In Search of Our Mothers' Garden: A Womanist Witnessing of Black Motherhood and Mental Health

Dorothy'e Gott

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd

Recommended Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by University of Memphis Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of Memphis Digital Commons. For more information, please contact khggerty@memphis.edu.
IN SEARCH OF OUR MOTHERS’ GARDEN: A WOMANIST WITNESSING OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD AND MENTAL HEALTH

by

Dorothy’e Helen-Marie Gott, MS

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Counseling Psychology

The University of Memphis

August 2022
Abstract

It is reported that 7.5 million African Americans are diagnosed with mental illness, and up to 7.5 million more may be affected without formal diagnosis (Davis, 2005). Acknowledging a 2:1 gender ratio of depression, women may be over-represented in this population (Immerman & Mackey, 2003). African American women’s lower rates of utilization of mental health services, which has been suggested to be impacted by stigma surrounding mental health, serves as an additional barrier for the attainment of optimal mental health. Thompson-Sanders et al. (2004) suggested that Black women who believe that living with psychological pain is part of her role as a “Strong Black Woman” may not see that pain as a health threat and may cope by enduring rather than receiving treatment.

Limited research exists regarding attitudes and beliefs of African American mothers with mental health concerns. An extensive amount of research available regarding maternal mental illness focuses its attention on the impact a mother’s mental health has on her children. Highlighting the limited research available regarding African American mothers with mental health concerns, and extensive research focused on the impact of maternal mental health on children, which is generalized from studies of White and middle-class women (Oyserman et al., 2002), research focus on the experiences of African American mothers was imperative.

Coupling cultural values regarding strength with the Silencing Paradigm, which is defined as feeling the need to self-silence to keep aspects of a woman’s experiences hidden from those around her, serve as additional barriers for women to report distress. Considering that the Strong Black Woman stereotype is represented and experienced differently amongst African American women, the focus of this research was to examine individualized understandings of “Strong Black Woman” amongst African American mothers with mental health concerns.
Utilizing an integrated Womanism theory and Womanist and Voice-centered methodologies, 8 African American mothers participated in Womanist witnessing. Engagement in Womanist witnessing highlighted unique and individualized experiences of 8 African American mothers, whose experiences of motherhood, mental health, and strength varied significantly.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother. Words cannot express how proud I am to be your daughter. It is my greatest honor.
Acknowledgement

First, I want to say thank you to my committee. Thank you for supporting this dissertation and the journey it has taken me on. Thank you for embracing my search for a less crooked space to tell these wonderful stories from a group of phenomenal women.

I want to say thank you to my friends and family. To my friends, particularly Daniel and Asia, you both have made this journey so amazing, even in the darkest of days. I am so grateful that Counseling Psychology brought us together, these past 5 years, and grateful to you both for the growth you have required from me. To my mother, father, and brother, there is not a big enough word to say thank you for all you have done. My biggest supporters, and even bigger protectors, I am so grateful to have been blessed with a family that could see in me what I could not always see in myself.

Most importantly, thank you to the 8 gracious mothers that made this dissertation possible. Your words and your voices are the thread that holds this work together. Thank you for inviting me into your homes (virtually) and into your world. Each of you are permanently etched on my heart, and I hope this experience provided you a space that was a little less crooked. I am eternally grateful and in awe of you all.
# Table of Content

*Abstract* .................................................................................................................................................. *i*

*Dedication* ................................................................................................................................................ *iii*

*Acknowledgement* ..................................................................................................................................... *iv*

*Chapter 1* ................................................................................................................................................ *1*

African American Motherhood and Mental Health ..................................................................................... *1*

Strength ......................................................................................................................................................... *6*

Crooked Room ............................................................................................................................................. *8*

Misrecognition Recognized ......................................................................................................................... *11*

Silencing Paradigm ....................................................................................................................................... *12*

Strong Black Woman .................................................................................................................................. *14*

Ain’t I a Woman? .......................................................................................................................................... *17*

My Strength is not Your Strength but, Neither Should Hurt ....................................................................... *19*

Maternal Mental Illness ................................................................................................................................. *22*

Standing Upright in a Space with her Shape in Mind ............................................................................... *24*

*Chapter 2* ................................................................................................................................................ *27*

Womanism ...................................................................................................................................................... *27*

Why Womanism? ......................................................................................................................................... *28*

History of Struggle ....................................................................................................................................... *29*

Seneca Falls .................................................................................................................................................. *29*

National American Women Suffrage Association ..................................................................................... *30*

Black Liberation Movement ......................................................................................................................... *31*

Women’s Movement ..................................................................................................................................... *32*

Black feminism .............................................................................................................................................. *34*

Black feminism and Womanism .................................................................................................................. *35*

Five tenets of Womanism ............................................................................................................................. *37*

Antioppressive .............................................................................................................................................. *37*

Connection, Community, and Commonweal ............................................................................................... *38*

Vernacular ...................................................................................................................................................... *39*

Nonideological ............................................................................................................................................ *39*
Spiritualized ................................................................. 40
Womanism and Social Transformation for Physical Health. Mental Health? .......... 40
Lovingly Dancing in Her Own Space ............................................. 41
Alice, Chikwenye, and Clenora ....................................................... 46
African Womanism ........................................................................ 46
Africana Womanism ..................................................................... 47
Rectifying Concerns with Walker’s Womanism .................................. 51
Rectifying my Crooked Room ......................................................... 53
My Womanism is Not Your Womanism, That’s Womanism .................... 54

Chapter 3 .................................................................................... 59
Statement of Womanist Inquiry ................................................................ 59
Purpose and Research Questions ................................................................ 60
Theoretical Framework ........................................................................... 60
Rationale ............................................................................................. 63
Positionality Statement ............................................................................ 64
Mothers ............................................................................................... 66
womanist shares ................................................................................. 68
Development of Womanist witnessing .................................................... 72
Mothers Recruitment ............................................................................ 83
Trustworthiness/ Ethics .......................................................................... 84
Voice-Centeredness ............................................................................. 85
Listening Guide ..................................................................................... 85
Analysis ............................................................................................... 86
Summary .............................................................................................. 90

Chapter 4 .................................................................................... 91
CHIKWENYE ................................................................................. 95
CLENORA ....................................................................................... 128
PATRICIA ....................................................................................... 143
AUDRE ............................................................................................. 177
ALICE ............................................................................................... 199
LAYLI ............................................................................................... 231
Chapter 1

Who saw in me
what I considered
a scar
And redefined it
as
a world
-Alice Walker (1983) to her daughter Rebecca

African American Motherhood and Mental Health

“Not a separatist, except periodically, for health”

Walker (1983):

I felt at the mercy of everything, including my own body, which I had learned to accept as
a kind of casing over what I considered my real self. As long as it functioned properly, I
dressed it, pampered it, led it into acceptable arms, and forgot about it. But now it
refused to function properly. I was so sick I could not even bear the smell of fresh air... I
felt there was no way out, and I was not romantic enough to believe in maternal instincts
alone as a means of survival; in any case, I did not seem to possess those instincts.

(p.245)

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2015), only about 12% of African
American females seek out treatment or help for depression, however, research suggests that
rates of depression amongst African American women are as high as 35%. Brody et al. (2018)
noted that in the 2013-2016 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, it was found that
depression was almost twice as prevalent amongst women compared to men. Negative
sociopolitical experiences such as racism, discrimination, and sexism create additional risks for
African American women to be subjected to low-income jobs, health problems, and multiple role
strains. These factors catalyze the onset of mental illness (Schneider et al., 2000). African American women’s lower rates of utilization of mental health services are often attributed to mental health stigma and serve as an additional barrier for the attainment of optimal mental health. Mental health is defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as “the successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and cope with adversity” (DHHS, 2001). To add more context, the World Health Organization defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes [their] own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to [their] community” (WHO, 2014). For the purpose of this study, mental health concerns are viewed as experiences that do not fit into the restrictive construct of what it means to be mentally healthy. Beliefs regarding mental health in the African American community may affect an individual's likelihood of expressing mental health concerns. For this dissertation, an area of importance was the impact of the Strong Black Woman stereotype on African American mothers with mental health concerns (Anxiety, Depression, Bipolar Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Schizophrenia, etc.).

Dawes and Holden (2017) highlighted the relationship between African American women and mental health in a way that zeros in on the necessity of understanding African American women’s relationship with mental health. Dawes and Holden (2017) cite Holden et al. (2015) and Taylor and Holden’s (2011) assertion that African American women do not experience stress in an isolated context. According to these researchers, African American women are exposed to juggling multiple instances that produce stress including, but not limited to handling difficult life experiences, management of personal relationships, fostering identity
development, balancing work and life expectations, development of a purposeful life through goals and aligning for achievement and success. Although all these experiences may not be unique only to African American women, Holden et al. (2013) and McKnight-Eily et al. (2009) suggest that the addition of African American women potentially being subjected to low socioeconomic and structural position within the United States, along with the double impact of racism and sexism, may increase mental and emotional distress, and as a result, increase their likelihood of being vulnerable to depression. Research by Ward and Heidrich (2009) highlighted the use of the Common Sense Model (CSM) that explored the common sense beliefs individuals have regarding illness, and how those beliefs affect the way they cope with threats to their health. Ward and Heidrich (2009) connect CSM in the context of coping and note that coping employs behavioral strategies in times of stress that align with one’s own beliefs of that illness. Research by Thomson-Sanders et al. (2004) suggested the role of the “Strong Black Woman” may influence a Black woman’s belief that living with psychological pain is a necessary part of her role, rather than a health threat. Because of this belief, Black women may forgo treatment for the sake of coping by enduring.

Expectations of motherhood, interpersonal relationships, occupational expectations, as well as other external pulls and responsibilities of Black and African American women, potentially create additional stress on mothers to meet all the expectations and responsibilities placed before them. Thoits (2013) noted that Black women may develop different versions of themselves or multiple “me’s” as a way to shift to meet the expectations and responsibilities of distinct roles placed upon them by society. However, Lashley (2017) notes that these different responsibilities and demands such as taking care of and pleasing others, and “complying with the mores and communal expectations may require hiding behind a mask(s) so that the community
may perceive that they are well” (p.218). However, this perception may come at the expense of abandoning their own wishes and dreams. Black and Peacock (2011) and Watson and Hunter (2015) add that the juggling of these different versions of themselves can lead to mental illness; and may potentially increase presentation of existing mental health concerns.

Considering the interconnectedness of sociopolitical influences and mental health amongst Black women, the importance of understanding their unique experience becomes even more imperative. Spates (2012) noted misdiagnoses of mental health is a general concern across populations, however, its prevalence is more frequent amongst African Americans. Gara et al. (2012) identified two factors that lead to misdiagnosing of Black individuals, misinterpretation of cultural differences and clinician biases. The inability of practitioners to be able to “identify and comprehend viewpoints, behaviors, and mental health outcomes of racially and ethnically diverse populations has created daunting challenges in the field of psychology” (Spates, 2012, p.2). However, when examining the experiences of Black women and mental health concerns the gaps in the literature are even more prominent, as according to Spates (2012) these experiences are “significantly lacking in psychology literature” (p.2). Thomas (2004) suggests that this lack of emphasis in psychology literature, “results in missing bricks of foundational knowledge” (p.287). They add that this missing knowledge “yield[s] a psychological knowledge bases that is faulty, inadequate, and incomplete” (Thomas, 2004, p. 287).

According to Spates (2012), these “missing bricks” and psychological knowledge bases that are “faulty, inadequate, and incomplete” result in practitioners conceptualizing Black women within the confines of traditional psychology, unable to incorporate culturally specific behaviors that may influence their presentation. Jones and Shorter-Goeden (2003) research suggested that Black women’s presentation of clinical symptoms of depression does not always
align with typical presentation. They believed that the diagnosis of depressive disorders was more difficult, due to the projection of confidence, toughness, and power some Black women exude. Their research highlights not only how presentation of mental health concerns might look different amongst Black women, but also the responsibility providers hold in supplying culturally competent care.

Limited research exists regarding the attitudes and beliefs of African American mothers with mental health concerns. Oyserman et al. (2002) posited the importance of understanding the effect of mental illness on parenting practices amongst minority and low-income women rather than generalizing from studies of White and middle-class women. Oyserman et al. (2002) also highlighted the importance of encompassing nuances specific to minority status. In a qualitative study by Waite and Killian (2008) regarding African American women’s attitudes and beliefs about mental illness, specifically depression for this study, they found that African American women believed that they were not susceptible to depression and believed depression developed in individuals with a “weak mind, poor health, a troubled spirit, and a lack of self-love” (p.189). If the additional factor of the mythization of Black maternity cited by Christian (1980), is included, it becomes clear that there are major dilemmas and problems that society has yet to solve. These myths, according to Ghasemi and Hajizadeh (2012) “delineate black mothers as matriarchal figures, superbly strong and protective, and at the same time, selfless, all-embracing, demanding nothing or little, and totally self-sacrificing creatures whose identities are inseparable from their nurturing services" (p. 477). This myth along with that of the Strong Black Woman may serve as a silencing paradigm, affecting African American women’s ability or desire to speak on concerns of motherhood or mental health.
Addressing mental illness with African American mothers may be a challenging task. Thompson-Sanders et al. (2004) added that mental illness in the African American community is often associated with shame and embarrassment that not only affect the individual with the mental health concern but also the family that might be hiding the illness. Qualitative case study research, using ethnographic observations and informal interviews done by Carpenter-Song et al. (2014) on 3 African American mothers’ experience of serious mental illness, found that these African American women had an “arm’s length” perspective regarding discussing mental illness. This suggests a belief of keeping one's “business” private and taking on a more minimizing approach to the severity of their problems. Carpenter-Song et al. (2014) also suggested that cultural value on strength in the African American community may serve as a shield for being perceived as “weak”. However, their research, suggest that spirituality and an intimate and confiding relationship with God was a constant source of solace and strength. The researchers suggest that suffering, which can include mental illness, is a meaning-making tool in the context of a religious worldview. This is reflected in Whitley’s (2012) belief that religion is an essential consideration regarding how African American women understand their lives. Whitley (2012) also highlighted past work that suggested that people of color fare poorly compared to Euro-Americans within most western mental health care systems. However, Whitley (2012) goes on to suggest that the Black Church and African American religiosity serves as a protective factor for African Americans with mental health concerns.

Strength

These suprahuman women have been denied the “luxuries” of failure, nervous breakdowns, leisured existences, or anything else that would suggest that they are complex, multidimensional
characters. They must swallow their pain, gird their loins against trouble..., and persist in spite of adversity.

-Trudier Harris, *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*

Being strong, or labeled as strong, has been seen as a necessity for survival for Black women, and a central part of their identity (Nelson et al. 2016). However, it comes at a price. Though this idea of “strength” has been a survival mechanism for enduring hardship, Romero (2000) noted that an “overused asset that develops uncritically without ongoing evaluation and attention to changing needs and demands runs the risk of becoming a liability” (p.225). An area of interest for this dissertation was on exploring the role strength and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype had on the individualized experiences of mothers with mental health concerns. However, the concept of strength is more complex than strong or not strong. Nelson et al. (2016) highlighted past research that suggested that African-centered principles, such as “interconnectedness, strength in collectivity, self-knowledge, and ‘spiritness’ identified by Parham (2009), continue to influence the Black experience (p. 552). They go on to add that the research of Boyd-Franklin (2003) and Mattis (2002), highlights the role spirituality and relationships with others, including extended families and communities, has on Black women’s acquiring of strength (p.552). Acknowledging that conceptualization and performing strength can reach outside of the individual, I found myself wondering what messages did displays of strength send to mothers' children, more specifically, their daughters? Did these messages of displaying strength serve as intergenerational learning that continued to exist? These two questions made me think of my own experience.

As a daughter of a mother with mental health concerns, I saw my mother struggle to be strong for everyone, but what about herself? My mother tried so hard to be and meet
expectations that were not hers, but the expectation of who she should be, act and feel. Though these same expectations may be prevalent in most mothers, I believe that the added stressor of a mental health diagnosis worsened the impact of not meeting those expectations. It was not until my mother gave up her need to portray strength, her need to represent this unmoving invulnerable superhuman when she began to rely not on herself, but God, did she show strength. My mother, who is open about her story and experience, struggled greatly while being consumed with meeting expectations of balancing motherhood, being a wife, working, and acting in ways suitable for others rather than herself. However, the freedom that she has now, the outrageous, audacious, courageous, and willful woman that I see, represents strength not because she is invincible, unbreakable, immune, or shielded but, because she embraces her vulnerability and loves her tears as much as her laughter.

It is with my mother and other Black women like her in mind, that I approached this study focused on moving away from this potentially harmful image of the Strong Black Woman for a self-identified representation of each woman’s experience. This dissertation explored the idea of the crooked room, a room not made for Black women, crooked, and full of angles that Black women are asked to navigate. This was followed by addressing the silencing of women with mental health concerns, navigating the Strong Black Woman schema for Black/African American mothers with mental health concerns, maternal mental health, and the future hopes of supplying a space where African American women can stand upright in a not so crooked room. To begin, I addressed the room that Black women sit in with all its angles and crookedness, as this can impact her sense of self.

**Crooked Room**

“Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people”
Imagine walking into a room and noticing that the ceiling is too low, so you duck down. In that same room, you notice the walls are too narrowly spaced, so you turn sideways. The space does not fit you! This would be considered uncomfortable for anyone but, imagine having to bend, tilt, slump, and make yourself small to fit in all spaces, and never being able to fully stand upright in these spaces, this is the Crooked Room. Harris-Perry (2011) suggested that when Black women confront race and gender stereotypes, they are standing in a crooked room. This room is warped with images of Black women’s humanity and bombarded with these images, Black women are forced to tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion. Harris-Perry (2011) adds that to understand why black women’s strategies seem tilted in ways that accommodate degrading stereotypes about them, an examination of the structural constraints that influence the behavior and make it hard to stand up straight in a crooked room must be appreciated.

The concept of the crooked room is inspired by the work of Ntozake Shange (1975) for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf. Shange’s choreopoem exposes the fragility of Black women’s emotional lives, but also their love, joy, and passion. Flowers (1981) notes that Shange’s work reflects the crooked room black women face. According to Harris-Perry (2011) for colored girls reflects “the harshest and most bitter experiences of black women’s lives” (39). Presenting an unfiltered glimpse into the experience of Black women, the focus shifts to shining a light on the challenges of these women sans pity from others. for colored girls is a message to Black women that they are not alone in this crooked room. Witkin et al. (1977) conducted research having participants sit in crooked chairs situated in crooked rooms. These participants were asked to align themselves upright. The researchers found one of three outcomes: some participants thought they were already upright.
compared to their surroundings, participants adjusted 35 degrees and thought they were perfectly straight, because they aligned with the crooked images in the room, and lastly some managed to become more or less upright no matter the crookedness of their surroundings. Harris-Perry (2011) uses this study to suggest that not all Black women exposed to the confinement of the crooked room are broken, but rather that it is possible to find an upright positionality even when everything around them is distorted. However, the question is still for those that cannot achieve the upright positionality, how much bending and tilting is asked of them to accommodate the distortion the crooked room creates?

Though many stereotypes exist that attack both the race and gender of Black women (Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Welfare Queen) the focus of the current study was on Strong Black Woman schema and its impact on Black women’s struggle to stand upright. Harris-Perry (2011) suggested that “African American women’s struggle with the slanted images of the crooked room is characterized as a problem of recognition” (p. 35). This theme is seen in political philosophers interested in issues of identity, difference, and citizenship; however, it can also be related to Black women’s experience of being labeled as a Strong Black Woman and the additional expectations that come with this label. Harris-Perry (2011) identified recognition as a useful framework because of its interconnection between individuals and groups. Individuals from a disempowered social group want recognition for their group, but also want recognition for their distinction from the group. Womanist thinking, which honors the survival of the wholeness of all people (Walker, 1983), embraces not only the need for recognition of the entire social group but also the needs of the individual. Understanding that the crooked room potentially requires African American women to bend and tilt to fit the room, it is not unimaginable to believe that this might create misrecognition of who she is.
Political scientist, Patchen Markell (2003), speaks on the harmfulness of misrecognition in subordinated groups, “a ubiquitous and deep-seated form of injustice, called ‘misrecognition’, which consists in the failure, whether out of malice or out of ignorance, to extend to people the respect or esteem that is due to them in virtue of who they are” (p.3). However, Markell adds that recognition, which is viewed as an endogenous process, develops when individuals can become who they are because of being seen. Acknowledging that placement in the crooked room is related to information around us, understanding of the room influences an individual's feeling of shame. Harris-Perry (2011) noted that some individuals see the room as correct, and therefore adapt themselves to it, while others can detect its crookedness.

Shame, which is an emotional response to misrecognition, results when the room is assumed to be straight, and the self is wrong. Shame urges the individual to internalize the crooked room. Gendered and racial stereotypes are the angles in the crooked room where Black women live. Harris-Perry (2011) suggests that African American women hold up the Strong Black Woman as a shield against other shame-inducing stereotypes in the crooked room. However, Harris-Perry (2011) notes that this hole-ridden shield not only sets up space for misrecognition but also another angle in the crooked room that can plague Black women.
Acknowledging the impact that misrecognition can have on an individual, it is important to examine how silencing that individual does not alleviate the shame of misrecognition, but strips away another layer of her identity, and her ability to be truly recognized.

**Silencing Paradigm**

“Appreciates and prefers... women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter)”

Many women in our society live in an untenable position, wedged between sociocultural expectations and their own human growth potential.... Yet women thirst to be more than the roles and behaviors that are ascribed to them, and therein lies the trap of depression.

(Schreiber 1996, p. 490)

Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2008) acknowledged that women find themselves centered overwhelmingly in the position of victims of depression. She go on to add that both feminist theorist and researchers suggest that expectations of normative femininity are tied to these incidences, rather than based solely on the biological makeup of these women. Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2008), with the support of earlier research, makes it clear that they are not suggesting that biological factors do not contribute to depression, but rather that the silencing paradigm “conceptualize depression as a crisis embedded in the everyday inequitable social relations (interpersonal and structural) that surround and define a woman’s social existence” (p.392).

Mazure et al. (2002) supports the necessity of viewing depression further than genetic factors by suggesting that to truly gain a better insight into the contributors of depression in women, it is necessary to explore life stress and trauma, cognitive styles, sex hormones, and interpersonal relationships.
In her analysis of the need to show strength and the exploration of gender, race, and depression, Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2007) noted a concept of the silencing paradigm linked to this conceptualization of “feminine goodness”. Feminine goodness is an expectation for women to be overly attuned to other’s needs, even at the expense of their wishes, needs, and feelings. Furthermore, it has been noted that the onset of depressive episodes, then, is a period in which women become voiceless and fractured (Schreiber 1998) from doubting and repressing private thoughts that are at odds with the forms of femininity that they are pressured to take on to be considered good women (Crowley Jack 2003). The silencing paradigm or feeling the need to self-silence to keep aspects of a woman’s experiences hidden from those around them is out of fear that those closest to them will not accept their discourse-discrepant feelings, needs, and thoughts (Crowley Jack 1991,1999a, 1999b). This is reflected by Daniel (1995) who notes that Black women experience double victimization. First, Black women are victimized because of their gender, then expected to not speak on it, persuaded by community norms. Highlighting that the silencing paradigm conceptualizes depression as a psychosocial process, Crowley Jack (1991) notes that women “mourn” a “self that has become ‘submerged, excluded, or weakened’ under relationships that they are socialized to view as central to their social acceptance and critical to their well-being” (p.30).

Crowley Jack (2011) formulated the Silencing the Self theory to understand how the primary motivation of establishing positive, close relationships throughout life and “cognitive relational schemas about how to make and keep attachments are critical for understanding depression” (p.524). According to Crowley Jack (2011), relational schemas in depressed women reflect attachment behaviors such as pleasing, self-silencing, and self-sacrifice. These schemas developed regarding creating and maintaining safe, intimate relationships which, in return, have
created a need amongst women to put the needs of others before themselves and to silence their thoughts, feelings, and actions. This silencing leads to not only a decrease in self-esteem but also feelings of a loss of self, as a woman continues to experience self-negation at the expense of aligning with expected interpersonal behavior. Self-silencing plays a role in the inhibition of self-directed action and self-development. According to Crowley Jack (2011), some of the hopelessness and helplessness noted in depression is a result of the attainment of intimacy at the cost of authenticity. Acknowledging self-silencing's ability to inhibit self-development, African American women’s development of self faces not only the silencing of their life experiences but also a cultural and historical ideology of strength that serves to make the crooked room that much more crooked.

**Strong Black Woman**

“Appreciates and prefers... women’s strength”

. . . The do-it-all mother, always on call, raising children, sustaining households, working both outside and inside the home . . . the community mother . . . the determined sister . . . We’ve named her the ‘‘Strong Black Woman.’’

Marcia Ann Gillespie (Parks, 2010, p. viii)

Within psychological literature, there is extensive research around stereotypes that have been placed upon African American women. Of these stereotypes, such as Mammy, Jezebel, Welfare Queen, the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema was developed to counteract the negative societal stereotypes mentioned previously. This stereotype was created as an attempt to highlight unacknowledged attributes that developed and continue to be present despite oppression and adversity (Beauboueuf-Lafontant, 2003). Strong Black Woman schema provides the sociopolitical context of African American women’s lives specifically concerning racism,
disenfranchisement, oppression based on race and gender, and limited resources during and post-slavery (Woods-Giscombe 2010). However, Harris-Perry (2011) proposes a theory that suggests that the “Strong Black Woman functions as a racial and citizenship imperative on black women” (p.21). Harris-Perry (2011) adds that this construct is not based on actual observations of who Black women are, but this construct was created to meet expectations and needs of the nation that frame African American women in narrow ways. Harris-Perry (2011) suggest that Strong Black Woman serves as a misrecognition of Black women, which requires them to align with specific expectations placed on their behavior.

