BLACK GRADUATE WOMEN’S SELF-DEFINING PROCESS USING MEDIA AND SISTA CIRCLE METHODOLOGY

By

MARVETTE CENSARRAY CIARA LACY

(Under the Direction of Chris Linder)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black women on college campuses make meaning of media representations of themselves and how that meaning impacts how the women define themselves. I used sista circle methodology through a Endarkend Feminist lens for this study. Black women in this study made meaning of self by interpreting, implementing, and interrogating messages received from family, particularly mother figures, Black women on television, and from their Christian socialization. Additionally, I found that Black women self-sacrifice and create space for themselves where that space has not previously existed. Educators can take intentional efforts to recognize and acknowledge the work that has already been done by women. One example is providing and maintaining mentoring opportunities. Educators in graduate programs can encourage Black women to utilize research designs that are more in line with their researcher’s perspective. Finally, educators utilize more partnerships between graduate programs, graduate student organizations, and health services to provide more intentional and high impact initiatives to address the needs of Black graduate women at PWIs.

INDEX WORDS: Black women, Identity development, Sista circle methodology, Endarkended Feminist, Popular culture
BLACK GRADUATE WOMEN’S SELF-DEFINING PROCESS USING MEDIA AND SISTA CIRCLE METHODOLOGY

by

MARVETTE CENSARRAY CIARA LACY

B.S., Elmhurst College, 2009
M.A., Illinois State University, 2011

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GA
2017
BLACK GRADUATE WOMEN’S SELF-DEFINING PROCESS USING MEDIA AND SISTA CIRCLE METHODOLOGY

by

MARVETTE CENSARRAY CIARA LACY

Major Professor: Chris Linder

Committee: Candace Moore
           Merrily Dunn
           Jori Hall

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2017
DEDICATION

To all the sista scholars who gave their time and shared their sacred stories.

Asé and Amen
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the years, I have received support and encouragement from a great number of loved ones and for that, I am eternally grateful. Thank you Dr. Candace Moore for your love and countless hours of reassurance and advice. Your love and guidance encouraged me to begin this doctoral journey. Without you, I would have not achieved this dream of being Dr. Lacy. Dr. Chris Linder, I could not have asked for a better major professor. You have saved my life countless times with your love and unconditional support. Thank you for being my champion even when I could not be my own. Thank you for always encouraging me to use my voice.

I would like to thank Dr. Merrily Dunn and Dr. Jori Hall for your support over the past four years. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Jillian Martin for your friendship and sisterhood. A special thanks to Dr. Joan Collier for being an exemplary example of the sister I never had and never knew I needed. Thank you for giving your time, knowledge, and love to this dissertation project. I have learned so much from our time together. I know that I am a much better person because of you. Thank you for helping me to learn to love myself. Finally, thank you to my family for your love and sacrifices that have allowed me to travel on this educational journey.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 FINDINGS</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: [Participant Demographic Information] .................................................... 47
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 1: [Data Collection Methods]</th>
<th>49</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana; you mix that negro with that Creole, make a Texasbama, I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros; I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils, earned all this money, but they never take the country out me; I got hot sauce in my bag, swag.

Oh yeah, baby, oh yea, I, ohhhh, oh yes, I like that; I did not come to play with you hoes, haha; I came to slay, bitch; I like cornbreads and collard greens, bitch; oh, yes, you besta believe it.

Sometimes I go off, I go hard, Get what’s mine, I’m a star. Cause I slay... All day...Okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation; You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation; Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper (BeyonceVEVO, 2016, 0:38 – 4:38).

It is an early Monday morning in February 2016 as I sit in the back corner office speaking with my therapist. Unbeknownst to me, the world was lit with lively discussion of last night’s Superbowl game, particularly the half-time show. Beyoncé made a surprise appearance in the middle of the headliner’s, Coldplay, performance. She was debuting her new single, Formation, dressed in attire to salute the 50th anniversary of the Black Panther Party. Leading up to this event, Beyoncé and her husband made several charitable donations to organizations
advocating for the needs of Black Americans. Additionally, a music video for Formation was released unlisted on YouTube that had several million views by Monday morning. One could reasonably make the assumption that the black barets, the natural hair, the all black, leather costumes that adorn Beyoncé and her dancers; Beyoncé standing on top of a sinking police car in the middle of New Orleans on her music video; and the charitable donations were all in connection and response to the unarmed killing of several Black people in America. My therapist was among those in heavy discussion and contemplation about the meaning of Beyoncé’s performance, attire, and music video.

Early 2016 was a difficult time for me personally. I had just successfully completed my preliminary exams and was paralyzed from anxiety and depression to begin my dissertation prospectus, among other daily activities. In an effort to practice self-care, I begin to see a therapist on a weekly basis. My therapist, a well-meaning, liberal, nice White woman, who I had been seeing for about two months, greeted me as I took a seat across from her. “How are you doing today?” she asked. I began to disclose the progress I made in my decision to finally meet with a psychiatrist. I was finally acquiescing to taking medication to manage my anxiety and depression. “Oh, I thought you would have mentioned something about Beyoncé. Did you see last night’s performance? Why would she do that? Why would she celebrate that terrorist organization?”

We spent the remaining of that session with me communicating that the Black Panther Party was not a terrorist organization, providing a more accurate description of the movement, that AllLivesMatter is not real until BlackLivesMatter, and other emotionally draining topics. This was supposed to be a person who was trained to help me navigate my depression and anxiety. Instead, she inflicted more harm through her innocent ignorance and good intentions to
understand. This encounter, though exhausting, did prompt me to think about the effects of popular culture on Black women’s identity development.

Beyoncé’s performance and video was affirming for me as a Black woman. I have been a fan of Beyoncé as an entertainer for most of my life. Like me, Beyoncé had also evolved in her own understanding of what it means to be a woman, specifically a Black woman, as reflected through her latest albums, publications, and interviews. If Beyoncé intentionally displayed imagery through a large, national stage as the Super Bowl, I then wondered how other Black women made sense of this display. How did this performance and video influence their understandings of self?

In the following chapter, I will define #BlackGirlMagic and how it is utilized at predominately White institutions (PWIs). Next, I identify the purpose and research questions that guided this study. After clarifying the significance of the study, I conclude the chapter by describing the research design by explaining the theoretical framework, epistemology, and methodology.

#BlackGirlMagic

In 2015, Loretta Lynch gets confirmed as attorney general (Steinhauer, 2015), Serena Williams is sportsperson of the year (Price, 2015), Misty Copeland becomes the first black woman to be named a principal dancer in the American Ballet Theater (Cunningham & Harwell, 2015), and Viola Davis is the first Black woman to win an Oscar, Emmy and Tony (Ryan, 2017). These are just some of the ways Black women have displayed the essence of Black Girl Magic. CaShawn Thompson created the term Black Girl Magic as a way of recognizing and celebrating the many accomplishments and resilience of Black women in America (Thomas, 2015). Black women around the world continue to use the phrase for celebration and as a way to counter the
deficit narrative that has been historically and incessantly used to define Black women as Viola Davis did in .... “Black Girl Magic means we are shape-shifters, superheroes, styles-layers, soul scholars, truth seekers, sisters, healers, Holy Rollers, hotties, listeners, lovers, dreamers, divas, daredevils, doers of the damn thing…all at the same damn time” (Davis, 2015, Episode 3).

Black women are constantly flooded with messages from the world that they are not good enough as they are or that they are wrong for their actions and behaviors, and #BlackGirlMagic interrupts this master narrative (D’Oyley, 2016).

Throughout my life, I have used famous Black women as a guide in helping me travel from the inner city of Chicago to now on the cusp of earning a doctoral degree. As I reflect on my life experiences, I can see the heavy influences of these women in my life. Famous Black women such as Brandy Norwood, Toni Braxton, Serena Williams, Beyoncé Carter, and Michelle Obama have provided examples of being the best in their respective fields and filling me with the inspiration that I could do it too. I have never met any of these women in person nor have I ever had an in-person conversation with them. Still, they have provided a diversity of examples of how I can acknowledge and be proud of where I come from while still having the courage and resilience to push forward in my educational pursuits. It makes me wonder if any other women, specifically Black women, have had similar experiences, especially those women who did not have strong, personal mentoring relationships with other Black women? For me, these women are the embodiment of Black Girl Magic and continue to inspire Black girls everywhere to appreciate their own magic.

Conversely, there is another side to the #BlackGirlMagic hashtag. Believing in the magic of Black women can strip away the humanity of Black women by reinforcing the caricature of Black women being superwomen, Mammy, and divas (Harris, 2015; Harris-Perry, 2011;
Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Caricatures, such as these, send messages to both Black women and non-Black women alike that Black women are not contending with the ills of high levels of stress that have major negative implications on their mental and physical health (Harris, 2015; Harris-Perry, 2011; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). It can be said that Black women are literally killing themselves because they are not seen as humans who also have needs, emotions, and humanity.

**Black Girl Magic On College Campuses**

Black women continue to earn approximately two-thirds of the degrees of Black students conferred on college campuses across America, despite being the ultimate proverbial other of society (Collins, 2000; Henry, West, & Jackson, 2010; US Department of Education, 2016). Black women continue to be ignored, marginalized, and underserved on college campuses (Hannon, Woodside, Pollard & Roman, 2016; Henry, West, & Jackson, 2010). Despite this, Black women are constantly increasing in numbers in retention and persistence to graduation. While Black women are a successful group on college campuses, there remains a lack of specific programming and resources for them. Specifically, not many opportunities exist for Black women to explore and understand their identity development through formal programming and services on college campuses (Tuitt, 2010). Only recently have increasing qualitative, critical academic researcher attempted to understand the experiences and identity development of Black women (e.g., Domingue, 2015; Patton & Croom, 2017; Porter & Dean, 2015; Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011; Thomas, Hoxha, & Hacker, 2012).

Existing research mainly focuses on the influences of family (i.e., mother-daughter relationships) and mentoring relationships contributing to the identity development and academic success of Black women (Baugh & Barnes, 2015; Byrd & Shavers, 2013; Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011). Having real-life representation of strength and resilience provides Black women
with a guide of how to navigate the world. It is through relationships with other Black women that Black women come to understand their life experiences as Black women (Collins, 2000; Porter & Dean, 2015). These communal relationships help Black women to engage in dialogue that provides them stories, kinship, support, and validation of who they are as Black women and what they experience (Domingue, 2015; Tomas, Hoxha, & Hacker, 2012). Dialogue and community help Black women to navigate the outside messages they receive and to make meaning of those messages (Collins, 2000).

Additional influences such as physical environments, non-familial relationships, and media influence identity development (Harris, 2015; Kellner, 2003; Porter & Dean, 2015; Richardson-Stovall, 2012). However, the research is limited on exactly how these things influence development and in a positive way. Most research focuses on the negative impact of media as it relates to Black women’s self-esteem, understanding of self, and resilience (Harris, 2015; Richardson-Stovall, 2012). The portrayal of Black women through more current popular culture media representations has given pause to what it means to be a Black woman in America (Harris, 2015; Richardson-Stovall, 2012). Black women are often portrayed as angry, overly independent, hostile, and sexualized through reality television, music videos, and music lyrics. Unfortunately, all society members, including other Black women, have participated in this portrayal.

Relating back to the collegiate experiences of Black women, Black women appear to be doing well in terms of persistence and graduation rates. Despite appearances, Black women still lag behind their white counterparts, which make up a majority of the college student population (US Department of Education, 2016). It leads one to wonder where and how Black women on college campuses are gaining the necessary resilience and persistence to be successful on college
campuses? Who are the people providing the support and validation needed for Black women to navigate their educational journey? If there is no specific place for Black women to critically reflect on and examine their collegiate experience and understanding of self, where are these women going for this development?

**Purpose of Study**

Black women have proven to be one of the most influential and exploited minoritized populations. Each week, millions of people tune into television shows, music, videos, and other media to watch the likeness and entertainment of Black women through urban reality television and other hip hop related media (Patterson, 2015; Rap Rehab, 2012). Additionally, traditional aged college women make up the largest proportion of consumers of pop culture (Boylorn, 2008; Palmer-Mehta & Haliliuc, 2009; Patterson, 2013; Patterson, 2015; Reid, 2013). While growing research explores the influence of pop culture (mainly hip hop and reality television) on Black women’s self esteem, little research privileges the voices and lived experiences of Black women. Media (radio, television, film, and music videos) influences how college students make meaning of their social identities, such as race, gender, and class (hooks, 1992; Kellner, 2003; Richardson-Stovall, 2012). The purpose of this study was to explore how Black women on college campuses make meaning of media representations of themselves and how that meaning impacts how the women define themselves. I used a form of critical narrative methodology called sista circle methodology through a *Endarkend Feminist* lens for this study.

**Research Questions**

Using *Endarkend Feminist* epistemology (Dillard, 2006) and Sista Circle Methodology (Johnson, 2015), I centered gender and race in this study. Identity development includes the
relationship between external influences (e.g., relationships, media) and internal processing (i.e., cognitive development; citations); therefore, the research questions for this study included:

- How does popular culture representations of Black women influence how Black women make meaning of self?
- How do interactions and relationships between Black women influence the meaning making experience?

**Significance of Study**

Sista Circle methodology will be used in this study as it employs shared dialogue at the center of data collection. Shared dialogue between Black women may be a tactic in navigating and making sense of daily, racist, and sexist encounters (Brock, 2012; Patterson, 2015). Within these dialogues, women help each other to combat and deal with negative encounters by providing support, validation, and personal strategies (Collins, 2000; Harris, 2015). Through this dialogue, women also simultaneously built mutual trust and understanding with one another. This relationship building allows for the women to share and communicate about more difficult and personal matters.

Sista circle methodology (shared dialogue) provided a communal space for the sista scholars and me to discuss our understanding of media depictions of Black women within popular culture as it related to our own identity formation. I achieved three goals by examining the dialogue shared within the sista circles. First, I gained information about the intersectional nature of identity and cognitive development of Black women. Second, I was more aptly able to demonstrate diaspora of Blackness, specifically of Black women. Third, I identified explicit examples that demonstrate some similar and specific needs of Black women on predominately
White campuses. The data from this study provides practical information for student affairs professionals interested in meeting the particular needs of Black women on their campuses.

College campus administrators across the culture constantly grapple to identify ways to educate and rectify common issues that exist among women. However, this is based on student development theory that mostly centers Whiteness and treats gender and race as separate entities. The data presented within this study is based on a more intersectional approach in examining Black women’s identity development. This will result in student affairs professionals being more equipped to create and implement intentional programming and services for Black women. More intentional programming and services leads to higher persistence to graduation rates of Black women (Porter & Dean, 2015).

**Theoretical Framework**

The unique contextual, historical, sociopolitical conditions of the U.S. create a shared experience in how women of color, particularly Black women, navigate the intersectionality of race, gender, and religion (Collins, 2000; Dominique, 2015). While there may be many similarities between the experiences of Black women, one must be careful not to generalize into a monolithic group; many types of Black women make up the Black diaspora. These varying and unique experiences create the need for Black women to develop relationships with one another where they are able to share and discuss their varying experiences. These relationships create self-defined perspectives of Black womanhood and the associated oppressions that lead to social action for other Black women.

Patricia Collins (2000) through her writings within *Black Feminist Thought* (BFT) describes this very nature of the relationships that exist between Black women. Although one should be clear not to make sweeping generalizations about Black women as a monolithic group,
some commonalities exist among Black women. Through the unique social location of being a Black woman, Black women use their relationships with each other as major form of support and validation (Collins, 2000). It is through these relationships where dialogue and meaning making of life experiences, outside messages, and cultural representations of Black women take place.

I use Black Feminist Thought as the theoretical framework for this study because it specifically defines not only the social location of Black women but also the meaning making processes of Black women. Black women create networks for themselves to provide the support to address and explore messages, self-definitions, and self-representation (Collins, 2000). Black women take these new understandings and display it to the rest of the world through resilience and strength. Collins (2000) also makes it a point to charge Black women intellectuals with an increased responsibility in generating research that details our own experiences as we will tell the story from a more authentic point of view.

**Endarkened Feminist Epistemology**

Grounded by Black Feminist Thought, Dillard (2006) described endarkend feminist epistemology,

I use the term “endarkend” feminist epistemology to articulate how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities, and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African American women (p. 3). The way I come to know and understand the world is through an endarkened lens. There is no separation of me as researcher from my research. There is no neutrality in life; experience rooted in culture, social locations, history, and context is knowledge as a Black woman.
Generating research in an authentic way that honors and fully encapsulates the experience of the sista scholars who participated in this study requires that I clearly outline my worldview.

Endarkened feminist epistemology clearly captures my worldview and is in line with Black feminist thought and sista circle methodology.

**My Worldview**

Gender became more salient for me after I completed my masters program and entered my first professional experience. Entering into a marriage and moving to a new state became the catalyst for me to begin to give voice and recognize the myriad ways my gender influenced my understandings of the world. I have always been aware of my Blackness; it was something instilled in me from a young age by my parents and other family members. Black women were not a separate entity to be valued or ever discussed in an edifying or positive way. If Black women were being discussed, it was in relation to their shortcomings or to a man. In my undergraduate years, fighting for Blackness had the picture of fighting for all Black people; however, in reality, it meant fighting for the rights and freedoms of Black men.

Having a new sense of gender and its interplay in my life experiences called me to investigate. This investigative process mostly happened in the conversations with close friends who were also Black women. I felt a sense of validation, a courageousness to be vulnerable and to ask the awkward questions within these relationships and conversations with Black women. They have opened up space that has allowed me to wrestle with my understandings from childhood and navigate how to merge the past with new understandings of life. I could ask them questions about their childhood and compare my own to theirs. These women gave me access to their families that allowed me to observe different family dynamics than my own.
My friends, mentors, and othermothers (Collins, 2000) answered my questions about their morning routines, cleaning routines, and how they shop for bras. Being able to ask such questions and receive answers gave me new options to explore how I would want to be as a person, as a Black woman. I now had new options for how I constructed my mornings, how I cared for my home, and what types of underwear I chose to purchase. I did not use the answers from these conversations as a way to divorce myself from my past or my way of life. I used these conversations as a way to make sense of those experiences I felt in my body and had no language on how to describe them. I used these conversations to give new perspectives and new ways of doing things. In these conversations, I experienced the highest sense of agency as a Black woman. I feel encouraged and propelled to consciously think about my life, actions, and beliefs. I realized that I got to decide who I want to be instead of being what everyone else has told me to be or being how I have been socialized.

My dialogues with other Black women also included current happenings of Black women in popular culture. Television shows such as Scandal, Real Housewives of Atlanta, and Love and Hip Hop Atlanta were typical topics of discussion. Yes, there was discussion of the messy events that happened on particular episodes. However, I had many conversations about individual characters (i.e., Joseline Hernendez; Oliva Pope). Other Black women and I would discuss the characters’ backgrounds, actions, and behaviors and compare them to our own. These comparisons highlighted our individual worldviews and values. These conversations show how I may have similar values and understandings as other women, and even pinpoint concepts and understanding I never considered before or been previously introduced. Experiences such as the ones previously mentioned frames this research project.
"This means that we are faced with, not one, but two challenges. The first challenge is making Black women a key part of our research whenever appropriate. The second challenge is for us to ask ourselves if our feminism includes a library message for those whose tastes and cultural investments may run counter to ours (e.g., those fans of ‘skanks’)" (Coleman, 2011, p. 38).

Discussing Black women within popular culture can be a controversial topic and most of these discourses highlight the negative portrayal of Black women in media. I believe that the portrayal of Black women in popular culture is not a binary subject (i.e., negative or positive). I believe that it is a paradoxical reality of the historical, social, and political context in which I live. I believe these images, characters, and individuals are a large piece to Black women (and others) defining individual notions of self (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). I believe that I would do a disservice to the experiences of Black women and to my research if I did not focus on the influence of Black women representations in popular culture on self-defining process of Black women. If we as Black women scholars continue to be silent when the (negative) images of Black women appear in pop culture, we may also be giving it more power (Coleman, 2011; hooks, 1992). This research study is the raising of my voice against the master narratives of Black women in popular culture. It is my action in spreading #BlackGirlMagic through the walls of the ivory tower.

**Sista Circle Methodology**

Latoya Johnson (2015), the creator of sista circle methodology, defined it as “a qualitative research methodology and support group for examining the lived experiences of Black women” (p. 43). The tenets of sista circle methodology are communication dynamics, centrality of empowerment, and researcher as sista scholar (Johnson, 2015). In the sacred spaces
of Black women, a unique style of communication is shared between the women. This can be observed through speech patterns, specific terminology, and non-verbal gestures that have a collective understanding between the Black women (Johnson, 2015).

