. Through the development of Black feminist epistemologies, Black women’s discourse and literacy practices, and co-construction of data, fourteen participants created a multi-genred methodological study on the benefits of oral and written narrative in our daily intersections of race, gender, place, and age. Central to the development of Black feminisms is the telling and sharing of narrative. In the present methodological approach developed through portraiture and playwriting, Black women and girls are not only calling for our stories to be told, but for them to be told in ways that are representative of the vast dynamics at play in our intersectional lives. Through alternative forms of data representation, we demonstrate a need for intergenerational literacies in the discourse of ideological frameworks central to our multiplicity of experience and criticality as Black mothers and daughters.

By centering Black girl’s and women’s subjectivity in the intersectional analysis of everyday lived experience, I examined the “situated, subjugated standpoint of African-American women in order to understand Black feminist thought as a partial perspective on domination” (Collins, 1991a, p. 269). As subjugated knowledge, the experiences of Black women have not been told by us. Therefore, the use of intergenerational literacies, multi-genred writing, oral and written narrative coupled with Black and hiphop feminisms, African American female literacies, and participant observation allowed fourteen Black mothers and daughters to rearticulate their Black women’s standpoint
through multiplicative intersectional experience. The need for this standpoint lies in its “ability to enrich our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that fosters both their empowerment and social justice (ibid). Collins’s use of a Black feminist standpoint is not to highlight the differences between Black women and other groups, but rather to center Black women’s standpoint as a specific site of active discourse and analysis within multiple [intergenerational] epistemologies.

As part of intergenerational literacies, I am hopeful that this research can foster continued exploration of written and oral performance of Black mothers and daughters’ everyday lived experiences and reveal additional implications for arts-based research within qualitative studies. Black women’s standpoint is never finished as knowledge is always ongoing, and through intergenerational literacies Black mothers and daughters continue to redefine their unique perspectives on race, place, age, and gender while simultaneously creating opportunities for the critical collective engagement of additional intersections. Too often, our narratives are distorted or not told at all, but intergenerational communication allows the centering of mother/daughter relationships to speak back to societal discourse. Developing the study through portraiture and playwriting allows variations of narrative length and style to be considered alongside critical analysis. It is my hope that attention to process and product expands the need for inclusion of our narratives and how these narratives are written and enacted.

Additionally, this line of research is necessary for community building and the preservation of history. It opens a space for further interrogation of the role of place in lives of Black people who desire emancipation from their multiple oppressions. Attention to a social justice framework affords opportunities to develop resistance strategies to
challenge injustice. Likewise, the use of technology was central to this study, so an in-depth analysis of the ways in which the internet and social media become limitations and enhancements to the lives and histories of Black people of different ages adds to ongoing work in digital literacies.

In the spirit of collective engagement that is central to the narratives of our foremothers, this dissertation has great implications for furthered intergenerational examination of intersectionality in Black girls and women. Whether a study on Black mothers and daughters negotiating the penal justice system, Black girls in foster care in search of their Black mothers, or a collection of Black mothers and daughters engaging in digital literacies, this work highlights the complex beauty of generational connections and disconnections in our collective understandings of identity and knowledge formation as Black girls and women, and the need for the telling of our stories to be continued for us, by us.
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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Discuss your experiences growing up as a Black girl in your respective city.
2. Discuss your experiences growing up as a Black girl in your respective city.
3. Do you find any challenges being a Black girl/woman in your city? If so, what are they and how would you change them?
4. Do you find any benefits of being Black girl/woman in your city? What do you enjoy the most?
5. Describe your relationship with your mother/daughter. Are there any areas you would like to improve? If so, what changes would you like to create? What are three wishes you have for your mother/daughter?
6. Are there any topics you feel uncomfortable discussing in front of your mother? In front of other Black girls?
7. Are there any topics you feel uncomfortable discussing in front of your daughter? Other mothers?
8. What three words would you use to describe yourself? Your daughter/mother?
9. What are your thoughts on the depiction of Black women in the media? What about these depictions would you maintain or change?
10. Many young Black girls are defined as “at risk” and “in crisis.” How do you interpret these labels?
11. How has your own upbringing influenced the way you raise your daughter?
12. Discuss your knowledge of the historical realities of Black women. How does your understanding of the past relate to your current experiences as a Black girl and woman?
13. How do you define community? Do you feel like you a part of a community in your town/city? What does this community look like? What would you maintain or change about it?
Appendix B: Synoptic Chart for Thematic Approach to Data and Codebook

This chart represents my theoretical approach to data collection surrounding the global theme: Intersectionality in Black mother/daughter relationships and organizing themes: Being Black girls and women, Descriptions of place, and Mother/daughter and othermother relationships. Though all of the codes represented here were not used in the data, organizing them into categories allowed me to bring theoretical frameworks to bear on the data, in search of grounded theory. In the next section, I explain the coding system.
Codebook

Being Black Girls and Women

DOS-Descriptions of Self
CECM-Concrete Experience as a Criterion of Meaning
PA-Personal Accountability
EOC-Ethic of Care
SDF-Self-Defined Feminism
SBW-Strong Black Woman
MP-Media Portrayals
SE-Self-Esteem
BWI-Black Women’s Issues

Descriptions of Place

DTLH-Desire to Leave Home
DDFD-Desires for Daughter
DDFM-Desires for Mother
RAP-Racism and Prejudice
CD-Community Dynamics
DFF-Desire for Freedom
SI-Societal Influences

Mother/daughter & Othermother Relationships

CTM- Closeness to Mother
CTD-Closeness to Daughter
DFM-Distancing from Mother
DFD-Distancing from Daughter
EOC-Ethic of Care
RC-Reclaiming Community