The Strong Black Woman stereotype was theorized in the work of Nelson et al. (2016) who cite Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2007) and Romero (2000) suggesting “this role consists of caretaking, independence, and restricted emotionality and may counter disparaging portrayals of Black women as subservient, hostile, and lazy” (p. 551). Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2007) goes further to suggest that this strength discourse “focuses on a Black woman’s outward behavior, ignoring her actual emotional or physical condition. Being strong is essentially about appearing so, affecting a persona and performance of managing a difficult life with dignity, grace, and composure” (p. 38-39). Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2007) highlights that the expectation of strength does not begin in adulthood, but rather from girlhoods, women reflected on being expected to present a “cool façade” by the strong women in their lives (p. 39). Within this cool façade, however, came an understanding for these girls that dwelling on pain and fears was seen as weakening a woman, and made her “less than capable of surviving the battle that her life was supposed to be” (p.39). Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) noted in their work regarding a “myth of unshakability” in African American women that, “Black girls don’t cry. They shake and bend and explode, but they never break” (p.18). This belief along with caricatures and stereotypes
further perpetuates a depiction of Black women as tough and strong rather than soft and vulnerable. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) suggest that this view of Black women depicts them as “one that should be feared rather than loved” (p.19). This denies Black women from being seen as whole. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) add that by not seeing Black women for their strengths and weaknesses, both their tenderness and tough edges, Black women are left invisible because they are not seen for all that they are.

Thomas et al. (2014) suggests that the SBW is in itself a stigma, as the identity requires Black women’s true identity to become invisible when maintaining the social persona of SBW at the expense of suppressing self-interest. Black and Peacock (2011) and Watson and Hunter (2015) go further to suggest that the maintaining of the Strong Black Woman stereotype does not come without potentially harmful outcomes. When considering the gendered socialization born from the SBW stereotype, Black women are left burdened with the expectation to not only maintain specific roles on their own, but also to maintain absences of rest or support (Lashley et al, 2017, p.216). In addition, expectations to maintain these roles in the absence of self-care not only create more stress, but also subject Black women to health difficulties such as hypertension and cardiovascular disease (Bronder et al. (2014); Donovan et al., 2013).

Expectations of strength forced African American women to take on numerous roles out of economic and social necessity including but not limited to mother, nurturer, breadwinner, and inevitably the Strong Black Woman. SBW stereotype is oftentimes transmitted from numerous proximal influences according to Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2003) including, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and other female fictive kin. Modeling, vicarious conditioning, and dialogue help in the embrace of independent and multiple role behavior of the SBW. This conditioning of essential and qualities of being a SBW begin at an early age. Kerrigan et al.
(2007) suggest that even if the approach is different (direct vs. indirect) each make note of how they are to navigate life based on their female role models. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) acknowledge that internalization of the Strong Black Woman persona will leave some Black women unwilling to accept help even when offered, suggesting a need to maintain being unshakeable in the face of anguish. The authors further this belief by noting a psychotherapist in their research that stated that the “‘paradox of strength’ is such that it’s often tough for these women to permit themselves to get the help that they need and deserve” (p. 20). Acknowledging close social relationships impact on African American women’s understanding of strength, we must ask how historically this stereotype developed.

Recognizing that not all Black Women identify the Strong Black Woman as a harmful expectation, Romero (2000) noted that some Black Women view the characteristics of the Strong Black Woman “caretaking and nurturing of family, emotion regulation or self-containment, and independence or self-reliance” positively, and serve as a reflection of their strength as Black women. However, Nelson et al. (2016) notes that “excessive adherence to the characteristics may silence Black women from voicing their personal needs, which are often unacknowledged and ignored” (p.552-53). Acknowledging the role, the SBW stereotype potentially has on the lives of African American women, the purpose of this dissertation was to explore the self-identified experience of the Strong Black Woman Stereotype for African American/ Black women when considering intersecting identities of motherhood and being a woman with mental health concerns.

Ain’t I a Woman?

“De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin’ guh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!”
When examining the development, endorsement, internalization, and maintenance of the Strong Black Woman ideal, the sociohistorical antecedents specifically to Black women must be examined. Development of Strong Black Woman schema was formulated amidst chattel slavery in North America. Collins (2000) noted that the underpinning of Black women’s strength stemmed from a perseverance through adversity, of which is exemplified through the historical representations of enslaved Black women. Nelson et al. (2016) notes that as a form of resistance and survival these enslaved Black women learned to mask their emotions in the presence of their slave owners, as expression of negative emotions could lead to dire consequences. Harris-Lacewell (2001) notes the rationalization of the enslavement of African women as justified by the belief that they were superior in psychological and physical strength compared to their White women counterparts. Systematic, institutional, and cultural oppression in both the pre- and post-enslavement spheres have and continue to disenfranchise and fragment Black women and their families. With these considerations, Woods-Giscombe (2010) suggests that the Strong Black Woman schema consists of resilience and independence and exists as a psychological coping mechanism for the preservation of community and family. Birthed out of necessity, SBW schema exists as a way to endure physical and mental oppression (Mullings, 2006).

SBW schema highlights Black women for their disconnection from self for connection in relationships. Harris-Lacewell (2001) suggests that along with their gross display of endurance, Black women can put on an appearance of managing difficulties alone. Harris-Lacewell (2001) adds that this appearance is normally an identity of these women because they have been considered fit for and unharmed by a life of laboring, suffering, and survival. Strength within the Strong Black Woman schema strips Black women of their humanity. Labeled as “mules of the
world” by Hurston (1937), strength under this construction allows onlookers and the woman herself to de-emphasize her struggle, turn a blind eye to her oppression, and disconnect from assistance (Beaubouef-Lafontant, 2005). Influenced by hip hop feminist Joan Morgan’s revelation, my study too advocates for the retirement of the Strong Black Woman role. Exclaiming that the script of strength as “cutting off my air supply,” Morgan (1999) makes explicit her formal “retirement” from the Strong Black Woman role, refusing to continue her life as a mule. Morgan (1999) is not denouncing her strength or even being a STRONG, BLACK, WOMAN but, rather the social conditioning that tells her to hide herself and her distress under the guise of “strength”. Nevertheless, it is important acknowledge and create space for differing understanding of strength and its role in African American women’s lives.

My Strength is not Your Strength but, Neither Should Hurt...

They were women then
My mama’s generation
Husky of voice- Stout of Step
With fists as well as
Hands
How they battered down
Doors
[...]
To discover books
Desks
A place for us
How they knew what we
Must know
Without knowing a page
Of it
Themselves

Alice Walker (1983, pgs. 242-43)

Acknowledging the impact, the development of the silencing paradigm has had on the understanding of depression in women specifically, the distress perceived still has a “white
women’s illness notion” (Amankwaa 2003a). However, the idea that Black women’s strength serves as a protection for depression has not been thoroughly considered (Edge and Rogers 2005). Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2008) highlights that there is a continual association of strength with depression, however, limited literature evaluates whether being strong helps or hurts Black women’s experiences of emotional distress. Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2008) goes on to add that consideration needs to be given as to whether strength as a construction of feminine goodness places Black women at risk for depression.

One of the many critiques of strength, according to Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2008) is that it is not an objective description of Black women but, a prescriptive discourse of embedded racist and sexist characterization of Black women as laborers of others. As strength is still a label placed upon the identity of African American women, this represents the unchanged social treatment of African American women in a sexist, racist, and classist society, that still views these women as capable “beasts of burden.” Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2005) adds that the dehumanization of black women into deviant beings, into “mules of the world,” is “centrally a problem of embodiment or of how the valuation of bodies in society affects the experience of living in those bodies” (p. 105-106). Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2008) notes the work of Black feminists who regard strength as a “myth” that has been imposed upon Black women but, framed Strong Black Women as “female Atlases”. These female Atlases represent women that take pride in their ability to endure and overcome adversity and survive the physical, economic, and relational savagery, segregation, and persistent racism (Gilleespie, 1984).

Creating what might be viewed as constraints on the development of identity and understanding of one’s self and navigating through the world, Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2008) acknowledged the notion that “respectable” Black femininity holds strength as a prevailing
definition that is typically seen in common child rearing practices of “armoring” of Black girls within families. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) note that this idea of “armoring” serves as an attempt to explain the socialization process that Black girls undergo to defy racism and sexism. bell and Nkomo (1998) suggest that Black women learn resistance to social inequality shown by their capacity to endure struggle with a stiff upper lip. How and why did this become a necessity? Why are young girls taught they must be strong before embracing their softness? How can we ignore one’s tears, tell them to not let them show, and in the same breath ask them to be soft enough to wipe away another's? Nevertheless, Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2008) noted that past research suggests that with strength being viewed as a normative construction of goodness, defensiveness develops amongst Black women regarding viewing strength as anything other than affirming and a positively defining quality of their womanhood.

Understanding the importance of differences of experiences and conceptualization of strength amongst Black women, this may seem to create a disconnect regarding its helpfulness or harmfulness to the women this label is ascribed. It was not the purpose to state that strength or identifying as strong was at the detriment of a woman with mental health concerns but, rather the focus was to understand what that label of “strong” meant for her and its effect on her view of self, and the love she gave herself. Temporarily shifting away from the Strong Black Woman stereotype, I needed to take time to examine the available literature regarding mothers with mental health concerns. This examination would serve as the groundwork for future exploration of the incorporation of Strong Black Woman stereotype with African American mothers with mental health concerns.
Maternal Mental Illness

“Loves struggle”

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), currently, 1 in every 5 adults has experienced mental illness in a given year, and 1 in 25 adults live with a serious mental illness. Considering these statistics, the likelihood that individuals suffering from mental illness are also parents becomes inevitable. The dramatic note shift to community-based services because of the implementation of psychiatric deinstitutionalization has created a stronger likelihood of individuals with mental illness also being parents (Oyserman et al., 2002). Aligned with past research, Dunn et al. (2021) noted a continued failure of mental health providers to routinely collect information regarding the parenting status of their patients. This lack of consideration placed on an individual's role as a parent, specifically mothers, creates an additional barrier for individuals to receive inclusive care for optimal mental health. Research suggests mothers living with mental health concerns report feelings of inadequacy as parents. Oyserman et al. (2005) noted mental illness’ impact on effective parenting and a decrease in parental ability to provide developmentally appropriate child rearing. Oyserman et al. (2005) go on to cite earlier research that noted mental illness’s impact on parental self-efficacy, reduction in parental responsiveness, and impacts on parenting style. Maternal mental illness, however, has been associated with many parenting problems including difficulty setting appropriate structure while avoiding hostile or negative interchanges (Oyserman et al., 2000). Though outcomes for children are outside the scope of this paper, it is important to note that maternal feelings regarding lack of parental efficacy and incompetence are linked to a variety of negative outcomes for their children (Coleman & Karraker, 2000).
Considering that mothers play an integral role in the growth and development of the children in their care, it was important to explore their feelings regarding their effectiveness as mothers, experiences of motherhood, and their conceptualization of the intersection of motherhood and mental health. Brunette & Dean (2002) identified that primary and secondary symptoms, lack of knowledge, possible need in help coping with mental illness and motherhood experience, and absence of social support as factors in parenting problems of women with mental illness. Acknowledging that motherhood can be central to the lives of mothers with mental illness, Oyserman and Bybee (2004) also suggest that it can be considered a burden due to being troubled about the degree of competence they had in the parenting role. Diaz-Caneja and Johnson (2004) note that parenting responsibilities created practical impediments for engaging in mental health services. However, they also note fear of losing custody or access to children dominates interaction with mental health and social services, making individuals with mental health concerns more reluctant to disclose difficulties to health professionals.

An extensive amount of research available regarding maternal mental illness focuses its attention on the impact a mother’s mental health has on a child’s developmental, psychological, emotional, and educational outcomes (e.g., increased risk of developing psychopathology, emotional and behavioral problems by emerging adulthood, higher prevalence of depression, and lower self-esteem). However, research centralized on the experience of and feelings towards motherhood is limited. As noted by Montgomery (2005) this leads to defining women with mental health concerns solely in terms of cause, course, and treatment. The focus of this dissertation, however, was on the experiences of African American mothers: African American mothers subjected to a possible silencing paradigm that tells them to care for others even at the expense of themselves. This paradigm, paired with many schemas depicting the strength of
African American women, may affect African American mothers’ experience of mental health and motherhood.

I found myself conflicted with a series of questions. Is there room for a woman’s strength and softness? Does space exist for women to care for and love those closest to her, and for her to experience that love in return? Cannot her strength be valued the same as her tears? Walker’s (1983) Womanism openly applauds womanish behavior, which is outrageous, audacious, courageous, and willful, which does not fit, better yet downright rejects a paradigm that silences what may be a woman’s strongest part, her voice. Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2008) seems to reflect this belief through her understanding that mental health and wellness are dependent on a woman’s realization that the discursive sociocultural representation of her womanhood does not include her reality. How does a womanish woman fit into a space not meant for her? Forced to stand in a crooked room, a product of racial inequality of broader society, how does this work when she is expected to bend and tilt to fit the room not built for her shape?

**Standing Upright in a Space with her Shape in Mind**

“Loves herself. Regardless”

Being strong, or labeled as strong, has been seen as a necessity for survival. It also comes at a price. Does the Strong Black Woman stereotype come at a cost for African American mothers with mental health concerns? Working from a Womanist lens, the focus was not to remove strength as a characteristic of these African American women, as Womanism appreciates and prefers women’s strength. The focus was to explore individualized understanding and beliefs about strength and the Strong Black Woman stereotype amongst African American mothers. Acknowledging that some African American women may view being a “Strong Black Woman”
or being strong as integral to her survival or sense of self, opening space for individualized interpretation of strength and understanding of the SBW stereotype was fundamental.

In Walker’s (1983) In Search of Our Mother’s Garden, she states that "In my mother’s garden, I found my own”. This study and the journey it has taken me on represents that for me. Understanding and standing in the truth that that this dissertation had a basis in the experience of my mother, what I did not realize was that this journey was a discovery of myself. “Strength” and its ability to silence me created a space of shame or need to hide my mother’s story, because of fear that it was a poor reflection of me. What I now know, is strength for me is represented in my mother’s ability to stand in the light and speak her story with tears, laughter, and an unshakeable intimacy with God, of whom she charges with being the supplier of all her needs. It was the hope that through this dissertation that African American mothers with mental health concerns would feel their strength in a space that is not crooked, had no imposed angles, and allowed upright standing in a room that was lovingly created for her.

Purpose Statement: The purpose of this study was to explore the individualized experiences of motherhood and mental health and understandings of strength and the Strong Black Woman stereotype amongst African American mothers with mental health concerns.

1) How have traditional ideas of the Strong Black Woman stereotype impacted African American mother’s experience of motherhood?

2) How do African American mothers with mental health concerns conceptualize their strength?

3) In what ways does the Strong Black Woman stereotype impact African American mothers’ identity of mothers with mental health concerns?

In search of theory, it was important to find a theoretical framework that honored the wholeness of Black women. This theory needed to support an intersectional framework that
according to Cannon (1995) and Settles (2006), and supported by Borum (2012), “emphasizes the unique mutually constitutive, and holistic integration of race, ethnicity, culture, and gender identities that are related to African American women’s experiences (p. 318). In search of theory, I found that framework in Womanism, but for me it needed some support. The following chapter explores womanism, the history of African American women trying to find space within movements without them in mind, Black feminism, African Womanism, Africana Womanism, my exploration of Womanism and addressing the crookedness, and defining Womanism that was used in this dissertation.
Chapter 2

Womanism

Alice Walker’s (1983) expression of Womanism in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* provides an extensive space for interpretation of Womanism that can be shaped to be what an individual Black woman needs. Walker (1983) defines a womanist as:

**womanist 1.** From *womanish*. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in great depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

**2. Also:** A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (pgs. xi-xii)

Womanism commitment to the wholeness of entire people creates space not only for different interpretations for Womanism, but also different ways it is defined. In this next section, I will briefly discuss why I chose Womanism and outline the roadmap for this chapter.

Why Womanism?

Imagine a person walking into a dining hall where there are chairs, name places, and table settings, but as they continue down the table, they notice currently there is not a place for them. If that person noticed tools to make their own table, chairs, name places, and settings in the corner, would we criticize or applaud them for creating their own space? Now imagine substituting that individual for a movement, a movement focused on creating space not readily afforded to them, in the space identified as “for them.” Liking this even further to Sojourner Truth’s (1851) “A’int I a Woman?” speech, how do we ignore women yelling “A’int I a Woman?” Where is my seat? Womanism represents the table made by, for, and with the black woman in mind. Walker's (1983) definition of Womanism provides an introductory approach to Womanist theory. Andrews, Foster, and Harris (1997) noted that Carol P. Marsh-Lockett posited a more simplistic approach to defining Womanism as a discourse that addresses the “triple impact of sex, race, and class on African American women and to compensate for the traditional shortcomings of feminist and African American liberation discourse that have routinely excluded the peculiar needs of African American women” (p.785). This section is organized by exploring the history of Black women’s struggle for space, Black feminism, what Womanism is, critiques
of Womanism, and different Womanist perspectives. The section concluded with my journey of Womanism and what my Womanism represented.

**History of Struggle**

Understanding the history of Womanism not only provides a context of why there was a need to create space but also what that space represented. The development of Womanism appeared because of a long history of silencing and invisibility of women of color, specifically Black women in both First and Third World spheres. Though a great deal of time will not be spent focusing on the history of feminism, it is important to note actions that led to the need for spaces for Black women. By the 19th century, strives for equality and suffrage for women was the forefront priority for a beginning feminist movement. This movement, however, according to Izgarjan and Markov (2012) was separated into two movements, as the rights of black women were not a concern of white women. Women’s suffrage movement brought additional marginalization instead of reprieve for African American women. Tied to the abolitionist movement, the women’s suffrage movement provided a platform for upper-class white women to voice oppressive gender roles and marriages, in which they related as being similar to slavery.

**Seneca Falls**

The Seneca Falls Convention, which serves as the first women’s rights convention shined a light on a political analysis of upper-class, married white womanhood sans poor White women or Black women. In July 1848, 300 hundred men and women attended the Seneca Falls Convention where the issue of electoral power for women was the focal point of contention. However, it is ironic that the support of Frederick Douglass, a Black man, made it possible for the proposal to even be presented, even as it left out Black women and working-class white women. Davis (1983) notes that the focus of the Seneca Falls Declaration, Seneca Fall’s
Convention Manifesto, was the concerns around marriage and its’ “many injurious effects on women” (p. 53). Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1848) credited for writing most of the Declaration, shined light on the disenfranchisement and oppression of married women in the form of loss of access to property rights, loss of autonomy, as these women were economically and morally dependent on their husbands, expectations of absolute obedience to their husbands, laws of separation and divorce based on male supremacy, and inequality in education obtainment.

Davis (1983) highlights the Declaration’s immense role as the “articulated consciousness of women’s rights at midcentury” (p.53), however, this Declaration “proposed an analysis of the female condition which disregarded the circumstances of women outside the social class of the document’s framers”. Those outside this social class included both white working-class women and Black women in the North and South. Seneca Falls Convention serves as an example of a negligible recognition of working women, and their complete disregard for the rights of Black women who “rebelled against the lives into which they were born” (Wertheimer et al.,1977, p. 104). The invisibility of Black women’s representation at Seneca Falls Convention represents a failure to promote a broad anti-racist consciousness, which according to Davis (1983) would be present in the organized movement for women’s rights.

National American Women Suffrage Association

The National American Women Suffrage Association (NWSA) organizers realized the exclusion of African American women would gain more support and equate easier access to gaining rights. This anti-Black approach to the attainment of rights communicated to Black women that a difficult choice would need to be made. Lacking the support of the NWSA and the feminist within the organization, African American women were left with the choice of supporting African American men in their attempt at receiving voting rights, or support women
who did not support them. African American women chose to support the cause of African American men receiving voting rights, at the expense of the deferment of their attainment of the very thing those within the feminist movement were fighting to receive. This split of identity asked of by black women, to ignore part of their identity, left Black women with choosing to answer am I a woman or black first? I imagine women questioning themselves of which of their identities was most important at that moment. Why could both not be equally important?

Womanism speaks to the “double marginalization” of being BOTH black and female and being able to be seen as both at the same time. This reflects an attempt at being seen as whole. Smith (1986) argues that “the meaning of blackness in this country shapes profoundly the experience of gender, just as the conditions of womanhood affect ineluctably the experience of race.” (p.17). With such an observation, a need for a space that supports this experience was necessary. bell hooks (1989) stated there was a need for “scholarship which addresses a wide variety of issues in Black life (mothering, Black masculinity, […] the crisis of Black womanhood, connections between health and our conceptions of the body, sexuality, media, etc.) work that could have been [a] transformative impact on our future” (p.55). However, this would not be the last time Black women would find themselves asking am I a woman or black first?

**Black Liberation Movement**

Black women were in the epicenter of the Black Liberation Movement (includes but is not limited to the Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalism, Black Panthers, and others). However, they were not immune to the impact of sexism within the movement. Designed to be a move towards liberation for the Black race, analysis of rhetoric for the movement suggests an extremely sexualized approach to race. This approach centralized its focus on manhood being equated to freedom, and attainment of freedom through the redemption of black masculinity
(Hull et al., 2018). This patriarchal lens towards liberation had the potential to alienate half the population which its purpose was to serve. Within the Black Liberation movement along with sexist rhetoric, Black women were subjugated to policing of their sexuality.

In the article *But Some of Us Are Brave: A History of Black Feminism in the United States*, Hull et al. (2018), policing of Black women’s sexuality is highlighted as a concern within the movement. Hull et al. (2018) cite bell hooks as noting that in the 1960s, “black men overemphasize[d] white male sexual exploitation of black womanhood as a way to explain their disapproval of inter-racial relationships”. However, black men themselves were excluded from this view, and served as exploiters of Black women, reflecting the right of men to have access to and control over a woman’s body. Compounded with experienced sexism within the Black Liberation Movement, Black women were denied a positionality of equality amongst men. Seen as expecting to fulfill a role of servitude rather than an equal partnership, misogynistic views were reinforced within the movement not only by men but also by Black women who supported strict gender roles that perpetuated patriarchy within the Black community. This in no way serves to suggest that all the Black Liberation Movement subjugated Black women, but to highlight crookedness present in a room sold as being upright.

**Women’s Movement**

Reprieve for the Black woman was not found amongst the feminist movement, either. The support some Black women felt they were not receiving in the Black Liberation Movement due to sexism, was met with racism in the feminist movement in the 1960s. Black women’s space within the Women’s Movement became increasingly crooked as they received: exclusion from conferences where their experiences were not a focus, lack of representation in academic spaces, confinement to having their experience of being a woman conceptualized from a white,
middle-class woman lens, and tokenized in white spaces to acknowledge the “black experience”. Black women were situated in a very crooked room, one not made with her in mind, nor room for her to stand upright.

Another factor that impeded Black women finding space within the feminist movement was white women’s inability to see or admit their racism. White feminist found it difficult to understand how they, who had been oppressed, could oppress others, especially those that identified as being “anti-racist.” However, bell hooks (2010) notes that this anti-racist positionality had “limited historical evidence that white women as a collective group or as women’s rights advocates are part of an anti-racist tradition” (p.19). To take this one step further, bell hooks notes that all past Women’s Movements in the U.S. were built on a racist foundation. White women reformers who sought to free slaves were acting on religious sentiment, attacking slavery, not racism, as an attempt at moral reform (hooks, 2010). hooks (2010) adds that the reformers' commitment to white supremacy overshadowed anti-slavery work because their focus was not on social equality and dismantling the racial hierarchy used to maintain disenfranchisement of Black people.

hooks (2010) notes through analysis of the Women’s Movement situated during the Black Liberation Movement, that it was no different than its predecessors because issues of conflict between black and white women had not been addressed. Rather than addressing these issues, rhetoric that suggested bonding of U.S. women across both race and class was used. Situating their efforts during the Black Liberation Movement was an attempt to make synonymous women’s social status with that of Black people. hooks (2010) adds that it was through the “endless comparisons of the plight of ‘women’ and ‘blacks’ that they revealed their racism” (p.23). This racism is viewed by hooks as unconscious because the Women’s Movement
which was predominately made up of white women was seen as an opportunity for white women to voice their grievances to society. hooks (2010) notes further alienation of black women through their attempt to highlight white women’s role in oppression. However, these women were met with beliefs that oppression could not be measured, and each group of women was experiencing common oppression. This does not acknowledge white women’s role of employers of both non-white and white domestics, who viewed “common oppression” as an assault of their experience (p.25). Oppressed due to gender in the Black Liberation Movement and racially oppressed in the Women’s Movement, Black women noticed that there was a need for a space for themselves. In 1973, Black feminists who felt that there was a need for a separate Black feminist group, did just that by developing the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO).

**Black feminism**

The personal is political. This principle originating in feminism represents the need for Black feminism. In the Combahee River Collective Statement, the Collective highlights that the start of Black feminism is personal because it reflects the personal lived experiences of Black women. Acknowledging a shared belief of the value of Black women, the Collective (1977) advocated for the necessity of liberation of Black women not an adjunct to someone else, but as a human person with their own needs of autonomy. The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) noted that the historical reality of Afro-American women is that of “continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation”. This represents the imperativeness of creating space for Black women, who within the American political system have been subjugated to oppression both racially and sexually within this system.

The lessons learned from both the Black Liberation Movement and the Women’s Movement shined light amongst Black feminists the need to create a system of politics that were
both anti-racist and anti-sexist. Identity politics is in the epicenter of Black feminism.

Highlighting how one’s oppression is included within identity politics, the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) suggests that “politics come directly out of our own identity as opposed to working to end someone else’s oppression”. Black feminism focused its attention on the multi-layeredness that is the Black woman, something that previously had not been considered. Black feminism acknowledges the psychological toll that innately comes with being a Black woman. This is compounded with the low value that is placed on the psyches of Black women within society, which undoubtedly is impacted by long held stereotypical views of Black women and beliefs that all Black women have mythical superhuman strength. These beliefs and actions serve as forms of misrecognition, which within itself is both racist and sexist. Lastly, The Collective also noted the dangers of using biological determinism when developing politics. The Collective made it clear that Black feminism does not represent an us vs. them mentality, concerning Black men.