Additionally, within these circles, Black women share their lived experiences with each other. Through this sharing, encouragement, support, validation, and problem solving is employed by the women because of the unique perspective and understanding of a shared history and context being a Black woman in America (Collins, 2000). Lastly, the researcher is as much of a sista scholar as the other women involved in the study. The researcher shares her experiences and understandings as well as the sista scholars. It is more of a mutual giving and sharing with one another (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006; Johnson, 2015).

I used Sista Circle methodology in this study to represent the more natural processes Black women take in discussing and making meaning of Black womanhood and popular culture. Those whom choose to participate in the study will select the topics for the circles as well as facilitate the circle conversation. I will be an active sista scholar in the dialogue by providing my own understandings and experiences. This methodology allows for an authentic and intentional mode of research.

**Dissertation Outline**

This research project is outlined in five chapters. Chapter one provides a brief overview of the research design. Chapter two highlights relevant literature and research of Black women experiences on predominately white institutions, identity development, and Black women in media. Chapter three describes the methodology, theoretical framework, epistemology, data collection and analysis methods, and data authenticity. Chapter four outlines the findings
organized in three themes. Finally, chapter five discusses the findings in relation to literature and practical implications.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

*Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair? Who taught you to hate the color of your skin? To such extent, you bleach to get like the white man. Who taught you to hate the shape of your nose and the shape of your lips? Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of your feet? ...*The most disrespect woman in America is the Black woman. The most un-protected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman* (Bihibindi News, 2016, 0:02).

This excerpt from a talk Malcolm X gave in 1962 aptly describes the literature and experiences of Black women in America. Whiteness and White supremacy undergirds American society and individual socializations. This quote represents the notion that Black women are positioned the furthest social group from Whiteness, while simultaneously being socialized to reach the closest proximity to Whiteness. The self-definition process is influenced by this positionality and by Whiteness. In the following sections, I will describe the experiences of Black women on predominately White campuses. I will provide an overview of common student development theory used to described the experiences of students who identify as Black and who identify as women. I will explain and discuss the use and importance of intersectionality and how it applies to this study. Lastly, this chapter will conclude with a review of the connection between identity development and popular culture media.
Black Women’s Experiences on College Campuses

Students who do not fit the normalized view of college students (i.e., White, middle/upper-class, cisgender, heterosexual) are usually viewed from a deficit point-of-view. A deficit point-of-view means that individuals from these groups are responsible for their inability to perform or behave in the same manner as the dominant group (Yosso, 2005). As the deficit view is often the central view of school professionals and researchers alike, it has permeated into the daily interactions that outsiders (e.g., Black women) have to contend within the collegiate environment (Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Yosso, 2005). Deficit thinking leads to the creation of a hostile campus environment for individuals such as Black women.

Black graduate women are mostly invisible with the academic literature. Literature that singularly focuses on the experiences of Black graduate women highlights their experiences being marred by physical and cultural isolation and hypervisibility (Gay, 2004; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Nettles, 1990; Patton, 2009; Tuitt, 2010). Black women at predominately White institutions report experiencing discrimination both inside and outside of the classroom. This discrimination comes from instructors and students alike who challenge their legitimacy and credibility of their admittance status (Daniel, 2007; Tuitt, 2010). As a result, discriminatory and hostile campus environments promote marginalization, which leads to experience marred by alienation, isolation, and loneliness (Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009; Wingle-Wagner, 2009). Such negative interactions often result from a series of microaggressions from various campus members. Microaggressions are “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue, 2010, p. 5).
Microaggressions lead to a daily assault on Black women’s self-esteem. This may be in contrast to Black women appearing to be strong and confident. From traditional measures of academic success, Black women appear to be highly functioning members of the academic community (Watt, 2006); however, they may be also experiencing psychological damage as they continuously navigate what it means to be a Black woman in American society (Morgan, 2005). Black women navigate psychological layers when deciding how to behave in certain collegiate environments (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Also, Black women deal with being perceived as “too Black” or “too White”, competing for Black men, being a “good” woman, and feeling invisible (Winkle-Wagner, 2009); which can have negative impact on the self-esteem of Black women.

Despite these circumstances, Black women continue to increase in enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates (US Department of Education, 2016). However, these numbers still lag behind White and Asian women (US Department of Education, 2016). Instead of only focusing on the academic success of Black women, it may be more beneficial to focus on their gender and racial identity development. Having an increased understanding of identity development of Black women will lead to a more accurate identification of their specific needs. Institutions that are more equipped and take action to address the needs of Black women will ultimately increase the number of Black women who graduate from predominately White campuses. In the next sections, I will give an overview of commonly used student development theory to explain identity development.

**Student Development Theories**

Student development theory provides an avenue for student affairs professionals to describe, predict, and understand the physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual changes of students during college (McEwen, 2003; Sandeen, 2001). It gives a common language to
communicate what is observed within student behavior, what can be expected to happen during the undergraduate collegiate experience, and direction for program creation (McEwen, 2003; Sandeen, 2001). Although student development theory has evolved to become more inclusive and holistic (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007), there is still no student development theory or model specifically for Black women’s identity development. There are, however, theories that explain Blackness (Helms, 1995; Cross, 1991) and being a woman (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Josselson, 1987; Gilligan, 1982). I will provide an overview of these existing theories as well as a more holistic model that will give context to my theoretical framework for this study.

**Black Identity Development**


**Cross’s Nigrescence Model**

Cross’s (1991) *Black Racial Identity Development Model*, better known as the *Nigrescence Model*, outlines five levels of racial identity development. These levels are pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization commitment. Individuals in the pre-encounter stage are at a place where their way of life is heavily rooted within White normative beliefs and culture (Cross, 1991). Their blackness may not be a central part of how they define themselves and they may not be aware of their Blackness as others may perceive it. Individuals may even intentionally and unintentionally detach themselves from other Black individuals and Black culture.
When a racially charged event (positive or negative), or an encounter (Cross, 1991), happens in the lives of a pre-encounter individual, they are catapulted unto the next level, encounter. At this stage, individuals are forced to acknowledge their Blackness as well as forced to acknowledge how, in general, society views Blackness. This may encourage the individual to learn and embrace more about Blackness, the history, and the culture. Individuals are consumed by all things that are Black (people, history, and culture) while simultaneously distancing and denouncing themselves from White people and White culture. This is known as the immersion/emersion stage (Cross, 1991). This creates a new, affirmed sense of self that may be seen through styles of dress, interests, speech patterns, and interactions with others.

After experiencing this romanticized view of Blackness, the individual becomes more comfortable with this sense of self and begins to interact with others in a less exaggerated way. They may begin to establish relationships with White individuals who are able to acknowledge and accept their Black identity. Lastly, the internalization commitment stage (Cross, 1991), is the individual’s self-definition of Blackness integrated sense of self that creates a self-mission to be an authentic Black person that rises above dualistic thinking of racial separation and works to promote and liberate the race as a whole.

This model was introduced and widely used after the height of the Civil Rights movement. It was during a liberation period for Blacks where it was becoming a priority to address the needs of Black students. Activists on college campuses were demanding formal resources and redefining Blackness was important. Conversely, this model contributes to the idea that Blackness is a monolithic experience and that there is an ideal level of blackness. It does not provide alternate forms of racial development. The model lacks an intersectional view of other social identities. Specifically, the experiences related to gender, class, and sexual
orientation are missing from the model. Future research, such as the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998), attempted to address racial identity development in a more holistic way.

**Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity**

The Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) describes Black identity development within a specific time and context. The researchers wanted to problematize the idea that Black identity development is a process in which a Black individual works to reach an ideal level of Blackness (1998). In response to the Cross’ (1991) Nigrescence Model, it was also important to provide an explicit definition of racial identity as stated below:

The MMRI defines racial identity in African Americans as the significance and qualitative meaning that individuals attribute to their membership within the Black racial group with their self-concepts. This definition can be broken into two questions: “How important is race in the individual’s perception of self?” and “What does it mean to be a member of this racial group?” The MMRI attempts to address these questions (p. 23). Instead of a broad model that describes racial identity development, the MMRI was designed to describe development at a specific point in an individual’s life using their own perceptions, understandings, and lived experiences of being Black in the United States.

Four assumptions underline the MMRI. The first is that identity is self-defined and influenced by social context (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). The individual has a somewhat stable self-concept of what it means to be Black and that self-concept can be influenced by social context. Secondly, individuals have a number of social identities that are placed in a self-defined hierarchical system (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Social identities such as gender, class, and sexual orientation interact with race in a ranking system
within an individual’s self-concept. Third, the individual’s perception and lived experience is the most accurate indication of their identity (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). There is no value attached to this perception and/or experience. Finally, identity is measured at a specific time and context as opposed to happening within a linear, predefined manner (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Identity development can only be captured in a moment as it is ever impacted and influenced by context. These four assumptions provide boundaries for the dimensions of the model.

The four dimensions of the MMRI include racial salience, racial centrality, racial regard, and racial ideology (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Racial salience and racial centrality refer to the amount of meaning that an individual places on race and how that meaning impacts their self-definition of being Black (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Regard and ideology are the perceptions and understanding of what it means to be Black (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Within regard, two concepts exist: public and private. Public regard is the individual’s perception of how others view African Americans, while private is how the individual views African Americans (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). It becomes important to understand if the individual views within a positive or negative light. Conversely, ideology is about how the individual believes African American should behave (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998).

Four areas organize the concept of ideology: nationalist, oppressed minority, assimilation, and humanist philosophies (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). The nationalist prefers all-Black environments and social organizations whereas the oppressed minority believes in the community and commonality between all minoritized groups (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). The assimilationist prefers to combine their Blackness
with their America-ness, preferring to working within the mainstream system of things to accomplish social change (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). The humanist believes that all individuals belong to one race, the human race (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). They prefer to focus on issues that concern the entire group (global warming and world peace) (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). One can understand an individual’s racial identity development by examining these four dimensions, including their separate components, within the four assumptions for a particular moment in time.

In order to make this theory more clear, I will use an example. Tamara is in her last year of undergrad and has a job interview at a local news station. Tamara put great efforts into her academics as well as into her memberships in a Black lettered Greek sorority and a Black leadership organization. For Tamara, being a Black woman was a major part of her identity and something she was very proud to be (high racial salience and racial centrality). Tamara is preparing for a job interview in a few days. She is heavily contemplating how she should prepare for the interview.

Tamara is aware that most people in her life view Black people as not being as capable or able to be successful in the job place and that they are unprofessional (public racial regard). However, Tamara truly believes that most times, Black people are highly qualified and believes in her own abilities (private racial regard). As a result, Tamara decides that that she will press out her natural hair and wear minimum makeup. She will be careful to not use any slang terms or to speak too proudly of her Blackness in order to appeal more professional (racial ideology). This is just one example of how the MMRI can be applied.

This idea that identity development can only be measured within a specific time and context continue to progress into other theories beyond the salience of race. In more holistic
student development theories, this is a strongly highlighted theme. In a later section, I will discuss an example of a more holistic theory, Intersectionality. As this study is about the identity development of Black women, it is important to first discuss with the women identity development theories.

**Women’s Identity Development**

The early 1980s marked the end of the second wave feminism and more research was being done in order to understand student development from the perspective of women. Earlier research efforts were absent of women as sista scholars. Conversely, White women’s perspectives were mostly being centered in the research (as White men’s perspectives were mainly centered in earlier development theories). It is not until the 1990s, when research that is more intersectional becomes more mainstreamed. Through the next few sections, I will provide a brief overview of Gilligan’s *Stages of the Ethic of Care* (1982), Josselson’s *Theory of Identity Development in Women* (1987), Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) *Women Ways of Knowing*, and Helms’ (1990) *Womanist Identity Development Theory*.

**Gilligan’s Stages of the Ethic of Care**

Gilligan’s Stages of the Ethic of Care was one example of centering the development of women (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan found that, for women, moral development happened within three levels that included two transitions between the three levels (Gilligan, 1982). Level one is Orientation to Individual Survival, where the woman is focused on her own needs and survival (Gilligan, 1982). This leads to the first transition where the woman goes from Selfishness to Responsibility (Gilligan, 1982), becoming more involved with others and less centered on self. Level two is Goodness as Self-Sacrifice, the identification of others needs becomes the woman’s main priority (Gilligan, 1982); often at the detriment of her own needs. Transition two,
Goodness to Truth, the woman begins to question her ability to continue putting others needs above her own (Gilligan, 1982). Examining if the needs of others are more important than her well-being. Finally, level three, Morality of Nonviolence, self-worth is more developed and respected (Gilligan, 1982). The woman has a better balance between meeting the needs of others and meeting personal needs.

Gilligan made an effort to diversify the research of moral development, however, the theory treated gender (as so did earlier researchers) as a monolithic entity in which moral development was the same across all women. This research also reinforced traditional gender roles of women by indicating that a woman’s nature was to mostly care for others. Gilligan was not the only researcher to discuss women’s development. Next, I will describe Josselson’s Theory of Identity Development.

**Josselson’s Theory of Identity Development in Women**

Josselson noted that there were specific defining moments in life that were termed crisis. These crises could be so great that they could determine the life path of an individual based on how one makes meaning of those events. In Josselson’s *Theory of Identity Development in Women* (1987), based on the impact or absence of major life crisis, women are organized into four groups: foreclosures/gatekeepers, identity achievers/path makers, moratoriums/searchers, and identity diffusions/drifters (Josselson, 1987).

A woman within the foreclosures/gatekeepers group has not experienced a crisis of identity and has committed to the values and ideas developed during childhood by her parents (Josselson, 1987). This woman has not perceived any event in her life that would have significantly altered how she would define herself. As a result, she maintains the identity in which her parents socialized her into. The next group is identity achievers/path makers
These women have encountered a crisis and have made a strong commitment to a new identity (Josselson, 1987). This new identity would be different than the one she has come to know through her family. The next group, moratorium/searcher, involves women who have also experienced a crisis; however, these women have trouble committing to an identity. They are overwhelmed by the identity possibilities and are continually searching for that perfect identity. Finally, within diffusers/drifters, women have not encountered a crisis and have not committed to an identity (Josselson, 1987). They are reactionary towards life, unpredictable and avoid decision-making (Josselson, 1987). While no worthwhile events have taken place within their lives, these women also feel that their family’s definitions of who they are does not adequately define them.

Josselson made an effort to account for the different experiences of women by not lumping all women into one category experiencing development in a linear fashion. This theory also highlighted the absence of women from earlier identity development theories and attempted to identify the different ways in which women developed. There were also another group of women researcher interested in the different experiences that existed for women. Women’s Ways of Knowing will be described in the next section.

**Women’s Ways of Knowing**

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) wanted to understand more about how women described their academic experiences. Specifically, the researchers were interested in the cognitive development of women; how does one come to know or learn (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). *Women's Ways of Knowing* is organized into five categories: silence, received knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing and contextual knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Silence refers to those women who were
voiceless and mindless (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). These women are unable to make their own decisions and require the direction of an authority figure. For example, a woman may feel that she can only be in an academic classroom and that it is not her place to ask questions or contribute to class discussion because she has no knowledge or ability to do so.

Received knowing is the second category where a woman can receive and even reproduce knowledge; however, she is unable to create knowledge (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). She has to receive knowledge from those who are in authority. She may have difficulty applying knowledge in scenarios that require critical thinking and applying it to a real-world situation. Subjective knowing is the view that knowledge is private, personal, and intuitive (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Everyone is entitled to their own opinion and way of doing things; there is no right or wrong way. From this, women transition into procedural knowing, where they create a formula in how they come to validate and understand information (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Women may continue in the subjective knowing direction, in that everyone has their own opinion; conversely, everyone’s opinion is not viewed as legitimate. On the other end of this category, women may view knowing as a more formal and objective relationship. A right and wrong answer exist and it is judged based on objective facts and research (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). This is in line with a more masculine way of thinking. The final category is contextual knowing; knowledge is socially constructed and based on context (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Experience is seen as a more legitimate form of knowledge construction with objective research and facts.

The researchers were more intentional and reflective within this research study (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). The voices of women who did not attend college, who
had children, and who were from low and working class were also included (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). However, race was not an identifier within the sista scholars. Helm’s Womanist Identity Development Theory did take race into account and is explained in the next section.

**Helms’ Womanist Identity Development Model**

The previous three theories mainly focused on the experiences of White women. Other identities, such as race, were not a factor in the study. Helms developed the womanist identity model to describe how intersectionality of identities influences gender identity development of African American women. This theory was based on Cross’ (1991) Nigrescence Model and more so to be utilized to explain how women (not just African American women specifically) made meaning of their gender in connection to their other identities. Womanist was used instead of feminist as womanist allows women the flexibility to select whatever positive perceptions of womanhood that she chooses (Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992).

Feminism is generally thought of as having one, streamlined definition strongly related to the White, middle class, educated woman’s perspective. This model captures the process in which women move from using external view of womanhood to a more holistic, internally based view of womanhood (Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992). Four statuses represent a linear progression of womanist identity development: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization.

The woman’s acceptance of traditional gender roles and a lack of recognition and understanding of sexism mark the Pre-Encounter stage (Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992). Transitioning from this stage is prompted by a significant event, or encounter, that causes cognitive dissonance for a woman to begin questioning her understanding of gender (Ossana,
Helms, & Leonard, 1992). The Encounter stage is where this act of questioning begins and the search of alternative explanations to explain her gender confusion and contradictions (Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992). The Immersion-Emersion stage is where these confusion and contradictions are answered through external explanations (Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992). Women in this third stage will reject traditional gender roles, identify positive women role-models to immolate their gender performance and ideals, and may have an extreme view against men (Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992). The transition into the Internalization stage is a woman shifting away from her sole dependence on external explanations and the development of a more personal definition of womanhood (Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992).

White women more readily identify with terms such as feminist; however, Black women and other Women of Color do not identify with such terms. Researchers utilizing the womanist identity development model have, however, found that Black women had higher scored for the Immersion-Emersion stages (Boisnier, 2003). This indicates that this model more accurately represents Black women’s gender identity development. And while this gives a tool to better understand, it does not allow for a more complex understanding of the identity development of Black women. Who are the positive role models and how are these relationships initiated? Do these relationships exist only in a real-life interaction or can a woman make a connection with Black women through media and use her as an example as a positive woman role model? This study sought to explore the connections that Black women make with Black women represented through popular culture media forms.

**Intersectional Approach to Identity Development**

For Black women, race and gender are two aspects of their identity that they are unable to separate from one another (Collins, 2000; Harris, 2007). In every aspect of their lives, Black
women are faced with the direct awareness of how their gender and race impacts their life experiences (Henry, West, & Jackson, 2010; Watt, 2006). Black women are often navigating double-consciousness in every aspect of their lives as their race and gender does not allow them to peacefully belong to one group or another (i.e., being a woman or being a part of the Black community) (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006; Watt, 2006). Additionally, research does little to examine how the intersectionality of race and gender impacts the experiences of Black women in institutions of higher education (Aiken, Cervero, Johnson-Bailey, 2001). The next section will explain the history and theory of intersectionality.

**Understanding Intersectionality**

Intersectionality comes from the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) who coined the term in her work regarding Black feminism. Her writings included the argument that one could not understand the experiences of Black women by studying Black men’s and White women’s experiences and combining the two (Crenshaw, 1991). Instead, the two identities (in addition to other identities) are so tightly intertwined that it is a great disservice to attempt to separate the two in study. Davis (2008) defines intersectionality as “the interaction [among] categories of difference individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (p. 68). Every person, based on their multiple identities, operates at several intersections of social identity structures that give social advantages and disadvantages based on those structures (Gopaldas, 2013). These advantages and disadvantages give way to privilege, oppression, and power. Combined, identities define how privilege, oppression, and power operate within these social identity structures (Davis, 2008). Applying an intersectional framework will create a context for lived experience of those from ignored marginalized groups, including as Black women.
Intersectionality relies on praxis, transforming theory to practice, in giving focus to the voices of marginalized communities to inform social change (Crenshaw, 1991). Black women are experts of their lived experiences while also being experts of the norms, customs, and values of Whiteness, the dominant group (Collins, 2000). Centering the voices of the Black women will distinguish their narratives from the dominant (master) narrative. This centering gives way to identifying to nuances within the diaspora of Black women; capturing in-group relations and differences and moving away from understanding Black women as a monolithic experience. Having a non-flattened understanding of Black women’s experiences provides more effective avenues for creating a more just society for Black women (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991).

Intersectionality is at the heart of the more recent holistic identity development theories and models. It is understood that for many students, it is impossible to separate certain identities. Instead, as researchers, it is important to find ways of inquiry that allows for a more complex understanding of identity, how one makes meaning of their identity, and how that impacts their close relationships and understanding of their life (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006).

**Relationship of Identity Development to Current Study**

In this study, I will explore how Black women make meaning of media representations of themselves and how that meaning impacts women’s definitions of themselves. The theories that I have described provide context for how one may define their race and their gender separately. However, I am more interested in the relationship between gender and race in the self-defining process of identity development. Using intersectionality to undergird my research design will give a more complex understanding of how Black women make meaning of their identities. Additionally, I want to explore the impact of media on this identity development process. In the next section, I will describe the connection between identity development and media.
Media and Identity Development

…Radio, television, film, and other products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities; our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality; and of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Kellner, 2003, p. 9).

The average college student spends about three hours viewing the Internet and about two hours watching television every day (Mokhtari et al., 2009). Media, such as television, music, film, and the Internet, is a part of the average college student’s daily life. Media heavily influences how consumers view themselves and how they interact with others (Boylorn, 2008). In particular, college students have recently become heavy consumers of hip-hop media (e.g., urban reality television shows, hip hop music). This consumption contributes to the promotion of rape culture, sexual aggression, and the objectification of women (Kistler & Lee, 2009). As a result, women who regularly consume this type of media spend a considerable amount of time grappling with these messages in connection to their own development (Henry, 2010).

Black women are more represented within hip-hop culture and media than any other form of media. Black women are depicted as the mere personification of sexual objects used for and by Black men (Keyes, 2012; Lena, 2012). When women do appear to be in control of her own agency, it becomes more about her taking ownership and appreciation of her role as a sexual object (Keyes, 2012; Lena, 2012). These depictions can be seen in music videos and reality television shows among other forms of media. Conversely, these images continue to exist and have mass dissemination because they enforce associated negative stereotypes (Edwards, 2016; Henry, 2010). Constant reinforcement of the master narrative created about Black people, that
they are low class, uneducated, and highly sexualized, contributes to Black culture being seen as a commodity instead of being humanized (Edwards, 2016; Henry, 2010).

Black women may find themselves attracted and attached to these characters because they may find a sense of motivation or aspiration with these characters, particularly with the Black women caricatures that appear to have control over her agency (Edwards, 2016; Henry, 2010; Peoples, 2008). There may be some parallels of this fictional character to the woman’s life. As a result, a plethora of bloggers and other writers give voice to their understanding of these characters. A paradox is ensued as a result. The very characters depicted in media can serve as a source of negative messages for Black women’s identity development while at the same time creating a counter-space of depicting the strength, resiliency, and magic of Black women (Henry, 2008; Peoples, 2008). This is the very essence Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) captured in her book, *Sister Citizen*:

> When they confront race and gender stereotypes, Black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some Black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 29).

Black women are expending time and effort of figuring out who they are due to the daily bombardment of messages of what it means to be a Black woman in America.

**Hip Hop Feminism As A Tool In Identity Development**

Hip-hop extends beyond rap music; it is a culture all of its own that embodies music, fashion, types of speech, and social norms (Henry, 2010). Hip-hop has permeated through various social institutions including college campuses (Patterson, 2015). Aspects of hip-hop music, references, and culture can be found within campus programs and events and even within
the academic classroom. Additionally, current college students are the largest consumers of hip hop music and television and it is a reasonable conclusion that hip-hop culture influences the development of these students (Boylorn, 2008; Henry, 2010). This includes Black women.

In popular culture, where White women are the standard of beauty (Hartman, 2011), exist a wave of contradictory images of what it means to be a Black woman in society. While most images reflect the overly sexualized images of Black women (Hartman, 2011; Henry, West & Jackson, 2010; Stokes, 2007; Collins, 2000), some women, particularly musicians, lead the charge of empowerment for Black women (Hartman, 2011; Stokes, 2007). Musicians such as Beyoncé, Mary J. Blige, and Erykah Badu provide a positive image of a Black woman who is able to be “independent, successful, and psychologically secure” (Henry, West & Jackson, 2010, p. 244). Although Black college women may not be able to receive this positive and empowering images from their college campus, they can look to popular culture for both positive and negative perceptions about being a Black woman. This is the precise foundation that hip-hop feminist use through their work.

**Hip-Hop Feminism**

In critique of the second wave feminist movement, a group of women arose to carry out the sentiment that “as women of the hip-hop generation we need a feminist consciousness that allows us to examine how representations and images can be simultaneously empowering and problematic” (jamila, 2002, p. 202). Second wave feminist were no longer connected to needs and perspectives of current young women, especially those heavily involved in hip-hop culture (Peoples, 2008). Therefore, a new understanding needed to be added that would allow women to understand their notions of self and the world by joining historical feminist perspectives and hip-hop culture. Contending that hip-hop can provide a space where “young Black women begin to
build or further develop their own gender critique and feminist identity” (Peoples, 2008, p. 21). Henry (2010) aptly concludes “hip-hop feminism makes use of the tools of hip-hop culture to explore female identity and experiences” (p. 147).

**Hip-Hop Feminism and Identity Development**

Broido (2004) and Henry (2010) provide strategies for student affairs professionals to consider when assisting Black women in their identity development. These strategies included combining student development theory with hip-hop feminism, providing space to discuss and untangle negative stereotypes communicated through the collegiate environment, society, and hop-hop, and adding more hop-hop images that affirm positive presentations of Black women within programming, training, and leadership opportunities are all ways to recognize, affirm, and empower Black college women. “Only through facilitating a critical consciousness among all on campus can the positive self-identity of contemporary Black college women be fully achieved” (Henry, 2010, p. 151). However, student affairs professionals must first begin with their own understanding of hip-hop culture and its impact on Black college women.

This study will use elements of hip-hop feminism by providing space for sista scholars to discuss and critique media representations of Black women in popular culture. The media representations are embedded within hip-hop culture and are represented through music, movies, and reality television. These depictions center the many forms of Black women and recognize the diversity of the Black diaspora. Additionally, sista scholars are able to discuss how these depictions fully impact the self-defining process in positive, negative, and in other ways.

**Outsider-Within**

Historically, Black women have always developed kinship with other Black women in an effort to care, support, and validate one another (Collins, 2000; Domingue, 2015). It is through
these ties that women come to understand their daily lives, interactions with others, and inner thought and dealings. Actively building and engaging in these relationships not only gives a safe haven in which she is able to be authentic in her Blackness and Womaness but also allows her to know another Black woman’s life experiences. Other experiences serve as a counterpoint for comparison and understanding of their individual life experiences.

Collins (1999) identifies the experiences of Black women as a collective as the outsider-within in American society due to the social, political, and economic history of the country. The term outsider-within is meant to define the unique social locations created by the many intersections of race, gender, and class. This term is not meant for individual identity development. It was intended to illuminate that one’s social location and its intersecting context (i.e., reported history) influences that individual’s worldview. This unique perspective within American society allows for an outsider-within to gain a more complete picture of the social-political landscape and identify ways to improve it so that it is more inclusive of all (Collins, 1999). As a collective, Collins calls for all those who identify as outsiders-within to act in the name of social justice. My act will be in the form of my research and my writings.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I described the experiences of Black women on predominately White campuses. I provided an overview of common student development theory used to described the experiences of students who identify as Black and who identify as women. I also discussed the use and importance of intersectionality and how it applied to this study. Lastly, I concluded with a review of the connection between identity development and popular culture media. In the next chapter, I will identify the research design.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In the following sections, I have outlined my research design. The chapter will begin with a description of my epistemological and theoretical frameworks in which the research was designed. I will then discuss methodology, data collection methods, and data analysis. This chapter will conclude with an explanation of authenticity and concluding thoughts.

Endarkened Feminist Epistemology

This is the dilemma often faced by African American women academics: How to embrace the resonances of our souls that arise from a spirituality that is the very fabric of Black life as we know it—and how to do so within academic contexts that have little energy for the spiritual, especially as expressed by an African American woman (Dillard, 2006, p. 40).

In thinking about this research project, it was important to me that I, as the researcher, was as much a sista scholar as the women who chose to give their time and their story to this project. In this sense, it was more important that I, along with my sista scholars, also give to this research. In the academy, a long tradition of researchers being detached or objective within their research exist. However, for me to engage in that form of research would require an almost dishonoring of my history and cultural understandings as a Black woman. “As researchers, we all too often embrace the notion that we should remain the same in the project, just reporting or theorizing what we’ve seen…Spiritually, researchers can also be transformed along the way” (Dillard, 2006, p. 86). Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (EFE) is appropriate for study as I am someone who believes that the foundation of how I come to know what I know is through the
connection and communication between others, specifically Black women whom I love and trust, it is imperative that this also be reflected within my research (Dillard, 2006). Researcher-sista scholar relationships should not be distant and formal; instead, they should be of shared giving and mutual interaction. In this spirit, I choose Endarkend Feminist Epistemology (Dillard, 2006) as my theoretical framework as it connects my research with my spirituality.

_Therefore, in contrast to the common use of the term “enlightened” as a way of expressing the having of new and important feminist insights (arising historically from the well-established canon of white feminist thought), I use the term “endarkend” feminist epistemology to articulate how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities, and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African American women._ (Dillard, 2006, p. 3).

Below, I will describe the five underlying assumptions of EFE.

**Epistemological Assumptions**

**Assumption 1: Self-definition forms one’s participating and responsibility to one’s community** (Dillard, 2006, p. 6).

In this research, I must center the ideas and people I say I care the most about and connect with the most (i.e., Black women). This epistemology “draws on a spiritual tradition, where the concern is not solely with the production of knowledge (an intellectual pursuit) but also with uncovering and constructing truth as the fabric of everyday life (a spiritual pursuit)” (Dillard, 2006, p. 20). I have the responsibility to my sista scholars in how I design this study
and how I engage with and care for them. This responsibility includes representing and treating my sista scholars’ knowledge (i.e., lived experiences) as legitimate.

Assumption 2: Research is both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose (Dillard, 2006, p. 6).

I also have the responsibility to emotionally and intellectually engage with the sista scholars and research. In the identification of individualized definitions of Black woman-ness lies the diversity and transnational intersections of race and gender. Although there may be separate understandings of Black woman-ness, it is thought to relate to a “common spirit, power, or energy inherent in all life” (Collins, 2000, p. 263). In the sharing of life experiences with one another, the level of emotion evoked through the act of sharing is used as a legitimate factor in determining the validity of what is being said (Collins, 2000). Research is not to be an objective act devoid of emotions and understandings. Instead, it is this very subjective-ness of the research that leads to credible data (Collins, 1990; Dillard, 2006). Finally, the capacity to connect to the emotions of another individual is the cornerstone of caring and being a great researcher. This relies heavily on the shared context that exist between Black women in the U.S. (Collins, 2000).

Assumption 3: Only within the context of community does the individual appear (Palmer, 1983) and, through dialogue, continue to become (Dillard, 2006, p. 6).

Dialogue with other Black women is at the center of the meaning making experience. Through dialogues, what it means to be a Black woman and how to accurately represent those meanings in society are identified and understood (Collins, 2000; Dillard 2006). Within nonverbal communication, tones and words exchanged contain a deep sense of empathy, expressiveness, and emotionality that permeate the conversations (Johnson, 2015). Intertwined between the elements of dialogue is an understanding of each other’s social location related to
race, gender, and class (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006). While the social location may not be the same or have the same salience to each woman, a shared, similar context (social, historical, and political) of their life experiences exists. It helps each woman to come to understand more of who she is and who she wants to be (Collins, 2000). This cultural exchange produces varying narratives of Black womaness. Further understanding of these (counter) narratives helps Black women to push back against (or align with) the master narrative. Whatever the definition, Black women then have an obligation to present varying narratives into the world (Collins, 1990). It provides options for other Black women and helps to break Black women being viewed as a monolithic group.

Assumption 4: Concrete experience within everyday life form the criterion of meaning, the “matrix of meaning making” (Ephraim-Donker, 1997, p. 8).

Black women’s epistemology, how Black women believe what we believe, is shaped from our lived experiences through the world as members of two (or more) marginalized groups (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006). Black women create meanings and perspectives absent within the master narrative created by the dominant culture (Williams, Brewley, Reed, White, & Davis-Haley, 2005). However, the master narrative is so omnipresent in the meaning making process that it creates a complex relationship between the master narrative and subsequent counter narratives (Alinia, 2015; Collins, 2000); meaning that the oppression is so great that Black women (or any other oppressed group) can simultaneously resist and maintain the oppression. This nuanced and critical component is often ignored from the research literature about Black women.
Assumption 5: Knowing and research are both historical (extending backwards in time) and outward to the world: To approach them otherwise is to diminish their cultural and empirical meaningfulness.

I approach this research through a critical lens and in this I recognize that some who may engage with this study by not have ever consider research within a specific cultural, historical, sociopolitical context. This research simultaneously “acknowledges and works against the ‘absent presence’ of women of color from the shaping of the rules that have historically guided formal educational research, the system of knowledge production within higher education, and the meanings and legitimacy surrounding research processes” (Dillard, 2006, p. 24). The sista scholars’ life experiences, in addition to my life experiences, are legitimate forms of knowledge that provides more meaningful and authentic to ways of understanding those experiences and knowledge and using it to inform policy and practice.

EFE and Research

Endarkened Feminist Epistemology is appropriate for this study as my aim is to explore the meaning making experiences related to race and gender of Black women through the interactions with other individuals, media, and systems of oppression. As Black women view representations of themselves through the mainstream media and through other Black women, a meaning making process exists in which the woman compares herself to the image being depicted (Collins, 2000). Naturally, Black women congregate with each other in an effort to understand these media representations and understandings of self. This can be done through face-to-face interactions, interactions within social media, and other forms. It can simply be a group of Black women coming together to watch a reality show where Black women dominate the cast. Conversations such as these happen throughout college campuses.
Being responsible to my sista scholars and community means that I, as a Black woman, should guide and produce the research centering Black women’s experiences. As the researcher, I engaged in a shared dialogue with other Black women, the sista scholars, where life experiences and other personal information were shared between the sista scholars and me. This helped to balance the power dynamics that may have existed in the researcher-sista scholar relationship. Additionally, as a Black woman, my shared experience of having membership as a Black woman with similar experiences with the sista scholars allowed me to understand insider language that involved cultural norms, cues, and codes, which assisted in data analysis.

In thinking about my role as more of a sista scholar, it is critical that my methodology and data collection methods also reflect this notion. In the next section, I will discuss the methodology that guided this study.

**Sista Circle Methodology**

Sista circle methodology may appear to be a new way of research; however, sister circles have been employed by Black women historically within the Black church and the Black women’s club movement as a way to socialize and build connection with one another (Black Women Health Imperative, 2010). Recently, more researchers and administrators are utilizing sister circles within research and practice (Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Murray, Payne, Thomas, & Salley, 2011; Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Payne, Crosby, Mitchell, Williams, & Williams-Costa, 2010; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Sister circles are defined as “support groups that build upon existing friendships, fictive kin networks, and the sense of community found among Black women” (Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Murray, Payne, Thomas, & Salley, 2011, p. 266). In this research, Black women participated in a dialogue where they were all students of the same
institutions, they all shared the same racial and gender identities, student membership and engagement of popular culture.

On the surface, sister circles may appear to be another name for the method of focus groups. However, focus groups often denote the notion that the researcher is separate or detached from their sista scholars and are mere observers of the dialogue taking place (Johnson, 2015). Additionally, focus groups are not centered within an Afrocentric paradigm. Instead, as the researcher, I was also an active sista scholar in this study. While I may have initiated the conversation and the topic, I had no more control than others on which the direction the conversation went or ended. Sista scholars were allowed to change the direction, introduce new topics, and ask questions of each other. Sista Circle is a qualitative methodology that allows for the sista scholars to be as engaged as they wish within the research projects and leads to the ideals expressed by both Collins (2009) and Dillard (2006). I will describe the tenets in more detail in the next section.

Tenets of Sista Circle Methodology

Sista circle methodology was created by Latoya Johnson (2015) who defined it as “a qualitative research methodology and support group for examining the lived experiences of Black women” (p. 43). Johnson goes on to define sista circles as a “group discussions or conversations among Black women arranged by a researcher to examine a specific set of topics and/or experiences” (p. 45). The tenets of Sista circle methodology are communication dynamics, centrality of empowerment, and researcher as sista scholar (Johnson, 2015).

Communication Dynamics. In the sacred spaces of Black women, a unique style of communication is shared between the women. It is through the nuanced pauses, inflections, facial expression, and other verbal and non-verbal communications that messages are transmitted.
between the women. Throughout dialogue, the completion of another’s sentence or a specific term is used with a general understanding between the women. Additionally, where the conversation takes place and who is involved in the conversation are also major components of the conversation. Collins (1986) speaks about the need for the space to be safe, exclusive of non-members (i.e., non-Black women), for those to fully participate and feel safe, supported, and validated.

**Centrality of Empowerment.** A unique power in the experiences, histories, and words of Black women is highlighted by Crenshaw (1991) and Collins (2009). When Black women engage in dialogue with one another, a sharing of realities is also happening simultaneously. Along with this sharing, women are empowered to choose their own definition and valuation of Black womanhood. Within this sharing and caring with and for one another lies the responsibility and self-accountability to pass along this same sharing and caring to other Black women (Collins, 2000). It is within these acts that different Black women representations are re-introduced into the mainstream world through various forms (e.g., media and research). For example, this research study provided narratives of Black women who all have unique narratives that may differ from the mainstream narrative.

**Researcher as Sista scholar.** The last tenet of sista circle methodology highlights the role of the researcher and the connection to reciprocity. The researcher is not a mere facilitator of the conversation. The researcher shares her personal experiences with sista scholars. The relationship between researcher and sista scholar is more about giving and sharing with one another in that both are changed and transcended by the interaction (Dillard, 2006; Johnson, 2015).
Through the tenets of sista circle methodology and Endarkened Feminist Epistemology, I identified the methods to capture the meaning making experiences of Black women. I explain them in the next section.

**Data Collection Methods**

I used various data collection methods throughout this research project in an effort to capture authenticity in the data. Sista scholars engaged in sista circles that included reflection journals. Through the next sections, I will explain sista scholar recruitment and selection, in addition to each data collection method.

**Recruitment and Selection**

I sent a call for sista scholars via email to Black women graduate students within my personal network, departmental listservs, and other mailing lists. I asked sista scholars to contact me by email if they were interested in the research study or to learn more information. Once a sista scholar contacted me, I sent them a link to a Qualtrics form that explained the study and the consent process. Through the Qualtrics form, sista scholars gave consent to participate and to be audio and video recorded. Sista scholars also indicated demographic information such as age, year in school, race, and gender.

I collected data in early spring 2017 (January and February) semester at a large flagship university located in a southeastern state of the United States of America, called State University. The institution currently enrolls approximately 35,000 students (Institutional Website, 2015). Sista scholars included 9 masters and doctoral level students. These women all identified as being Black/African American women who were currently enrolled in a program of study. Sista scholars were between the ages of 25 and 34. Table 1 includes additional information to give more contexts for the sista scholars in this study.
Once the Qualtrics form was completed, sista scholars were contacted with information about the first circle. At the end of the first circle, sista scholars selected additional dates and times for the other circles. Reminder emails were sent to sista scholars prior to the scheduled circles that included instruction and additional information for the sista circles.

**Sista Circles**

“Sista circle as a qualitative research method is designed to be conducted in a supportive – ‘sister to sister’ context. Sister circles provide a unique support for Black women whose shared experiences enables conversations marked by the offering of advice and wisdom” (Johnson, 2015, p. 45).

Sista circles were the major source of data for this project (see Figure 1). My aim in the circle was to participate and interact with the women in a way that we were all able to construct an understanding of how we came to make meaning of self. Sista scholars had the opportunity to engage in four sister circles. Not all sista scholars engaged in all four circles for various scheduling reasons. Each sister circle had a theme (e.g., sexuality, *Insecure*) that was selected either by the sista scholars or myself (See Appendix C).