**Black feminism and Womanism**

Imagine thinking and speaking as if the world was depicted from a white lens, this is what Rich (1978) suggested that feminist theory suffered from, or white solipsism. Shaped by silencing of, disenfranchisement, and indifference for needed action, Black feminism was developed to highlight the experiences of Black women. Hill Collins (1990) named four central focuses in Black feminist thought: (1) self-definitions and valuations serve as an empowerment for Black women, (2) political activism and intellectual thought are intertwined, (3) Black women must dismantle and confront existing structures of domination in the form of gender, race, and class oppression, and (4) the ability to resist and transform daily discrimination is driven by their distinct cultural heritage (p. 39). Hill Collins (1990) summarizes these four foci,
by suggesting that Black feminism is a “process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community” (p. 39). With critiques that exist suggesting that Womanism is the same as Black feminism, a question appears of how Black feminism is situated within/against/on Womanism. In Hill Collins (1996) article on Black feminism, Womanism, and naming, she suggests that because both Womanism and Black feminism have flaws that alienate Black women both domestically and globally, the focus should shift from naming or choosing one or the other. Instead, the focus should be on collaborating main ideas and working together to analyze overarching issues whose “centrality of gender in shaping a range of relationship within African American communities” (p.15) should be explored. However, I think the biggest connector between Black feminism and Womanism is love. Nash (2011) notes that love is a “resistant ethic of self-care" and is a politics of “claiming, embracing, and restoring the wounded black female self” (p.3).

Like Black feminism, Womanism has an affinity for and a focus on love. Nash (2011) notes that “Walker’s Womanism amplifies the centrality of love to black feminist politics. Although love had long been foundational to black feminist thought” (p. 9). Walker takes love seriously as it is mentioned eleven times in her definition of Womanism. This serious approach on love not only connects Womanism to Black feminism, as love is a Black feminist politic but also explores what Nash (2011) highlights, that “black feminists have suggested that a commitment to love means training the self in other ways, in ways that extend and challenge the self” (p.10). These challenges move the self toward difference, even in fear, which according to Lorde (1984) is necessary to acquire the deep places of knowledge where fear abides. These places must be touched for “the personal as the political [to] begin to illuminate all our choices” (p.113). Acknowledging shared beliefs with Black feminism, Womanism is defined as a form of
consciousness that merges the intersection of race, culture, economics, politics, and nationalism (Hill Collins, 1991; Phillips, 2006). Womanism gives special attention to the different ways that women of color experience inequalities on the race and class level within social structures, compared to white women in the United States (Gillman, 2010). Identity formation is a central focus of Womanism, whose intention is to pay homage to the struggles and achievements of African women.

Five tenets of Womanism

Though Womanism does not adhere to a set of “rules,” Layli Phillips editor of A Womanist Reader and author of its’ introduction notes five tenets that serve as “best traditions” of Womanism. Phillips (2006) notes that Womanism is: (1) antioppressive, focused on dismantling and fighting all oppressive social structures that serve to restrict and circumscribe the agency of black/African women, (2) it values the connection between an individual and the community, and emphasizes commonweal (states of collective well-being) as a goal of social change, (3) it is nonideological, and resists rigid lines of demarcation and functions in a decentralized manner, (4) it is vernacular, engaging in everyday experiences and language to define those experiences, and it is (5) spiritualized, spiritual practices and beliefs are honored above all (p.xxiv). It is important to spend some time conceptualizing each of these tenets, as they serve as groundwork to understanding Womanism’s impact.

Antioppressive

Phillips (2006) notes that a Womanist knows oppression when they see it, and when they are against it. A Womanist is focused on the dismantling and fighting of oppressive structures. Phillips (2006) notes that antioppressionist supersedes and organizes all labels referencing forms of oppression including antiracist, antisexist, antixenophobic, antiheterosexist, and
antihomosexist. An antioppressionist approach allows Womanism to enter zones of oppression. Therefore, antioppressive is being against any labels known and not yet named that serve as a form of oppression. Womanism supports the liberation of all humankind from these oppressive structures with the hope of transcending the relationship between oppression and domination.

**Connection, Community, and Commonweal**

A Womanist is a communitarian in that they view a goal of social change being a focus on the commonweal. Commonweal, according to Phillips (2006) is the principle that holds dimensions and aspects of creation together, creating a “dynamic balance and constant expressive unfoldment” (p. xxvi). It is suggested that commonweal does not exist at present, and therefore Womanist social change is focused on bringing commonweal to fruition.

Acknowledging the state of collective well-being, Phillips (2006) notes that community is conceptualized as a series of overlapping tiers, “beginning with Black women or women of color (the level of the self or identity), followed by the Black community and other communities of color (the level of “tribe” or “kin”), followed by all oppressed people (the level of similarly situated others), and ultimately encompassing all humanity (the universal level). (p.xxv).”

Phillips (2006) adds that Womanism’s main concern is not Black women specifically, but rather, Black women are where this form of thinking originated.

Womanist ideas of community extend past humankind, including all living things from “humans, animals, plants, organisms, inanimate components of the Earth, the universe beyond the Earth, the spiritual world(s), transcendental realm(s) encompassing the universe(s), and, ultimately, all of creation” (p.xxvi). Womanism shines a light on the interdependence between the living and the nonliving. Seeking to intervene between and heal wounds and imbalances, Womanist methods focus on reconciling relationships at three levels: people from different
groups, people and the environment/nature, and people and spiritual/transcendental realms (Phillips, 2006). As suggested previously, Womanism’s understanding of the importance of interdependence suggests that healing is not carried out on a singularly individual level.

**Vernacular**

Vernacular is viewed as the connection with everyday people and life, with a focus on the commonalities of all people (food, shelter, love, health, etc.). It highlights unifying the reality of all and moving away from elitism. With a focus on everyday people and life, the soul of Womanism is grassroots, with a focus on the masses of humanity (Phillips, 2006). This mass of humanity unifies individuals through the belief that all people have “everyday” lives and, those with elite positionality are not supplanted in that positionality, but cloaked by it (Phillips, 2006). Womanism views gross differentials in power and resources as problematic, like other critical theorists, because of the role it plays in the dehumanization of individuals and impacts on both individual and collective wellbeing (Phillips, 2006). However, Phillips (2006) notes that the difference between Womanist and critical theorist and social-justice activist is the faith Womanist puts in nonelites to develop and create social justice ends, both “inside or outside formal structures like organizations or social movements” (p. xxiv). This reflects the soul of Womanism, identified earlier as being grassroots in nature. This approach views all acts as beneficial and necessary to progress, and values diversity within those acts. Womanist progress values all steps towards positive social change and believes they will all add up in the end.

**Nonideological**

Focusing on inclusion and positive interrelationship, Womanism is resistant to being boxed in by rigid lines of demarcation. Womanism rejects absolutes requiring an either “with us or against us” ideology because ideology within itself is rigid and looks to control through
sameness. Phillips (2006) goes further to add that “ideological perspectives and movements rely on processes that compel or seduce people to conform and do not deal effectively with difference or paradox” (p. xxv). Womanism functions as a nondisciplinary system that does not require rules to address internal disagreement to effectively function. These disagreements are addressed through what Phillips (2006) suggest as dialogue focused on establishing and negotiating relationships that address conflict and anger through “agreement, affinity, and love” (p.xxv). Using a nonideological approach, the focus shifts to the experiences of individuals and their needs rather than being situated in rigid expectations and ideas.

**Spiritualized**

Phillips (2006) notes that Womanism is transparent in its acknowledgment of a “spiritual/transcendental realm with which human life, livingkind, and the material world are all intertwined” (p.xxvi). There is a divide amongst social-justice activism and more academic or ideological driven perspectives about the importance of the inclusion of spirituality. Social-justice activism acknowledges that spirituality is political, and even enhances it because it is rooted in conviction. These perspectives are not as present in academic realms and at times avoided. Nevertheless, Womanism maintains an adamant emphasis on the reality and importance of the spiritual world with less concern for the diversity of ways that it is conceptualized. However, spirituality serves as the most controversial tenet, as some Womanist theological thought is very specified to particular religious affiliations.

**Womanism and Social Transformation for Physical Health. Mental Health?**

Phillips (2006) speaks on Womanisms’ role in societal transformation in a way that might be applied to understanding its impact on mental health. Noting physical healing and reconciling body, mind, and spirit, Phillips shows that physical and psychological well-being supply an
important foundation for commonweal and social justice. Acknowledging the impact of oppressive conditions and processes. Phillips (2006) connects physical health and bodily well-being, which are foundations of other forms of well-being “…lack of good... health makes it hard for individuals to contribute their energy toward high level concerns” (p.xxiv). Linking bodily health as an indicator and channel for societal and environmental health, the question must be posited of how are societal and environmental health indicated by an environment’s understanding and acceptance of mental health? Phillips (2006) highlights the role of societal structures in physical and psychological health and suggests peace and justice as health-favoring conditions and war and injustice as health-compromising conditions. Considering these identified factors as favoring or compromising conditions, it leads to wonder if these same factors serve as equally impactful structures in the conceptualization of mental health?

**Lovingly Dancing in Her Own Space**

Contrary to other more critical theoretical approaches, Womanism is not defined or attached to sole concerns of gender or sexism, but on all sides of oppression with equal concern and action for all. Phillips (2006) notes that the link of Womanism to gender developed because of “historically produced race/class/gender matrix that is Black womanhood, and this was an origin point for a speaking position that freely and autonomously addresses any topic or problem” (p.xxii). Hill Collins (1996) notes that Walker’s (1983) suggestion that Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender, is situated as a comparison of “black women as ‘Womanist’ while white women remain merely ‘feminist’” (p.10). Hill Collins (1996) highlights that this usage reflects Black Nationalist traditions that held beliefs that blacks and whites in the same institutions or territories could not function as equal (Pickney1976; Van Deburg1992). Nash (2011) goes further to separate Womanism from feminism by suggesting that Womanism is
“serious, grounded, universal, and purposeful, feminism is the opposite, somehow trivial, diminished, selective, silly. Where Womanism is a vibrant, deep “purple,” feminism is a quiet, muted “lavender” (p. 8). However, even with the use of the analogy of Womanism to feminism, the Womanist has been criticized as having very little differences between black feminist, and even a feminist (Hill, 1996). According to Hill Collins (2001), Walker’s use of purple to lavender analogy not only creates a clear distinction between Womanist and feminist but also situates itself amongst Black nationalist traditions.

Pickney (1976) and Van Deburg (1992) noted that Black nationalist traditions held the belief that blacks and whites “cannot function as equals inhabiting the same territory or participating in the same social institutions” (Hill Collins, 1996, p. 10). This is reflective in the “vested interest” white people have in a continuing system of white supremacy that sees little to no use for “black integration or assimilation into a system predicated on black subjugation” (Hill Collins, 2001, p. 10). In summary, what this suggests is that Walker’s Womanism serves a reconciliation between nationalist tradition and addressing feminist concerns within the context of African American communities. Womanism, therefore served as a promise of coherence amongst philosophies that were previously thought of as incompatible, by offering a “vocabulary for addressing gender issues within African American communities without challenging the racially segregated terrain that characterizes American social institutions” (Hill Collins, 2001, p.11). However, Womanism’s attempt to stand alone has not made it immune to critiques about not only its purpose but also its function.

Phillips (2006) noted a series of questions that appear to question Womanism's purpose, strength, and added value in academic, theoretical, and identity spaces, and debates its merit versus feminism. These questions include: “Is Womanism “its own thing” or simply another

These questions not only placed binds upon Womanism to fit into a specific category, with clear demarcations, which is oppressive and is the antithesis of Womanism. It also according to Phillips (2006), pushed Womanism into obscurity once it was decided amongst those in the field of women’s studies that Womanism was merely a synonym for Black feminism. This leads me to ask two questions: Why is there a need to define Womanism in a very structured way? Does the idea of creating a space that is open to the interpretation and experience of the individual not have space within critical theory, which challenges the very idea of silencing those that feel invisible? I ask these questions to address a concern of why the creation of space, any for that matter, is met with a desire to categorize that space within one that already exists? I also find myself asking, who gets to decide the value of thought?

The questions posed above lead me to reflect on Hill Collins’ (1996) note that there would be a great benefit if we began to examine the discrepancy between what privileged black women, particularly those in the academy, view as important themes, and areas of needed attention compared to African American women outside of higher education. Hill Collins (1996) goes on to add that though there may be a physical similarity between these two women, and they may even occupy similar spaces, their worlds are significantly different. Therefore, for this study, I suggested giving back the space to the women of my study to serve as self-definers of their experience, rather than being treated as mere objects for my investigation, where they run
the risk of misrecognition. To accomplish this, I chose to utilize an unstructured approach rather than a structured interview to create space for the mothers to self-define their experiences rather than answer pre-determined questions that assume some level of pre-existing knowledge about their experience.

Analysis of Alice Walker’s (1983) *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose* text supplies space for not only representation but individualized interpretation. Walker’s Womanism does not work to create a one size fits all approach to the experience of Black women; rather, it acknowledges differences and fluidity amongst Black women. However, some suggest the fluidity represented is not as fluid as Walker might have hoped. Coleman (2006) reported that Womanism does not have “enough chairs, couches, or beds for me or many of the black women I know and love”. These missing “chairs” exist in the areas of sexuality, and the feelings of invisibility of Black lesbians, which goes against Walker’s explicit acknowledgment of a Womanist loving women both sexually and nonsexually. However, a critique of Womanists is their silence around the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, specifically, women loving women, which is still a silenced identity in some African American spaces (Hill Collins, 1996, p. 12). The other missing “chair” reflects a singular approach to spirituality, regarding typical Judeo-Christian understanding of spirituality in Womanist theology. However, I suggest that Womanism does have room at the table to encourage and celebrate the bringing of chairs to the table. Hill-Collins (1996) noted that Womanism creates a conceptual space that reflects the philosophical differences that exist amongst African American women (p. 12). I add that for one to truly be committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, both male and female, there exists a responsibility to embrace and celebrate all identities of black women.
In opposition to criticism that Womanism situates all Black women into a fixed identity that suggests a homogenized womanhood, Womanism creates space to explore the fluidity of identity construction. Hill Collins (1996) further negates this idea that Womanism acts from a fixed position, suggesting that as an ethical system, Womanism is always changing, it is not a closed fixed system of ideas, but rather “one that continually evolves through its rejection of all forms of oppression and commitment to social justice” (p.11). However, Walker identified that past Womanist views could be considered exclusionary and worked to create changes in the 1990s that created a space that more aligned with the desire to create a nonconstricting environment. Even with the critiques of Womanism, this framework creates a way for Black women to navigate their experience of being Black, woman, and any other identity that together forms her whole self. Womanism creates an accepting space for Black women to breathe and be seen and accepted as a whole human being.

According to Marsh-Lockett (1997), Womanism promises a universal perspective that is authored by Black women. A Womanist according to Marsh-Lockett is not only concerned with her experience, but that of her Black sisters, and the entire Black race, both male and female. A Womanist is political, she is an activist, a humanitarian, and her care and concern exceed national focus to encompass global concerns as well. Marsh-Lockett (1997) suggests that Womanism “furnishes a system of analysis and a worldview hitherto unavailable to African American women and other women of color” (p. 785). So why Womanism? The Womanist ideal, which is more of a worldview than a rigid ideology or theory, has created space for work to be done across disciplines, religious thought, activism, even when overshadowed by Black feminism in feminist histories of consciousness. Womanism is still around, still has merit, because of its fluidity and acceptance of the wholeness of individuals as they are. Womanism
does not need those that it represents to bend or tilt to meet the expectations of ideology, but asks those it represents who are you? All of you.

**Alice, Chikwenye, and Clenora**

Through criticism and natural change, Womanism has been broadened to address gaps outside the dominant histories of consciousness. Exploration of both Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi’s (1985) African Womanism and Clenora Hudson Weems’ (1993) Africana Womanism, are important conceptualizations of the experience of African and Africana women, respectfully. All three are considered distinctively different and formed independently from each other. Nevertheless, each has values that make up my conceptualization of Womanism that I will address later in this chapter.

**African Womanism**

Ogunyemi’s African Womanism centralizes itself towards issues that plague African women. The focus is on acknowledging concerns essential to the conceptualization of African women’s experience, that might be invisible from the African American/Black/Africana Womanism lens. Ogunyemi goes one step further to clearly state that only African women can be African Womanist. I wonder through my exploration of Womanism what it would have been like to make such a statement without concern of being labeled exclusionary? What would standing in the truth of a space for, by, and with the sole purpose of the African American/Black woman experience be like?

Susan Arndt (2000) notes that similar attitudes towards feminism indicate an antifeminist position across Africa. Acknowledging some truths align in Africa, the heterogeneous nature of white Western liberal feminism does not meet the needs of African women. Not being able to see past Western societies, problems that plague African women are ignored or a privileged Western
feminism stance is taken that it can speak for African women without any knowledge or understanding of their experience. Arndt (2000) adds that gender serving as a focal point, and in the context of “political, economic, cultural, social and mechanisms of oppression, (cultural) imperialism, capitalism, and religious fundamentalism” leave Africans claiming to not be able to identify with white Western feminism. Gender must be dealt with within the context of issues relevant to African women, but Walker and Hudson Weem’s race-class-gender approach does not meet the needs of the African woman. Oguynyemi provides a centralized understanding of African women’s experience that differs from those seen in Womanism or Africana Womanism.

Acknowledging Walker’s contributions to Womanism, Oguynyemi identifies African Womanism as appearing independently of Walker’s Womanism. Though they hold similarities, Oguynyemi criticizes Walker’s attempts to speak for the African woman, when it cannot capture the African woman’s experience completely. Oguynyemi also notes fundamental differences between the two, specifically importance placed on childbearing in African women and incompatible attitudes towards lesbianism. Oguynyemi (1985) stresses that a Womanist recognizes that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy. Oguynyemi’s African Womanism is both more complex and theoretically founded than Walker’s Womanism. In an interview with Ardnt (2000), Oguynyemi stated that African American Womanism peculiarities cannot be imposed on Africa, particularly as Africa is so big and culturally diverse. She added that issues such as extreme poverty, women oppressing their co-wives, religious fundamentalism, and gerontocracy are some areas that are relevant to Africans but not Blacks in America.

Africana Womanism
In 1987, Clenora Hudson-Weems coined the term Africana Womanism, after debating the importance of self-naming for Africana women. Hudson-Weems believed that Africana was stronger than Black because it encompasses ethnicity, including “cultural identity related to ancestry and land base-Africa” (Hudson Weems, 2019, p.22). Womanism, according to Hudson-Weems, reflects Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman” speech as she battled “dominant alienating forces in her life as a struggling Africana woman, questioning the accepted idea of womanhood” (Hudson Weems, 2019, p. 23). Hudson-Weems also identifies a driving factor for choosing Womanism over feminism was that only females of the human race could be a woman, while any living and non-living thing could be identified as female, whether they were a part of the human race. Hudson-Weems suggests that Africana Womanism is applicable for all women of African descent, because it is Afrocentric and African culture oriented, and focuses on the struggles, needs, experiences, and desires of women of the African diaspora. I found myself truly drawn to Africana Womanism, because of its’ unrelenting Afrocentric orientation, however, some of its views and principles do not align with my thoughts and beliefs. It is for this reason that I could not align with Africana Womanism as my theory, but it did provide some important frameworks for the development of the conceptualization of my Womanism.

Within Africana Womanism, there is a clear rejection of feminist politics and identity for the development of identity and politics within an Africana cultural framework. Hudson-Weems rejects feminism according to Maparyan (2012) citing that there is a difference in relations amongst Black men/Black women and White men/White women, therefore a different gender-based politics exists. Because of this, Hudson-Weems notes that “Africana Womanism do not privilege sexism among their many oppressions” (Maparyan, 2012, p. 27). From this perspective racism and class-based oppression are privileged as they affect the collective rather than part of
the community. Hudson-Weems notes the greatest source of contention amongst Africana men and women in the United States is employment and economic opportunity. She advocates for moving away from short-sighted approaches that focus on women needing more jobs compared to men, but more jobs for all. Hudson-Weems believed that short-sighted approaches lead to fighting within the community which in turn defeats the collective on all fronts.

Focusing on the collective as a unit of analysis, Africana Womanism also acknowledges the Black race as a collective including all people of African descent, it views the collective as the Black family and the group as the entire human collective. However, to carry out this collective driven focus, this African-centered approach predominates its’ focus towards the realities and injustices associated with race, class, then finally gender. Striving for race empowerment, female empowerment takes a back seat as according to Hudson-Weems (2001), the “first line of order for Black women and their communities is to address the race factor” (p. 139). This is to suggest that to address gender issues, race issues for Black women must be addressed first. In Hudson-Weems (2001) exploration of Africana Womanism, she cites Apetheker (1981) as a source of why placing gender before race is at the detriment of Black women:

When we place women at the center of our thinking, we are going about the business of creating an historical and cultural matrix from which women may claim autonomy and independence over their own lives. […] feminist in the modern sense, means empowerment of women. For women of color, such an equality, such an empowerment, cannot take place unless the communities in which they live can successfully establish their own racial and cultural integrity. (p. 13)
However, the question arises as to what does this mean for the injustices experienced by Africana women, based solely on their gender?

Hudson-Weems suggest that physical brutality, sexual harassment, and female subjugation within and outside of the race should be solved within Africana communities. The primary concern is to eliminate racist influences on the lives of Africana people; however, Hudson-Weems acknowledges that no form of female subjugation can be tolerated. Nevertheless, though Africana Womanism holds a positionality that suggests it condemns the subjugation of females, it is very clear on its’ stance about sexuality. Africana Womanism does not hold space for same sex-relationships for people of African descent and promotes heteronormativity. Maparyan (2012) notes that “while Hudson-Weems seeks to elevate women as speakers and participants within Afrocentric discourse, she still manages to discipline and police women’s differences within the community of women of African descent around issues of sexuality, feminism, and even cultural orientation” (p. 28) Hudson-Weems goes so far to critique Walker’s Womanism because she believes there is too much focus on women’s sexuality and culture. To me, this is a silencing or erasure of identity amongst those Hudson-Weems claims to been in support of and leads me to wonder what space is there really for the wholeness of Africana women.

As stated previously, Africana Womanism has very transparent critiques of Womanism, as well as critiques of Africana women who identify as feminists. Hudson-Weems (2001) notes that Africana Womanism is different from Alice Walker’s Womanism because where Walker’s Womanism suggests shade differences between Womanism and black feminism, Africana Womanism is an entity separate from feminism completely. Hudson-Weems (2001) notes that different from feminism, which is female-centered, Africana Womanism is family-centered.
Issues of gender are substantially different for Africana Womanism compared to feminism because Africana women have never been considered the property of their male counterparts. Africana Womanism makes a very clear divide between feminism and Africana Womanism suggesting that Africana women who take on feminism as an identity are assimilators or sell-outs because their focus is diverted from the collective struggle both historically and currently for Africana men and women. Africana Womanism, which is grassroots in nature, appeals to focusing energy and time into attainable change that offers liberation from oppression and survival of the Africana collective.

As much as I valued Africana Womanism, I found myself struggling with owning the identity of an Africana Womanist. I valued the struggle of Black/Africana women, and some of those struggles were directly affected due to gender or the expected role of their gender. I thought suggesting that gender was a non-factor or less of a factor compared to race and class did not see Black/Africana women in their wholeness that Alice Walker’s Womanism took care to see. Acknowledging that the focus of this study was on strength in Black women navigating this through a lens that saw gender as an afterthought did not feel completely aligned with me.

**Rectifying Concerns with Walker’s Womanism**

I wanted to take the time to acknowledge my journey through understanding and developing a relationship with Womanism. For me, I was in search of a theory that was centralized on the needs and experiences of both African and African American women. However, I addressed barriers that existed with that approach. Nevertheless, in my search, I struggled to identify as a Black feminist, because I grappled with identifying with a theory whose development, I felt was at the disadvantage of women that looked like me, a feeling I was surprised to find was cited significantly in the literature. Coming across Walker’s Womanism
was the breath of fresh air that I had been looking for, from its womanish terminology rooted in “Black folk” culture, to her spiritual connection seen in works including *The Color Purple*. I identify as a Womanist; however, I believed that my Womanism was different from the next Womanist. Therefore, I identify my Womanism as one that is influenced by many Womanists and Black feminist thought including, Dorothy Randal Tsuruta’s (2012) concept of an African centered Womanism.

Fearful that “womanish,” the term from which Womanism developed might lose its cultural concept, Tsuruta posited that there was a need to reaffirm the cultural rootedness and value of the ideal of being womanish, focusing on the importance of self-agency and transformative practice. Tsuruta (2012) who was fearful of the loss of cultural integrity in an attempt by others to appropriate the term, called for a need to recenter “womanish” as a term for Black women unremoved from “community regardless of education, neighborhood, connections, friendships, political allies, relationships or intellectual conceit” (p. 4). She goes on to add that the womanish image is a Black girl who is all grown up, mature, resourceful, and resilient, this is “womanish and Womanist;” a Womanist has the “freshness and zest of a womanish girl, and the maturity of mind and emotion of a woman” (Tsuruta, 2012, p. 4). Tsuruta advocates for “Womanist” to stand alone, and not need validation, aid, protection, or comfort by making it analogous with feminism. It like Black women can stand on its own because to not do so violates the principle of self-determination and negates the need for a self-defining term such as Womanism.

African-centered Womanism is proactive and culturally confident in its exclusively Black embrace, according to Tsuruta, and negates the idea than Womanism main concern is not Black women, but rather that Black women are the place where particular thinking originated.
Understanding that Womanism has created space for many women of color and has contributed to offset branches of Womanism that meets the needs of different women of color, African-centered Womanism pushes for the removal of unclear language by Walker, i.e., women of color rather than Black women, committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female to commitment to the survival and wholeness of the entire race of Black people, male and female. African-centered Womanism focused its attention on resituating “womanish” back to its original cultural context and social reality of Black women. Naming these areas of concern, Tsuruta and colleagues were able to gain permission from Walker to found The Womanist journal, holding Walker’s definition of Womanism, except for the parts of the definition they could not embrace. Specifically, the need to use Womanism as an analogy to feminism.