Each sista circle lasted approximately 90-120 minutes and was audio recorded for transcription. The first two circles were also video recorded. However, video recording was discontinued in the middle of the second circle due to distorted images and the camera set-up being more of a distraction to the circle. The first circle took place within a residence hall multipurpose room and the other two took place in a private, on-campus apartment of one of the sista scholars. Sista scholars indicated that the original location did not feel safe, comfortable
Table 1

*Sista scholar Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Additional Identities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trina</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Spiritual Christian Tradition</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Fluid</td>
<td>Able Bodied</td>
<td>Cis-Het Non Gender Conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alana</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td></td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomie</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Able-bodied</td>
<td>First generation college student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janae’</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Non-denomination Christian</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Able-bodied</td>
<td>Educated Black Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saphronia</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Disabled, minded, etc.</td>
<td>Disabled-eye contacts and glasses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sasha Fierce</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td></td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Lower SES, Working Class</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audre</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Traditionally Able</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Womanist Christian</td>
<td>Working Class Working Class</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Fully Abled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Southern, Fat-bodied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

enough (away from the White gaze) and requested a more intimate setting. Pamela offered her residence for the remaining sista circles. I provided food for the sista scholars. At the end of each sista circle, sista scholars were sent an email directing them to another Qualtrics
link to record their reflections entries on the sister circle process and the meaning it had for them.

**Sista Circles Overview**

These reflections asked such questions as, “After having some time to process the last circle, how would you describe your experience participating in the circle?” and “Is there anything you would like to share that I have not asked or that has not come up during the circles?” (See Appendix C for more information). Information from these reflections and discussion between the peer researcher and me were used to create the next circle’s protocol (see Figure 1).

I organized the first circle to meet in a multipurpose room within an on-campus residence hall. I provided light refreshments for sista scholars as many of the women were coming directly from class or a meeting. After everyone arrived, I asked everyone to introduce themselves and to explain why they decided to participate in the study. Following introductions, I showed two videos (See Appendix C) as prompts for the discussion to frame the discussion around Black women’s understandings of self using popular culture media. At the end of the circle, I asked the women to schedule additional circles and provide potential topics.

The remaining circles took place in one of the sista scholars’ on-campus apartment. This setting was private and comfortable as some sista scholars spoke more freely, let their hair out, take off bras, and walked around without shoes. The prompt for the second circle was to watch the first episode of the television show, *Insecure*, and discussion followed. Insecure was chosen as the theme of discussion from the first sista circle. Sista scholars were discussing pivotal moments that produced a great deal of tension between Black people on social media,
Figure 1. Outline of data collection methods. Each circle started with a brief protocol. Sista scholars were sent links to a Qualtric form for reflection on previous circle. The next circle’s protocol was created after the previous circle, sista scholars’ reflection, and researcher’s reflection with peer researcher.
Alana: so people were like, with the Insecure, they were like this is like the most tense period between men and women since like no scrubs [laughter]…

Nikki: yeah, I like that show

Sasha Fierce: it's very triggering some times

Marvette: That could be a whole circle with insecure.

Sasha Fierce: you know, great idea just go for it.

Sista circle methodology requires the researcher to be as present as possible. I invited a doctoral candidate who was a Black woman also using sista circle methodology in her dissertation study to be a sista scholar and peer observer during the circle. Additionally, the other sista scholars who participated were made aware about the peer observer and her role of taking mental or written notes during the sista circles. The peer observer would help me to reflect and process after each circle by providing prompts, questions, and observations for consideration. As we reflected after the second sista circle, we recognize the absence of discussion around gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality. In a journal entry, I recorded a snippet of our conversation. The peer observer asked, “How can we explore sexuality? Think about Queen Latifah’s character in Set It Off. We enjoy watching and at the same time, I don’t want to be her.” In Set It Off, Queen Latifah portrays the character Theo, a Black, queer, stud who is in a long-term relationship with another Black woman. We continued to discuss how sexuality and sex, in general, can be a taboo topic amongst Black women. However, it seemed to be an important factor in the self-defining process due to messaging received from interactions with other and society.

The third circle began with a series of questions about sex, sexuality, and gender and sista scholars could write down words or draw symbols on a sheet of paper. I asked sista scholars
things like “Being sexy is… or Sex positivity means to me..” After the questions, we watch three video clips: Kanye West’s Fade music video, Raven Symone interview, and a clip from Love And Hip Hop Atlanta. These videos were selected because these events prompted major discussion in the past year on social media among Black women. Each circle was audio recorded and transcribed for review.

After all of the transcriptions were completed and initially analyzed, I then scheduled a follow-up sista circle with the sista scholars for further crystallization of the data. The sista scholars who wished to participate and were unable to make it to the scheduled sista circle had the option to schedule a one-on-one time with me. No one elected the latter option. I provided my initial findings and themes during the circle to receive feedback from the sista scholars.

The final circle was used to ensure that data was captured in an authentic matter; that my findings were consistent with the sista scholars’ perspectives. Surprisingly, the data review led to sista scholars revealing additional personal experiences about family and childhood.

**Data Analysis**

“Instead of viewing the everyday as a negative influence on my theorizing, I tried to see how the everyday actions and ideas of the Black women in my life reflected the theoretical issues I claimed were so important to them” (Collins, 2000, p. viii).

In the data analysis process, in connection to Endarkend Feminist Epistemology and sista circle methodology, the lived experiences of sista scholars shared through dialogue became the central component of analysis. In this study, I, along with my sista scholars, sought to understand and analyze the lived experiences and meaning making process of how Black women come to defined Black womanhood. Inherited in this process is also examining how power, “resistance, activism, and politics of empowerment” (Alinia, 2015, p. 2334) reveals itself in both
the lived experiences and meaning making processes of Black women (Collins, 2000). In her review of Black feminist thought, in which EFE is grounded, Alinia (2015) goes on to describes this process:

“An important aspect of Black feminist thought as counter-hegemonic knowledge is its focus on ‘how power is organized and operates’, how relations of domination and subordination are maintained and normalized, and how they make the disempowered participate in the reproduction of their own subordination” (p. 2336).

There needs to be room in the analysis process for the understanding of how Black women representations (everyday life and in popular culture) serve dialectically as both a resistance (counter) story and an active sista scholar in the subordination of Black women.

EFE also requires that the analysis of the relationships and (spiritual) connections between Black women. This analysis includes the understanding how Black women use the understanding of their lived experiences through dialogue. In addition, layering the factors of caring and accountability to each other as Black women through dialogue contributes to this meaning making process. This leads to the revealing of the unique social location of each sista scholar and their individual narrative and how that contributes to the collective understanding of what it means to be a Black woman.

In analyzing data for this project, I took the previously mentioned factors into consideration. The identification of each sista scholar’s social location (i.e., race, gender, class, age, etc.) was compared to her current understandings of self. Exploring how sista scholars interacted with each other through observed verbal and nonverbal communication strategies were analyzed. Additionally, I noted any tension that may exist between sista scholars’ understanding
of systematic oppression and representation of Black women through society and popular culture.

My researcher’s journal and sista scholars’ analysis were used to further establish a balanced approach within the research between me and the other women (Maxwell, 2004). After each sista circle transcripts were completed, sista scholars had time to review and provide feedback on those transcripts. I was available by phone, email, and/or face-to-face interaction for any sista scholar(s) who wished to discuss more in depth the transcripts or other reflections from the interviews and circles.

I engaged in analysis throughout the data collection process; however, I provided initial codes, categories, and themes to sista scholars once all of the data was collected during the final circle. During this time, sista scholars and I discussed our reactions to the initial findings, asked for clarification of codes, categories, and themes, and provide additional ideas or information. I also audio recorded and transcribed this session for my personal review. Once a draft of the findings section was completed, I provided this to the sista scholars for their feedback and suggestions. I destroyed any recordings and any other information that could identify the sista scholars.

My researcher’s journal documented my emotions, reactions, and reflections from initial data collection, interactions with sista scholars through the circles, and other follow up interactions. Journal entries were used to guide the analytical process and to capture my own understanding of self in relation to the other women. As I continuously engaged with the data, I needed to constantly capture my understandings. These reflections helped me in forming opportunities for additional opportunities for social change and connection as discussed with tactical authenticity.
Data Coding

Sista circles, and journal entries were coded using a three-step process (Saldana, 2009). The first round includes a read-through of all the data and the attachment of in vivo codes to areas of interests. During this round, I attempted to identify information related to social identities, dialogue interactions between sista scholars, popular culture references, and meaningful relationships with other Black women and understanding of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism). The second round of coding involved collapsing these initial codes into categories that related across sista scholars. Those codes that appeared not to relate across sista scholars were added to another document for later review. Finally, during the third cycle, I organized the categories into broader themes in connection to the conceptual framework. These themes addressed the larger research questions.

Data Authenticity

In line with my epistemological and methodological approach, ensuring authentic data was critical. Authentic data would mean that others “feel safe in acting on them, or more important, that members of the community in which the research is conducted may act on them” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 180). Five criteria ensure authentic data: fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity. Fairness refers to having balance within the data, ensuring that voices and views are represented in the text. Fairness is achieved by taking “deliberate attempts to prevent marginalization” and “to act affirmatively with respect to inclusion” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 180). In other words, I did my best to ensure that the sista scholars’ words and stories were told and included with respect and fairness.
If knowledge is constructed through the connection and communication with others (Collins, 2000), than the telling of the data should also reflect that this has taken place. This is confirmed through ontological and educative authenticity. Ontological and educative authenticity is the capturing of sista scholars’ increase in understanding of self and of others that they have come into contact with (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Meaning, the data has ontological and educative authenticity because by participating in the sista circles, the women had more of an understanding of who they are and how that understanding may or may not relate to the other women in the circles. I attempted to organize the data in a way that demonstrated this.

Catalytic and tactical authenticity is connected to the critical paradigm represented through the Endarkend Feminist Epistemology and sista circle methodology. A researcher who operates within the critical paradigm “works with people to raise critical consciousness rather than merely describe social reality” (Carspecken, 2012, p. 44). As a result of a raised critical consciousness, it is hoped that this would lead sista scholars to “contribute to social change directly” (Carspecken, 2012, p. 44). This willingness to act for social change is also defined as catalytic authenticity. In this desire to act, the sista scholars requested for additional circle and opportunities to engage with other Black graduate women. Tactical authenticity is I, as the researcher, providing additional information of “specific forms of social and political action if sista scholars desire such training” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p.181). After data collection was completed, the women of this study along with other Black graduate women participated in an informal circle and a photo shoot. The photos captured Black women literally making room for them on a part of campus that has deep and complex historical implications that clearly indicate that this institution was not intended for the very women captured in the photos.
Boundaries of Study

To say that this study has limitation would dishonor the knowledge and truths of my sista scholars; instead, this study was conducted within specific boundaries. This study took place at a large historically White institution in the Southeastern region of the United States. Sista scholars identified as cisgender Black women. Most sista scholars identify as Christian. Also, 8 of the 10 sista scholars being current doctoral students. Additionally, all sista scholars had at least one social or academic in-person encounter or interaction with each other prior to participating in the sista circles. The aforementioned information is listed as a way to give a glimpse of the relationship between the women and does fully capture all identities and connection between the women.

Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the research design for this study. Using a critical paradigm, I will explore how Black women on college campuses make meaning of media representations of themselves and how that meaning impacts how the women define themselves. This study was guided through an Endarkend Feminist Epistemology and sista circle methodology. I employed sista circles, sista scholars’ reflections, peer researcher observations and reflection, and my personal journaling as my data collection methods. Additionally, I used a three cycle coding system. The trustworthiness and rigor of the data was assessed using authenticity criteria. The results of this study will inform student affairs practices and concerns as it relates to assist in the retention of Black women in graduate programs at historically White institutions.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Am I less of a lady if I don’t wear panty hose? My momma said a lady ain’t what she wears but what she knows. But I’ve drawn the conclusion; it’s all an illusion. Confusion’s the name of the game. A misconception, a mass deception, something gotta change. Now don’t be offended this is all my opinion, ain’t nothing that I’m saying law. This is a true confession of a life-learned lesson I was sent here to share with y’all. So get it when you fit in. Go on and shine. Clear your mind. Now’s the time, put your salt on the shelf. Go on and love yourself cause everything’s gonna be alright. I’m not the average girl from your video and I ain’t built like a supermodel. But I learned to love myself unconditionally because I am a queen. I’m not the average girl from your video. My worth is not determined by the price of my clothes. No matter what I’m wearing, I will always be India.Arie (Broady, Sanders, & India.Arie, 2001, 1:54).

This chapter outlines the finding of the data. The findings include 2 topical areas: (1) how the sista scholars made meaning of self through relationships and interaction with other Black women, like mothers, grandmothers, and Black women on television, (2) how Christianity influences the meaning making process of these sista scholars. Some implications are outlined at the end of each section. As a note, I interchangeably refer to sista scholars as “sista scholars,” “we,” and “us” to demonstrate my participation in the study. I also included data in a more conversational format to illustrate the experience within the sacred space of the sista circle.
We Love Our Sons, But We Raise Our Daughters

Making meaning of gender and race is of result of the messages and socialization that a person receives throughout life and is heavily influence by historical, social, and political contexts. The women in this project discussed receiving messages from three key areas: family members, particularly mother figures; Black women on television; and from their Christian socialization. These messages were both direct and indirect. I will explain these three areas in the next sections.

Race Was Always Present, Gender Came Later

Being Black and being a woman was something that was not as salient until young adulthood. Blackness was the most salient identity growing up. The women described older women, mostly mothers and grandmothers, as their early messengers of what it means to be a Black woman. While the socialization of being a woman happened from a young age, saliency of gender did not increase until later in life. Life events such as entering a graduate program, getting a divorce, and having a first child, increased gender saliency for some of the women in the circle.

Pamela describes how she came to understand her race, then her gender, “I was Black before my dad even planted seed,” reflected Pamela, “because my mama Black. So I’m gonna be Black regardless, but then my gender kind of kicks in once like dad decides he’s gonna do something.” In affirming the way Pamela stated her understanding of being Black, Sasha Fierce states in the background, “Yes, chromosome!” Pamela continues, “Oh, dad. I mean, I was Black my whole life. I knew I was a girl but I didn’t connect that Black woman piece until I was good and grown.”
Pamela was always Black, from a biological stance, because her mother is Black. The chromosomes from the sperm that fertilizes an embryo determines the sex of a fetus, therefore, Pamela is saying that her father is responsible for her being female. Most of the women in the circle discussed their childhood and understanding of their gender as something happening in the peripheral. Yes, we understood that we were socialized as girls and that was a convoluted process. We could recall messages that we received from strong woman figures in our lives; however, most of those messages were in relation to a man figure (i.e., brother, father, future man partner). Pamela recalls the messages she would receive as young child from her grandmothers,

And I can remember my grandmothers, both of them, one born in 1921, one born in 1927, saying you know, have your own stuff. Like one of them was very like, quintessential prim and proper, you know, Pammie, stop eating all the cornbread, nobody wants a fat girl. Right? Nobody wants that. But then the other one being very like ... fuck bitches, get money! You don’t want to have to rely on nobody! Black women can’t afford to depend on nobody, we all we got! So once I got, probably in my mid or up like lower twenties. I was like hm, there’s something different about being a Black woman that’s not just Black.

Pamela was taught from a young age that she should be concerned about the amount of food she consumed, being self-sufficient, and that she should not trust or depend on a man.

Gender became more salient as most of us entered our different masters programs. A majority of the sista scholars are currently in social sciences graduate programs, which leads to discussions and learning around society and culture. Audre discussed her masters’ classroom
experiences as being monolithic, non-nuanced understanding of society and culture. Audre speaks about being in class and realizing that things were “a little different,”

Yeah, I would say it happened around grad school time, as far as being a Black woman. The Black piece yeah, I think kind of agree that’s always been there. The woman piece came up, I’d say late high school, early college. And it was mostly around sex. …But ...

It was ... Probably my master’s program, and sitting in there with just ... with all these white woman in my master’s program, and three of us, like three Black women being in there and talking about race and all that, I’m just like ... this aint the same. This aint the same. It’s a little different...So being here is where it’s just kind of like, “Oh, that’s what that is.  Okay.”

Audre went to further discuss that while she felt a difference in her masters program, it was not until being in her PhD program that she had language and further understanding of her gender.

The main source of learning for her was being around a “bunch of critical-ass women!” Her relationships with other Black women were the catalyst in furthering her understandings of being a Black woman. Naomie also had a similar experience. Her relationships with other Black women, particularly those within her specific PhD program, have “opened me up to the intersectionality of being a Black woman.”

Major life events also have an impact on understanding what it means to be a Black woman. For me,

…it was getting married and understanding different peoples perspective of like, or expectations of what that meant for them. And then going through a divorce and how people responded to that made me realize, oh, I’m a woman, I’m supposed to cook and
clean and take care of the house and keep a full time job and pop out a kid or two and I don’t know what a man’s responsibilities are supposed to be ...

Sasha Fierce, a master student, also agrees with Audre and Naomie that the relationships with other Black women have been helpful; however, it was the birth of her daughter that provided the greatest shift in saliency. “But I guess to tie that all in, being a Black woman, …all things came together, like Blackness and being a woman, until I had my daughter. It was the birth of her daughter that [led] to more understanding. The birth of her daughter created a different dynamic between Sasha and her own mother. It also prompted Sasha to think about the ways in which she wanted her daughter to be socialized. In particular, she spoke about being very intentional about the imagery that her child consumes through television (i.e., Doc McStuffins cartoon character) and education materials (i.e., flash cards featuring little Black girls with natural hair). It is important for Sasha that her child is aware and values being a Black girl in America.

“Grandma’s Just An Old-School Woman”

For women who have brothers or other young men in their lives while growing up, there was discourse about a noticeable difference in between the treatment the brothers and the women received. This difference in treatment sent messages to the women of what it means to be a Black girl and eventually a Black woman. Naomie describes how she came to know the difference between her and her brother,

I can say that previously, I've thought of things in terms of being a woman and the difference in [the] kind of expectations… [of] being a man. So one thing I think of, for example, is the quote my mom would say it, or I've heard it from her or something. That "we love our sons, but we raise our daughters." So, in thinking about the relationship that
a mother has with her, her son versus the relationship that she has with her daughter. Essentially, she's preparing her daughter to do the same thing. Like you, as the girl, are supposed to know how to cook and know how to clean and do all these things but you love your son in that you take care of everything for him. So, in thinking of, like their relationships between Black men and Black women I see that that carries on.

Naomie describes that for a mother to love her son means to do everything for him; in contrast, for a mother to raise her daughter means to prepare her to do everything. Naomie provides a current example that demonstrates the differences in how her and her brother were raised and loved differently. Naomie’s younger brother had “two women who essentially took care of everything and so his idea of cooking is making noodles. And like, that's not food. That's not food at all.” Now as a young adult, Naomie’s younger brother is not as independent as she.

Naomie reflects on how different her life is compared to her brother’s,

I've thought of that as far as how my life looks a lot different from my brother's. But the responsibility that I felt, kind of, as the daughter to do something different and like, be a good example, and to work hard. Um, I think that comes in with the whole raising our daughters. So, you raise your daughter to be able to be independent in all of these things and she becomes that. And then your boys are like, children.

Naomie was not alone in this occurrence. I also went on to describe my relationship with my older brother and his understanding of the academic differences between us,

I'm thinking about my brother who, whenever we have conversations, he's four years older than I am, and throughout school ... he would say that, well nobody ever told me I could do it, so I didn't try. And I'm like ... yes ... and ... He said, they always gave you praise. Well ... It was more of an expectation. So the expectation was that I bring home
A's, the expectation was, oh you didn't get a D or an F? Great…its like, yeah you can say, oh that was motivation that you were gonna even make it that far or on the flip side, for me, could be that it was the expectation that you had no choice and that's what you're gonna do. You don't get any like, leeway to explore. With him, with my brother it was like, we just want him to be, he wanted to be a garbage man, like that was his dream job. And so it was just like, okay, great, but with you, you have to go through all these hoops and go to school and get all these great grades.

As a child, I felt more pressure to do well academically while I felt that my brother did not have the same expectations. His only expectations were to pass his classes. Our understandings of our childhood and messages from our parents was that we needed to excel in all things (e.g., academics, domestic duties) while our brothers were given the expectations to depend on the women in their lives.

Nikki talked about the relationship that she had with her dad growing up. Both of her parents lived in her home and are still married today; however, Nikki explained that did not necessarily guarantee a more equitable childhood. Nikki described her relationship with her dad and the difference in treatment by her father towards her and her brother,

He would always get on me. And then, I experienced growing up, like, it was like a lot of emotional, and sometimes even like physical abuse…Um, but, the way that he treats my brother though, is like more of a friendship. With me, [he] has always been like, very hard on me, very critical of me. Even like, my weight, … just … I hate talking about it. Pamela: Yeah.

Nikki: [crying] But, so, I just see like the difference in that and just the way that the dynamics in that. I mean, my brother, I mean, they got into physical fights, but you
know, it's still at the end of the day, he has, I guess, been more lenient on my brother, which you know. I feel bad for my brother because he's just, I think he's depressed and he just, doesn't know what to do. And he doesn't ... nobody's given him the push he needs to be grown up...So, he's like 25 and he just pretty much stays in his room. He's not working. He doesn't go to school. But my dad went out and bought him an Xbox for Christmas just so he can make sure that my brother's not going out, doing drugs or anything like that. He gives him money, my brother buys drugs, he smokes weed in the house, and my dad feels like it's better he does that at home so he's not going out and getting arrested or whatever.

Pamela: Would he buy you weed if you were...

Nikki: No! He would not do that, no. I would never even think of even trying that.

When my brother told my mom she can't do nothing, he's gonna smoke weed if he wants to ... and he's still living at home.

Nikki talks about that her father had different expectations of her. His evaluation of Nikki not meeting those expectations was emotionally and physically abusive. Nikki’s brother does not have the same pressures; his expectations are to not get arrested. He is not required to attend school, procure employment, or abstain from drug use. Nikki’s parents financially care for by her brother and not Nikki. It became clear that through this discussion the inequitable treatment was intergenerational. Nikki mentions that this treatment was something that her father had witnessed as a child. Nikki continues,

And my dad blames my mom for a lot of stuff. Like if your mom spoke up more, or did this and that ... and I try to stick up for my mom, cause she wouldn't stick up for herself of course, and my dad snapped on me, so. Um. I don't know. Just, growing up has been
very different experiences, between what me and my brother have and ... we don't talk about it as a family, cause I mean, there's no way. Cause my dad is not gonna want to hear it.

After Nikki finished her story, the room fell silent for a moment. We collectively shared in her pain. The silence was not out of awkwardness or because we were at a lost for words, it was a way to honor her pain and experience and to be in it with her. After a moment, Nikki continues,

But. Yeah, so I guess that’s one way that I learned about the difference, I guess, in being a Black woman and being a Black male.

Sasha Fierce: Thank you for sharing.

Naomie: Yeah, thank you.

Nikki: Yeah, still...he, yeah. I mean.

Pamela: Sounds like that shit hurts.

After another pause, Sasha shares her reflections on how to break the intergenerational cycle with her daughter,

Thank you for bringing up that interesting ... like, I don't know the word, sorry. Your story is so touching. Like the thing that keeps reoccurring, like, how do you break the cycle and everything. Like, your mom, she's working hard like a Black woman usually does to fix, or avoid, whatever problems they have, and the cycle continues, so like moving forward, I'm looking for a way like how can I avoid that. Whatever I experienced or, hearing stories like that like how can I avoid that for my daughter in moving forward.
Pamela and Sasha shift the emotions in the room as Sahsa begins to speak about her brother. Sasha discussed the way her mother currently “loves” her brother by her mom being “easy” on her brother because he “still lives at home ...”

Pamela: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sasha fierce: ... in his early twenties ...

Pamela: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sasha fierce: ... Smoking weed

Pamela: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Sasha fierce: With a daughter that my mom pays child support for. So, meanwhile, what am I doing? I'm in school finding a way to pay for things and everything like that.

This exchange demonstrated Pamela acknowledging and validating the Sasha’s description of her family and brother while simultaneously being able to relate from personal experiences. These things were not explicitly said, more communicated through facial expressions and tone. Sasha continues,

Thank you all for sharing because I'm thinking damn it must be just something in the water at my house. Cause, I don't know what we're going through… But I guess to tie that all in, being a Black woman I didn't like that all things came together like Blackness and being a woman until I had my daughter and like being terrified like, "Oh gosh I don't want to do the same thing to her." And my mother is a beautiful woman, and I know she's only doing what she's seen growing up, cause my grandma did do the same thing to my uncle and my mom, but like, I don't want to do that. So I'm just a little terrified, that's all.
Sasha understands that her mom loves her and is only acting out her own socialization as a Black woman. Sasha wants to break this cycle with her daughter, although she is terrified of repeating the behaviors of her mother and grandmother.

The intergenerational key of this dialogue about raising daughters and loving sons seems to rest on the matriarch of the family, usually the grandmother figure. This is not to place blame on the grandmother – this distinction is meant to demonstrate the respect and power of the grandmother within these Black families. Pamela reflects on her childhood observations between her maternal grandmother and mother. Pamela’s mother left high school and college in order to help her mother care for the family. Pamela explains,

My grandmother had three boys and three girls. My mother was the second daughter, she was the second oldest in rank. She quit high school to help my mother raise the other children. When she went to college, she quit to come back and help my mother, to help my grandmother. My mother had her first argument with my grandmother when she found out that my grandmother was taking money that she was earning on her job, and sending it to my mother's youngest brother who was away at college, because he didn't want to work while he was in school.

Trina: What?

Pamela: Or something like that. Like something ridiculous, weird. She had quit school to come help and here you are giving this nigga money!

Trina: No, she didn't.

Pamela: Oh yeah, oh yeah! Oh yeah, oh yeah. And he decided, he just, like he needed extra help. My grandma just wanted to give him help. He may have not even have asked for the money. Like she still doesn't know if he asked for the money, or grandma just
gave it to him, right? So my mom was like, "What? Like, mama!" And she was like, "Well he needs it." And she was like, "I needed to finish school! And I quit school to come back and help. You raise your children! Like, mama!" And so I remember her saying, “mama babies those boys. But she's on us like white on rice.”

Trina expresses surprise as Pamela recounts her story of her mother discovering that Pamela’s grandmother gave money to her son. The money was from the earning of Pamela’s mother. Pamela’s grandmother expected that Pamela’s mother would leave school and sacrifice education to help support the family. In contrast, Pamela’s grandmother would sacrifice to give money to her son who was away at college and did not want to work. Pamela’s mother would try to reason with Pamela’s grandmother to no avail. Pamela continues with other examples of how her grandmother had different expectations,

Everything. Like, I can remember my grandmother just like, my uncle was on crack and lived with her and stole stuff, not a word. If my aunt Sarah failed to bring her a plate from church anniversary, she was calling her sister to ask why her daughter was so lazy and raggedy and carrying on. Because I was so little, I was asking mom why she would do that, she was like, well, grandma's just an old-school woman. And I'd be like, "What in the world?" Because it didn't make sense. But, raising those daughters, you know, and letting those boys just be, just ... mm-hmm.

The expectation was that boys get to just be and the girls are expected to sacrifice and do all things for the boys. Pamela was confused as a child and did not understand why her grandmother had different expectations for her children. Pamela’s mother stating “grandma’s just an old-school woman” was in reference to Pamela’s grandmother’s socialization. Pamela’s
grandmother was taught, most likely from her parents, that the role of the woman was to sacrifice and care for the men of your life.

**Self-Sacrifice For The Men**

Maternal figures were not just self-sacrificing for the men in their lives, there was also a general level or expectation that Black women should be self-sacrificing. The women in the group who did not have brothers did not relate to the difference in treatment; however, they could see the similarities in receiving the messages from maternal figures about being self-sacrificing. Trina describes her observations of her mother being the caretaker of the family,

I can add to some of that. I don't ... the reason I was like eeeeh about having a brother is that my mom [was] raising everybody’s kids when shit hit the fan in the family. So at any given time I had a multitude of male cousins, in particular who were staying at our house. One, who I absolutely like, one of my cousins, his parents kicked him out because he came out of the closet. So, I was 100% behind my mom taking him in. As well as my little brother, or who I call my little brother who's technically my cousin, he's 9, so even that, that dynamic is interesting in and of itself, but I never felt like I was getting messages about this is how you be a woman or this is how you do this or, you know, we're gonna raise you, but we're going to be lenient from my mother. I got that shit from my grandma, who, you know, on both ... my dad's mom adored me so she treated me like I could do no wrong, but on the other end of the spectrum because whenever I got into it with my parents I was at her house like "fuck you all, then I'm over here."

Trina describes that she was not necessarily or directly told that she had different expectations than the men of her family. She did see those differences in the actions of the women of her family,
…so there's been a whole lot of like issues with the men, of my uncles. And no one ever talks about it but we always bail them out. My mom and my aunties always bailing out their children, and I get it that children are born into situations that are no fault of their own and I totally and completely agree with that but its really hard to like, for my mom to say to me like I know you wanted X Y Z for Christmas, and even though my mom worked so she could give us this, I'm not giving it to you because so-and-so's parents smoked all the drug money. I don't give a fuck! And at first I was really, really hurt. I know that sounds horrible but for me that goes back to, that for me as my mom's daughter, that means that I get sacrificed. And because my grandmother called and asked my mom to make that sacrifice, she had to. You see what I'm saying?

Pamela: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Trina explains that the women of her family also sacrifice for the men, namely Trina’s uncles. Trina’s mother sacrificed for the family by taking care of children and providing money, which meant that Trina would also have to sacrifice. Trina continues,

So, and I don't even give a shit about Christmas presents. My mom made – I had all the new clothes back when like X Y Z sneakers was in and all that looked good, I was happy. But it just reminds me the ways in which my grandmother would kind of pull the strings of my family. And even now, if you know one of my aunts or somebody tells my grandmother no about somethin, she'll call the rest of her children and then start talking shit about them, and you know then, you only get one mama and blah blah blah blah blah. And I'm just like, this is really, this is really fucked up.

Trina reflects that it was not about money or not getting Christmas presents because she was well taken care for by her mother. It was she was sacrificed because her mother took care of someone
else. This was usually done at the request of her Trina’s grandmother, who “pulls the strings” in the family.

Audre too did not grow up with a brother but a sister, like Trina. She talks about her mother and sister working when she was very young, which left her without a “frame of reference” for what a Black woman should be,

The other thought is as you were talking just like, I didn't see what you all are talking about in terms ... I saw my mom working, I saw her working hard, but I also saw my sister start working when she was really, really young. Cause she's six years older than me, so I remember her working when she was really, really young and then getting to a point where I'm budding into becoming a woman and all parental figures just gone. So there is no, yeah I'm struggling with this right now. Some shit happening, so bear with me. But like not having any frame of reference for what this was supposed to look like, at all. So still trying to figure out like what is even ... what does it even mean to be a woman? I don't know. I mean, like, I'm figuring this shit out. I'm grown, but, I ain't got no choice. But like, where do I get a frame of reference from?

A tearful pause occurs and Pamela encourages Audre to let out the tears. Audre is currently experiencing some family conflicts that make the discussion more difficult. Audre as an adult is now trying to figure out what it means to be a Black woman. It is difficult for her to reconcile the concept of Black women being workhorses because she now works to provide for herself. Audre describes her reflections from the earlier conversation in the circle, “all I could think of, like I don't know. Is it a workhorse? Yeah she worked, but I have to work now, so ... like, so I don't know. I don't know.” When it comes to being a Black woman, Audre is trying to “figur[e] it out in an academic space and that shit is hard.”
Overall, gender became more salient for the sista scholars after the saliency of race. Family members had a significant influence the scholars’ understanding of gender and that mostly was as a result of being treated different than the men. Additionally, the sista scholars talked about Black women in popular culture influencing their socialization.

**But She's Real, There Are Some Black Women Like That Though**

Seeing other Black women on television has been a strong messenger for sista scholars as they reflect on their socialization. In childhood, Black women in popular culture taught sista scholars about how to be a “sweet” or “good” girl by displaying respectability within their speech and behavior. As an adult, sista scholars seek out Black women television characters that match their current reality. These women show different versions of Black women who have achieved a “higher” life than the one’s of sista scholars’ families. Society’s reaction to these Black women television characters highlight the oppressive standard that a woman’s worth is only determined by being married to a man and having children. I outline these three points in the following sections.

**You Had To Have The Swoop!**

As children, we grew up searching for Black women on television who looked like us. We gravitated towards Black women celebrities who represented the unique features that we had or were insecure about. Alana discusses her love and connection for Left Eye, a performing artist who wore a condom over her left eye in the beginning of her career,

I had like a fascination with like Left Eye because I have weak muscles in my left eye, which cause them to cross. So that was my thing until – I would imitate Left Eye. I would like imitate her voice and then growing up… Left Eye was that person, even though she was skinner whatever, but she felt real to me.
Left Eye gave Alana a role model and influence how she spoke and even her decision to get involved in theater and arts.

Janae’ discusses her own experience feeling a connection with a celebrity, Free, a co-host of BET’s 106 & Park,

I remember coming home from school and watching Free and 106 & Park and being obsessed with her hair. She was a thicker girl. She was really cool. I didn't have the words for it then but I always thought her personality was dope and to see that on TV was awesome. And then even though she was really bratty, I loved Moesha. She was more home girl and I thought that that was cool too!

Janae’ felt a connection with Free because she looked different than other Black women on television. Free did not subscribe to respectability politics with her style or dress. She was known for her huge auburn Afro that she wore proudly on live television everyday. Moesha, portrayed by Brandy Norwood, was young Black girl from south Los Angles who was trying to navigate high school and finding her identity. I also shared an affinity for Brandy because of her physical characteristics,

I was a stand for Toni Braxton Whitney Houston also but when Brandy came out I was like finally someone with a wide nose, someone like with thicker lips, someone who’s soft spoken because I'm soft spoken and people are listening to her. And I remember…she went on Teen Summit and everybody wanted to know how to do that dance she did in I Wanna Be Down and I was like, “Oh yeah, that is so cool! People are listening to her.”

Finding Black women who look like us was definitely important and Left Eye, Free, and Brandy were just some of the Black women who served as a guide of how we should look as young
Black women. Naomie discussed her love of Aaliyah, a R&B singer, who was known for her “cool personality” and her hairstyle where she had a long bangs that swooped (covered) her right eye. Naomie “really loved her. Didn't know, didn’t see her like on TV or whatever. I see, oh I love her personality.” She did not connect with Aaliyah because of her beauty, she connected with her more because of what she perceived as her personality. Aaliyah did, however, have an impact on Naomie’s and other women in the circle’s physical appearance,

Yes while there were typically women who were thinner, they in my opinion were also very curvy. So for me, being someone who is thin but not curvy, kind of put me over here. It’s like yeah I might be slim umm but I don’t fit this this image of a Black woman. So seeing someone like Aaliyah or Brandy or Monica, who were all slim and are also not curvy, or at least weren’t then, umm for me those were people that I kinda looked up to. And I’d try to have my lil Aaliyah swoop and everything (laughter) 

Sasha Fierce: I think a lot of us did. You’re not the only one

Marvette: Yeah I have pictures like from middle school, like you couldn't tell me nothing!

Audre: I used to have a little piece of track that I would put in in this part (laughter)

Sasha Fierce: Its okay

Naomie: You had to have the swoop.

Aaliyah’s iconic swoop influences the hairstyles of many Black girls. Even Alana discusses using extensions in the front of her hair so that she could achieve the “Aaliyah swoop.”

Watching Black women like Aaliyah on television gave us ideas of how we should do our hair, how we should speak, and affirmation of body types. These specific Black women and other portrayals of Black women also provided messages of how we should be as young Black girls.
Within our circles, we talked about the pressure to live up to the ideal Black girl. It was about not only looking a certain way, but also being perceived as the nice, “sweet” girl, not the “ghetto” or “booty shakin” girls from the music videos. Audre continues explaining,

For me, it's always become like this dichotomy of like growing up it was all I saw the ghetto girls or the really smart basically respectable women. Even with the videos, I remember having conversations or hearing conversations about ooooh I’m gon be a video girl but I don't want to be one of the ass shaking video girls. (laughter) I don't want to be one of the booty shakin girls. I want to be the loved interest, the sweet girls that they fall-that they want to marry.

The women discussed that it was sometimes difficult to live up to this ideal because the “respectable” women did not look like them. Nikki explained, “Yeah watching videos, honestly I never, as far as videos girls, I never pictured or felt liked I relate because I never had the body image of a video girl.” Alana agreed,

…when I thought about videos and representation, I couldn't necessary aspire to be a beauty girl. Not saying you want to aspire to be a video girl but you wanted to be seen on a larger scale. Now it made you think bout when people are rapping about a certain girl, that they want a thick girl. They’re not talking about thick like me, they’re talking about maybe ass or titties. You know they’re not talking about a gut. So I just thought that was my first thought like when I thought about showing up in places it took me a while to really accept that I'm going to be a little different. I’m going to look different I’m a brown skin woman, so I never had the dark skin, light skin kind of thing but I wasn't skinny. And I didn't have long hair so like, that was like, I was like, well kind of just basic, in the middle
It is complex when you find yourself in-between the beauty ideals. Alana explains that her skin tone sort of fit in with the beauty standards for Black women; however, her weight or hair did not fit in. She just felt, in a way, ordinary.

Sasha Fierce agreed with Alana in being in this in-between stage and struggling to fit all of the beauty ideals for Black women. This challenge of fitting in became easier as she was introduced to new Black women on television, such as India.Arie, motivating others to love and accept who they are and to be proud of not being the “video girl.” Sasha explains,

I remember being what like eleven, probably ten years old when India.Arie came out with Video Girl cause I was obsessed with pop culture. Like I had to watch every red carpet and even to the point where I did have body image issues growing up in middle school because I obsessed over videos…so when she came out with her video girl video, and was like, “I'm not the average girl from the video.” I was like, me either! And nor will I ever! (laughter) But I’m like still aspiring for something…And here you have India.Arie and Corrine bailey Rae just on their bicycles, just being happy (laughter), I said, that is me! I remember it like having that moment as a kid I need to focus more on reality, Sasha Fierce, because the red carpet is not real. (laughter)

There was this moment where Sasha realized that most of the images of Black women on television were not “real” and were causing her psychological harm. As she and other women were introduced to real imagery, they began to better accept themselves or their versions of Black womanhood.

**Real Black Women Characters**

Today, the focus for many of us is figuring out our own definition of Black womanhood. It is difficult because no model exists for the self-definition process. We may have once used
our mothers as role models and guides; however, most of our mothers cannot relate to the lives that we live now. Most of our mothers did not attain masters and doctoral degrees. As a result, we gravitated towards television characters who depicted more of our reality. These characters are Black women who have academic accomplishments and are living lives that reflect more our reality and current life events. As we begin to develop into adults, we begin to look for characters who matched our real life experiences. Three main shows, Scandal, Being Mary Jane, Insecure, and three specific characters, Olivia Pope, Mary Jane Paul, Issa, came up during the circles. These shows and characters are among a new wave of television shows that allow Black women to be portrayed in a more nuanced way.

Mary Jane Paul seemed to be the most popular character among the circle. Being Mary Jane is a television show about a Black woman who has established her career while trying to balance family, dating, and friends. Mary Jane is a character that spurs discussions and debates about Black women and their connections and obligation to dating and being. In the beginning of this conversation, I mention to the circle that if Mary Jane “were a person I met” in real life, I’m not sure if she could be “my friend.” There are some behaviors and personality characteristics that I’m not sure I could connect with in a long-term way. Audre agreed and also saw these behaviors and characteristics as something Black women can do from the time to time and that is why Mary Jane is so relatable as a character. Audre discusses Mary Jane as friend, I can be her friend. But then times like, I just want to slap the shit out of you, and the other times its…mmm…mirror. Okay been there. I hate you right cause you stupid but been there at the same time. So she gives you, you wanna stop her because aaahhh but then next week you out here doing the same thing or you have a friend who is doing it or you know like those types of things.
For Audre, Mary Jane reminds women of the human parts that cause decisions to be made that may not be in our best interest. Mary Jane makes decisions that could be construed as questionable, like helping to financially support her family or deciding to continue a relationship with a married man. Audre expressed a frustrated connection with the character. She described the character as someone you want to stop from making certain decision at the same time having compassion for her because those same decisions are the ones that Audre and her friends would or could potentially make. Sasha Fierce responds to this statement, “But she's real, there are some Black women like that though.”

Olivia Pope, the main character of the television show, *Scandal*, begins to enter the discussion in comparison to Mary Jane. Olivia Pope comes from an upper-class, northeastern family. Her career is about fixing political situations. Olivia presents in a “respectable” way through her clothing, speech, and behavior. A comparison is made between Mary Jane and Olivia during the first two circles. The comparison is about who is more relatable and likeable as a person. In continuing with the previous discussion, Pamela reflects on the Mary Janes of her world,

I think with *Being Mary Jane*, it reminded me that it made me question, do I have to like her as a person? Like do I have to like her and then why do we have to like Black women on TV? Like can they just be. I know Mary Jane’s, they're my sorority sisters, they’re girls I go to school with, they’re a lot of things and I still love em and they’re just a whole lot but I don't have to make them like definitively good and righteous or bad. I’m just like they can do fucked up shit. They do really good shit too and sometimes I rock with them and sometimes I take them in doses.
For Pamela, she can see the character Mary Jane in her sorority sisters and other friends. However, as for Olivia, she could not relate because the show did not mirror Pamela’s life events or her friends’ life event. These two characters depict educated and successful Black women who have two different life experiences. Pamela continues to explain why Olivia Pope is unrealistic because Pamela does not have experience “dating a republican White ass president [while being] on the road with him. Like I'm not doing that.” However, she appreciates Olivia as a character because Pamela can relate to being “the girl who worked my ass off, got to place where I can make some room for myself, and try to bring some people on, and try to figure out this whole dating thing.” A commonality exist of trying to be successful at a career, caring for family and friends, and still trying to have a social life.