African-centered Womanism helped bridge the gap for me, regarding the struggle I had with fully embracing a Womanist stance both professionally and personally. This diverges from Phillips (2006) understanding of Womanism, who does not share the same need for exclusivity regarding who Womanism is for. Walker’s Womanist definition encompasses my idea of Womanism, with some critiques. For fear of getting lost in Walker’s Womanism, I needed to carve out for myself a space that felt salient not only to who I am, but my perception of the world, and my experience in it. James E. Turner (1997) cites John H. Clarke statement that African centeredness “relates you to a land, history, and culture. No people is spiritually or cultural secure until it answers to a name of its own choosing- a name that simultaneously relates that people to its past, present, and future” (p.92). Therefore, my Womanism is not your Womanism, and that is Womanism.

Rectifying my Crooked Room
Before I moved onto what Womanism was to me, I thought it is important to explain why I gave so much space to other theories for Black women. Finding theory was not just a journey of finding a framework that best suited the women I worked with, it was also a journey to find myself. In this journey, I thought a great deal about “putting on” or “trying out” theory, and subsequently putting/ trying on theory with the women of my study. For me, that theory needed to be developed out of love and care for African American/Black women and served as a vehicle for creating “uncrookedness” in what might feel like a very crooked space. I also wanted to acknowledge some of the fear that I originally felt by taking a very Afrocentric stance regarding my theory. I feared that saying my focus was only on Black women, and in connection Black men, that I was in some way exclusionary, something I wanted to avoid. I appreciated Kelsey Blackwell’s (2018) article *Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People* because, she reflected a view that was not exclusionary by any means but represented a response to oppression. Blackwell (2018) suggests that a separate space is not a regression to “pre-Civil Rights era”, but an acknowledgment that the pain of racial inequality is still present, and these spaces taken represent equal access to being felt, seen, and heard. In both my writing and learning, I was moved and lovingly pushed to reconcile who I was, who I am, and who I would like to become.

**My Womanism is Not Your Womanism, That’s Womanism**

In Layli Phillips’ (2006) introduction of *The Womanist Reader*, rigidity is denounced when conceptualizing Womanist ideals. Phillips (2006) notes that a Womanist has the right to describe something or someone as having a Womanist disposition if that is how it seems to them. This non-constrictive view of Womanism provides further support for the idea that Womanism can serve the needs of different individuals based on what they need Womanism to be for them.
Phillips (2006) goes on to add the importance that Womanism “interpolates perspective rather than an ideology. Womanism is not and never has been set in stone; codification and canonization are processes that are antithetical to the spirit of Womanism” (xxxiv). With such freedom to define one’s understanding and experience, Womanism appears open to the interpretation of those who claim it as their own. Dialogue whether written, verbal, or visual, and inspiration in the form of internal or spiritual creativity is central to the continual generation of Womanist expression. This along with the interaction with the knowledge of individual gain through moving through the world daily, impacts, and direct Womanist functioning (Phillips, 2006). Womanism flexible in nature is not governed by a set of rules or decorum that does not give it room to stretch and move and is not concerned with the idea of or need for conformity. This lack of “hard set rules” of how one should and must be a Womanist, really opened up Womanism to be received lovingly and openly by those that find representation in Walker’s Womanist space. With a focus on continual movement towards healing and commonweal, “right action” noted by Phillips (2006) resides in the individual's conscience and the dialogue of social and spiritual communities she “embeds herself by affinity” (p.xxxiv). Where some may view this representation of Womanism to be laissez-faire, Womanism provides freedom, where some have not always had that privilege. It provides truth where some felt unheard. And it holds space for those that never had a place of their own.

Acknowledging that Womanism is different amongst different individuals that identify as a Womanist is crucial. My Womanism is not your Womanism, but that’s Womanism. When I considered my development and understanding of Womanism, I thought it is important to acknowledge the journey that it took me to get there. For me, when I was exploring theories, I knew that my strong connection to my identity as a Black woman would drive my search for a
theory that aligned with my beliefs. I found comfort in having commonality with women who have struggled with identifying with a feminist labeled framework, because of the history attached to the name. Acknowledging the growth of feminist theory and development of intersectionality, I needed a theory that made space for women that looked like me, and whose focus was on support and love of these women. I struggled with Black feminism because I felt that the addition of the word Black did not shadow for me, the word feminism. Coming across Alice Walker’s Womanism was a transformational experience for me. Yes, she labels Womanist as Black feminist or a feminist of color, but Womanism seemed to carve that space intentionally and fully for women that looked like me. Even Walker’s definition spoke to history and culture so rich that I felt drawn to Womanism, and all it could provide. With an emphasis on spirituality, a continual reminder of love and its’ impact on self and others, recognition of women’s strength and softness, and emotional flexibility, Womanism became a love letter to myself and the Black women in my life that I love, both known and unknown. Womanism provided a space where I felt heard and seen, a space that existed to nurture and protect me and those that looked like me. Womanism was a place where me being tired, angry, and hurt were given a reprieve. Womanism was where I stopped hiding and stood in my womanhood for all that it was, and all that it would become.

My expression of Womanism was different from the next Womanist, but the mutual respect and care that existed was the commonality amongst all Womanist thought. Identifying my definition of Womanism was not only important in terms of this study, but also my journey of self-discovery. My Womanism was unapologetically African-centered, but valued love for and care of all people. It valued spiritual connections, nourishment of the soul, and connection with God (in whatever form that was for her). It thrived on relationships both spiritually and
socially. It held family in high regard and understood the importance of remembering history, honoring one’s culture, and valuing life experiences. It was centralized in the uplifting and love of Black women and women of African descent. It craved sisterhood and connection.

My Womanism valued Africana Womanisms’ importance of self-naming and defining role flexibility, and family-centeredness. It acknowledged, respected, and loved African Womanism, both due to its care for and centralization of the needs of African women. It celebrated the differences amongst Black women and women of African descent and strived to encourage individuality. It valued Black feminism’ political activism and intellectual thought. It valued its willfulness to dismantle and confront existing structures of domination in the form of gender, race, and class oppression, and its resistance and desire for transformation of discrimination. It supported, empowered, and loved Black men and men of African descent. It acknowledged a woman’s strength and resiliency but, also protected and loved her softness and vulnerability. It acknowledged the multifaceted identities of a woman but, allowed her to write the narrative of what they meant to her. It honored the Black woman’s body, grieved its traumas both past and present, and celebrated its beauty for its ability to give life, house strength, resiliency, and conjure love. Lastly, and of significant importance, my Womanism placed high priority around the care of and maintenance of a Black women’s mental health and the importance of protecting not only her body but her mind.

When I thought about “wholeness,” my first thought was why did I have to remain within a very rigid demarcation of “claiming” one theory. Yes, Womanism was my driving theory, but I believed it could be supported, and allowed to be whole with the help of Black Feminism who focused on the gendered experience of black women, Africana Womanism who valued racial solidarity and collectivism, and African-centered Womanism which valued self-determination
and being willfully independent. For me, I created a space, that was not crooked, but allowed for me to stand upright, the same thing I wanted for the women of my study.

I believed the search for both space and wholeness were reflected heavily in this dissertation. It was the intention that this same space and wholeness was reflected for African American women of this study who had been asked to choose “strength” over softness or vulnerability; mothers who had been asked to choose motherhood over mental health, or women who were not seen as both mother and patient, as all of these served as examples of misrecognition. This misrecognition reflected African American mother’s wholeness not being recognized, and as a result, left them standing in a crooked room. Acknowledging that strength was not viewed the same amongst different women and suggesting that it was is an act of misrecognition; the focus of this dissertation was to recognize the wholeness of African American mother’s through creating space for self-defined understandings of motherhood and mental health concerns.
Chapter 3

The purpose of this chapter was to link the Womanist framework mentioned in Chapter Two with the methodological stance of this study. As there continued to be a need to examine the experience of African American mothers with mental health concerns, this study examined this experience through the Womanist methodological approach of supplying an upright space for women who may have been standing in a crooked room. The direction of this chapter was as follows: address the focus and research questions that drove the direction of this study and provide a rationale for using Womanist method and voice centeredness. Next, I identified my positionality in this study, acknowledged my participation, as more than just a researcher. Lastly, I addressed the methodology, including an ethics section, the use of womanist shares analysis, and the rationale for the use of member checking. It was with the use of a Womanist and voice-centered methodology that space for the wholeness of the women in this study was provided. This approach served as a way to rectify some of the jagged edges the mothers of this study potentially succumbed to in the crooked room.

Statement of Womanist Inquiry

Experiences of motherhood for African American/Black women with mental health concerns was an area of needed scholarly exploration. Further, historically imposed expectations and stereotypes served as a potential deterrent for African American mothers regarding expressing mental health or motherhood concerns. Acknowledging the impact of the silencing paradigm addressed in the earlier chapter along with the conceptualization of the crooked room, creating a space for African American women to discuss knowing of strength, motherhood, and mental health was imperative.
**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine the individualized experience of African American mothers with mental health concerns (Anxiety, Depression, Bipolar Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Schizophrenia, etc.). Understanding the role of socialization regarding strength in African American women, this inquiry specifically focused on the self-defined experiences of motherhood and mental health concerns. As the study’s underlining interest was on the role of the Strong Black Woman stereotype on those experiences, questions around strength were not asked directly during the Womanist witnessing portion of the mothers’ share. The research questions regarding strength were asked during a separate portion of the womanist share and were the following questions: 1) How have traditional ideas of the Strong Black Woman stereotype impacted African American mother’s experience of motherhood? 2) How do African American mothers with mental health concerns conceptualize their strength? 3) In what ways does the Strong Black Woman stereotype impact African American mothers' identity of mothers with mental health concerns?

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that I used to conceptualize the experiences of African American/Black mothers with mental health concerns was integrated Womanism. Discussed previously, it was important to use a theory centralized on the experiences of African American/Black women specifically, in an attempt to create space made for and focused lovingly on her. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, I found myself struggling to identify solely with Walker’s (1983) Womanism. I found my own space in theory through conceptualizing Womanism with African-centered Womanism, and respect for Black Feminism, Africana and African Womanism. When identifying a methodology, I ran into a similar concern. I found myself
wanting more from Womanism but knew using Womanism as my methodology was imperative to best support the women in my study. So, like theory, I decided to incorporate methodologies that would make space where I felt I did not have any. I found this necessary because I felt as if I was in a crooked methodological room. This room felt constricting and not reflective of Womanist work, and I feared an instance of misrecognition if space was not created.

McClish-Boyd and Bhattacharya (2021) shared the necessity of methodological improvisation in their development of endarkened narrative inquiry. Traditional approaches in qualitative research, such as case studies, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology, did not work for them for two reasons. First, because these approaches were not conceptualized in ways that centered Black women’s experiences. And, secondly, use of traditional interpretivist perspectives in qualitative research, “were informed by whiteness-centered discourses, usually from western intellectual perspectives” (p. 2). For McClish-Boyd and Bhattacharya (2021) use of improvisation became necessary in the goal of “concretizing” a methodological framework (p.3). Similar to my desire to use a method framed in the context of “Black women- centric ontoepistemologies,” the researchers used a “set of methodological processes that informed our juxtaposition of multiple theoretical perspectives with existing substantive literature (McClish-Boyd and Bhattacharya,2021, p.2). Therefore, for this dissertation, I intended to concretize integrated Womanism, leaning on the ideas of Walker’s (1983) Womanism with an African-centered Womanism influence and Africana Womanism methodology to best support the focus of this study.

Acknowledging that both race and gender are important identities that intersect and impact African American/Black women’s experience, it was important to use a theory that respected not only these two identities but provided room for different interpretations and
understanding of those identities. Voice, knowing, and relationships were also important aspects of this study, and Womanism provided space for each aspect individually. Dilliard (2006) highlights that Womanist epistemology challenges assumptions that a group can be “spoken for” and represented by a singular conception of “truth” through a positivistic lens (p.4). In their 2014 article, MarrSource adds that Womanist epistemology and theory seek to disrupt the current dominant ways of knowing. Acknowledging the importance of taking an anti-codification stance in knowing, Womanism according to MarrSource (2014) expresses the importance of responsibility in Womanist driven research to not only provide space for unheard voices to speak but, also to build meaningful relationships between community members and researchers to ensure the protection of accurate representation that extends “well beyond data collection and interpretation” (p. 99).

Africana Womanism, according to Pellerin (2012) supports 8 principles central to Africana Womanism methodology. These principles include: 1) the wholeness of Africana womanhood 2) Africana family and community serving as consciousness of the Africana woman 3) centrality of motherhood 4) interconnectedness of Africana women and humanity 5) spiritual and moral grounding awareness 6) Africana women’s intrinsic bond to the struggle for social justice 7) commitment to the beauty and strength of body, soul, and mind of the Africana woman and, 8) inseparability of the Africana woman and her race (Pellerin, 2012, p. 77). Africana Womanism methodology’s focus on the centrality of motherhood, created supplemental support to my integrated Womanist approach, as it provided space and focused on aspects of motherhood, which was central to the present research. However, even though Africana Womanism suggests a focus on the wholeness of Africana womanhood, it also supports a belief that Africana women’s “burden of oppression is not solely grounded in her gender, but her race
first” (Pellerin, 2012, p.77). Nevertheless, where Africana Womanism did not reflect wholeness as being able to hold both gender and race on equal platforms, the combination of Walker (1983) and African-centered Womanism did. It was my intention that by merging these methodologies, a loving and supportive approach to working with African American mothers could be used.

This qualitative research aimed to focus on understanding individualized knowing and understanding of motherhood, mental health, and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype, rather than leaning on assumptions and pre-existing knowledge. In the current study, the knowledge gained from this method can be used to help better understand the experiences of African American women who have mental health concerns and are mothers.

**Rationale**

When considering why a Womanist methodology would be used in this study, it was my natural inclination to use a methodology that supported Womanism. A Womanist way of knowing was clear not only in the way an individual perceives a phenomenon but also in the way they interpret it. It was important to me that I chose a methodology that appreciated the emotional flexibility of Black women and their strength (however they defined it) and created space for struggle and love of oneself. I wanted a methodology that was centralized on the experience of African American/ Black women and valued motherhood. I wanted to work with a methodology that valued the importance of the wholeness of a woman. And lastly, the chosen methodology had to create and support space for each individual, to avoid the development of a crooked room within analyzing womanist shares. Acknowledging Phillips (2006) who notes that Womanism “interpolates perspective rather than ideology...has never been set in stone, and codification and canonization are processes that are antithetical to the spirit of Womanism” (p.xxxiv), it became important that this study represented that throughout. However, I found it
important to not only address and create space for the emotional flexibility, strength, motherhood, and wholeness of Black women but, also their voice.

As I mentioned in Chapter One, a Black woman’s voice can be the strongest part of her and should not be silenced. The silencing paradigm often conceptualized with depression, and for this study, other forms of mental health concerns are viewed as a “psychological process in which women lose and then “mourn” a self that has become submerged, excluded, or weakened” (Jack, 1991, p.30) under identities, relationships, and “normative restrictions of goodness and niceness” (Fox, 1977, p. 805). Women are therefore socialized to view these identities, relationships, and restrictions as integral to their welfare and vital to their social acceptance. Although I am not suggesting that every Black woman is subjected to or engages in silencing of self, acknowledging the impact of the silencing paradigm, it was important to explore the presence or absence of the paradigm in Black women’s lives.

Acknowledging the impact being silenced can have on African American women, it seemed imperative to pair an integrated Womanist methodology with voice-centered analysis. Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2008) notes that voice-centered research places significant importance on identifying the distorted and overlooked experiences of women. Voice-centeredness seeks to access and understand a central dynamic: the distinction that cultural understanding of how women are supposed to act, think, and feel, and the voices of individual women expressing thoughts and feelings are relatively “free from second thoughts and instant revision” (Gilligan, 2003, p.25). Voice-centeredness would be addressed further in a later section.

**Positionality Statement**

MarrSource (2014) noted that Womanism is grounded in “spirituality, community, and activist praxis” (p.103), these characteristics along with an emphasis on the physical and mental
health of Black women and their experience of motherhood, influenced my standpoint as a Womanist researcher and future Counseling Psychologist. I also identify as a Black daughter of a Black mother who has had her struggles with mental health concerns. However, I acknowledged that this positionality, though it stood as reasoning for my love for this population, still placed me in an “outsider within” position, a term introduced by Patricia Hill Collins (1998). Hill Collins (1998) suggests that “under conditions of social justice” which for the intents of this study, will focus on the mental health of African American women, “the outsider-within location describes a particular knowledge-power relationship, one of gaining knowledge about or of a dominant group without gaining the full power accorded to members of that group” (p. 6). I acknowledged the importance of remaining aware of my position as an outsider within, knowing that my own experiences of having a mother with mental health concerns did not give me the privilege of membership within this group. This further solidified my stance of co-authorship with the women of my study, because without their words I had none, and for that, I am eternally grateful. However, Hill Collins (1998) poses a question that made me analyze my stance on the experiences of Black women. Hill Collins (1998) asked if African American women as a group occupy a comparable location? My response to this question was to make clear that this study was not to find similarity amongst the women, but to serve as an attempt for each story to occupy its own space. Not to align with others.

As I found it important to support the women that so graciously agreed to share their story, for me, it was important that the word “data” not be used. “Data” was replaced with womanist shares. I made this decision because, the use of the word data removed the women from their experiences, and it felt as if it became an entity separated from the one that it exists within, and that did not sit well with me. Further, when using the term womanist shares, it was
important to not capitalize the w in womanist. This decision centralize these shares as the focus rather than an emphasis on womanism. Using the word data for me, also suggested that this was something I found, rather than something that was shared with me or created in collaboration. Laura (2013) suggests that data is a love act, and for me, it was more important to reflect this act of love by the women of my work rather than presenting something that I suggested belonged to me. Each share, because collection feels like taking something that was not mine, and analysis of these womanist shares was supported, surrounded, and heard, as maybe some of the women had not felt previously. As the Womanist methodology was participatory in nature (MarrSource, 2014), I was situated in a collaborative relationship with the women of my study. For me to foster that relationship, credibility, and trust had to be developed, therefore the collaborative relationship remained a priority. JKSB (2018) viewed collaboration as active in creating space that not only is coming into existence and beginning to display potential but, “always of difference in itself” (p.746) and emergent. It was the intention that by using a Womanist methodology that was collaborative, a less crooked space that was open to new experiences and understandings could be explored.

**Mothers**

Before discussing the selection criteria, it was important to briefly discuss the use of the word “mothers” over “subjects” or “participants.” Though I did not have any direct concerns regarding the use of the word participants, I found it important that this dissertation reflected Womanist care throughout, even down to how the women of my study were spoken about. As I discussed in a later section and mentioned in the earlier chapter, love (a resistant act of self-care) was a driving force for this dissertation. Laura (2013) noted that when qualitative researchers incorporate love into their work, they not only make the decision to engage, witness, and labor
for those people but, also treat them with the level of reverence often reserved for their kin. Acknowledging a kinship between researcher and her people, Laura (2013) notes that it is not the “subjects”, but rather “my people”, [who] inspire and direct such acts toward the negotiation of relationships- personal, social, political, historical- out of love and in solidarity” (p. 291). For myself, I also found a connection towards looking at the women of my work as my kin and wanting to reflect treating them as I would my kin. For this reason, I chose to use “mothers” rather than subjects or participants, not only as a researcher who invoked love in her work but, also acknowledging that this dissertation had been inspired by my own mother’s life.

This study consisted of 8 African American/Black women from varying socioeconomic status recruited from the greater metropolitan area including Memphis and surrounding counties in Arkansas and Mississippi. Eligibility criteria for this study included 1) Identify as an African American/ Black woman 2) At least 30 years of age 3) Experienced or are experiencing mental health concern: (Anxiety, Bipolar Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Schizophrenia, etc.) 3) Identify as a mother 3) Mental health concerns are not due to postpartum depression and 4) English speaking

Additionally, although not needed, a targeted effort was made to recruit eligible mothers who have one daughter. The rationale for this criterion was that according to Abrams et al. (2014), Black women socialize their daughters through dialogue, modeling, and vicarious conditioning. From an early age, the essentiality of being a Strong Black Woman, and the qualities of assuming that role is learned through this socialization (Staples & Johnson, 1993; Wallace, 2007). However, not having a daughter did not serve as an exclusion criterion. Of the mothers that took part in this study, two did not have daughters.
Each mother was asked demographic questions regarding age, occupational status, relationship status, and age and number of children. The intention for gaining this additional information was twofold. First, to address the varying differences of the mothers of this study based on intersecting identities. And, secondly to create potential dialogue regarding the impact of varying identities on their experience of motherhood and mental health. Lastly, the mothers of the study were not asked to directly disclose mental health diagnosis. As the requirements of a mental health concern were stated on the flyer, I felt requiring the mothers to disclose their diagnosis could potentially serve as a barrier for them to feel comfortable sharing their experience with me. I also noticed within myself a concern regarding the mothers wondering if their experiences were “good enough” to participate, if asked to disclose a formal diagnosis. For me, it was more important for the mothers to reach a level of comfort or connection to their story to share their diagnosis, if they wished.

**womanist shares**

In their 2013 manuscript, Denzin notes past research (Richardson, 2000, p.928; St. Pierre & Adams, 2011, p.620) that suggests that a “God’s eye view of the world” (p. 353), was once often given to researchers as justification that they can serve as knowers of what is considered data and, has more recently been taken away. Denzin (2013) adds that St. Pierre & Adams (2011) argue that words “become data only when theory acknowledges them as data” (p.621). This shift in thought according to Denzin (2013) creates doubt regarding theory, method, discourse, and tradition having “a universal and general claim as the ‘right’ or privileged form of authoritative knowledge” (Richardson, 2000, p. 928). Richardson (2000) goes on to add that claims of universal truth hide interest of struggles on the local, cultural, and political levels. Shifts away from viewing data as a representation of authoritative knowledge create what Denzin
(2013) notes as a rupture. With this rupture comes undeniable questions as to what happens post-
rupture. Where does data fit in these new spaces? Is there any longer even a need for the word?
Why keep the word after you have deconstructed it? (Denzin, 2013, p. 353). Denzin (2013) notes
three different ways of using data, but for this dissertation, I find myself aligning with the
depiction of Madison’s (2010) belief that there is no place for data, but attention should be
focused on a search for justice, and a politics of representation that “seeks out utopias of
possibility, a politics of hope not a politics based on data” (p. 354).

Reflecting on earlier discussions on the importance of representation and the removal of
misrepresentation, I found it important in my work to not use the word data. To me, data
reflected this claim on someone else’s experience and situated me in a position of having an
authoritative say on another person’s life experience. Furthermore, Denzin’s (2013) critique on
the impact of the politics of evidence, serves as an additional justification for not using the word
data, and reflected for me a need to reexamine what it meant to find evidence towards previously
intended research questions:

In this new terrain, it is understood that data and evidence are never morally or ethically
neutral. Paraphrasing Morse (2006, pp. 415-416), who quotes Larner (2004, p. 20), the
politics and political economy of evidence, also known as data, is not a question of
evidence or no evidence. It is rather a question of who has the power to control the
definition of evidence, who defines the kinds of materials that count as evidence, who
determines what methods best produce the best forms of evidence, whose criteria and
standards are used to evaluate quality evidence? The politics of data, the politics of
evidence cannot be separated from the ethics of evidence. (p. 354)
For this dissertation, I proposed the use of womanist shares, to signify discussion regarding “data” received during my work with these women. Further, as a way to combat falling into “data collection,” my work was influenced by the principles addressed in Laura’s (2013) work. Laura (2013) highlighted the importance of individuals being acknowledged, validated, and having their history confirmed (Brant, 1994, p.74) through witnessing. Witnessing according to Laura (2013) is the deliberate attendance to people, which is done through taking notice and seeing what they believe is meaningful. Laura (2013) adds that the act of witnessing serves to validate the existence of stories and protect their place in the world. Gannon et al. (2014) note that the use of collaborative writing, and for this dissertation collaborative research, deterritorializes experiences and prevents them from being reterritorialized in an attempt to identify meaning or ownership of those experiences. As I intended to abdicate the position of the holder of authoritative knowledge, for a collaborative approach of working with the mothers. I believed that serving as a witness to these women’s stories and using a collaborative approach fit into a Womanist methodology and reflected the importance of self-defining. Ropers-Huilman (1999) further reflected the role of witnessing by suggesting that “We are acting as witnesses when we participate in knowing and learning about others, engage within constructions of truth, and communicate what we have experienced to others” (p. 23). Laura (2013) notes that there is a very clear difference between witnessing and observing people in qualitative research:

When we witness others’ lives, we are complicit in active and partial meaning-making about those experiences, up close and personal to the phenomenon of collective interest. While it is impossible to *really* know what other people or completely understand what is happening to them, the act of witnessing is an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn about lived lives, and to explore rationalization of people’s experiences. (p. 290)
Laura (2013) notes that it is important for the empathic listener to be present during witnessing to affirm and recognize the realness of a story, which otherwise is annihilated. JKSB (2018) notes that ethics includes a commitment to listening to everyone involved in collaborative research. Wyatt et al., (2011) adds:

The particular quality of listening that we engaged in…involved paying attention, not just with our minds, but our whole bodies. It involved listening carefully-with care-caring enough to hear what was said; it involved asking how is it to be this, in this moment-coming to know internally. It involved existing fully in the moment of listening, going beyond the binaries of you and me, speaker and listener. It involved listening without judgment, giving up on moralism, giving up on the ego that seeks to defend and criticize and judge. It involved willing vulnerability to the other, an openness to the breakdown of what one knows already, an openness to the knowledge that undoes the already known, an openness to the abjected other that lives at one’s borders. (p.137)

I took my roles as witness and collaborator very seriously, acknowledging not only the responsibility that came with these roles but, also acknowledging the honor of being invited into these women’s lives.