After this particular circle, where we discussed these two characters, I asked the women to reflect on their experiences and provide any additional thoughts from the circle. Trina reflected on the previous conversation about Olivia and Mary Jane,

I still have an issue with the idea that Olivia Pope is an unrealistic character. As a Black woman who went to the Ivy League, instead of seeing her as unrealistic, I see her as being among the top 1% of Black families. Of Black women who grew up amidst a culture that is indeed foreign to us to the point that we make statements that we can't believe she doesn't have Black friends when the same is true of Malia Obama. I wanted to say something in the moment but it felt very mob rule about that topic so I let it go. I have aspirations for my child to be around people with more money than I could ever imagine. That I give birth to one of the next Black presidents and my child has a boarding school experiences.
Trina did not completely agree with the idea that Mary Jane was the most realistic character. Trina saw Olivia Pope as something to aspire to, a way to see that her life and child’s life could be different than the one Trina has and is experiencing currently. Nikki did not say much during the circle about this topic. She later reflected in her journal,

> Personally, the main reason why I like the show is because all of the characters are flawed. I also enjoyed hearing people's thoughts about being single, educated, and a Black woman. It was reaffirming that others feel the same way. I also gained a different perspective from those that felt differently about being single.

The two shows are hosted on two different television networks with different targeted audiences. Being Mary Jane is hosted on Black Entertainment Television and was created specifically to depict life events that are common and not often discussed in the Black community. For example, suicide and childhood sexual abuse are topics that are often not discussed. Pamela describes an episode that portrayed Mary Jane’s best friend, Lisa, committing suicide as a result of her childhood sexual abuse,

> But it is for all these other women who are like ooooh this shit is great. And then when her friend committed suicide, that episode particularly was one – we talk suicide…in our fields particularly, we talk this and we do this – but for most people, I don't think they ever really see it. And the depiction of her suicide, the actual going through with it was the part that was like holy shit! And then the, you know, going through the phone to see where it was, like that sort of representation. As she was educated. She was a doctor. She had her MD. She was a doctor [and] was still having these other issues that were linked to something that happened a long time ago. And so when [Mary Jane] got to see herself in how we can heal each other and hurt each other the same time is very often
like oooooohhh! It was one of the few times where I felt like umm well what was shown was like healing and convicting at the same time and it was about people I probably could know, probably some of my friends and so that was new for me.

Lisa, by societal standards, was very successful. She was a light-skinned Black woman, with a looser curl pattern, and she earned her medical degree. Lisa was presented in a very respectable manner as a character. Lisa also experiences sexual abuse in her childhood that caused depression and anxiety for her continuing into her adult life. Through the seasons of the show, there are a few times where the viewers sees Lisa navigating depression and suicidal ideation with Mary Jane being her main support system. In this particular episode, Lisa and Mary Jane are in conflict within their relationship. Lisa is having a tough time with everything and completes suicide.

It is a difficult episode to watch because for many of us, it is the first that a complete suicide is depicted on television. This prompted many discussions among Black people within different social media platforms. Pamela concludes her thoughts about Being Mary Jane,

Its very representative to what it means for me to be Black, except I'm trying to be a lot of things to a lot of people and be true to myself and get free and I can I still play respectable and and and its all of that in one TV show and you make it with it what you can its just just is yeah.

Mary Jane and Olivia Pope provide two versions of Black women. These characters are presented in a very “flawed” human manner. Mary Jane and Olivia are depicted as successful within their careers who sometimes make questionable decisions in relationships. More importantly, these shows allow Black women to see a representation of themselves currently and what they aspire to be in the future.
Insecure

We watched the first episode of the HBO show, *Insecure*, that centers on the life of Issa a 30-year-old Black woman trying to navigate building a career and maintaining a long-term relationship. *Insecure* is different from *Scandal* and *Being Mary Jane* because the main character, Issa, is younger than the other main characters. Additionally, Issa is at the beginning of her career and hasn’t yet reached a higher-level position. It is also a newer show that was created based off a YouTube web series, *Awkward Black Girl*, written, directed, and starring the same person, Issa Rae. The sista scholars did debate much about how realistic the show or characters were in the show. The show depicts 4 different Black women who are friends and who have different lives. Saphronia reflects on *Insecure*,

I think something that I remember I think when I first seen it was that I appreciated seeing people who are as insecure and trying to figure out themselves in their 20s, just as I am. Cuz I feel like – I think about most of the shows I watch and like *Scandal* and other stuff. Leading Black women and it seems like they had to [be] put together and make fun of the insecurities later, or they don't really necessarily say it. And even though this was like a comedy, it still feels like, yeah, I know what that feels like when you hear people who are not Black always finding love. You're in your 20s and I'm sitting with this relationship. And are things gonna work out? Like I'm in this high place ... Not really high. I'm in education, but I'm, I'm doing this thing (laughs) ... I'm doing this thing and I feel like, you know, I should be having things put together, but things are kind of like falling apart. And who do I want to be in relationships? Who do I want to be as a professional or student? And so I think ... Um, at least I finally felt I found something that feels like I'm going through similar questions and processes.
Saphronia explains that she relates more to Insecure because it depicts a woman in her twenties who does not have life figured out. In the first episode, there are moments that prompt Issa to question the current state of her career, five-year relationship with her partner, and life in general. The actors in the show did a great job depicting what it is like to be an insecure 20-something year old Black woman who is trying to figure out life. Saphronia can relate to the character and the pressure of having to have life figure out as a PhD student.

One of the main themes of the show is about romantic relationships; what does it mean to be a good partner and how does being a good partner intersect with individual social identities? One character, Tiffany DuBois, sparked a great debate among the circle. Tiffany is a character who revels in her happy marriage and having her life together. She often criticizes her friends for their relationship problems because they were not like her and did not make the right life decisions. Pamela discusses her frustration with Tiffany,

I can't stand her... She drives me up the wall, partly because like ... Partly because she's the woman who, in real life, did A plus B plus C went to D, right? So, for her, everything is A plus B ... So she went to school. She pledged a sorority. She did what she was supposed to do. She got this husband and so if y'all would just do this, like she personifies so many women who I've encountered through, you know, all these young professional orgs and ... Even some married women when who were in grad school who were like, "If you just do this, this, and this then you get this. Like, I don't understand why." And I'm just like, "Shut the fuck up talking to me. Like bitch, shut up."

Tiffany represents the Black women and other persons who did everything “she was supposed to do” in life to graduate with a college degree, pledge a sorority, and as a result she has her husband and a great marriage. Pamela describes women whom she has encountered through life,
like Tiffany, who pressure or blame other Black women for not having their husbands or marriages because they did not do the right things. Women who engage in this line of reasoning often do so in the absence of acknowledging and recognizing other factors such as colorism and sexism. Pamela and other sista scholars discussed that this causes the sentiment that no other accomplishments matter if you are not married to a cisgender, heterosexual man. Pamela continues in the conversation,

Why do I have so many who of my friends who are that obnoxious, you know, they say stuff like, "I mean, I don't know why you're not married, but just keep believing, girl. It's gon happen." And I'm like, I mean, "It may or may not happen. That still does not determine my worth." Like if I get married, if I don't, I'm still amazing. I'm still smart. I'm still awesome. It'll be hard for me to buy a house, but I mean, the shit's real. I mean, yeah ... I mean, but like-

Sasha fierce:  You can work it out. (laughs)

Trina: It will be okay, so I think that's one of the reasons why she bothers me. But she also bothers me because she's super light skinned and-

Sasha fierce:  Super stereotypical-

Pamela: There's a super stereotypical and like even though they love her, like they ...

Like ... No ... They check her in like these passive aggressive or over aggressive ways, but not in a way that's like shut up talking, like be quiet. And so she just gets on my nerves, like ...

Pamela continues to describe her many encounters with other people who question her relationship status and the absence of children in her life. Pamela express that marriage and children should not determine her self-worth. Even if those things never happen for her it does
not diminish who she is and what she has accomplished. Trina and Sasha Fierce validate Pamela by expressing their own frustration with character.

The discussion of Tiffany prompts a much deeper discussion about the self-worth of women being determined only by marriage to a man and having children. Naomie talks about how we as women do receive these messages throughout our lives, “Well, I was just gonna say in listening to everyone, what I hear is that we do receive a message it's better to be partnered than to be single and that's just it-.”

Sasha fierce: Mm-hmm (affirmative), always.
Naomie: You know? And that nothing else matters.
Pamela: Nothing.
Naomie: That's it, so, you know, it doesn't matter how well you do in school and how much you further your education, what kind of job you have, what great things you've done to save the world or to improve things. Like, "Oh, you're single? Oh." Or, "You don't have kids?"
Saphronia: It brings your value down as if you're not doing anything.
Naomie: Yeah. (laughs) It's like nothing else ... Nothing else matters. And then, and then on the flip side, then if you're a woman who has too many kids, too many, than that's also a problem. So it's like ... I mean, you can't really live to satisfy other people anyway. And it's a reminder that you can't, cause there's, there's really nothing that you can do that's gonna be good enough from other people's perspectives.
Pamela: Yeah, yeah, that's true.

Naomie describes the frustration of having a woman’s worth be determined by kids and marriage. She explains that when people ask her about being married of having kids and she
says she doesn’t have either of those things then those people think less of her. However, 
Naomie believes that if she “had too many kids,” her worth would also be “diminished.” These 
standards seem to be contradictory and impossible. Naoime uses this a reminder that you cannot 
live your life for other people because no matter what you do, it will never “be good enough 
from other people’s perspective.”

A thoughtful pause occurs within the group. I wondered what was not being said as I 
observed the reactions of the other women in the circle. I asked, “Why is that?” Pamela 
responded,

I literally was thinking, before you started talking about, part of my understanding of 
being a Black woman came from a lot of distance around being around Black men and 
their expectations for what Black women do, versus what women of other races do. So 
Black women need to do this, this, this, this, this, this, this, this, this, this, this, this, and if 
they fart out loud, cut off! Every other…group of women can just be trash, a hot mess 
express barely get it together. They ain't even gotta be like ... they don't have to meet like 
basic patriarchal standards of womanhood. Like stuff that we get ... they don't have to 
do that. Just, just have a vagina, maybe, and like, be a woman. Not like, 
transphobically…But that comes back to the expectation of Black women, have to be 
able to do everything right all the time without exception. And the idea that if you can't 
manage perfection, you're somehow not a good Black woman. But being a Black woman 
means like being superhuman. So everybody else just gets to be human.

Some of Pamela’s understanding of Black womanhood stems from the expectations of Black 
women. From her perspective, Black men have high expectations of Black women and those 
expectations are less and different for women of other races. It reminds her that Black women
have to be perfect, “superhuman” without flaws and everyone else just get to be without the same expectations of perfection. Black women will never be “good enough” because they are being measured against perfection.

This Shit [Has] Me Really Uncomfortable

The theme of circle three was sex and sexuality. A woman is socialized to abstain for sexual activity and sexual pleasure in order to remain pure for her husband. This socialization is heavily related to some of the women who practice the Christian faith. The section concludes with the circle discussing ways to problematize society’s, specifically those within the Christian faith, view of women’s sexual pleasure and agency.

Policing Bodies

Black women are constantly portrayed as overly sexualized beings through television and other mediums. Within the third circle, the women reflected that as Black women, we do not discuss sex openly, especially with one another. Trina discusses this lack of discussion as it related to religion and as a society and policing women’s bodies,

…In thinking about that, it made me think about the fact that none of my friends that I talk to about sex with Black women because Black women are so closed off. So closed minded – so judgmental in a lot of ways because we have been socialized to be. I don't know if that's something that is inherent to us.

Trinia discusses that she chooses not to have many conversations with other Black women about sex. She contributes this to the socialization of Black women, particularly through religion. Trina continues,

I don't think that, that is something that we would be without religion. I don't think that it is something that we would be without, the ways that we were raised, but it's also why I
don't have really close relationships with many Black women when it comes to talking
about what my sex life looks like. About the fact that I'm not gonna qualify and say I
didn't have sex with a lot of people. I did. And (laughs) I use sex for whatever and that
came at a price. And that meant friendship with Black women.

Trina expresses that her decision to be open to sexual experiences came at the cost of losing
some friendships with Black women due to them being closed-minded. It’s becomes more about
policing women and their bodies,

… we spend so much time policing women and policing women's bodies and talking
about how we need to wait and so on and so forth. Particularly as Black women, but
there are so many sexless marriages. We don't even talk about the statistics of folks, who
are in a sexless marriage. And-and folks who – you know, because their husband is
experienced, they take their word for this is what sex is supposed to be like. And I have,
one friend who did save herself for marriage, and she's married to her husband now and,
um, you know, they're in therapy whatever. But one of the things that became clear to
me is that she's never had a orgasm. And I'm like, I would be divorced. You have me
fucked up.

Black women receive so much judgment around sex. Women receive the messages that it is
okay for men to be more sexually experienced and women should learn about sex from men.
Trina believes this leads to sexless and unhappy marriages because of the pressure placed on
women and women not having the freedom to explore sex outside of marriage. Trina continues,

Like absolutely not. And so, I just think about, that-that's what comes with, continued
policing of-of women's bodies because you come to know sex through one person's
perception of what it should be for you. And not what it should mean to you, because
you've had the opportunity to experience that, on multiple levels and in multiple ways with multiple people. Again, you can have sex with one person your entire life, but if that person isn't willing to help you figure out what your body can do and what feels good for your body, then you are gonna have a very limited point of view of sex. And to me that's at odds with the idea that, if we talk about biblically, and I say this as someone who's not religious, but if we talk about biblically that the marriage bedroom is undefiled, you don't even know what that means because you have- you can't. Like you're being taught that by somebody who is shaping your experience. So if your husband is someone who for example is not good at having sex, or has a small penis, or cannot please you, you don't even know that that pleasure is necessary. Or that that pleasure is an option. Or that you're even capable of having that kind of pleasure.

A noticeable change of energy happens in the circle as Trina mentions, “if we talk about biblically…that the marriage bedroom is undefiled, you don't even know what that means because you have – you can't.”

**Sex and Christianity**

Janae’ has participated in the circles via GoogleHangouts and has been relatively quiet until this moment. In a moment of great vulnerability, she responds to Trina’s comments,

Janae’: Can I jump in?

Marvette: Of course.

Pamela: Yeah girl.

Nikki: Aw.

Janae’: Okay so I've also been struggling to pop in, for the opposite reason of what Trina just said, um, because I have, I am very churched (laughs). I grew up in the church. My
Christian faith and identity is my most salient identity, and so, this shit have me really uncomfortable, um, and even in like answering the questions at the beginning, I was like I can't answer these. This is awkward and uncomfortable like I'm not allowed to think about this. I mean I'm not. This doesn't feel right to me because of my Christian values. Um, even saying the word sexuality feels like a curse word for me. Um, and because for me my values said that's not, that's something that's not supposed to happen outside of marriage. I didn't feel like I have much to contribute here. So I'm just real uncomfortable and I wanted to name that.

Pamela: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Marvette: Thank you for sharing.

Nikki: Yeah.

Janae’ felt extremely uncomfortable which left her unsure of how to participate in the circle. The circle became quiet, reflective. There were some women who were nodding their heads in agreement as Janae’ spoke. In support of naming her feelings, other women began to share their experiences in reconciling Christianity with sexuality. Naomie speaks of her own struggles within this discussion,

So in thinking about the videos too, I also think of, my identity as a Christian and how being – I wasn't even raised in the church. Um, just started going in like '08. But even in the short amount of time since I've been in church, just the messages that I've received has really impacted the way that I view sexuality and who I am as a woman, and all of these different things. So, that really plays out for me when I see, videos. Then the questionnaire you sent out talked about just that battle between what I've learned, who I
am, and how don't want to be oppressive to people. But those messages are just so like
rooted in me. And it really is a conflict, because, um, you know. It's just a conflict.
Naomie is trying to reconcile how to be supportive of others who have values that are in conflict
with her values. She wants to be supportive of others and be true to herself without being
oppressive to others.

Alana joins in the discussion to speak about her own journey of reconciling religion with
sex,

Yeah I think I go back and forth about that…Because context I think is important, like I
know when Paul talks about in the bible like, if you're single, your focus should be on
God. And developing a relationship with God. But if you can't control some of your
desires…you need to be married, if you can't control lust essentially. And I think there's
some validity in that. If the framework of the Christian faith is that you are here and
you're honoring God, and so you want to do things in your life, in your actions to solely
honor him. So things like pleasuring yourself, does not put him at the forefront. So
masturbation, all those things, but- but there's a lot of like conversations around the purity
movement, or this conversation about like waiting for marriage, but the context of in-
when the bible was written, was that men were coming to women who were like 13, 14
years old, saying I want you to be my wife. And here's a cow. You know like that was
the context of what was happening. And so how do we take those things, especially-
particularly I think when a lot of people are trying to reference honoring your body,
they're talking about what Paul is saying, to address those who are single and who are
married, how do we take that into application. So I'd go back and forth about it…
Alana received the message that women are unable to explore their sexuality and honor their relationship with God. Women should marry and only engage in sexual activity with their husbands in order to explore sexual pleasure. Alana thinks about these messages in the context they were written within. When Paul made this speech, marriage was initiated and looked different than it does today. This causes her to wrestle with these conflicting understandings.

An inner struggle continues for Alana. She shared her story so that Janae’ doesn’t feel like she is the only one who is struggling and feeling uncomfortable. Alana continues,

It's very hard, yeah so it's very hard. I go back and forth about it. And I don't have an answer for it but I keep, you know like, talking to God with that and I feel like there – I don't feel like I'm going to hell for that when there's questions I'm asking him continually and- but I don't know. Maybe I will go to hell. I don't know. But, I think I struggle with that too, and so I said that because I don't want you to feel uncomfortable, because I think it's okay to have questions and grapple with those questions. And even name what's uncomfortable to you and name what's uncomfortable to you because you're not the only one who has those questions. And regardless of what my sexual experience will be, I think there's still moments where we- we have to get to a place where we are comfortable with that, and then, where in the word can we find solace and comfort or hold yourself-ourselves accountable as people in the body of Christ or naw. Like I think there's room for us to have conversations and have those uncomfortable conversations in spaces. So I just wanted to name that or like address that, because it can be uncomfortable, but you're not alone, even if people practicing faith or as a part of the body of Christ. That those things aren't like, uncomfortable to deal with. And it's a struggle that even I have.
Alana continues to affirm and validate the feelings expressed by Janae’. She also notes that there should be space in the church for women to have these discussions and dialogues around sexuality and having a relationship with God. Sex is an uncomfortable topic for many women to discuss openly, and in this case, specifically Black women who practice Christianity.

Pamela continues with the discussion of sex and Christianity by reflecting on the evolution of her faith and her understanding of Christianity,

Yeah. I just let all my religion go. I ain't gon' lie…I just started having sex last year. Because the first time I let my old boyfriend eat me out, I had a panic attack. And I was like, I can't be living like this, I ain't follow Jesus to be having no panic attacks over no eating coochie. Like not happening. And so I was like something got to give. Um, I mean, I knew a lot of people who was having plenty of sex, and who still love – they still love Jesus…I can remember a time when I would be really uncomfortable doing this and so I absolutely hear you when you say that this is uncomfortable…Yes, I got journals in my room if I go find them and pull them out, where I've written like, I can't believe people want me to talk about this. I just didn't know what to do with it, like I just didn't know what to do with this.