Laura (2013) accounts that engaging and laboring is also integral when using love in social research. Laura (2013) underlines that engaging unveils problems and highlights contradictions that are present for all people. Laura (2013) adds that engagement creates a deliberate dialogue around those subjects that are viewed as mundane, taken for granted, and spoken in hushed tones. Engagement leads to publicly naming what has been witnessed and “draw[s] upon multiple vantage points-including the lenses of the inquirer herself-for a fuller and more complicated understanding of people’s issues” (p.290). Through engaging, we aim to
establish the conditions for personal empowerment. Lastly, Laura (2013) notes laboring as the work of writing, “but also the physical labor-the work of the hands and the bodies of sharing available resources” (p.290). Viewing “data” as womanist shares aligned not only with love politics seen in Black feminist work, but also situated itself seamlessly within Womanist practice and self-definition.

**Development of Womanist witnessing**

The primary womanist share technique was individual Womanist witnessing. I proposed the development of Womanist witnessing because, when trying to find a method that I thought would best reflect and complement Womanist driven research, nothing seemed to fit completely. Womanist witnessing reflected not only the philosophical stance of Womanism but also created space for self-defining by the women of my study. Witnessing, as previously discussed, is an act of joining and taking notice of what others find meaningful. Use of Womanist witnessing allowed not only space for self-definition, but also collaboration and engaging with the mothers in an attempt to create deliberate dialogue. In this section, I shared how I developed this method.

The development of Womanist witnessing was heavily influenced by the work of Laura (2013) discussed previously, and Maparyan’s (2012) exploration of Womanist methodology, which focuses on social and ecological transformation. Maparyan (2012) suggested that Womanist methodology focuses on the changing of energy whether physical, emotional, mental, or social. However, this change comes with a denial of respectability politics. In her chapter on how to write about Black women, Kendall (2020) outlines the importance of rejecting the politics of respectability. According to Kendall (2020) respectability politics are not only centralized on having control of group behavior but, also having the privilege to decide what is and is not appropriate behavior. This, Kendall explains, is undeniably rooted in structural
inequality (2020). Respectability politics expects an individual to cleave to respectability rather than seek autonomy, creating a hierarchy of privilege dependent on dominant norms. Respectability politics also mandate assimilation and accommodation. It was my intention that through using Womanist witnessing, this study would begin to shift the energy surrounding strength and mental health in African American mothers. It was the intention that this dissertation would create space for the potential rejection of the confines of “appropriate behavior” and the celebration of self-definition. It is my belief that these intentions were met, as each mother shared how meaningful engaging in this opportunity was for her, as well as, acknowledged that the hesitancy they originally felt was unwarranted and lead to unknown realizations in the end.

Kendall (2020) noted that this search to obtain respectability has, in turn, created emotionally neutral and restrained politeness that conflicts with any concept of normal human emotion (p. 93). With this in mind, Kendall (2020) urges that those writing about, working with, or speaking for Black women should listen to these women rather than projecting narratives onto them. This first requires unlearning those narratives, which without a doubt are influenced by the crooked room. Kendall (2020) adds that feminism, and for the sake of this research, Womanism, needs to accept not knowing everything, and acknowledging a lack of lived experience to suggest it can relate to those it claims to represent. Badiou (2002) poses an alternative to contemporary ethics, called ethics of truth. Ethics of truth honors the following: not imposing itself on others, it is open to different placements in the world, it does not use absolute truths imposed on others, and judgments are not based on own self-interested position (Badiou, 2002, p. 85). When approaching my research, I found it important to support similar ethics of truth when working with the mothers. This approach created space not only for self-definition by the
women, but it reflected Womanist ethics and created a guideline for using a collaborative approach.

When exploring my decision to employ Womanist witnessing rather than a traditional structured or semi-structured interview, the biggest determining factor was the importance of using a tool that reflected Womanist practice and principles. Nunkoosing (2005) notes that conventional interviews are transactional, and suggested that language such as structured, semi-structured, and unstructured are inaccurate designations, as interviews involve conversation, and all conversation is a highly structured event. Nunkoosing (2005) goes on to add that all three of these types of interviews reflect the different degrees and order to which the same preselected questions are asked. Nunkoosing (2005) ends by highlighting that “structured” represents the degree of control the interviewer has over the transaction of the interview. They believe that this assumption of control can be problematic when highlighting the reality that often individuals may believe one thing but do something different. As Womanism rejects the need for structure, applying these tools would have been the antithesis of Womanist work. I also found myself struggling with the use of a method that suggested I had some sense of authority or knowledge about the experience of the mothers that shared with me. Nunkoosing (2005) also notes that the act of using interviews as a tool for collecting data involves a search of precise technology of interviewing that often results in a lack of attention given to the uniqueness of each interview encounter with different people.

The consideration of using interviews also came with the task of developing questions. Asking pre-determined questions about African American mothers’ lives felt leading and created an underlying suggestion that those chosen questions would tap into the experience of each woman. I believed rather than developing questions, driven by my research interest, a Womanist
way of witnessing required me to see the women I worked with as the expert of their experience. Witnessing required me to ask what should I know rather than is this true? Utilizing a Womanist witnessing method allowed me to follow more traditional Womanist practices in rejecting structure and arriving without ideology. By rejecting structure, such as using a structured interview approach, I was granted the opportunity to join the mothers of my study and engage in dialogue and inquiry and focus on what they considered as important regarding their experiences as a mother with mental health concerns. It was important that this dissertation was not only collaborative, but most importantly a moment of potential self-definition and recognition. I believed that by listening rather than leading the mothers, space would be created for them to share their own story, and if strength were an integral part of that, it would show itself on her accord. To accomplish this, I leaned heavily on a very unstructured “interview” approach and informed the mothers that I hoped our time together would be more conversational, with each mother taking lead on the direction that we took, during our time together. Nevertheless, to address the research questions posed, at the end of my time with the mothers, so as not to influence the depiction of their experience. I asked each mother questions about the Strong Black Woman Stereotype, and what it meant to them. This was an attempt to not only explore a focus of this study but, also to create space for witnessing the mother’s exploration of strength in their own lives and on their own terms.

Choosing an approach that suggested less structure, I also acknowledged that I was guided by principles of Womanist methodology. Maparyan (2012) highlights that “changing of hearts and minds” is the basic Womanist modus operandi (p.51). According to Maparyan (2012) change of hearts and minds occurs within the set of practices within spiritual activism dedicated to promoting “optimal well-being in individuals, communities, humanity as a whole, all
livingkind, and ultimately Planet Earth.” (p. 117). When thinking about change, and what that means in the context of Womanist witnessing, change creates space for what Lather (1991) suggest as an opportunity for “analyzing ideas about the causes of powerlessness, recognizing systemic oppressive forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change the conditions of our lives” (p.4). Laura (2013) adds that the act of bearing witness is an act of validating and advancing the rights of individuals regarding justice, peace, and humanity. According to Laura (2013), this happens by “closely watching the particular contexts in which our people try to make sense of things” (p. 290). Through listening, we are able to serve as a captive audience for critical reflections (Laura, 2013, p. 290). Witnessing serves as a catalyst in reflection and change within an individual, it serves as a space for meaning making but also witnessing which within itself is an act of social justice.

As an active participant in Womanist witnessing, I too was impacted and changed by the experience of being with these women. Acknowledging my outsider within position, I saw myself within Womanist witnessing as someone subjected to change, as well. Maparyan (2012) suggested that Womanist methodology influences unintended areas of social change, thereby preparing ground for institutionally based actions (p.52). It was the intention that this dissertation would create an opportunity for future dialogue on the importance of considering self-definition regarding experiences of mental health and motherhood in African American mothers. Maparyan (2012) adds that the reason that Womanist methodology is effective is that it “opens hearts” and establishes community and unselfish practices that are filled with love energy used for social transformation projects (p.52). This love energy reflected not only a Womanist idea of action, but also an overarching hope that I had for this dissertation. Participation in Womanist witnessing created shifts within myself. The biggest shift was the realization of how my own
beliefs about how the mothers would respond, could have potentially served as a barrier, and impacted the work that each mother and I did together. Through this experience, I was able to move past my own agenda and really engage in witnessing and being with the women across from me on the computer screen in a way that created lasting change. I laughed, I cried, I was left speechless, each of these experiences changed something within me, the experiences made this dissertation what it is today.

Maparyan (2012) notes many factors regarding Womanist methodology, but in the current use of Womanist witnessing, I was guided by the following factors: self-care, dialogue, mothering, mutual aid, and hospitality. Maparyan (2012) noted that self-care is important, because imbalances at the emotional, mental, and spiritual level impact the physical level and are manifested outwardly socially. Dialogue will serve as the central tenet of these acts of witnessing. Maparyan (2012) noted that the act of communication with another being is a basic act of not only recognition but honoring and connection. As avoidance of misrecognition was a primary concern of mine, creating spaces that honored individuals was of the utmost importance. Phillips (2006) adds that dialogue is the place where both tension and connection are present at the same time, as it is the site for both love and struggle. Maparyan (2012) notes that “Words carry conceptual content as well as feeling content, and thus are extensions of the energy of the speaker. Words also carry the energy of the histories” (p.58). Through this act of witnessing, it was the intention to not only support the development of dialogue, but also to accept the invitation to be an active participant in the mother's meaning making.

Mothering, which is seen as the deep sense of caring for another person, as if having the same flesh, and nurturing and protecting others is an act of nurturing and protecting oneself (Maparyan, 2012). According to Maparyan (2012), this loving ecology allows for an individual
to recognize one’s agency while also realizing interconnectivity with others. It is the intention that this dissertation will be accessible to all in and outside of the academic sphere. With an inclusive approach, it is the hope that other African American mothers could find a connection within this dissertation. Laura (2013) notes the importance of love in social research being taken seriously. She suggests that the use of love in research has real consequences for the three-dimensional human beings it affects, including the researcher, this not an act for imagined “others,” and therefore the process and product of scholarship should reflect that (p. 291). It was important that mothering and Womanist witnessing could work together, not only because they each facilitated kinship, but also, they each reflected an opportunity for joining, without a loss of individuality.

Maparyan (2012) acknowledgment of mutual aid or self-help focuses on coming together as a group to solve a common problem. However, this study did not serve to suggest that these women had a problem that needed to be solved, but I intended to highlight the societal influence that has created a problem that needed to be addressed. As suggested by Kendall (2020) when Black women internalize standards set by racism, they, in turn, hold themselves to these oppressive expectations and create “self-replicating schism within our own communities” (p. 90). It was the intention that by creating space where self-help could occur, that those internalized standards had a chance to be witnessed, reflected on critically, made sense of, and changed if that was her wish. Lastly, hospitality, which represents a welcoming and connection with those outside of our kin, to form bonds. I believed this principle might be the most important when sharing space with these women. As we were strangers, I needed to create a connection and welcoming spirit working with the mothers for Womanist witnessing to work. I believe I accomplished building connections with each mother through the care that was taken
before, during, and after our time together. I was intentional in providing as much information as possible for each mother. I engaged in conversations and answered questions and concerns that arose. I believe the biggest influence in building connections with the mothers was my intention to make sure they did not feel like subjects or participants, but rather co-creators, of which, without their presence, this work would cease to exist.

It was important to highlight these principles because they served as guidelines for Womanist witnessing. As I stated previously, I did not have specific questions regarding strength, but intended to leave the space open for these women to share their own experiences of mental health and motherhood. I thought by keeping in the forefront of my mind that self-care had an impact on an individual’s outward depiction of imbalances in their lives, it would be important to pay close attention to instances that the mothers used self-care, as this may have served as a guide for expansion of disclosures regarding societal influences that may have been problematic or lead to misrecognition. Encouraging dialogue amongst the mothers was intended to combat misrecognition they may have experienced in other spheres. It was the hope that the mothering principles would be reflected not only in each woman using their agency but, also the acknowledgment that their experience may serve as support for others in the future.

In search of providing as much space as possible for recognition for the women, and an attempt to prevent misrecognition within the Womanist witnessing, I chose to incorporate the Africana Womanist methodology of a photo-biographic approach to further support a Womanist witnessing method. Integrated within the Womanist witnessing, an opportunity was created for the mothers of this study to bring in their images or photos of what they believed was meaningful regarding motherhood and mental health. Engaging with photos allowed for the mothers to create a visual representation of their own story, to be recognized through sharing their experiences,
and as a witness of those moments. I not only validated the existence of these stories but, also
protected their place within the world (Laura, 2013).

Pellerin (2012), who posited the concept of Africana Womanist methodology, which used
photo-biographic methods, noted the importance of engaging the wholeness of Africana
womanhood, which is a similar value within Walker’s (1983) Womanism. Pellerin (2012)
highlights the importance of using methodological tools that create space to “adequately address
and reclaim Africana womanhood from the vantage point of the Africana woman, as her history,
name, and being has been misinterpreted and distorted” (p. 77). Utilizing Hudson-Weems (2004)
philosophical stance on the importance of Africana women owning the ability to self-define,
Pellerin (2012) used a photo-biographic method to allow for Africana women to serve as self-
definers, rather than just merely an object of investigation. Valuing the emphasis of Africana
women serving as self-definers and moving away from the women of my study being merely
objects for my investigation, I incorporated a photo-biographic method into Womanist
witnessing, for the following reasons noted by Pellerin (2012). First, this specific method is
different from earlier methods, because an Africana Womanist method allows for a central focus
on the self-definition of Africana womanhood by Africana women, and for the purpose of this
dissertation, African American mothers. Secondly, this approach highlights the release of
“Africana women’s image [which] allows the women’s self-selected images to speak for
themselves rather than interpreting the meanings of the images selected, as employed in previous
photographing methods” (Pellerin, 2012, p.79). This act of self-definition not only created an
instance for further witnessing for the mothers, but it also took notice of how these self-selected
images served as a meaningful symbol of their story. Acknowledging philosophical differences
between Africana Womanism and Walker’s (1983) Womanism, it was the belief that this method would still serve as an important addition to the wholeness of this study.

Incorporating a photo-biographic method to my Womanist witnessing, the mothers were asked to share ten photos or images that represented motherhood and mental health. The purpose of these photos was an attempt to create space for the women of this study to self-define their own experiences. It was important to note that no direct reference to strength was given as a prompt for photo choice. Mothers were informed that the photos would be used in this study, and a suggestion was made to not include photographs that were identifiable. Outside of this requirement, the mothers were allowed to share pictures of their choice. Noting Bugos, et al. (2014) who suggested that participant-generated photographs pose special challenges regarding confidentiality and privacy, due to images being a tool used to identify participants, it was important that the mothers of this study were informed in advance regarding how the images would be used (described below). The mothers were informed that at any time, they could request to have their chosen image redacted from the study. The mothers were also informed that the photos or images they chose to share with me would be kept safe in a password protected OneDrive folder. Acknowledging that individual mothers would want to share different types of images, it was the intention that the mothers would use representational, artistic, or symbolic images rather than identifiable images. Mothers that used a photograph or image that was identifiable, were asked to sign a written photograph release and were given the choice of having their face blurred. However, the release also noted that she can request to have her photo removed at any time.

Acknowledging that not all the mothers of this study may have felt comfortable utilizing visual images or may not have felt they could represent their experiences through visual imagery,
the mothers of the study were encouraged to bring in a piece of music, song, lyrics, or other auditory representations that they believed captured their experiences. Incorporation of auditory representation not only allowed for this study to be respectful of the different ways of expression amongst the mothers but also served as another connection to Womanism, as a Womanist loves music. Mothers were assured that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. Each witnessing was tape-recorded and video-taped to address nuances in voice and body language. The mothers took part in a 90-minute conversation; however, the average womanist share was around 120-minutes. This included the photo-biographical and music discussion, as well as the standard questions on strength. All witnessing was transcribed, noting voice nuances, laughter, and crying. Photos and music that participants gave permission to be used were included in the analysis.

The mothers were not promised compensation before the study however, it was the intention to send the mothers a visual representation of our time together, after the completion of the study. The location of interviews was decided based on locations the mothers identify as most comfortable. Noting King et al. (2002) analysis of the kitchen table serving as a social location for nurturing woman-to woman relationships that nourish community.” (p.405) According to King et al. (2002) the kitchen table has been used to resolve problems of life, and serves as the location for strategizing, talking deep, and healing each other’s wounds. As the tradition of the kitchen table has supported itself over time, these “service-oriented” spaces controlled by women take place in a variety of locations. Although the current global pandemic of COVID-19, did not allow for in person engagement of kitchen table Womanist witnessing, virtual methods were employed. Although virtual methods were employed, the kitchen table approach was still of significant importance. King et al. (2002) notes that the kitchen table is
“women’s spaces, the place to which people gravitate to prepare and strengthen, cleanse and release, feel safe and become empowered.” As creation and supporting of space for the mothers was a priority of this dissertation, it was believed that the kitchen table approach could be successfully replicated virtually.

I provided the mothers with an informed consent outlining the risks of being involved in the study, and the possibility of being overheard by others that were in their home, before our first meeting. Before the mothers took part in the Womanist witnessing, I went over the informed consent with the mothers to address any concerns they had, as well as, discussed in-depth concerns regarding privacy and sharing of their photos of self-definition.

**Mothers Recruitment**

The mothers for this study were obtained through two methods of recruitment. Snowball sampling and community outreach. Pratt-Clarke (2012) noted that research rooted in Black Womanist and feminist praxis, use “‘storytelling, narrative, voice, autoethnography, and phenomenology’ to enable the creation of ‘a theoretical and methodological space for traditionally silenced and marginalized groups” (p. 84). Snowball sampling provides the ability to zero in on these populations through social networking and personal connection. Seen as a “solution” for accessing hidden populations (Faugier & Sartgeant, 1997, p.792), snowball sampling was used to identify the mothers. It was important to note, that use of this recruitment style does have weaknesses, specifically the inability to deem samples representative of a population, however the need to use developed studies that legitimize cultural knowledge outweighed its weakness of representation. Community outreach was used, as well through a relationship with Christ Community Health Services and their Universal Parenting Place.
Through the utilization of social networking, personal connections of earlier participants and community outreach, the 8 mothers of this study were recruited,

**Trustworthiness/ Ethics**

As a researcher, I acknowledged my hesitation or fear of speaking to the intended women of my study. I held in high regard the importance of making sure that the mothers felt like a co-author of this process rather than a “specimen” for me to “collect data” (MarrSource, 2014 p.104) from, for my research gain. Acknowledging that obtaining “data” was a focus in research, as a Womanist, I found it to be my duty to respect the wholeness of the mothers, not only for the experience that they shared with me, but also the hesitation, fear, distrust, happiness, sadness, and love that was experienced through this journey. It was my intention to treat each womanist share with care. Through asking and re-asking during womanist share analysis and in writing does my interpretation match her voice? I kept a journal throughout womanist share analysis as a way to still be able to note my thoughts, directions, and assumptions, and as a way to check to make sure that my interpretations were not leading this study. However, the bigger purpose behind journaling was to align with Laura's (2013) approach of data as love acts. Levinasian (1998) noted that it is the responsibility of the researcher who witnesses and engages to also take some course of action. Laura (2013) notes writing as a testimony as an action of the researcher. Laura (2013) adds that this writing as testimony becomes “a vehicle through which we come to know other people and ourselves by implication […] The love-based ambition for writing lives is a certain kind of reception that involves empathy and responsibility to think differently about the world” (p.290).

For me, it was important to member check each share. Member checking served as an additional protection that I was reflecting womanist shares that were true to the women who
graciously agreed to participate. As each woman was a co-author in this experience, I wanted to ensure that I did not add any crookedness to their room but reflected a space in which she could stand upright. Acknowledging the importance of collaboration, I worked with the mothers to correct any crookedness that was created in my interpretations.

**Voice-Centeredness**

Driven by a Womanist approach and understanding of knowing, a voice-centered relational approach was used to analyze individual womanist shares with the support of Listening Guides. A voice-centered relational approach was used to emphasize the importance of the mother’s voice. Identified as “polyphonic and complex” (Brown & Gilligan, 1993, p.15), an individual’s voice may experience multiple and even contradictory ways of understanding and thinking about situations. Dorothy Smith (1987) noted the importance of inquiry on women’s voices over social discourse, as it is an act of “creating the space for an absent subject” (p.107). Voice centeredness places attention on the way women speak from an experienced-based standpoint that identifies its proximity to and from cultural narratives. Therefore, according to Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2008) “voices are subject positions identifiable by their relative obedience or resistance to a particular discourse” (p. 396). Voice centeredness develops an analysis by attending to an individual's meaning-making and supports sensitivity to the diversity of responses of individuals.

**Listening Guide**

Addressing its development as a tool for analyzing the psychosocial realities of white, middle-class women’s experience of gender subordination, Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2008) notes the Listening Guide can still serve as a tool for examining the voices of other groups, specifically African American women, regarding this study. The Listening Guide consists of three distinct
qualities: its acknowledgment of the presence and pervasiveness of sexism within race and class inequities, utterances viewed as multi-layered texts both manifest and latent content, and reliance on researchers listening to what women believe and feel beyond cultural prescriptions and norms (Brown and Gilligan, 1992). Key to the Listening Guide is the understanding that tension between discourses and voices, “between normalized representation and subjectivity, are central features of contemporary configurations of power in a race, class, and gender-stratified society” (Beauboueuf-Lafontant, 2008, p.398). This Guide provided this study with the ability to see not only how the participants saw and presented themselves, but also the meanings they held and how they developed. Acknowledging that meaning making becomes clear in the actions and the way an individual speaks of themselves, this tool was integral in deciphering not only the women’s knowing of strength, when present, but also the meaning that strength held for them.

Analysis

Acknowledging that I could not provide a definitive approach to analysis and that this would be developed once the study had begun, Merriam (2009) noted that analysis and collection occur together. Noting that my analysis changed based on my experiences of Womanist witnessing, I discussed a probable approach towards analysis within this study. Because voice-centeredness was sensitive to the diversity of individual meaning-making, and the listening guides went beyond the assimilation of cultural expectations, combining these approaches with a Womanist photo-biographic method served as a core part of this analysis.

Included in the analysis of the womanist shares was the presentation of collage portraits. Each womanist share served as an individual self-definition of each mother of the study. Gerstenblatt (2013) noted that when a qualitative researcher takes on the role of creating an art piece meant to represent the narrative of their participants, they must be both mindful and careful
in creating a balance between their creative expressions and attending to the voices of those they intend to represent. Similar to the focus of Womanist witnessing, utilizing collage as a research tool according to Diaz (2002) blends images and text in an attempt to create reality and find meaning. Using Gerstenblatt (2013) work with three African American women regarding meaning around an art installation as a guideline, I used the collage portraits as a visual representation of the womanist shares. Noting that Jongeward (2009) reflected that segmenting and coding data was at the expense of the image of the whole person, they found the utilization of visual images as critical to “gain energy, clarity, and insight” (p.242). This paired well with a Womanist methodology focused on changing of energy, which was impacted as previously mentioned by the denial of respectability politics in exchange for opportunities of self-definition.

According to Gerstenblatt (2013) her method of analysis centralized on incorporating data she received from the interviews, including photographs from her participants, newspaper articles, and archival data with her family photographs, and newspaper and archival data to create the collage portraits. Gerstenblatt (2013) noted that her method of analysis began with reviewing interview transcripts and listening to the recording noting inflections, tone of voice, and other verbal cues that signified vital information. During the process of the first review, Gerstenblatt (2013) made notes on the transcript along with notations when participants referred to visual material or significant historical events, while also supporting a focus on changes in speech. During her first round of review, her focus was on emotion, injection of humor, intonation, and speech pattern. From her first round, Gerstenblatt (2013) was able to draw on preliminary themes based on the participant's perspective and her experience as a participant observer, and for my study witness. Gerstenblatt (2013) highlights the importance of words,
concepts, and stories in the creation of collage portraits, noting cutting them out of the transcript to be used during the collage portrait creation.

Next, incorporating photographs, archival data, and other material given by the participants, Gerstenblatt (2013) was able to develop a visual portrait of each participants’ narrative alongside printed text she cut out of the transcript. Moving around transcript cut outs and pictures, Gerstenblatt (2013) was able to develop collage portraits, based on what was identified as reflective of her participant's experience. Noting that this approach is an emotive process, there is a collaborative piece regarding her interpretation of the narrative, her emotional response to it, and the experiences of both the participant and researcher. Gerstenblatt (2013, p.12) reflected the importance of the ethics of doing this work by adding that she:

flowed back and forth between the text and images, all the while returning to my notes and the interview to remain tethered to the narrative. In remaining connected to the interview, I attempted to convey what Jongeward (2009) refers to as the perspective of the participant using visual imagery while maintain[ing] “integrity and complexity of who they are”. (p.243)

Acknowledging the importance of a voice-centered analysis pairing with my integrated Womanist methodology, incorporating the Listening Guide was imperative to my analysis. Utilizing Gilligan (2015) method of analysis, the Listening Guide, I engaged in three listenings of the womanist shares. The first listening was focused on Listening for the Plot. This type of listening provided a landscape of the womanist share, answering the questions of “who is there, who or what is missing, are there repeated words, salient themes, striking metaphors or symbols, emotional hot spots, gaps or ruptures” (p. 71). The first listening also served as a locator of myself (witness) in relation to the share. Locating my presence within the share allowed for me
to explore my feelings and thoughts about the share and the mothers I was honored to engage with through witnessing. This listening allowed for me to separate my voice from that of the mothers. It also protected their share from projections based on my own thoughts and feelings, when writing the research.

The second listening according to Gilligan (2015) was focused on Listening for the I. Gilligan (2015) suggests that this “tunes the ear of the researcher to the voice of the other and specifically to the ‘I’, the first-person voice as it speaks of acting and being in the world” (p.71). These “I’s” with the support of verbs and objects are placed chronologically into I-poems that follow the mother's story. Gilligan (2015) adds that the I-poems that are developed through this listening highlight “associative stream that flows through the narrative, running underneath the structure of the sentences” (p. 72). The researcher adds that although the “logic of the poems is not linear” associative logic is present. The presence of associative logic allows for listening to the I in a way that “can evoke a voice that is speaking under a surface of dissociation: an I who knows, and yet may not consciously know what it knows” (Gilligan, 2015, p.72).

The third listening focused on Listening for Contrapuntal Voices. Unique to the Listening Guide the research questions guide this listening towards the voices that address, and for the sake of my dissertation, not address the questions. This listening unveiled the actual research questions for this dissertation and highlighted the constrictive and assumptive nature of the original questions. Listening for contrapuntal voices notices the “tension, the harmonies and dissonances between voices and underscores the musical aspect of listening where the goal is to listen for nuances, for modulations and silences (such as where ‘I’ turns to ‘you’ or drops out completely), to resist categories, and to hear complexity rather than flatten the data” (p.72).
To provide some additional structure for conceptualizing my analysis process, I will share how analysis was approached. Each womanist share was broken into two parts. The first part consisted of the entire womanist share, including the photo-biographic share portion, until the standard questions asked at the end. The standard questions were analyzed not using a Listening Guide approach and were depicted in a summary format. I believed that by keeping in the forefront of my mind the importance of returning to the shares repeatedly and reflecting on my interpretation and emotional responses, that I could analyze the womanist shares in a way that honored the words of the mothers of my study. Through this approach, I reflected on their meaning making and drew on the multiple vantage points, including my own in attempts to gain a fuller and more complex understanding of the mother’s experiences.

Summary

For this study, integrated Womanist and voice centered methodologies were used to explore individualized experiences of mental health concerns and motherhood in African American/ Black mothers. Through snowball sampling and community outreach, women were invited to participate in photo-biographical Womanist witnessing. Individual member checking was incorporated in an attempt to create a space for the women that was not crooked and built lovingly for them.
Chapter 4

Each share was analyzed using aspects of the Listening Guide. Influenced by the dissertation work of Melissa Geib (2012) and her use of the Listening Guide for analysis, I was able to change the Listening Guide analysis approach to align with a womanist way of analyzing shares. Focused on supporting the mothers’ voices as the forefront of this analysis, each share is depicted in two similar ways. First, the mothers’ shares are depicted as I-poems. I-poems reflected instances where the mothers described themselves using the word I (I-voice) and in some instances, Me and 2nd person You. The purpose of I-poems was to focus on each mothers’ sense of self and highlight the way she spoke about herself. During analysis, I underlined every instance where the mothers used the pronoun “I” along with following words that depicted what she was trying to convey. From here, the poem was constructed by placing each I-poem line in sequential order to create each I-poem. To incorporate the mother’s photo biographic share, their pictures are located above the poem that connects with the photo. The inclusion of each mother’s entire I-poem was important as I wanted their voices to be the prominent voice heard.

Included in the analysis was a depiction of each woman’s story. Acknowledging that the presentation of their I-voice is of most importance, I believe inclusion of a story of their share serves two purposes. The first purpose is that story serves to support the I-poems in a way that provided further context to an already rich and full experience. However, the second purpose, and driving factor of maintaining the story, is for the mothers who so graciously shared their experience with me. During my periods of member checking, the mothers were in awe to see the way they spoke about themselves and the way their voices told their story. Sharing with them the story that developed from their share was an act of love from me and a moment of recognition for them. I received varying responses to the depiction of the mother’s story from tears, pauses,
laughter, and signs. However, the common response across the mothers was a sense of “getting their story right.” I reflected specifically on one member check where the mother stated she knew she had been heard, something she had not always felt in the past. With this voice in mind, I knew that the stories had to be displayed, as they represented rooms lovingly created, and absent from crookedness.

Keeping in the forefront of my mind the importance of making sure these shares stayed accurate to the women who shared them and, fearful that their story might be diluted by using themes I identified, I believed the best way to share these women’s shares was through the use of a story. Included in the story, five standard questions were addressed, and were given their own subsection. Understanding the importance of maintaining individual experiences of motherhood, mental health, and ideas of strength, it was important to not group the 8 women’s responses together in search of some consensus regarding strength and the Strong Black Woman stereotype. To maintain the integrity of each share and, to reflect the importance I had placed on this study being done “with” rather than “to,” I returned to each mother and shared the I-poems and the narrative. Each mother and I, except for one that declined participation, went line by line making sure the stories presented in this work represented their lived experience.

I acknowledge that my role as a witness did not leave me without feelings, reactions, and even ideas of reoccurring themes amongst individual shares. Honoring and wanting to make sure that my own thoughts and ideas did not impact presenting the mother’s shares in their authentic form, space was created for my reactions and thoughts regarding their I-poem, narrative, and depiction of strength. Geib (2012) noted the difficulty in separating her own thoughts and experiences from the data she was presented. Following her approach, I maintained a personal journal where I noted my personal responses and acknowledged instances where my own
experiences were pushing up against the shares I was analyzing. The second journal, which serves as my responses to each section, created space for me to ask questions about the poems, stories, and depiction of strength. This served not only as a place for me to explore the themes I withheld from the analysis but, allowed me to explore my “voice as a researcher, engaging with participants’ stories and more focused on my sociocultural perspective and voice(s)” (Geib, 2012, p. 31).

The chapter is broken into 8 parts. I found it important that each mother have her own “chapter” to reflect the importance of supporting the individualized experience of each mother. Each mother’s name has been changed to keep their confidentiality. The names used are the names of women who made this research possible due to their contribution to the literature and research. For descriptive purposes, at the time of their interview:

Chikwenye was in her early 40s, divorced, and employed. She was married once for seven years and has one adult son. She was born and raised in Louisville, KY but has spent most of her adulthood in Memphis. Chikwenye and I spent 2.5 hours together.

Clenora was in her early 60s, married, and employed but considering retirement. She was married with two grown daughters. She was born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee. Clenora and I spent 1.5 hours together.

Patricia was in her late 50s, married, and self-employed. She has been married twice and has one adult son and 3 grandchildren. She was born and raised in Memphis, Patricia and I spent 2.5 hours together.

Audre was in her mid 50s, divorced, and employed. She has one adult daughter. She was born in Norfolk, VA and has been living in Memphis, TN since 2000. Audre and I spent 1.5 hours together.
Alice was in her mid 50s, married, and was a homemaker. She has an adult daughter and son. She was born in Collinsville, IL and has been living in Memphis, TN since 1989. Alice and I spent 2.5 hours together.

Layli was in her late 30s, divorced twice, and employed. She has two sons (ages 10 and 15). She was born in Memphis, TN. Layli and I spent 2 hours together.

Sojourner was in her early 50s, separated, and employed. She has three adult children. She was born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee. Sojourner and I spent 2.5 hours together.

Bell was in her mid-40's, married, and employed. She has been married once and has four children (ages 21, 18, 17, and 7). She was born and raised on the South Side of Chicago and recently moved to Memphis, TN. Bell and I spent 2 hours together.

Each section begins with a depiction of each mother’s photo collage, as an introduction to their story and as an act of storytelling. This is followed by the mother’s I-poems, as it was important to introduce each mother with the opportunity to hear her voice. Next, the depiction of her story and understanding of strength. Each “chapter” is concluded with a womanist witnessing and reflection of the I-poems, summary, and conceptualization of strength. Each share holds a place in my heart. This experience was transformative in many ways, ways in which I hope others can have for themselves.
CHIKWENYE
I am a transplant to Memphis
I was born in Louisville, KY
I say mostly raised
I’m a military, my childhood was spent living in different places
I feel like those experiences shaped me to who this weird person
I am now

I got married and had a baby at 20
I was a baby
I did go to college
I partied too much
I didn’t finish traditionally
I went back to school
I took, you know, two classes a semester
I’m still not done

I think the struggle for me right now is
I spent 13 or 12 years being you know his mom
What do I do?
I have a career or job
I wouldn’t necessarily say a career, but a job
What do I do outside of being his mother now?
I’ve been searching for looking for and just trying to identify the next phase

My husband and I were married for like 7 years
I think we lived together two years physically
I think shaped the way
I was trying to raise our son
I don’t know
I could ramble
I’m going off track

I think
I had in in the time that he was in boot camp
I moved to Alaska
I was, you know, pregnant and with a newborn
More Black people than I was anticipating
I was with my mom and my family
I didn’t feel isolated
I moved to Boston, and it was just me and the baby
I did stay in touch a lot with our families
I wasn’t working
I didn’t have those relationships
I listen to still to this day
I listen to NPR
I’d wake up
I heard adults

I enjoy living in that part
I miss
I mean
I’m seeing it now
I’m looking out my window
I’m seeing all this crazy snow
I you know left
I just couldn’t like
I wanted to work
I wanted to do something with my time
I ended up here
I’m happy to have landed here
I think
I’ve gained so many things
I did find a job
I’ve been with this job 19
I say not a career
[not] what I want to do when I grow up
I was able to buy a house by myself
I wouldn’t have
I don’t think
I would have had experience
I’ve not come here
I’m thankful for that

I wouldn’t say
I wasn’t necessarily depressed
I mean it was very lonely
I mean
I was so young
I felt like very mature
I’m not sure
I felt like I was playing house

I mean that was just so hard
I’m sitting here
I gotta buy groceries, there’s $15 left in the account
I breastfed my son
I made like all of his baby food
I had planned to do

I mean
I’m still
I’m not a religious person
I do consider myself to be spiritual
I do think there are gifts from the universe
I feel like
I’ve benefited so much throughout my whole life
I was living there in Boston
I think
I had to go pay the insurance
I was raised
I was going to buy or pay for insurance
I think
I had to go into the office
I had usually
I think just talked to him by phone
I’m talking about like this was a suburb of Boston
I want to say like his cousin
I’m paying my bill

I was living on the base
I had this baby
I was here alone
I didn’t know anyone there
I don’t
Network of wives I found cliquish
I’m not
I’m not really into group joining things
I kind of stepped away from that
I did spend a lot of time talking to my aunts

I didn’t mention
I actually was raised majority of the time by my aunts
I was taken from my mother
I was three or four
I can't remember the age
I was very young
I had to be removed from her care
I was raised initially by her mother
I consider them more like my mother
I’m like personality wise and everything like
I’m much like one of my aunts
I’m probably her child
I spent a lot of time on the phone with her

I would
I would just randomly meet people
I don’t know
I got like a free washer machine and dryer
I was walking with the baby
I was looking for
I think I was looking for something like to make a garden
I was like
I didn’t even talk about washer and dryer
I feel like a lot
I've had a lot of those moments

I mean
I have a relationship with my mom
I wouldn’t say traditional mother and daughter relationship
I have a younger sister
I mean, it sounds so old
I think about how young she really was
I was born
I think those
I had this conversation with a friend
I realize how much they're just gambling and winging it

I’m not crying
I’m not crying
I don’t want you to think
I made her cry

I rarely called anyone
I rarely called about like financial support
I talked to
My aunt, the one I talked to
I’m sorry
I lived in the house with her
I think that’s where
I would get like my creative, fun side
I've picked up like all of those things from her
I view the world or whatever, my other aunt
I didn’t live with
I spent a lot of time with
I would just
I think she would just really listen

I kept telling my ex-husband please tell him to go
I was telling my aunt
I remember very vividly
I don’t know if you're familiar with five percenters
I at the time we did study like Nation of Islam
I took her to the airport, he was leaving
I think do something like that
I would say she just listen
I called her
I randomly found this job
I find myself calling her a lot
Work stuff I dealt with she's had similar experiences
I do look to her more for advice
[than] I would say like my mom

I mean
I think it was really like she heard me
I’m so sorry
I was calling back
I hate FaceTime
I’m adding emotional labor
I’m an introvert
I don’t really need
I don’t need that
I mean
I mean
I understand he felt he was doing something beneficial to me
I think that’s
I think that me
I think that was what was so impactful for me
I kind of was a shy kid
I guess shy being introverted
I didn't really use my voice a lot
I have a hard time asking for help
I didn’t necessarily say help me
I needed that help
I don’t know
I didn’t feel
I didn’t feel heard by my husband
I mean
I wasn’t alone
I’m okay alone
I’m okay alone
I don’t
I don’t think the aloneness
It wasn’t that I was alone
I love that
I'm so sorry

I was a newlywed without a husband
I
I didn’t have
I had worked since 15
I was used to being a productive person
I’m a housewife
I’m thinking about this
I told this to someone the other day
I don’t miss
I love the snow
I love this kind of weather
I don’t miss being in it
I lived there
I had to shovel out the car
I had to do that
I had to shovel or walk out
I wanted to get the mail
I felt like single motherhood
I was married
I think that was a major contributor to it

I wasn’t
I never was like a partier
I like to hang out and stuff
I don’t think
I mean
I was growing the baby and stuff
I would say
I’m nesting
I read cover to cover
I you know my side, my mindset
I realized
I’m gonna be
I need to be responsible
Not that I was irresponsible
I mean like this is my main responsibility
What I am called to do
I couldn’t drink
I didn’t really miss that
I don’t think

I think
I don’t like to join things
I felt like with the nation
I think yes that was helpful
Shaped how I ate
I consumed not only like with my mouth like my mind
I remember just the things
I was like wanting for him was so outside of like the norm
I’m crazy
I’m weird crazy
I didn’t want my son to eat solid food
I felt like
I was kind of
I know
I wasn’t alone in that thinking
I knew that
I never felt like a person that fits into things
I knew
I didn’t want to raise my child X way
I know I wasn’t to raise my child this way
I guess
I just found things that supported my thinking
I think it gave me
I needed at that time

I found someone
I consider a sister
I’m like where the fuck you been
I ate
I don’t care
I first moved here to Memphis
I don’t know
I first moved here
I first moved here
I was able to find one or two people
I wouldn’t say necessarily a support system
I’m not alone in this
I met
I met this lady
I worked at Gap kids
I met this lady
I think
I liked her hair
I talked to her
I started my hair
I think
I probably have found support

I was just kind of busy myself with projects
I would take random drive with my baby
I knew
I had to learn my surroundings
I do that
I just go driving and just kind of get lost
I did a lot of that
I wasn’t alone necessarily
I always had the baby with me
I didn’t
I didn’t feel comfortable leaving him
I rarely
I barely know
I moved here it was a little bit different
I had my mother and my sister
I met people at work

I moved to Memphis
I was alone in Boston
I didn’t want to be alone
I don’t wanna necessarily
I would like to hug
I mean
I didn’t really want to be alone
I don’t know
I just
I
I’m probably just made myself busy
I told you
I made baby food
I was really like super homemakey homemakery
I kind of enjoyed that
I read and listening to NPR
I
I feel like
I probably called in a couple of times
I was able to like talk to people
I’m not from here
I don’t know things

I think still
I struggle with that now
I think that’s one of the contributors to why my husband
I grew apart
I was curious about this
I never really subscribed to traditions
I was already like on board
I started to realize
I said with the nation
I felt like
I see it from this lens
I didn’t at the time it just always misogynistic
I think that’s what turned me off
I didn’t like
I don’t know

I think
I just
I don’t know
I don’t
I don’t think
I had necessarily my identity I wasn’t aware of it
I met my my husband
I never wanted to get married
I had
I knew like
I was gonna go to college
I don’t
I’m not like rushed to get married
I definitely don’t want to have kids
I did both

I’m you know grateful you know, love my love, my son
I saw myself as a wife and mother
I ended up
I became both
I don’t know
I don’t really
I don’t
I don’t think like in that in Boston
I don’t think
I don’t think
I was aware
I think once
I left became productive
I think
I think too that’s probably what contributed

I don’t like asking for help
I have always carried my weight
I was old enough to work
I looked into it
I was gonna put him in daycare

I don’t know that
I really was aware if
I was able to find
I think it was the precursor to shaping me
I didn’t you know
I don’t know what
I like
I don’t like like those things
I think you know my husband
I divorced
I mean we were married for seven years
I was just like this is just something that’s just hanging over my head
I felt
I mean
I dated
I am a single person kind of
I don’t know
I am
I’m
I’m married right?

I think
I reached that point
I was becoming
I was going to school
I was working
I had a full-time job
I also was doing part time work
I don’t know if
I answered your question
I ramble a lot

I don’t know
I don’t wanna say a challenge
I feel like it was done in love
I think that that’s the only reason it happened
I don’t think
I don't think
I would have
I don’t think
I would have
I
I told like
I told like my ex-husband husband at the time
I had when
I came home from college
I got
I take this year off
I was going to
I met him at this job
I did
I felt like it was love
I felt like
I anticipating
I anticipated, like you know, growing old with this person
I didn’t
I mean
I think initially
I was like ok
I don’t think
I’m ready for this
I did consider abortion
I went to the appointment
I didn’t realize it was the place where they kind of talked you out of doing abortions
I didn’t realize that
I we might not be having this discussion
I’m not against abortion
Changed what I wanted to do
I feel like he was more about it than
I was
I told him
I don’t want to get married just because
I’m pregnant
I’m saying like
I’m fine
I’m fine if we don’t get married

I wanted
I didn’t have that with my mother and father
I am
I have a younger brother
I didn’t really see growing up was like a family

I mean like
I
I mean
I, you would prefer
I think
I just
I was in love
I didn’t think of
I’ve never really thought about
I did feel like a failure
I took as long as it did for me to come to that
I mean
I say that because we’re friends now
I think we were even
I think it
I felt like
I did feel like
I didn’t
I wasn’t successful
I didn’t
I didn’t, I couldn’t do for my for my child
I couldn’t hold the family together
I started, you know, seeking therapy

I signed the papers
I think
I mean
I went down
I actually did it
I had to go down to the courthouse
I wanted to do this
I didn’t realize that it would be so hard
I said
I can actually
I want to pursue new relationships
I can pursue new relationships
I don’t have to be, you know, a deceptive person
I wouldn’t want
I’m still having that
I still have a wife

I think
I’ve
I’ve always just come to reconcile
I knew
I felt at the time
I knew it was gonna be
I cared about
I don’t want it
I think that’s
I mean
I’m not upset it didn’t work out
I realize now
I realize like
I am so different
I don’t
I don’t necessarily
I mean
I don’t
I don’t see it happening
I think that where we are now is so far apart
I think his train
I’m not necessarily there
I like
I said
I like the bus analogy
I think of it

I’m a huge proponent
I’m a huge proponent of not staying together for the kids
I was an adult
I think
I knew
I was way different
I was earning
I had a job
I was able to do that on my own
I didn’t
I didn’t feel like
I had to stay for the sake
I couldn’t get these things without him
I knew
I couldn’t just stay together so
I could say that my son had two parents
I experience
I know
I said
I wanted something different for him
I had
I knew that it was best
I recognized that it was two people
I found out he had gotten another woman pregnant

I mean
I
I fought
I didn’t want to divorce him
I did love him
I thought
I did
I probably did
I couldn’t like
I feel like he had an opportunity
I love
I love her
I was just like come be with your family
I understand
I was the one fighting
I guess why
I didn’t keep it
I know it’s not my failure
I didn’t keep
I found out after we divorced
I feel like we talked more
I didn’t realize that he was struggling
I didn’t
I wasn’t aware
I see how it shaped a lot of the decisions

I feel like this is more of me
I’ve been self caring myself for years
I, you know, dealt with things, outside of therapy
I think after my son got older
I adopted
I am committed to it now
I said working
I had no time for me
I don’t think
I’ve gained
I don’t think
I gained the time back for myself
I was able to like trust
I was still taking him
I was just so hyper focused

I think
I started during quarantine
I talked about not knowing who I am
I was like wow
I always thought I was bad
I killed
I’ve killed
I’m not gonna say I killed them
I was not very good
I tried to keep plants alive
I just was
I always considered myself to be bad at it
I, you know, grew things
I decided
I was like
I grew a human
I grew a human
I could
I should be able to keep plants alive
I think
I was like
I can do other things
I can do something
I thought
I was really bad at

I think
I had
I was like
I have literally grew these things from seeds
I was just so mind blown
I
I’m
I was so bad
I killed a Venus Flytrap
I’m like
I just
I was just really proud of myself

I added another bed
I added
I had added the lights
I was
I was going insane inside these four walls
I was like
I’ve always hated my backyard
I was like, well, you can do something about that
I was able to spend time out there
I think
I think azalea
I inherited them
I inherited these

I think
I probably cry like right after
I took this picture
I’m still not used him being here
I think

I’m sorry
I should know this
I think this was our last holiday together
I don’t know
I just really
I don’t know
I was, you know, good cop, bad cop
I had to be
I was just so touched
I added that
I feel like our relationship is kind of shifting back
I love my mom
I mean this was three, maybe four years ago
I know that
I think was helpful
I feel like we have had a village in some way

I had to pick
I had to drop him off
I would find ways to take care of myself

I think
I think
I mean
I
I spoke about how she was a young mother
I'm sure you've heard that from other parents
I hope
I hope
I hope
I will be different
I hope
I will be a different grandparent
Than I was a mother
I’ve always
I wanted them to have a relationship
I try
I was very mindful
I wanted that relationship to be its own thing
I really tried
I’m still trying
I think it speaks him not growing up in a home with us together
I think it’s getting better
I
I could go back
I would
I want
I would want him to be better focused

I think spoke to like the balance
I was trying to am trying to maintain
I just found someone
I guess
I see these kind of sculptures
I’m like
I know that just one false movement

I consider him an artist
I would like
I do his laundry
I don’t know if you can see
I would pull out random pieces
I don’t know if you can see
I think it’s like that rebar
I’m just so impressed
I you know
I’m grateful for the support
I was able to find and make a home
Chikwenye’s story

A self-identified “weird person,” Chikwenye has a significant relationship with the military, her stepfather, ex-husband, and son, are all in the Coast Guard. Moving to Memphis at age 25, she experienced adulthood earlier than she wished, “I was a baby.” At age 20 she had to adjust to being a wife and mother, saying “adulthood, you know, kind of started then”. She had her sights on college but, acknowledged she partied too much. Juggling motherhood and school was difficult for her, it took time, “I’m still not done.” Chikwenye took motherhood seriously, it was hard and did not leave a lot of space to learn who she was. Her son is now 24, she acknowledges her struggle now is figuring out who she is outside of him, “what do I do outside of being his mother, now that he is going off into the world?”. She is now in search of the next stage of life for herself.

Chikwenye was married for seven years, during that time she experienced the strain a military marriage could have. It shaped the way she raised her son. Her son never had the family she wanted him to have. While pregnant and with a newborn, she lived with her mother and stepfather in Juneau, AK, as isolating as the environment of Alaska was, she did not feel isolated because she had her family. Moving to Boston was different. Just her and her baby, her husband on the ship for months, this time was isolating. She relied heavily on calls and emails to family, but she did not have those relationships to keep her connected. Listening to NPR became a part of her daily routine, she would listen to it all day, “at least I heard adults talking.” She misses Boston, the snow particularly, she does not miss not being able to work. Her mother offered her and her son to come with her to Memphis, she said yes. Here she would gain her independence.

Living in Boston was hard for her. The time alone was hard for her. She says she was not necessarily depressed but very lonely. She saw herself as being “really mature for being so young” but, it is hard to “play house” on one entry level military personnel income. Money was
an issue between her and her husband, growing up differently, she worried about buying
groceries for three weeks, he bought shoes he did not need. Luckily, she breastfed her son and
made all his food. She jokes, he had a walking food supply. Taking care of the household was
hard. Chikwenye does not identify as religious but spiritual. She believes she received gifts from
the universe, gifts that supplied unsolicited relief and community from an unexpected source.

Time, therapy, and her own experiences have allotted her more grace when she reflects
on her relationship with her mother. Taken from her mother at an early age, she acknowledges
her mother was a baby having a baby. She was 16. Raised by her aunts, she credits them for
nurturing her creativity and the way she views the world. She talked to them often while in
Boston. Chikwenye reflected on the gift her aunt gave her, one that she still values today, hearing
her. She felt unheard by her husband. Her aunt listened to her concern of added emotional labor,
her aunt acted. Chikwenye is grateful. She still calls her today.

She reflected on her marriage and how she did not expect to be a wife without a husband.
She reflected on not being the productive person she had been since she was 15. Being married
did not stop her from feeling like “a single mother,” if things needed to be done, she had to do it.
However, outside of motherhood and “keeping this human alive,” she felt separated from
something that made her feel productive. When he was sleeping or fed, she found herself asking
“then what?”

Chikwenye cites “growing her baby” as what helped shift her mindset to motherhood, she
read *What to Expect When Expecting* from cover to cover. During this time, she was also
studying Islam, this helped her not miss the things she used to do before pregnancy. Though she
reports not liking to “join things,” she appreciates the boundaries and discipline she learned
through studying. It also served to find like-minded individuals in a world that saw her ways of
living as “outside the norm.” However, she will say she did not find a tribe with these people. She does believe that life has allowed her to meet a few people that have made her feel less alone.

Chikwenye finds herself reflecting on her loneliness in Boston. Boston pushed her to find ways to busy herself with projects, she learned how to navigate the city on her own. She did not feel comfortable, nor could she afford to leave her son with anyone, so she reflected on always having him with her. When her husband was home, she deeply craved the moments of connection with him. When she was alone, she wished for those higher-level conversations she found listening to NPR. They fed her, allowed her to talk to people from different perspectives, and engage in “dialogue with you know a person who is not a baby.”

Chikwenye initially saw herself as a failure when her marriage ended. She noticed that she and her husband had begun to grow apart. They wanted different things and saw the world differently. She honestly shares that she did not necessarily think she knew who she was when she got married. Marriage was not a priority for her, and a child was not a part of her plan, she got both. She knew her marriage was not what she had envisioned, they had been married for seven years but four of them were” just on paper.” Ending her marriage was her idea, this was not her plan. She was going to grow old with him. She grieved for the family she wanted for her child. Feeling like she had failed is what took her so long to make the decision to end her marriage. She fought so hard. She just could not stay together for the “sake of her son,” she knew this was best. She and her ex-husband are now closer than when they were married.

Chikwenye highlighted that now that her son is an adult, she has shifted her focus to caring for herself. This is something she is aware that she was not as focused on when he was younger. She believes this chapter of her life is about understanding who she is. She is excited
for the shift that is happening in her relationship with her son, one where she is not the bad guy. She is proud of the man he has become and, only hopes that he and his father can build their relationship. For herself, she wishes for balance and to continue to push herself to do the things she thought she could not.