In affirming Janae’s feelings, Pamela describes that her first sexual experience led to a panic attack and led her to question if it was the intention of Jesus for her to have mental ailments as a result of something that feels natural. She has decided that this was not true and that sex and Christianity is not a binary concept. Pamela believes she is allowed to question what she has learned Christianity to be while simultaneously using Christianity as frame to make meaning of the world around her.
Audre begins to describes her thoughts on faith and sexuality after listening in on the discussion between Janea’, Alana, and Pamela. Audre describes that the meaning of her faith and sexuality have been more fluid throughout her life,

So I'm in the middle… I've had both. I grew up in the church. All my life all of this stuff. But I've also always had [a] very open way of thinking about sex. Like it's just, it's just always been that way. Maybe it has something to do with my daddy telling me at 17 that it's okay to swallow. I don't know…sex specifically, has been the biggest distancer for me when it comes to religion. Because I just don't. I don't buy it. I never bought it. I still don't… that's why I think some of my Christian friends around me don't see me as…Christian as I believe I am.

Audre describes herself as being in the middle of the spectrum between sexuality and Christianity. She believes that some of her friends question her Christianity membership because of her views on sex.

**Consensual Sex**

The circle continues to have discussion about the Christian faith and the ideal that women must save themselves for marriage. There are grey areas within this concept. For example, if a woman is “molested” as a child, is she still considered a virgin? If a woman does do the “right” thing and waits for marriage, is she prepared physically and mentally for that sexual experience? Pamela reflects on how to rectify these grey areas within the church,

I've really been trying to figure out how in church we have these kind of conversations…And so in church, how do I have conversations with younger women. I'm not gon' tell them don't have sex before you get married. I will say that – to them, things that your sex needs to be consensual. So that you know if you wanna do it or not.
That's where we start. Because I don't- because if you start talkin' about concepts of virginity. We're talk- they were talking 'bout consent. And so if everything is- if a woman's value is centered on her willingness to have sex with you and her value as a virgin, we're in a lot of trouble. And so this really started when I was younger. My best friend was molested growing up. And I can remember being like 13 years old and her being like "I don't know if I'm a virgin or not. Because I was molested." And me being like yeah well you are because I mean well technically, I don't know. And like, struggling trying to figure out what it was. That's a dumb ass conversation. We don’t even – it doesn't need to be had. But we have it because for women in church you need to be a virgin.

Pamela wonders how the church can help young women navigate this idea of virginity and sexual violence, particularly at a young age. If society was more sex positive, would we be better equipped as women to have conversations about sex?

This circle has provided the space for these particular women to wrestle with their feelings and thoughts around faith and sex. Saphronia continues this discussion by expressing appreciation for having a space to discuss sex in general as Black women. She reflects on the evolution of her understanding of women sexual liberations and believes everyone should get to decide how they engage in sexual activity. Saphronia reflects, “I thought what the greatest thing somebody told me was that, you know, I'm sex positive, I think everybody should have sex. I think it's empowering that you have the opportunity to do whatever you want to.” Women could be more liberated sexually if society as a whole was sex positive; believing that everyone gets to make their own choices about sex free from judgment of others.
I appreciate you asking that question because I feel like often times it's not a conversation we have as Black women. First, I feel like we don't talk about sex enough. I've just been lucky to have friends who have been very like, sex! Let's have sex! Let's all talk about it! (laughs) All the time! 100%. Everyday. It's in our lives and so I've gotten, like used to always talking about it so it doesn't feel uncomfortable. But also honoring people who choose like I don't want to have sex right now. Maybe later. Maybe not ever, and I'm okay with it…Like I feel, excited talking about it! And I feel like it's great. It's a liberating experience for people but also, other side too. It's liberating that you get to decide.

Saphronia is excited that she gets to exist in a space where she feels free to talk about and engage in sex whenever she chooses while still respecting the decisions of others that choose not to engage. The liberation and excitement is in the ability for people to make choices about sex for themselves.

Sista scholars discussed how they were socialized by Christain beliefs to abstain from sexual activity and sexual pleasure in order to remain pure for their future husband. The scholars reflected on ways to problematize society’s, specifically those within the Christian faith, view of women’s sexual pleasure and agency. This concluded the circles, leading the scholars a better understanding of their meaning-making process and how to assist other, younger Black women in their own self-defining process.

**Conclusion: Magic Not Invincible**

At the beginning of circle 4, I began to summarize the past three circles. The topic of self-care emerged for me during my initial analysis and reflection on the past circles. Ending the
last circle discussing self-care was a way to give back and for the women to have something tangible to walk away with from this research experience. I reflected,

    Faith, again, consistent with literature is very important. Whether that be Christianity, which is mainly what came up here, or spiritual, more spiritual beliefs in terms of universe or vibrations or things like that. It's very important and integral into who we are and how we keep going and how we ... it's integral in like the self-sacrificing attitude that seems to show up and that we have to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others. That we're doing all of this emotional labor particularly without the expectation of getting that back, even though that's showing up in ... it manifests its ways in our bodies. So a lot of anxiety and depression ... came up. Uh, the self-care piece is more like ... an extra task, that's not something that's really integrated into who [we are]. I think that's because we've been socialized that that's not something that's important for us to take and do.

Self-sacrificing behavior came across as a major point within the three circles; although, it was not something that was explicitly discussed. It became quiet as I finished my last statement. I was not sure why and so I asked for someone to share their thoughts on my reflections. Sasha Fierce agreed and reflected on her experience with her mother,

    As far as the self-care piece and ... the relationship with the Black women, of course I meant, like you said ... most of the time it relates back to our mothers. And I can relate back to that because my mom, she was like Superwoman to me. She would come home after an 8-hour shift, cook a 30-minute meal before Rachael Ray made that popular, and then have us off to whatever activity, and then make sure we get our homework done and be in bed by 9 o'clock, 10 o'clock. And I just thought that was normal, and me trying to do that now ... She ... had [to] tell me like, you're crazy. Like, I used to cry most nights.
And she said the amount of work that you're doing right now I can't even imagine. And so, she's like, "You need to take a break. I did not take a break. I wish I would have taken a break." And then she reflected back on how her mother was doing the same thing so it's like a cycle that I don't want to teach my daughter, because I do want her to value life, rest, and reflection and like, taking in the moment of happiness.

Sasha Fierce has a young daughter who is a toddler while also being a full-time graduate student. Sasha’s mother warned her to not make the same mistakes by not taking care of herself. Sasha observed in childhood that to be a mother meant to be superwoman. Her mother disclosed to her that it was difficult for her to do everything by herself and not take time for herself. This labor caused her to cry most nights and she does not want the same thing for Sasha. Sasha continues her reflection,

And so like, how can I break that cycle, now that I'm aware of it, and what practices can I show my daughter so that ... yes I want her to see me as amazing, but I also want her to see me as someone who's taking care of myself.

Marvette: Yeah, that made me think of like, we're magic, right? But we're not, um, what's the word, we're not invincible.

We are magic. We are also not invincible. We have needs to be addressed. In the next chapter, I discuss these needs and ways educators and administrators can begin to address those needs within graduate programs.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We rock! We rock! No matter who you are, no matter where you come from, you are beautiful, you are powerful, you are brilliant, you are funny! Let me tell you, I’m so proud of you. My husband, your president, is so proud of you. And we have such big hopes and dreams for every single one of you. Now I know that is not always the message that you get from the world. I know there are voices that tell you that you are not good enough. That you have to look a certain way, act a certain way. That if you speak up, you’re too loud. If you step up to lead, you’re being bossy.

I decided to rewrite the tired old scripts that defines too many of us. I decided that I wasn’t bossy. I was confident and strong. I wasn’t loud. I was a young woman with something important to say. And when I looked into the mirror, I saw a tall and smart and beautiful Black girl. And THAT, more than anything else is what I want all of you to know. I want that for you. I want you to live life on your own terms, according to your own script. Use those tests in your life today to make you stronger for the bigger challenges tomorrow. Because trust me those challenges will come.

Anyone who has achieved ANYTHING in life knows that challenges and failures are necessary components of success. They know that when things get hard, it’s not always a sign that you’re doing something wrong. It’s often a sign you’re doing something right. Because those hard times shape you into the person you’re meant to be.” (Luvvie, 2015, First Lady Michelle Obama, para. 2-6).
In this chapter, I discuss the findings presented in chapter four. For the first section, titled Life Notes, I address the women who graciously gave their time and knowledge to this research project before presenting the discussion in more “traditional modes of representation and discourses” (Dillard, 2006, p. 6). I then summarize the findings connecting them back to existing literature. Next, I discuss the implications for practice and boundaries of the study. Finally, I outline potential areas for future research.

**Life Notes**

The voices and stories of Black women have been excluded from academia (Dillard, 2006). As a result, Black women have created counter spaces and room for themselves to tell their truth through other forms and spaces such as music, television shows, literature, and one-on-one dialogue with one another (Dillard, 2006). I choose to present my knowing and understandings in a narrative representation, or a life note (Bell-Scott, 1994; Dillard, 2006). Life notes provide a way to express the historical, political, context that encapsulate Black women and pays honor to the historical traditions of how Black women have come to share and learn from one another (Bell-Scott, 1994; Dillard, 2006). These life notes are a way to serve as conversations that may not be meant for all readers but allows the reader the privilege to gain some insight to the experiences of Black women and their ways of knowing. In this letter to my sista scholars, I again use the language of “we” and “our” as a way continue our dialogue with one another.

**Dear Sista Scholars**

I wanted to center the experiences of Black women without centering whiteness in the way that many research projects compare our experience to those of White students. I wanted to
explore the parts we do not often discuss or have an opportunity to explore. We have been socialized within systemic oppressive structures that have and continue to impact our lives. I wanted to conduct this project in a way that honored your stories without flattening the experiences of Black women as a whole. I wanted to provide a peek into the world of Black women’s identity development for the benefit and knowledge of other Black women. We live our lives and have so few opportunities to untangle our experiences and knowing through supportive dialogue with other Black women who are doing the same. This was meant to be an opportunity for Black women to see their insides reflected by those who look like their outsides. This letter is my homage to you and your truths. For those of you who may not understand, respectfully, this letter was not meant for you. “Don’t feel bad if you can’t sing along. Just be glad you got the whole wide world. This us. This shit is from us. Some shit you can’t touch” (Solange, 2016, 3:56).

“He’s very dreamy, but he is not the sun, you are” (Harper & Phelan, 2014, episode 24).

Growing up, we have seen the women in our lives have to be strong, self-sacrificing for those she loved, especially the men in her life. A higher standard of responsibility exists for us that requires us to be superhuman, that requires us to appear perfect. Our mothers, grandmothers, and othermothers (Collins, 1990) raised us to be the same, which was in contrast to our brothers and fathers. Our role is to act and sacrifice for the good of the family, mostly the men.

As young girls, we are taught to not expect anything or depend on a man while simultaneously being taught that everything we do, learn, and earn is for the benefit of a man. As a mother, you love your son by coddling him. You teach your daughter about caring for a family, a house, and sacrificing. You communicate to your son that a woman will be there
to take care of his needs. As a sister, you know you have to work harder than your brother academically and financially. As a wife, you are expected to work, raise kids, cook and clean. We are raised to be workhorses and it continues in our schooling. As doctoral students, we are expected to be quiet, work twice as hard, and not boast about our accomplishments. We sacrifice and are the backbone of our programs only to be overlooked and ignored for awards, accolades, and praise.

As Black women, and women in general, society tells us our worth, our very existence is connected to cisgender, heterosexual, able bodied men. Our life is about doing the right things so that we can be chosen. A woman’s accolades and accomplishments will never legitimize her in the way that marriage and children can. A woman who just gets to be is not something to be celebrated or even discussed. Our reproductive organs are not to be discussed. Even saying words such as sexuality and vagina feel wrong to us because of our socialization as women. The pressure for being married and bearing children is real; however, these things do not determine your worth. Having it all together does not determine your worth. Your body is yours and you are allowed to give it to whomever you choose.

Sex and sexuality have always been in the background of our lives. Talking and thinking about sex is unholy; saving ourselves for marriage is more important. We learn of sex from the world, from someone telling us not to do it, and from finding pornography with our friends. We are excited to explore sex, although it comes with a side of guilt from dishonoring our relationships with God. Now is the time that we begin to question our understandings of religion, spirituality, and the world. As we grow into Black women, we have the freedom to define our own meanings of sexuality. This defining process produces tension with our faith traditions and it becomes more and more challenging and necessary to reconcile the two.
We looked to women depicted on television as a way to figure out what it meant to be and look like a “cool” and “sweet” Black woman as a child. Messages told us who we should be and how we should act but we did not quite fit those standards. Instead, we looked for women who matched more of how we viewed ourselves because it felt more affirming. These women may not have behaved the way or thought the way we did, but they looked like us. Today, we fight to personally define our Black womanhood. This process is difficult because no model exists for this. Our mothers cannot fully relate to the life that we live now, so we gravitate towards characters on television that can. These women remind us of our friends, our sisters, and us. The Mary Janes and Olivias seem to have accomplished something different, something higher that we are currently working towards.

“It’s not just that you take what we create, it’s that it’s always lost in translation.” (Button Poetry, 2016, 1:57)

Our bodies hold the magic, the sacrifices, and the trauma of the past and present. As slaves, we were used to breed more property while matching the men in skill and productivity. Today, we are still expected to do the same. Except we are not harvesting cotton, we are now harvesting degrees. We are the silent ones behind the scenes. We are the ones on committees, running research projects, teaching courses, volunteering our time and emotion to our communities while still completing our class assignments and own research projects. We do so without praise or mention from the Ivory Tower. Oh yes, the academics celebrate our numbers, but it is hidden behind convoluted rhetoric that erases our efforts.

Colleges and universities give extra attention and funding for Black men because there are few of them. What about the Black women who are here, who have been here? What about the Black women who continue to make the academic programs look good as they capture our
beauty in their marketing and promotional materials? Who continue to earn degrees without assistance, support, or validation?

Ivory Tower, you give the gifts of trauma and pain, instead of support and assistance. And we keep rising; we keep spreading our magic. You tell us that we are not good enough; that our acceptance into your program was some sort of anomaly. As a result, we have to work harder, be the butt of your oppressive jokes and remarks. I acknowledge that this is not about one particular group of individuals. It is about the institution of higher education. This shit was not built for Black women. We are not asking for handouts and or special attention because we have been doing great without it. That excellence comes with its price though. And we continue to bear that price alone. We ask that you acknowledge us and that you hear us. We are asking to stop being lost in translation.

“Cause you were my sister, my strength, and my pride” (Chamber, 1996).

Sista Scholars, being with you gave me what I needed even when I did not want to or think I needed your support and community. You all have taught me that it is okay to show up, support your sista, and sit in her pain with her, knowing that you will also have to sit in your own pain and discomfort. And that is what healing looks like. Being vulnerable, opening up to those who have earned the privilege to sit with you is how we can continue to heal each other and ourselves. You have taught me that we can be in the spirit of love and sisterhood with one another and at the same time, recognize that socialization and spirit of unhealthy competition based on color, hair, and acceptance from men also exists in that space.

No one will ever outmatch your magic and your hustle. Remember, you are not invincible. You are important and you do deserve love. It is okay not to be superwoman; it is okay to place you first. Self-care “is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act
of political warfare” (Lorde, 1998, p. 131). Preserving yourself is not about additional items to your ever-growing to-do list, it is about managing and building your emotional energy. Our constant labor and sacrifice takes an emotional, physical, and spiritual toil. That hustle, while admirable, is ultimately causing our deaths (Harris, 2015). It is okay to recharge your mind and your heart, whether it is God, sex, or Scandal.

I am here as a fellow sista and scholar to be here to support, validate, and confide in you. I am eternally grateful to share in your stories to end my doctoral experience with women who will change the world.

**Discussion and Implications**

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black graduate women on college campuses make meaning of media representations of themselves and how that meaning impacts how the women define themselves. I found that the Black women in this study made meaning of self by interpreting, implementing, and interrogating messages received from family, particularly mother figures, Black women on television, and from their Christian socialization. Additionally, I found that Black women self-sacrifice and create space for themselves where that space has not previously existed.

**Identity Development and Socialization**

Identity development is a continuum, a tight rope where one oscillates between various levels of saliency and understanding at any given time in any given context (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, & Rowley, 1998). Mothers, grandmother, and othermothers first inform the meaning-making process of self for sista scholars. These women- figures raised the scholars to work hard, not to depend or trust another person, especially a man, and to always self-sacrifice for everyone. This understanding of what it means to be a Black
woman also translates into graduate programs. Identity development theorists argue that this superwoman, self-sacrificing process inhibits the development process (Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987). Self-sacrifice does not have to mean that a woman will not continue to define herself (Josselson, 1987) it means that she can simultaneously self-sacrifice herself for the benefit of others and choose a new empowering definition, (Collins, 2000) if given the space to do so.

Interactions and relationships with Black women figures, including television characters, continue to influence the meaning-making process for the sista scholars by providing nuanced definitions of Black womanhood. The relationships and interactions offer a catalyst or a space for the sista scholars to engage in dialogue and critique of self (Henry, 2010; Peoples, 2008). Dialogue and identity critique highlight nuanced versions of women who present in a complex, non-binary manner; versions may be different from previous understandings of Black womanhood. Black women can now choose to define themselves differently than they have before because of these new and different understandings (Boylorn, 2008; Henry, 2010; Peoples, 2008; Perry, 2011).

Context, in which identity development occurs, is always informed by systems of oppression and individual matrices of oppression (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Collins, 2000; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, & Rowley, 1998). The sista scholars mostly grew up guided by Christian values and beliefs. Christianity (religion) is intertwined with Blackness (race) and womanliness (gender) (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). These sista scholars understanding of self cannot be divorced for their socialization as Christian women. This is an important note as this impacts how these scholars interact with others, advocate for themselves and others, and self-esteem and self-valuation. The constant tension
between being “a good Christian woman” with the self-definition process impacts understanding of self. The messages from church, family, and other institutions tell women to maintain their purity and to not engage of questions of self.

Black women are not a monolith. The progression through identity development calls for Black women to move away from this one Black woman idea to the consideration of multiple forms of Black women. For the sista scholars, this progress was more about the relationship with and the distancing from respectability. One of the original version of a Black woman is someone who is respectable, close to whiteness. This woman is a “sweet, pure” woman of service; the Claire Huxtables of the world. As the scholars age, they generate more experience (i.e., knowledge), which produces different versions of what Black womanhood means (Collins, 2000). Sista scholars wrestle with their closeness to whiteness, Christianity, and heteronormativity while simultaneously resisting those very systems. Naomie summarizes this best by stating that this relationship to whiteness and respectability as a “battle between what I've learned, who I am, and how don't want to be oppressive to people. But those messages are just so like rooted in me. And it really is a conflict, because, …It's just a conflict.”

Christiannormativity, heteronormative, patriarchy, and racism are normative and pervasive in U.S. based society.

**For Us, By Us: Black Women Creating and Supporting Each Other**

Identity development continues after the undergraduate degree. This study expands the discussion about identity development because it explores “non-traditional” students’ identity development. The data provided creates more understanding and nuance due to the sista scholars having more life experiences and speaking about their stories within a different educational environment from the undergraduate experience. Without community and a sense of belonging,
students are known to not persist towards graduation (Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2012). Feelings of isolation links to academic success and physical and virtual spaces created for and by Black women allow for a sense of community of support and validation (Alina, 2015). With some women being the “only” in their program, having opportunities to connect with other women in PhD programs and be in community provides an avenue for further self-exploration and self-definition. Black women are making the space for themselves. It is not about waiting on the assistance and support from others specifically faculty and other educators and administrators. Black women are creating networks that help inform each other about class selection, information about the doctoral process and resources, creating accountability and advising for personal and education topics, and creating social opportunities that allow each other to foster and experience a sense of belonging within the institution that otherwise feels isolating.

Dialoguing is the meaning-making process for Black women (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006). The process of one Black woman communicating with another Black woman about her experience provides support, understanding, and validation. A scholar telling another scholar about her meeting with a faculty member helps both scholars make meaning of self and their experiences with faculty. The transaction of one scholar telling about her meeting and the other scholar listening provides support. Discussing and listening to each other cause them both to process and compare each of their experiences to the others. This comparison helps each scholar situate her respective relationships and interactions into a larger picture of understanding. As a result of this process, both women can receive validation of their experiences (Alinia, 2015; Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2006).
Black women will continue to show up and make space for one another. Sista scholar requirements and data collection were completed in a three-week timeline. Sista scholars wanted to show up for me, a fellow sista scholar. Sasha Fierce states in her introduction, “Marvette is just a wonderful Black Girl Magic that I [encountered] when I cam here to [the institution], so I wanted to be a supportive sister for her.” I personally have a connection with sista scholars in some way. Most of them decided to participate in the circle because of our relationship and interactions. Additionally, one reason I wanted to do research with graduate Black women was because we do not qualify for many research studies and I wanted to center the voices of Black women graduate students. Alana followed with,

This is one of the first ones I can, since I've been in a masters program…that I [am] actually qualified to participate in (collective laughter) cause the other ones never really fit the parameters. And I thought it was an important topic, so, I wanted to also support Marvette.