**Strength**

Chikwenye shared that she grew up in a household full of women. She saw independence, she saw strength, physical strength. For her, she saw women “making things work when there you know isn't a way to make things work,” for her that depicted both strength and resilience. She discloses that she finds herself still struggling with the idea of rest. As a “housewife,” she found herself feeling “unproductive” and, she believes that speaks to what she saw growing up, women working, not sitting around, even in the face of domestic violence, “they weren’t weak.” She shared that weakness is a word that she struggles with, a word she struggled with in therapy. She asks herself “what is weakness?” For her, that was how strength was depicted, “being and doing in spite of.” However, she finds herself in a place of challenging that knowing, saying “I want to look at it in a softer way. I feel like that’s the problem.” She speaks about how crying at work is received differently between her and her white coworker saying, she “can cry about work but, if I cry about work, it’s you know, put your big girl panties on. Which, I was literally told that ‘put your big girl panties on and you know get back to work.’”

She struggles with this imbalance and desires for strength to be seen as softness too. She shares that work is a real struggle for her but, take solace in not being alone, her best friend has the same experience. Chikwenye names her friend as more outspoken and assertive, people call her more aggressive than Chikwenye, who identifies as the laid-back hippie of the group. She
shares, “if they see me as like, you know, strong Black woman, like you can't, you know imagine what they see her.” She shares that work has been hard but, she notes that what she calls the “awakening of White America” has awakened her own voice. She is now speaking out more about the inequities she is seeing in the workplace. Not being able to bring her authentic self to work and the discrepancies it causes has caused her to push back more. She just hopes it is not at the expense of her job. She finds herself unsure of what to do. But she knows that she is tired and she “shouldn't have to adjust as much as I do in order to do the job that I have to do.” She feels this is not the case for some of her other coworkers. Chikwenye made a commitment to herself that “I’m not going to make it palatable. Like I’m not going to make it palatable, palatable for them to hear me because, they, I’m not afforded the same courtesy.” She reiterates that she is tired.

Chikwenye shares that she does not think that she ever heard of Black women being described as strong, she just saw it. She shared that through action she saw what being a strong Black woman looked like to her. She believes that she internalized the idea of being strong because each of the women in her life “overcame very hard things at different times.” She believes others in the same situation might not have been able to overcome it. Because of this, she thinks that she internalized the idea of what strength looks like in a woman. When asked about how she would describe being a strong Black woman she shared that independence rang high to her in terms of strength. For her, a strong Black woman can take care of herself, she contributes to the household or community. She can “come back or snap back” from hardship and endure hardship without falling, she acknowledges that this sounds “really hard.” This type of woman endures without falling apart, she holds it together, she is disciplined and controlled.
She acknowledges again that this idea of strength is internalized and acknowledges that some of these traits she does not have. She clarifies that this is not a harder person but someone you can count on. She is like a duck in water. You see her floating, but you do not see what is happening under the water’s surface. To you, it seems like she is floating. She acknowledges her mother’s own struggles with depression and highlights that in the “wake of that, even like maybe at her lowest point, like hold it together, because she had to.” She shares that she has “seen the women in my life pivot at that point and like, you know, make it.” For her these women had “plan Z” when plan B did not work. She acknowledges that as awful as it sounds, being strong is being able to face struggle and being able to still move forward. She believes this is because, “we are not afforded that breaking a part moment. We are expected to hold it together.” She adds that Black women are also humans and should be afforded human emotions, without feeling guilty about it.

When asked about being called strong by people when dealing with difficulties regarding mental health and motherhood, she laughed and said “yes, all the time.” She shares that it is annoying to hear this response, sometimes she speaks out, other times, she does not. She reflected on a comment made to her, “Oh my God, single parents, I don’t know how you do it.” She shared the comment reflected someone having to care for their child while their partner was away for a week, calling themselves a “single parent.” She was so annoyed by the comment and responded back “You just you just do it.” She shares that she has been called strong during challenging times in her life and previously considered this label with a sense of pride. As she has gotten older, she no longer sees it this way. She shares that “I want to be seen as soft too.” She adds that she has been described as that duck in the water sharing, “I’ve been that person even though like I’m struggling with depression or anxiety, you know?” She says that on the
outside looking in, it looks like strength, for her, “I’m just trying not to fall apart.” Chikwenye
shares the reason she does not always correct these instances of misrecognition is due to the
mental, physical, or emotional energy this might cost. She asks herself “am I willing to give
energy today?” when these instances occur. When asked how she would like to be described
rather than strong, she shared that “I’m not sure I have the words though.” She acknowledged
that she comes off as “strong and like just very serious but, I think that’s my armor.” She would
love to be seen as a multi-dimensional person. She does not think being strong is bad for her, but
she does not want to be seen as being just strong. She is “strong and...” Although she does not
have the words to finish that sentence just yet, she just wishes that others would see her as multi-
dimensional, as well.

Chikwenye is honest that she struggles to introduce who she is because, “I still don’t, you
know like I’m still searching for that, who who, who I want to be when I grow up.” She does not
wrap her identity up in her job but, the “things I do outside of that.” She is curious and hungry
for knowledge. She is interested in people and their experiences. She is an introvert but, a
curious one that wants to know about others and the “stuff that makes them them.” She is a
mother and her greatest accomplishment on the planet has been “raising a son that is thoughtful,
responsible, and a productive citizen.” She considers herself to be mischievous and is worried
she cannot describe herself succinctly. She is fun loving, a hippie, a hippie that likes comfort.

**Womanist Witnessing and Reflections**

**Chikwenye’s I-poem**

Chikwenye’s I-voice reflected her journey to figure out who she is in a world that
required her to grow up faster than she wished. I found myself drawn to the instances where she
would self-silence herself by saying “I ramble” or ending a thought by suggesting “I’ve gotten
off track.” These instances stood out not only as points of silencing of self but also reflected this overall sense of uncertainty and questioning I noticed throughout the I-poem. I also found myself questioning her questioning of her potential becoming “I think. I reached that point. I was becoming. I was going to school... I ramble a lot.” What was going on for her at that moment for her to silence this part of her story?

An area of consideration was also the places where laughter was present for Chikwenye. Reflecting on those instances of laughter, the tones that I named previously felt louder when listening to her I-voice. I also noticed how nervousness seemed to show up while listening to her and how uncertainty of who she was and how she was depicting herself seemed more prevalent when reading the poem. Listening to Chikwenye’s share, I found myself returning to a series of themes: the sense of regret she had, her struggle with loneliness, the blame she placed on the dissolution of her marriage and the later loss of the “family” she had wished for her son. Chikwenye’s uncertainty in herself and her words seemed prevalent, particularly in the instances where you can see her struggle between certainty and uncertainty “I wouldn’t have, I don’t think, I would have had.” Chikwenye seems lost and unsure in some ways, potentially reflective of her continued journey to understanding who she is outside of being a mother.

Listening to how she speaks about not asking for help and even not engaging in group activities, I found myself wondering how she balanced this self-sufficiency as a wife, mother, and individual with isolation she reported feeling. This question made me reflect on the self-silencing that I noticed previously. As I continued listening, that self-silencing had an instance of being paired with her speaking out about bearing the burden of the emotional labor of having an unexpected houseguest. She shared that “I didn't really use my voice a lot. I have a hard time asking for help. I didn’t necessarily say help me. I needed that help.” This moment really stood
out because of the way she speaks about being heard by her aunt, and the way her aunt said what she could not. It made me wonder how often she had been in situations where she felt unheard or in a place where she could not use her voice. And, most importantly, how isolating that might have felt for her.

Listening for emotional responses, frustration towards being a married single mother was prevalent “I gotta buy groceries, there’s $15 left in the account.” I also noticed this sense of disappointment that covered many areas of her life. There seemed to be this sense of disappointment with what she had hoped her marriage would be. The disappointment and blame that she originally placed on herself about the dissolution of that marriage. And the disappointment in not being able to give her son the family she never had and desired for him. I found myself noticing this sense of longing. Longing for “productivity” that was not fulfilled through motherhood. Her I-voice really highlights this internal struggle and questioning of not only her decisions but also her thoughts, and even who she is. Each of these areas made me wonder how this affected her mental health and potentially increased the isolation she felt. However, I find myself wondering if that is an assumption, I am placing on her, as she speaks about her experiences shaping her. Nevertheless, I find myself wondering, can these experiences hold both a place of shaping and hurt? Reading and even listening to Chikwenye’s I-voice, I found myself wondering why it was important that I knew her tears were not tears from crying, more importantly, that I had not made her cry. What about her becoming emotional or potentially crying was necessary to clarify for her?

I found myself really drawn to the conflicting voices I found within her I-voice. Chikwenye shares that she does not like asking for help but the help she received from her aunt seemed to be a very impactful experience for her. She speaks about not liking group activities
but seemed to appreciate the availability of a group of people(s) with similar views and approaches to life. And, lastly, she denied the presence of a tribe but found individuals in her life that were influential and supplied support in different ways when she needed it most. I found myself wondering what about asking for help or receiving support felt inaccessible or difficult for her?

Chikwenye’s Story

I found myself both anxious and excited to explore Chikwenye’s share. The excitement was around feeling a sense of connection to her during the interview. The anxiousness was centered around a fear of “not getting it right.” As I listened and reflected on her share, I found some similarities in thought about strength and the impact that it can have on Black women. Noticing these similarities, I found myself fearful that my own views might skew my interpretation of hers. Acknowledging that concern and intentionally listening to hear, I found it easier to create that separation to really understand her experience.

When listening to Chikwenye’s share, I found myself drawn to her laughs and the places she laughed at, some voluntary and others, not so much. Her laughs were different, some felt happy, others felt sad, and some had hints of regret and longing. I am sure I may have missed one or two but, I counted 41 instances of laughter during our time together. I found myself curious about what those laughs could tell me about her experience. Wanting to understand the tone of the laughter, I created a tally system to follow what her laughter was expressing. This exploration unveiled 13 tones, four appeared more often: Isolation (9), Overwhelmed (7), Sadness (7), and Disappointment (5). The other tones included: Nervous (2)/ Embarrassment (1), Yearning (1)/Regret (1), Anger (2), Surprise (2)/ Humor (1), Connection (2), and Confusion (1).
During my listening and reading, I wondered if some of these tones could be merged but, chose against this for the sake of keeping her voice in the forefront of my exploration.

While reading and listening to Chikwenye’s share, I also found myself navigating many themes. I found myself being pulled between experiences (Independence vs. Loss of independence). I questioned whether my observations were like hers, a sense of navigating conflicting experiences. I found myself really drawn to a few specific themes that seemed to reappear throughout her share. The experience of growing up too fast seems to be an important part of her story. It made me wonder quite a bit about her development of her sense of self and her understanding of who she was outside of motherhood. I acknowledge that this may reflect her many instances of discussing still trying to figure out who she will be “when she grows up.” I found myself reflecting on her experience of feeling unproductive while raising her child and really found myself curious about what was missing for her. What about motherhood did not give her purpose, meaning, or value, that she might have found somewhere else. I also acknowledge that there might be some assumptions in the way I perceive what being productive means.

Chikwenye shares a story about her husband sending a house guest to live with her and her son, “for her benefit.” As she shared this story and later added how much emotional labor this added to her. I found myself wondering how difficult that must have been for her to navigate motherhood, loneliness and this added person sent by her husband to “keep an eye” on his family. Did she perceive this as a message that she could not handle motherhood on her own? What did that mean about the independence life had required her to achieve? The importance of being heard was presented as something that was significant to her. I found myself wondering how navigating feeling unheard by her husband and heard by her aunt reinforced the feeling of
connection and disconnection she spoke about. How did she play against and with her efforts to “use her voice” when she did not do that often. Most importantly, it led me to wonder how many instances she has had of not being heard.

However, what stood out the most was the theme of loneliness and how layered that experience seemed to be. Throughout her share, I felt myself in this battle between connection versus disconnection and loneliness versus being alone. She denies having a tribe but identifies with a small group of people that have been a necessary and important support to her. I found myself wondering what connection would look like for her. Although she reported liking being alone, I am curious if the being alone that she did not like centered around the dissolution of her marriage and the failure she for some time claimed as her own. Lastly, I found myself left with this feeling of yearning and disappointed hopes. She spoke about wanting her son to have the family she did not have and not being able to give it to him. For her, what did that mean about her as a mother? How did it affect her mental health?

**Strength**

I found myself really interested in hearing the way Chikwenye described strength. From the beginning of the interview, I was really connected to her story as well as the way she viewed herself in the world. As I read over the way she spoke about strength, I noticed feelings of sadness for her and concern about the sustainability of her being able to support this strength that sometimes felt out of her grasps. Chikwenye shared that she “shouldn't have to adjust as much as I do in order to do the job that I have to do.” I noticed myself making a connection to her adjusting to the concept of the crooked room. I began to wonder if her job was her crooked room. I found myself wondering when would enough be enough? When would it be too much? I appreciated the way she was able to name her strength but also make it clear that was not the end
of who she was, that there was more to her than just strength. Even more important was the way that she wanted to be acknowledged for her softness, as well. I found myself really rooting for Chikwenye, rooting for the person that she would become and her journey to find that person.
CLENORA
I come from a family of 12
I’m toward the bottom
I’m the first to graduate from college
I was really close with my mother
I always helped my mother
Anything she needed me to do
Though I was too young
I had eight over me
Everybody comes to me for everything
I think they think
I know everything

I would ask questions about certain things
When I do talk, people look at me
Sometimes I get quiet in office meetings
I’m not as talkative as some of the other peers
I can see myself getting very, very, very agitated a lot quicker at work
I see that’s happening

I always try to help people
That has been instilled in me
I tried to carry that
I remember the times that we didn’t have food to eat
I don’t know if anybody could experience that
That’s stuck with me
I look at my two daughters now
So, I’m just very thankful
I was raised to do the right thing
I pursued a higher education
I hate to say it
I’ve come across, it’s more of a selfish thing
It’s very hard for me
Because I see what they’re doing
I just still try to do the right thing
I got 38 years with the company
I’ve seen a lot
I just can’t see how people can be so selfish
I look at those individuals
They didn’t come from poverty like I come from
That’s the way I look at it
I don’t disrespect those individuals
It bothers me tremendously
I was going to retire in 2017
I just chose not to retire because a scenario took place
I'm at a point
No one is forcing me to retire,
The situations I witnessed were sickening

When I started, she was two
I wasn’t married
But I knew
I was very mature
It wasn’t hard at all for me
My mother took care of my daughter
I didn’t have to send her to daycare
I didn’t have a bad experience

I was in the prime of my life
I wanted to go to parties, not have anymore babies
They’re not going to stop me
From what I want to do
I had to put her in daycare real quick, for my mothers’ sake
It wasn’t bad
It didn’t interfere with my job
My social life
I think that what the mental health come into play
My husband and I were on different pages
I didn’t approve of it
I’m wondering where he is
I was making up lies
That was mentally bothering me
I took the stance on it
I’m not gonna let anyone deter me
Make me feel different or bad
I was at the point
It was not going to be me
I’m being honest
I refuse to be with anyone who disrespects me
I brought that to his attention
I moved with my niece
I took my daughter
I knew where my mind was
I knew
I was getting ready to hurt him

I made up my mind
I have zero tolerance for anything
I deal with some unnecessarily stuff
I leave it alone
Some people look at me and say
You don’t have a heart
Oh, you cruel
You don’t have a sense of humor
You just too mean
No, I’ve gone through stuff
I just
I don't deal with things anymore
I’m very direct
I don't sugarcoat
You want me to lie
You’re talking to the wrong person
I don’t think
I’ve always been this way
I know in high school
I wasn’t this way
I think
I was primarily this way when the oldest one was probably 11
I started seeing myself being direct
I think that’s sort of enhanced some of the way I’m feeling as well
I had to be very direct
I think my daughters were about
I’m thinking they were when all this stuff, this quote unquote personality took place
I don’t want to call it a personality
It’s just the way I view things
I just look at things a little bit different than other people

I don’t ask probing questions to put them on the spot
I ask probing question because
I’m trying to get clarity
I can see myself getting very, very, very agitated a lot quicker at work
Because of the things I see that’s happening
I get along practically with anyone
But when I see some of them
I’m very
I’m extremely observant
I don’t say it like
I told you
I don’t say a whole lot
I don’t say a whole lot
I’m very observant
I observe people in their action, mentally it’s been very stressful
I take this zero-tolerance approach
I would not let anything get me upset or frustrate anything
I have zero tolerance for stuff
That’s when I have to do my walking

I was a cheerleader
I was a captain
I played softball from age 13 to 55 years old
I did not miss a season playing softball
I would play when
I was pregnant with my daughters
I am a fitness guru
I do like working out
I don’t eat right at all
I tell people if
I halfway ate right
I would probably weigh 80 pounds
I’m not a small person
I’m not a large person
I did go to the doctor a couple weeks ago, my cholesterol
I didn’t like that it was going up
I don’t like taking any medicine
I requested to have another six-month checkup
So I can see has my cholesterol numbers gone down

I force myself to eat right
I’m just a fanatic when it comes to sweets
I’m not going discipline myself to eat right
I know the fitness
I’m looking at this big old honey bun
That’s what I want to go and grab
I don’t want you think
I’m real skinny
I'm not a large person
I do workout
I don’t wanna say
I’m arrogant when
I say this
I’ve always been built really nice
I don’t have good body parts
I’ve done all my life
I can’t get rid of these flabby arms
I just think that there’s just something that
I got to deal with
Working out makes me mentally feel good
Makes me look good
Makes me feel really good about myself

I want to get clarity
When I think of mental health
I think of somebody being crazy
I have a clear mind
I’m not mentally incompetent
I'm just putting all that out there for the record

I will say this
I came up with a family of 12, it was a lot different
That’s why I say my daughters now, they’re blessed
Clenora’s story.

Clenora is a no-nonsense, tell it like it is type of woman. As one of 12 children and the first in her family to graduate from college, Clenora developed a sense of responsibility for herself and others that has translated across childhood to adulthood. Clenora reports knowing what it is like to grow up poor and this experience taught her not only how important it is to help people but, also how important the way you treat people is. She is grateful that her own daughters have not experienced what it means to be poor and to struggle. She is thankful that she was raised to do the right thing and pursue a higher education. Her mother would be so proud. Her drive and dedication not only allotted her to achieve her goals she set her eyes on at an early age but, also to fulfill positions of leadership that gave her the opportunity to affect and pursue of leadership and advocate for people of color. However, her fight for equity did come at a cost. She is mentally tired.

Clenora has two daughters, 10 ½ years apart. A woman that is good with numbers, she calculates the ages and reflects that her youngest was 2 when she started at her job. 38 years she has given this company, she hopes to retire in the next 12 months. Clenora reports that balancing a new job and a 2-year-old was not hard, due to the help of her mother and her daughters’ father. She did not have to use daycare, not until she was 4. She did not have a bad experience with motherhood. Her youngest, she had 10 ½ years later. Clenora was in the prime of her life, going to parties and enjoying what life had to offer. A second baby was not the plan, a baby was not going to stop her from doing what she wanted to do. Her mother was older and so was her daughter, because her youngest daycare was used, and she reported having balance between motherhood and the things she wanted in her life. However, Clenora acknowledged that after her
second child, her mental health was challenged. She and her husband could not get on the same page. Clenora had to navigate him doing things she did not approve of and shielding her girls. Making excuses for him weighed on her mentally. Clenora values respect from her spouse and others and is willing to take a stand when that respect is not shown.

Clenora uses community engagement and fitness as the things that keep her grounded but, she loves a good workout burn. Clenora is proud of the way she looks; she has always been active and loves fitness. She shares the comments that are made about the way she looks, because she takes fitness seriously and gives her all, expecting the same from others. She does not like that nickname. COVID was hard for her, it felt like the walls were closing in. She found solace in Zoom line dancing. She wishes her arms looked different. A size 8 but her arms make her feel like a 14. She has accepted it is something she might have to deal with, she gets it from her mother.

**Strength**

Clenora reports that strength for her growing up was depicted as enduring. Being strong means making sure you mentally know and believe that you can succeed, regardless of what obstacles are in your way. In school you read about strong Black women in history class but, realizing it as reality did not happen for Clenora until she was an adult. However, when she looks back at the Black women in history, Coretta Scott King, and Rosa Parks, she respectfully acknowledges they are not her mother. Her mother endured and was successful, so she honors her mother of 12, this is strength, making a lot Clenora is a product of that.
When asked what being a Strong Black Woman means to her, Clenora shared that it means you are loved. This kind of woman is loved because of who she is and the mindset she must have to do whatever she chooses to do. She believes in herself. Clenora struggles with whether education affects the strength of a woman but, reflects on her mother with a 6th grade education and, a body full of strength. A strong Black woman loves herself, believes in herself, supports her children, treats people well, and helps other by pulling them up with their bootstraps. A strong Black woman should be able to reach out and help everyone, especially people of color. “All of those attributes to me exemplifies a strong Black woman.”

Clenora has had her fair share of being called strong, those around her say, “I wish it was more people like you.” But when she shares with those in her small circle her own struggles, she is met with disbelief, “how did you make it through,” they ask. She responds, “You just have to pray. You just have to keep moving.” They have no idea about the sleepless nights. Clenora bounces back. Suicide for her has never been the answer, even when things have been hard. She shares this with those closest to her that have their own struggles. She depends on God and herself. Therefore, people think she is strong.

Clenora introduces herself to the world as a mother of two daughters, a wife, and a grandmother of 3. She is someone that treats everyone the best way she can. She helps people. She respects the decisions of others and the way they view things in life. She is direct. She does not sugarcoat. And is not with the good boy system. If you are, you do not want her as a friend. Clenora hopes that others see her as caring,
direct, having a heart for service, tells it to you straight and, holds you accountable for your actions.

*Womanist Witnessing and Reflections*

**Clenora’s I-poem**

Clenora’s I-voice reflects a sense of responsibility. From being a child helping her mother, even when she was too young, to everyone coming to her for everything. There seems to be a back and forth between pride of being the person people turn to and the burden of needing to know everything for everyone. People look to her to ask tough questions and say the uncomfortable things they are thinking. Clenora’s I-voice suggests that this causes increased agitation for her. Clenora creates a comparison between herself and others, “I was raised to do the right thing,” “I just can’t see how people can be so selfish,” “They didn’t come from poverty.” Clenora’s, I-voice seems to use this to make sense of why people would do things that are not fair or right according to her beliefs.

There seems to be a shift in Clenora’s I-voice about responsibility when speaking about her children. A distance in responsibility. With her first child, Clenora speaks about maturity but, notes “My mother took care of my daughter. I didn’t have a bad experience.” There is a noticeable shift in the way that she speaks about the birth of her second daughter. Here the I-voice of responsibility moves to one of resistance. She speaks as if the birth of her child was done to her rather than something she has done, “They’re not going to stop me.” There’s distance in her voice as well, “I had to put her in daycare real quick,” “For my mothers’ sake,” “It (motherhood?) didn’t interfere with my job,” “My social life.”

Clenora’s I-voice seems to shift back to responsibility, however, there seems to be an introduction of anger towards her husband. I found myself drawn to this part of her share
because, of the sense of vulnerability she displayed and the loneliness and anger I felt in her voice, “I think that what the mental health come in play,” “My husband I were on different pages in life,” “one of us probably would have gotten hurt,” “It was not going to be me,” “I know I was getting ready to hurt him.” I found myself really interested in how her response to her daughter’s questioning of where their father was, “I was making up lies,” played against her desire to be direct and, also wondered if this was the moment when she began to develop her zero-tolerance, no-nonsense approach, remembering she said she was “not always that way. “

I noticed there is a shift in Clenora’s I-voice from first to second person quite a bit. Places where I noticed more prominently were when she began to describe the comments, she received from others about her zero-tolerance approach. “Some people look at me and say” “you cruel,” “you don’t have a sense of humor,” “you just too mean.” However, Clenora returns to that first person voice to defend why she responds the way she does, “No. I’ve gone through stuff,” “I just I don’t deal with things anymore,” “I’m very direct,” “I just look at things a little bit different than other people. Clenora’s I-voice seems to eventually shift back to responsibility but, it is a responsibility to self. To protect herself from the things that mentally cause her stress and to care for her body. However, her voice also seems to move between proud and critical, “I am a fitness guru,” “I don’t eat right at all,” “I don’t wanna say I’m arrogant when I say this, I’ve always been built really nice,” “I don’t have good body parts, I’ve done all my life, I can’t get rid of these flabby arms. I just think that there’s just something that I got to deal with.”

Towards the end of Clenora’s share, I find myself struggling to find her voice. And it is not for me to label. I hear a sense of judgement “When I think of mental help, I pick up somebody crazy.” But I also find myself wondering if it is fear. “I have a clear mind. I’m not
mentally incompetent. I’m just putting all that out there for the record.” I have gone back and forth on the necessity of adding that note at the end of her share.

Overall, Clenora describes herself as someone that takes a no-nonsense and zero-tolerance approach. She is frustrated in the system she works in because people of color are being overlooked by a woman in power, she believes should be helping them. She makes many connections between people coming to her for help because they think she knows quite a bit. Her voice is important to others and, they look at her, people listen when she speaks. When reading Clenora’s, I poem the theme that stands out is one of responsibility. That responsibility shifts in diverse ways throughout but, that responsibility is the driving force to her staying in a position she has outgrown, it drives her desire to help others, it is what allowed her daughters to have a life growing up she did not have. Most importantly her responsibility to self is what keeps her grounded and separated from the aspects of life that could potentially serve as a disruption.

Clenora’s Story

Even from the beginning of the interview with Clenora I felt a wall between us. First due to the work that it took to get this interview to happen, second because she never turned on her camera, seeing that she was doing her hair and, third, something about this interview felt more difficult than my other ones. Oftentimes, I found myself wondering if I was asking the right questions and how comfortable she felt with me. At times, her focus was on her job, the wrongs of higher management, and how things should be different because she and this person shared similar identities. I now wonder how difficult that must be for her, as she cites it as one of the catalysts for trying to retire. My first reaction during the interview and even through the first listen was “what is here? Is there something here?” even so much as “why did she agree to this?” I found myself even more frustrated when she did not share pictures nor return my follow up
Attempts for us to meet, “I’m a busy woman” plays on repeat every time I listen to her share, even now when I write about it.