I am thankful for the constant support and community with my fellow sista scholars. In the next section, I will discuss recommendations for educators.

**Recommendations For Educators**

Educators can take steps to meet the needs of Black women graduate students. Educators can take intentional efforts to recognize and acknowledge the work that has already been done by women. One example is providing and maintaining mentoring opportunities. Educators in graduate programs can encourage Black women to utilize research designs that are more in line with their researcher’s perspective. Finally, educators utilize more partnerships between graduate programs, graduate student organizations, and health services to provide more intentional and
high impact initiatives to address the needs of Black graduate women at PWIs. I address these recommendations further in the following sections.

**Recognize And Acknowledge Black Graduate Women’s Work**

Black women being raised to work hard, not to depend or trust another person, especially a man, and to always self-sacrifice for everyone also translate into their graduate programs. Black women will continue to be the hardest working and overlooked because most do not know that it is an option not to do these things (or there may be real, negative consequences). Black women may know on an intellectual basis that they choose which activities to participate in; however, socialization and oppression is ever omnipresent and continuously influencing decision making. Likewise, the caricature of Black women being superwomen has also been a heavily depicted image displayed through society since slavery. This means that instructors and other educators may unknowingly (or knowingly) hold the expectations that, more than their peers, Black women graduate students should work harder to prove themselves academically worthy. These expectations only contribute to further trauma and oppression of Black women.

Black women earning the majority of the degrees awarded to Black students have little to do with the support and guidance of those within the institutions. Black women’s success is due to their own emotional and physical labor and for showing up for each other. Student Affairs educators should be aware that students are doing the very work that student affairs educators are charged to do. While Black women are relatively academically successful, the numbers of Black women graduates are still significantly lower than the overall average of graduates (US Department of Education, 2016).

Black women show up for one another, create spaces for one another, and share information with one another. This additional labor should be applauded and is mandatory for
the survival and success of Black women, particularly Black women graduate students. Black women are helping each other navigate the understanding of self by showing up and dialoguing with one another. Understanding of self happens within dialogues, even dialogues about last night’s episode of *Scandal*. Black women will continue to make space for themselves. As they should continue to be the operator of these spaces, the institution can still provide other support and acknowledgment to Black women by recognizing and acknowledging their presence, their work, and their needs by providing financial, physical, and human resources.

**Create and Sustain Mentoring Opportunities**

Sista circles serve as a space that Black women can hold for each other that allows for relationship building, mentoring, and ultimately healing. Existing research cites mentoring as an important tool in the academic success for Black women (Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011). Mentoring is best when it happens organically and is an intentional and reciprocal relationship between all involved. A form of mentoring is also happening within sista circles as the women provide guidance, support, and challenge to one another through dialogue. This research adds that mentoring relationships can also be an intentional space of healing, specifically with intergenerational trauma. Student affairs professionals would best serve mentoring programs by engaging in research about the identity development of Black women in a historical American history context to better inform the designing and implementation of formal mentoring programs within universities and colleges.

Formal mentoring programs intended for Black women would be best to have time and space for groups of women to come together to share their experiences. Black women come to know from experience and dialogue with other Black women (Collins, 2000). Providing space and opportunity for women to come together allows for this knowledge production to take place.
The use of sista circles and organization of mentoring programs for Black women would be better if done so by Black women educators. Research and other information cannot fully communicate the cultural and nuance that exists between Black women. It should be noted that this does not mean that black women are a monolithic entity with the same cultural understandings; there are some cultural elements that are native and intuitive between American Black women.

**Explore Different Epistemologies and Methodologies**

Faculty within graduate programs have to remove the systematic and structural barriers that prevent Black women from engaging in more authentic forms of research. Making room for epistemologies and methodologies that highlight the often ignored and erased knowledge, theories, and learning of Black women. Making room for these ways of research requires program administrators and faculty to recognize, acknowledge, and dismantle the oppressive barriers that exists with the more “traditional” forms of research. Additionally, graduate programs could provide more formal resources for graduate students in general without placing the burden of support to graduate student organization.

**Stronger Partnerships With Health Care and Spiritual Services**

The women in the circles communicated the importance of their spiritual and religious beliefs; however, there are not many opportunities for women to question their understandings of self and the world. Researchers have indicated the positive correlation between a strong spiritual connection, resilience, and academic success (Hesse-Biber, Livingstone, Ramirez, Barko, & Johnson, 2010; Watt, 2006). Educators intending to implement intentional programming for Black women could partner with spiritual leaders and departments on and off campus to offer higher quality programming. In addition to spiritual leaders, educators should also connect with
health care and promotions departments. Black women are less likely to ask for help and as a result, stress related ailments will present itself within the body (Scott, 2016). Health care providers (e.g., general practitioners, counselors) who are more informed with the research on Black women will have a more accurate understanding of how symptoms present themselves particularly with Black women. Also, providing information and demystifying health care processes for Black women may increase their chances for reaching out for assistance.

The messages from church, family, and other institutions tell women to maintain their purity and to not engage of questions of self. Asking women to divorce Christianity within the classroom and research is impossible and unethical. There has to be room within the college environment where students are allowed to dissect and discuss their understanding of self that also includes their understanding of religion and spirituality.

Recommendations for Future Research

The scope and time limits of this study did not allow for the stories of additional identities to be centered within the research. The knowledge of the social locations of other intersecting identities (e.g., trans, queer) experiences in identity development and connection with popular culture would provide more nuance and detail to the understanding of Black women’s identity development. These additional identity layers provide a different context of how graduate students experience a historically White institution. It highlights how additional space can be made in a more inclusive way.

Additionally, understanding the experiences of non-American Black women’s development experiences are needed in approaching the notion that Black women are a non-monolithic group. Students who are making meaning in a way that combines a series of cultures’ histories, and stereotypes within an American collegiate environment could provide
additional insight into the experience of graduate students. Identifying as a Black woman can be interpreting in myriad ways, such as Afro-Latina and first-generation African American. Each experience being unique in it’s own way.

Using a more interdisciplinary approach to resources can produce a new depth of understanding of identity development. Black women experiencing outside life events within their bodies and/or the use of spirituality to bolster resiliency would add another layer of understanding the meaning making systems of Black women. Finally, exploring the mother-daughter and intergenerational trauma within the family and its influence on identity development could be beneficial. This relationship between identity development and intergenerational trauma may potentially have ties to Black women faculty relationships with Black women graduate students.

**Conclusion**

This chapter outlines the discussion of the findings, implications for practice, and suggestions for future research. The big takeaway from this study is that identity development continues after the undergraduate process and as a result, should also be a consideration of student affairs administrators, educators, and researchers when making policy and programming decisions. Additionally, the experiences of women of the Black diaspora should also be considered within the conversation and research around Black women’s identity development. Finally, the relationship between Black women faculty and Black women graduate students, the relationship between identity development and spirituality and resiliency are all topics to explore further.
REFERENCES


Harris, T. M. (2007). Black feminist thought and cultural contracts: Understanding the intersection and negotiation of racial, gendered, and professional identities in the academy. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, (110), 55-64.*


Henry, W. J. (2010). Hip-hop feminism: A standpoint to enhance the positive self-identity of
Black college women. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 47*(2), 139-156. doi: 0.2202/1949-6605.6065


Ryan, L. (2017, February 27). Viola davis is the first black actor to win Oscar, Emmy, and Tony


Williams, M. R., Brewley, D. N., Reed, R., White, D. Y., Davis-Haley, R. T. (2005). Learning to read each other: Black female graduate students share their experiences at a white


APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

Researcher’s Statement
I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called “informed consent.” A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator: Chris Linder, PhD
Department of Counseling and Human Development
linder@uga.edu
706.542.1812

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to better understand Black college women’s understanding of media representations of Black women and how that understanding influences Black college women’s identity development. My hope is that the results of this study will improve campus environments, programs, and services for all students, and more specifically Black college women. You are being asked to participate because you are a Black college woman.

Study Procedures
• If you agree to participate, you will be asked to…
• Participate in an audio and video recorded sista circle (focus group) lasting 90-120 minutes with three to seven other students.
• Provide a media representation (picture, movie, video, music, television show, etc.) of a famous Black woman in popular culture that has had a great impact on your life. You will be asked to share about this representation and the impact it has had on your life.
• Share your thoughts and reflections of the sista circle (focus group) experience.

Risks and discomforts
I do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research.

Benefits
There are not benefits to participating in this study. The results of this study may help to influence college and university practices to build more inclusive campus environments for all students, but especially Black college women.

**Incentives for participation**
There are no incentives for participating in this study.

**Audio/Video Recording**
I plan to audio record these sista circles (focus groups) to ensure that I appropriately and accurately capture your thoughts and experiences. I will have the audio files transcribed by a professional transcriptionist and then the audio files will be destroyed. Additionally, I will personally review and partially transcribe the video files and then the video files will be destroyed. I will replace your name with a pseudonym in the transcription of the sista circle (focus group). Please initial below if you agree to have this interview audio recorded or not. You may still participate in this study even if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.

- [ ] I do not want to have this interview recorded.
- [ ] I am willing to have this interview recorded.

I plan to take a photo of the media representation you draw in the focus group so that I can look at all of the representations together in the data analysis process. I may also use the photo of the media representation in a publication. Please do not write your name anywhere on the representation (if applicable) – you may use a pseudonym in place of your name if you want to use your name somewhere in the picture.

- [ ] I do not want to have a picture of my media representation taken and used.
- [ ] I am willing to have a picture of my media representation taken and used.

**Privacy/Confidentiality**
The sista circle (focus group) data will not have your name associated with it. I will replace your name with a pseudonym in the transcription of the focus group and I will not link the pseudonym to your actual name. Even though I will emphasize to all sista scholars that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential, it is possible that sista scholars may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future. The audio and video files and the transcriptions of the files will be stored on a password-protected folder on the UGA secured cloud storage (SkyDrive) to which only the researcher and the transcriptionist have access. The project's research records may be reviewed by departments at the University of Georgia responsible for regulatory and research oversight. Researchers will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law.

**If you have questions**
The main researcher conducting this study is Marvette Lacy a doctoral student at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact mlsccy@uga.edu or at 478.387.8927. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights
as a research sista scholar in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

**Research Subject’s Consent to Participate in Research:**
To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Researcher</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of Sista scholar</td>
<td>Signature</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.
NAME:
Pseudonym: (name that will be used to maintain confidentiality)

Email address:

Age:

Year in School:

Major/Program:

Religious affiliation (if any):

Race:

Ethnicity:

Gender Identity:

Sexual Orientation:

Ability Status:

Socio-economic Status:

Additional salient identities:
APPENDIX C

SISTA CIRCLE 1 PROTOCOL

Step 1: Welcome

Welcome everyone and engage in conversation until start time. This is used to build rapport and to create a comfortable and informal environment. Snacks will also be provided.

Step 2: Consent

The following script will be utilized at the start of each interview:

Hello!

Thank you for taking the time to participate in today’s sista circle. I will honor your time by trying to complete today’s session within a 2-hour timeframe, however, there is a possibility that we may take more time. If you must leave due to time constraints, please feel free to do so.

I would like for each of you to note that I will be audio and video recording today’s session. The purpose recording is simply to ensure that my notes and observations remain accurate.

I am a researcher studying the experiences of Black college women’s understanding media representations of Black women and how that understanding impacts how you define yourself.

My study is qualitative. This means that I will be collecting data that is inclusive of your perspectives, viewpoints, and overall experiences.

All the information that I collect will remain confidential. For instance, any direct quotes that are published in the final product will be logged under a pseudo name. It is my hope that these guidelines will aid you in openly sharing your thoughts.

Finally, please recognize that this is intended to be a brave and power conscious space. If at any time you do not feel comfortable answering a question, please do not feel pressured to do so. I am sensitive to any requests you may have in concealing the particulars of your personal experience.

What concerns, if any, do you have involving this study?

[Be certain that the sista scholar(s) has completed the consent forms.]
One final note: Please remember to state your name prior to making a comment or asking a question. This will help me to keep your responses organized.

Step Three: Check For New Sista scholars

If there are new sista scholars who came to the circle before having a chance to be contacted by email, I will have two laptops for sista scholars to complete the consent forms.

Step Four: Begin recordings

I will have two audio recorders and two video recorders.

Step Five: Start Sista Circle

- Introductions: Name, Year in School, Program, Why are you interested in participating in this study?
- Crystal Valentine & Aaliyah Jihad - “Hide Your Shea Butter” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzcwWMqRjl8&index=20&list=PLy18cZUrDR9gS8MPEHf47ASRrc_5LYoXu
- Beyoncé Formation https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDZJPJV__b
- Questions
  - What are your reactions to these videos?
  - Where do you see yourself in popular culture media?
  - How do you think Black women are presented through media (e.g., reality television or music videos)? Why?
  - What does it mean to see yourself represented within popular culture?
  - How do the Black women in popular culture influence how you view and define yourself?
- Explanation of remaining sista circles and topic selections
  - What topics would you like to discuss for the next two circles?

Step Six: Conclude Circle

Stop recorders. Thank everyone for coming. Answer any questions.

Step Seven: Journal Prompt

After each circle, sista scholars received a follow-up, thank you email that included a link to a Qualtrics form. This form was a journal prompt to reflect on the previous circle and to prepare for the next circle.

Journal Prompt #1

- Name (First or Pseudonym)
- How would you describe the experience of participating in this sista circle?
- After having some time to reflect, are there any thoughts or reactions that you want to share from anything discussed in the circle?
- Is there anything else that you would like to share?
APPENDIX D
SISTA CIRCLE 2 PROTOCOL

Step 1: Welcome

Welcome everyone and engage in conversation until start time. This is used to build rapport and to create a comfortable and informal environment. Snacks will also be provided.

Step 2: Consent

The following script will be utilized at the start of each interview:

Hello!

Thank you for taking the time to participate in today’s sista circle. I will honor your time by trying to complete today’s session within a 2-hour timeframe, however, there is a possibility that we may take more time. If you must leave due to time constraints, please feel free to do so.

I would like for each of you to note that I will be audio and video recording today’s session. The purpose recording is simply to ensure that my notes and observations remain accurate.

I am a researcher studying the experiences of Black college women’s understanding media representations of Black women and how that understanding impacts how you define yourself.

My study is qualitative. This means that I will be collecting data that is inclusive of your perspectives, viewpoints, and overall experiences.

All the information that I collect will remain confidential. For instance, any direct quotes that are published in the final product will be logged under a pseudo name. It is my hope that these guidelines will aid you in openly sharing your thoughts.

Finally, please recognize that this is intended to be a brave and power conscious space. If at any time you do not feel comfortable answering a question, please do not feel pressured to do so. I am sensitive to any requests you may have in concealing the particulars of your personal experience

What concerns, if any, do you have involving this study?

[Be certain that the sista scholar s has completed the consent forms.]
One final note: Please remember to state your name prior to making a comment or asking a question. This will help me to keep your responses organized.

Step Three: Check For New Sista scholars

If there are new sista scholars who came to the circle before having a chance to be contacted by email, I will have two laptops for sista scholars to complete the consent forms.

Step Four: Begin recordings

I will have two audio recorders and two video recorders.

Step Five: Start Sista Circle

• Introductions: Name, Year in School, Program, Why are you interested in participating in this study?
• Insecure Episode 1 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMwjmHYqOZo
• Discussion of episode and any messages communicated from the video.

Step Six: Conclude Circle

Stop recorders. Thank everyone for coming. Answer any questions.

Step Seven: Journal Prompt

After each circle, sista scholars received a follow-up, thank you email that included a link to a Qualtrics form. This form was a journal prompt to reflect on the previous circle and to prepare for the next circle.

Journal Prompt #2

• Name (First or Pseudonym)
• How would you describe the experience of participating in this sista circle?
• After having some time to reflect, are there any thoughts or reactions that you want to share from anything discussed in the circle?
• These next set of questions will help transition to the next circle.
• What are some of your favorite #BlackGirlMagic songs? (e.g., Indie.Arie’s Video)
• As Black women, we can constantly sacrifice ourselves to help others. How do you practice self-care and give back to yourself?
• What does a sexually confident Black woman look like to you? What are some things that she does or how does she think about her sexuality?
• What messages did you receive about sex and sexuality growing up? If at all, how have those messages evolved?
• Thank you!
APPENDIX E
SISTA CIRCLE 3 PROTOCOL

Step 1: Welcome

Welcome everyone and engage in conversation until start time. This is used to build rapport and to create a comfortable and informal environment. Snacks will also be provided.

Step 2: Consent

The following script will be utilized at the start of each interview:

Hello!

Thank you for taking the time to participate in today’s sista circle. I will honor your time by trying to complete today’s session within a 2-hour timeframe, however, there is a possibility that we may take more time. If you must leave due to time constraints, please feel free to do so.

I would like for each of you to note that I will be audio and video recording today’s session. The purpose recording is simply to ensure that my notes and observations remain accurate.

I am a researcher studying the experiences of Black college women’s understanding media representations of Black women and how that understanding impacts how you define yourself.

My study is qualitative. This means that I will be collecting data that is inclusive of your perspectives, viewpoints, and overall experiences.

All the information that I collect will remain confidential. For instance, any direct quotes that are published in the final product will be logged under a pseudo name. It is my hope that these guidelines will aid you in openly sharing your thoughts.

Finally, please recognize that this is intended to be a brave and power conscious space. If at any time you do not feel comfortable answering a question, please do not feel pressured to do so. I am sensitive to any requests you may have in concealing the particulars of your personal experience.

What concerns, if any, do you have involving this study?

[Be certain that the sista scholar has completed the consent forms.]
One final note: Please remember to state your name prior to making a comment or asking a question. This will help me to keep your responses organized.

Step Three: Check For New Sista scholars

If there are new sista scholars who came to the circle before having a chance to be contacted by email, I will have two laptops for sista scholars to complete the consent forms.

Step Four: Begin recordings

I will have two audio recorders and two video recorders.

Step Five: Start Sista Circle

- Introductions: Name, Year in School, Program, Why are you interested in participating in this study?
- Provide each sista scholar a sheet of black, white paper. Explain to sista scholars that there will be a series of statements and questions. Sista scholars could draw pictures, symbols, or write words to answer the statements and questions.
  - Sexuality to me is…
  - Being sexy is…
  - If you are sexuality active, I feel comfortable during a sexual experience when…
  - I feel comfortable asking for what I need and want during sex…
  - I feel comfortable asking for what I need and want within a romantic relationship
  - I feel my sexuality is a big part of my identity
  - Things and people who influence my understanding of my sexuality are…
  - Being a woman means…
  - This is how a woman should act in relationships
  - Sex positive looks like…
- After the statements and questions, sista scholars had time to reflect on their answers while they watched the following videos.
  - Fade Video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxGvm6btP1A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxGvm6btP1A)
  - Raven Symone Video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h97F6BGdqA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h97F6BGdqA) Start at 2:09 End at 5:13
- Discussion
  - Thoughts and reactions from the drawing activities and/or videos
  - What messages have you received about sex, sexuality, and gender

Step Six: Conclude Circle

Stop recorders. Thank everyone for coming. Answer any questions.

Step Seven: Journal Prompt
After each circle, sista scholars received a follow-up, thank you email that included a link to a Qualtrics form. This form was a journal prompt to reflect on the previous circle and to prepare for the next circle.

Journal Prompt #3

- Name (First or Pseudonym)
- After having some time to process the last circle, how would you describe your experience participating in the circle? Any other insights or a-ha’s?
- If you feel comfortable sharing, how would you describe the relationship with your parents (or guardians)? How have those relationships impacted who you are today?
- Is there anything you would like to share that I have not asked or that has not come up during the circles?
## APPENDIX F

**SISTA SCHOLAR INFORMATION**

### Table 1

*Sista scholar Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Additional Identities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trina</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Spiritual Christian Tradition</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Fluid</td>
<td>Able Bodied</td>
<td>Cis-Het Non Gender Conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alana</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td>Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomie</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Able-Bodied, minded, etc.</td>
<td>First generation college student Educated Black Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janae’</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Non-denomination Christian</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Able-bodied</td>
<td>Disabled-eye contacts and glasses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saphronia</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td></td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sasha</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Lower SES, Working Class</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Able</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audre</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Traditionally Able</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Womanist Christian</td>
<td>Working Class Working Class</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Fully Abled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>socialized, Black Middle Class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>actualized</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