Acknowledging the frustration and confusion I was feeling, I made a concerted effort to clear my mind in the final listening and as I read and re-read her words as I formulated the summary and I-poems. By creating that distance, I was able to see Clenora’s story in a different light. Clenora is an achiever, has always been. She cares deeply for others and is focused on the advancement of people of color in spaces that are hard for them to find a place in. I find the wall coming back into the picture but, this time I find myself asking what purpose does the wall serve? Who does it keep out and who does it let in? How does it keep her safe, healthy, happy? As said previously, I intended on shying away from specific themes as source of data for this work but, I found myself writing down a few words that continued to show up as I engaged with her words: responsibility, zero tolerance, fairness, frustration, directness, no nonsense, and endurance. I found myself wrestling with these words wondering which causes comfort and which causes added burden.

I saw the distance she appeared to have from talking in depth about her daughters. From the way she spoke about her mother playing a significant role in caring for them, her desire to still do the things she wanted to do when she found herself having a second child, to her shares later that no one could cause her to hurt herself, not even her daughters. I find myself wishing I had pushed her harder but, I acknowledge something about pushing in this area felt like it was off limits. I noticed that Clenora uses fitness as her anchor, as the activity that keeps her grounded. The time that she did not have that (COVID) the walls seemed to close in on her, I wish I had dug deeper here. Looking back, I think the hardest part to navigate for myself was the clear separation she wished for and made clear regarding mental health. From statements like
“When I think of mental health, I think of somebody crazy” or the desire to make sure that I understood that she had a “clear mind” and was not “mentally incompetent,” I remember having a reaction to those statements initially. As I listened and re-read her share now it makes me inquisitive on what would it mean about her to be labeled as having mental health concerns. Would that be a burden or a release?

**Strength**

When reading Clenora’s depiction of strength, I found myself appreciative of the way that she starts off talking about strength being about believing in yourself rather than based on a doing. This felt like a fresh perspective, that I did not expect. What really drew me to her perspective of being a Strong Black Woman was the aspect of this type of woman being loved by others. This type of woman not only is loved but, she loves herself and treats others kindly. I think I never really considered where love or being loved fit into this stereotype of strength but, I think that may speak more to a rigid approach to the stereotype I may have taken, I am grateful for her perspective. I did notice for myself a slight reaction to the concept of “pulling people up by their bootstraps” and whether this left room for a person’s tiredness or inability to do something expected of them and, then the added labor needed from her to help them achieve. However, I can acknowledge that my own biases might be affecting my belief of what that statement meant. I found myself incredibly touched by the way that Clenora speaks about her mother being the epitome of strength for her, she makes it clear where she originally questioned the role of education in strength, that it did not matter and, her mother was the prime example of why that was the case.
PATRICIA
I'm 57 years old
I'm the oldest of 12
I have a son
I we have been married 20 years
I have to ask him how long
I was
I worked in the educational field
I am a full-time farmer
I completed my undergrad
I went back to get my masters
I go back
I got a year
I would have to get my doctoral
I’m farming now
I do have a vision
I would love to do
I see
I don’t
I would like to do something
I would like to do something
I
I really enjoy working with special needs children
I was growing up
I thought
I was one of those children
I thought
I was one of those children
I went to school
I was a C student
I’ve always struggled
I went back to school
I got my cosmetology license
I went back to school
I learned that it
Wasn’t that I was a slow learner
I learned differently
I learned
I was a kinesthetic learner
I also learned
I was auditory
I said well
I learned differently
I discovered about myself
I always struggled to read
I started doing
I started reading more
I could comprehend
I would read a little bit
I did that
I’m reading often
I’m thankful for my husband
I read something
I ask him
I made

I've never been outspoken person
I've always been a person that sits in the back
I was there
I because you see me
I’m always
I hate to be late
I'm gonna be there
Type of student I was
I didn't know
I you know had to help cook
I learned to cook
I still love today
I could
I got you

I met my husband
I never was a talkative person
I’m more friendlier
I don’t think
I'm friendlier
I think
I'm just finding my way at 57

I knew
I
I had to make a cake
I did that
I think that gave me responsibility
I think that did help me
I think it kind of gave me a break
I can’t do
I focused on cooking
I could do
I think it helped
I even now
I’m a
I’m a caregiver
I’m coming
I think that all came about as a child
I played
Protective and I
I am as well

I
I’ve
I’ve always said my sister was beautiful
I have a
I have two sisters
I had some brothers
I’ve always looked at them
More beautiful than I
I think that last even now
I look at them
I would say you so pretty
I met my husband
I met Tom
I was like
I am?

I wasn’t a big girl
I’ve always saw myself as fat
Now I’m really fat
I didn’t know
I was really thin
I think those struggles came from being molested
I keep referring back to my husband

I just remove myself from uncomfortable situations
I know my dad
I would always look at the relationship
I often want
I talk about how
I’ve had this conversation with my mom
I love all my children
I was like no
I’ve just accepted things
I’ve done in my life
I’ve
I’ve stopped focusing on negative
I’m doing in my life
I hope that answered the question

I think
Tom and I
I think when we started farming
I started making
I making my own soap
I started
I think
I started doing research
I started making cream
I started
I thought my family would support me
I think
I longed for that
I went to Lakeside

I was really seeking family approval
I learned
I has to come to grips
I thought
I’m at the point
I’m sure everybody
I just keep it moving
I just
I just celebrate the people
I just keep it moving

I know
I internalize
I feel
I’m gonna be
I feel like
I need them
I was telling
I went
I call
I was
I do know
I was
I said
I’m over here
I was struggling
I’ve processed
I’m alright

I was molested
I
I want to go
I go
I don’t know
I don’t
I can’t question people’s actions
I just choose
I’m removing myself
I feel
I go with the intentions
I did confront him

I spoke
I told you
I was molested
I spoke
I feel like
I felt like she should have some responsibility
I told
I
I
I think everybody
I was like 20
I told my mom
I said
I felt like
I was looking
I thought they would

I
I’m the opposite
I haven’t always been
I’ve always been
I learned
I just never understood how
I thought
I feel
I can’t expect anyone
I have to
I got to fight my own fight
I’m sure no one else
I wanted to put him on notice
I know
I know
I told
I have to forgive
I’m
I truly forgive him
I don’t think
I have
I saw him
I just
I left
I said
I was
I removed myself

I can
I go
I lied
I was married
I’ve always been
I was willing
I feel like
I was willing to do to say
I’m still married
I noticed the child was suffering
I had to resolve the marriage
I met Tom
I was like
I’m like
I didn’t like him
I got to know him
I was like
I’m ready to get married
I am
I gave

Am I tracking
I’ve been abused
I’m in an abusive relationship
I was
I was in
I was back in school
I’m still moving forward
I wanted
I ain’t gonna have nothing
I guess
I met Tom
I was always trying to please him
I remember
I was pregnant
I’m like oh Lord
I was like
I remember
I mean
I was pregnant
I was
I might have been 7-8 months, he hit me
I just
I just go this fight in me
I was like you ain’t gonna be fighting me
I was like okay you got it in you
I said don’t ever hit him again
I noticed
I was like oh no
I
I had to save him

Tom and I knew each other a year
I know
I was like
I um my marriage ended
I lost my job
I decided
I was like you got to go
I bought a house
I was like
I wasn’t up for the job
I was going to
I was withdrawing from all my classes
I ran up on Tom
I was like
I’m doing fine
I’m
I’m
I’m withdrawing from my classes
I was
I thought
I was
I would
I was looking for a job
I was like
I when
First husband I broke up
I said
I don’t know
I don’t know
I’m doing
I felt like he was overbearing
I felt like he was jealous
I saw guy
I was
I look over
I see a guy now
I can
I’m free
I’m
I’m free
I’m free to be me
I appreciate that
I know it’s a lot

I was
I’ve been in school systems for 23 years
I was working on
I was a substitute teacher
I met Tom
I was
I worked factory jobs
I was
I
I was working at Nike
I was excited about getting this job
I went for my interview
I
I was in school
Why would I stop school
I explained
I was just down
I’m looking for another job
I was like subbing?
I was like

I started subbing
I did that until
I finished my undergrad
I was
I was in school for my Masters
I got into a TEP program
I did that
I was able to teach
I worked
I
I taught art history
I wasn’t willing
I knew
I wanted to work with special needs
I worked for a year
I found a job
I got the job with SPED
I did that
I think
I thought that was gonna be my last year working
I need to work
I did that for a year
I
I had some very uneasy feelings
I didn’t know what that was
I said
I will farm
I would do my products
I got a call

I’m $257,000 in student loan debt
I go back to school
I have my PhD
I was willing
I made up my mind
I’m not gonna take the test
I’m not gonna quit
I didn’t go into debt to teach to quit
I had to leave
I left work
I left

I decided to make
I went to the doctor
I just
I just broke down
I know
I’ve been crying
I thought it was because
I
I didn’t know
I was going to do in my life
I went to another doctor
I went to the guy
I was late
I got there
I couldn’t remember the guy’s name
I couldn’t remember what floor
I just went blank
I
I couldn’t remember
I couldn’t remember
I just went blank
I was sitting there about to break down
I said
I had been walking around
I looked
I got to the office
I got there

I was just emotional
I
I was crying
I said yeah
I gave him the paperwork
I just lost it
I
I was crying uncontrollably
I’m gonna
I’m
I’m even worse
I was
I’ve always
I fill it out
I was done
I couldn’t even get past the first sheet
I thought
I was done
I guess it didn’t register
I didn’t do any of that
I was telling him
I was telling
I would talk
I will come back
I wasn’t remembering things
I was telling the doctor
I said
I used to
I have always been put together
I was like Lakeside?

I’m saying to myself that’s for crazy people

I called
I called Tom
I’m like you don’t want me to get no help
I started Lakeside
I went in on my birthday
Best things that I could have done

I was in confusion
I think
I went
I was diagnosed with depression, severe anxiety, and PTSD
I did that
I did
I don’t like
I
I
I’m
I’m
I’m the type of person
I don’t like taking medication
I know everybody say that
I have not had any of that medication in over a year

I didn’t know anything else to do
I didn’t know
I know one person experience is not the next
What I was doing clearly wasn’t working
I had gone many days without doing anything
I don’t know

I’ve always been that person
I never say anything
I just shut down
I’ve always been that person
I never say anything
I just shut down
I can go
I could go a month without talking to Tom
I have done it before

I’ve learned to say
I’m mad
I don’t like that
I said
I know
I wake up
I wake up
I wake up
I could wake up
I’m down
I let him know
I’m not feeling good
I just let him know
I don’t feel good
I’m not well

I
I enjoy gardening
I enjoy
I do a lot
I
I used to do a lot of ceramics
I don’t so that anymore
I don’t
I do like
I said
I do a lot of dehydration
I love
I’m working on a seasoning
I do a lot
I dehydrate
I just say
I enjoyed that
I enjoyed
I say my family
I’m talking about people that surround me
I have
I do a lot of posting
I post
I’m gonna say
I try to engage everyday
I’m not gonna say simple things
I became
I was still subbing
I was working
I had to go onto wage earners
I know
I did that
I had to have major surgery
I received a letter
I had to report to court
I umm
I still haven’t, we lost the house
I had taken some pills
I was like
I can’t do it anymore

When you
When you think about suicide
You don’t think about
You killing yourself
You think about
You don’t wake up no more
That was my first experience
I discovered
I have passive suicidal thoughts
I often think
I could just go to sleep
You don’t actively think about killing yourself
I just
I if
I had an accident
I died
I struggle though some days
I do
I said
I just let Tom know
I’m doing well
I just
I just go down
I make sure
I let him know
I’m not feeling well
I have a friend
I met him at Lakeside
I said you got to get out the house
I just keep waking up
I wake up
Just be better than I was yesterday
I get a chance to reevaluate
I
I get upset
I talk to myself
I do a lot of that
I
I
I try to look at things positive now
I hope that answers your question

I think my biggest thing
I’m very protective
I’m like
I said
Am I getting old
I’m like
I think about
I’m always questioning
I’m
I’m always watching
I tell people
I said being a grandparent is worse

I was
I was
I was awful
I had to go to her
I was
I said
I thought
I went to Lakeside
I had to re-evaluate
I did some things
I has to call her
I don’t curse
I was just
I was something else
I had to make that right

I don’t
I don’t
I’ve never
I never saw
I was
I don’t know him
She and I talk about everything now
I don’t take sides
I’m for what’s right
I
I feel
I tell her
I feel
I got to tell you

I stopped working
I had more time
I will go to work
I’m free to move
I need to
I never would have
I never would have
I’m free
I’m free to be me
I can be who
I wanna be
I go to the land
I go
I
I don’t have to be
I’m not going to say not put together
I can
I can be confident
I have on now
I look now

I just
Don’t uh I take myself seriously
I
I feel like
I
I
I
I’m getting it together
I finally
I finally got it together
I can
I can meet people
I can talk
I don’t
I’m getting over that nervousness
I’ve noticed with bout with mental illness
I’m trying
I try to work on thinking about
I’m gonna say
I say it
I have no
I
I feel free now
I feel like the only expectations
I put on myself
I don’t allow anybody
I just don’t carry it
I don’t carry it
I give that
I did answer your question?

I do believe
I’m just opposite
I feel like if you hurt me
I need to let you know
I’m gonna say ouch
The second time I’m saying no
I think
I would like to be the voice

I had to go
I did
I questioned my going to church
I would go
I go
I stayed
I went
I sung
I had to question
Do I have to go to church
I discover that
I honor God
I show up
I’m trying to show up now as a wife
I’m praying
I
I show up
I’m showing up
It ain't because I’m going to church
I’m staying
I’m staying
I got to go sing
I got rehearsal
I got rehearsal
I do
I do take that seriously
I
I go
I get up
I
I started doing this after Lakeside

I lately
I’ve been more serious
I’m not gonna say more serious
I’ve been more intentional
I wake up
I started saying
I you know asked the Lord
I know if He keeps his hands on it

I everyday
I say that
I get out
I wake up
I have that talk
I get out of the bed
I wake up
I think it’s working
I think it’s working

I always
I’m always
I can’t remember
I was
I sing that song a lot
I don’t know why
I guess
I guess
I
I think about
I was born by the river
I’ve been running ever since
I think for me
I’ve been running for a long time
I’m at a place
I don’t have to run anymore
I’m
I’m
I’m at peace
I think
I’m finally
I could be satisfied
I’m enough
I sing
I’m always humming
I sing
I don’t know

I mean that shows growth
I
I like string beans
I mean

I don’t either
I was like
I don’t have any pictures of him
He and I together
I was like we got some clothes on

I
I picked

I put in a brine
I keep that lid
I’m
I’m being preserved
I continue to speak positive
I do
I get up in the morning
I’m preserved
I’m preserving my mind
I’m preserving my state of mind
I’m preserving my outlook

I didn’t tell you
I wanted to do fun parties
I really
I can do
I can do whatever
I want to do
I did fun parties
I wanted to start soap stuff
I need
I’m doing

I’m just true to my Blackness
I’m thinking
I’m like
I’m
I’m just true to my Blackness
I was
I was like
I put chemicals in my hair
I you know
I see your hair

I did
I had a couple
I want to
I can’t find them
I got them
I don’t know how to
I don’t know how to
I don’t know how to pull them
I’m looking
I find them
I got it
I got so many pictures
I’m gonna show you
I’m gonna turn
I ain’t got no bottom

I did
I drew that arm
I did
I was in undergrad
I view myself
Nobody looks at your face
Your face just comes along with it

I did a lot of work about self-image
I don’t
I think
I still focus on that
Not as much as I used to
I’m doing somethings
I thought
I’d never do before

I have bees on my land
I’m stepping out of my shell
I’m doing things
I never thought
I would do before
You know
You don’t have to be in a box
You can do whatever
You want to do
You just do it
I want to do it
That’s what I do
I’m living my life
I’m living my life
I’m enjoying it
I hope that has helped you
Patricia’s Story

Like her crops, Patricia has watched herself grow into the person that she is today. A mother of 1, a grandmother of 3, and a wife of 20+ years, family has a different meaning to Patricia. Previously working in the educational field, she is now a full-time farmer. She has never been happier. A year away from having her doctoral degree, she now has a vision of providing a space for children and adults that are dealing with mental illness, this is the work she loves to do. Growing up, school was difficult for her. She thought she could not learn, she struggled. She in fact could learn, she just learned a little differently.

Patricia has never been an outspoken person. In school she was the student at the back of the room. Please do not ask her questions or ask her to read, that made her nervous. Growing up as the oldest girl of 12 there were a lot of expectations placed upon her, she “kind of got lost in the shuffle.” She had a lot of responsibilities, but she learned how to cook from scratch. She still loves to do that today. Patricia struggled with self-doubt, meeting her husband helped increase her self-confidence. She is grateful for him, even if he talks a lot. She has noticed some changes in her because of their relationship but, really, she is just “finding her way.” Having a great deal of responsibility at an early age taught Patricia that “women have to learn how to juggle when their plates are full.” It helped as a child; she has maintained this as an adult.

Self-image has always been a struggle for her. Looking at her sisters, they were so beautiful, she compared herself to them. When she met her husband, she was surprised when he found her beautiful. He saw past the physical. She believes her struggles with herself came from being molested at age 8. Patricia refers to her husband quite a bit, he has been a blessing to her, “kind of showing me my self-worth.” She shares that her parents favored some of her siblings over her, they were loved differently. She has accepted that people “are the way they are.”
has decided not to focus on the negative and to look towards the positive. It still hurts when her family does not support her. Going to Lakeside (inpatient psychiatric hospital) taught her that not everyone will support you. She had to come to grips with this. She has learned to celebrate the people that want to be around and to just “keep it moving.”

Patricia still sees her uncle who molested her, she did not understand why no one did anything. She has learned to remove herself from situations and not react. She did confront him; he did not remember. She shared her experiences with her mother. Her mother asked if Patricia blamed her. Patricia feels like her mother did not protect her. Her mother does not like confrontation. Patricia is not like that, but she has not always been that way. She has learned that you cannot “expect anybody else to fight my fight.” She believes the Lord calls her to forgive him. She does not think she has just yet, she is still working on it. Her husband helped her process. He showed her there is more to a person than just the physical. Patricia shares that she was married previously. It was not a good marriage. She is a person that sticks it out, even to the extent of forgoing her happiness. She was willing to stay for the sake of saying she was married, until she realized her son was suffering. When she became a mother, her whole life changed. She took the word mother, and really lived it. She changed for her child, she believes the word mother means to nurture, take care of, and protect. She had to protect him because, he could not protect himself. Anxiety is what she felt, her son’s nervousness around his father was the sign that it was time to leave, so she left. By chance she ran into her now husband, he came at the right time.

Patricia worked in the school system for 23 years, she was not doing exactly what she wanted to do. She had a vision, her vision did not align with her job, she was asked to leave. That following week was a blur, something was wrong. She went to two doctors for help, the second
wanted her to go to Lakeside. She was hesitant, “that’s for crazy people.” She started treatment on her birthday and came out on her anniversary, “it was one of the best things that I could have done.” She was diagnosed with depression, severe anxiety, and PTSD. She does not like taking medication, she has not taken it in over a year. She is grateful for her time there because she did not realize how bad things had gotten. She had stopped taking care of herself, now she knows how to communicate when something is off. She is now able to tell her husband when he should “be careful with me.” Gardening grounds her, surrounding herself with people who care is good for her, these are the things that “helps me to not fall back.” Patricia shares her experience at Lakeside, which helped her understand her past experiences dealing with her mental health. She reflects on her losing her home and taking pills. She could not do it anymore. She now understands that she has passive suicidal thoughts, this is something she still struggles with, she does not want to die. Her experiences have allowed her to reevaluate her life, she tries to look at the positives.

When asked about how her mental health has affected her experience of mothering, she reflects on the protectiveness, hypervigilance rather, she had for her son and now grandchildren, specifically her granddaughter, she is really developed for a 10-year-old. She believes because of her experiences of being molested, that she finds herself questioning and watching to make sure no one touches her grandchildren in the wrong way. “That’s the biggest thing that that plays in my mind for my grandchildren.” She worried less about her son, because he did not do a great deal of visiting when he was younger. She believes being a grandparent is worse than being a parent because some of their parenting does not align with the way she would parent.

Patricia feels freer now to be who she wants to be. She finds solace in her land and freedom in not having to meet a certain standard. She no longer carries the expectations of
anyone but herself, she feels free. Her mind and spirit feel fed. She is saddened that there seems to not be room to deal with mental illness within the Black community and would like to be a voice for people that are going through mental health difficulties.

**Strength**

When asked how strength was depicted for Patricia growing up, she shared that her mom was a strong woman. Her mother, though not married, was with her dad for over 30 years. When she realized this was not what she wanted, she “got herself together” and left. Patricia shares that her mother was able to get her own house and never looked back. She acknowledges that strength was also present in her grandmother, who “was my rock.” She never took no for an answer, she advocated for Black people. Her other grandmother was the first Black Superintendent of her county. “I’ve had a great women around me all my life.” She shares that she did not so much hear of Black women being strong, she just saw it. From her mother struggling with her father and choosing to leave, to her grandmothers’ dedication to their communities. Strength was not a lot of talking but actions and demeanor, that spoke volumes.

For Patricia, strength does not mean that you are just strong, you can be strong and be “relaxed like for myself.” She shares that she carries her own weight. For her, strength does not mean you have to be boisterous, you can be as “elegant as you need to be.” Strength to her is showing up for the people that you need to show up for, that is being strong without saying anything. For her, those three women represented that. Patricia acknowledges that when people say “strong Black woman” this is usually seen as a negative. She shares that men want to be with a woman that is submissive, she is submissive to her husband, “the husband is the head.” But, for her she believes that people misunderstand submissiveness to being able to tell a woman what to do, that is not strong.
She shares that it meant a great deal to her when her mother attended therapy sessions with her while she was at Lakeside. Her mother told her she was proud of her, that meant a lot. As far as she can remember, she does not remember being called strong while at Lakeside.

However, she learned during this time that being a “strong Black woman” for her was being true to herself. For so many years she had been pretending to be someone else, now she could just be herself. She no longer has to wear different masks or remember which one she has put on. She can now just be free, that for her is being strong. Her strength also comes from not having to subscribe to certain beauty standards she thought she had to meet, being strong is showing up the way you are.

For Patricia, “strong Black woman” is a positive thing. She tries to “walk in that light.” She shares that there are so many different ideas of what being strong is and believes we have gotten sidetracked by the things we see now. She believes these images make it hard for people to see themselves. When asked how she would introduce herself, she shares that “I am a product of abuse. I am a person that wears mental illness and I’m a wife. I’m a grandmother, I'm a mother. I’m a spiritual woman. I’m a farmer. That’s who I am.” She would like others to not only see her the way she sees herself but, also as someone that is not ashamed of struggling with mental illness. She does not have shame from being abused. That shame belongs to someone else; she cannot wear it because it is not hers.

**Womanist Witnessing and Reflections**

**Patricia’s I-poem**

Patricia’s I-voice for me reflects the up and down journey that she experienced to get to the place she is now. Reading her I-poem, there are instances of being transported back in time and then returning to the present. Reading her I-poem is not linear, and that supplies a glimpse of
her own life path. Listening to Patricia’s I-voice, I found myself particularly drawn to her story telling of self-doubt to a place of freedom. Through abuse, battles with self-esteem, mental health concerns, and abusive relationships, Patricia found herself in a way that feels authentic to her.

I found myself curious of the way she speaks of her current husband, as if he were a saving grace “I’m thankful for my husband,” “I keep referring back to my husband.” The way she speaks about him and way that she credits him for her increased self-confidence, her belief that she is beautiful and pushing her to do the things she thought she could not, is quite interesting. Listening and reading the way she spoke about Tom shows how important that relationship is to her and how it has helped her. However, I found myself questioning what the experience was like for her when she found herself saying “I’m like you don’t want me to get no help,” about her and Tom making the decision for her to go to Lakeside for 30 days. I wonder for her what it was like to have someone support you so fully, raising her son, encouraging her when she felt discouraged, and then receiving the message that he was unwilling to let her go away for 30 days. During the interview, I remember the way she said that statement, her voice was exaggerated as if she were joking. However, there was a sadness that I heard that still stays with me.

Reading her I-poem, I noticed specific voices regarding her family. I found myself struggling to understand if hurt and disappointment were different voices for her. The hurt seemed to be centered in the past, “I know my dad [he’s always like light skinned people]” “I would always look at the relationship,” “I had this conversation with my mom too” “I was like no... [you love differently].” “I feel like it was her fault.” “I felt like she should have some responsibility in it.” “I thought [they would, you know, address him so they never did that].”
Disappointment appeared more situated in the present or near past, “I thought my family would support me.” “I thought that would bring [you know them closer to me].” Patricia shares “I'm $257,000 in student loan debt. If I go back to school [for a year], I will have my PhD.” It was interesting to see that shift of disappointment move away from her family to her husband, the one who had supported her the most. I found myself wondering what it was like to have an instance where she is told that her dream does not work by someone that had always been so supportive? What I found interesting was that the third voice that I heard was one of acceptance. This voice seemed to present itself in both the present and past. “I just celebrate the people [that want to be around us].” “I learned that everybody is not going to support you.”” I just keep it moving.” “I can’t expect anybody else to fight my fight.”

I found myself particularly drawn to the two instances where I noticed Patricia’s shift from a first-person voice to second person. The first instance was when she spoke about her suicide attempt. When she first discusses the attempt, she says “I had taken some pills,” “I was like. I can’t do it anymore.” As she begins to talk more about suicide and what it means there is a shift to “when you think about suicide. You don’t think about you killing yourself.” She returns to first-person when she shares “I discovered that I have passive suicidal thoughts. I often think about it. I could just go to sleep.” But then she returns to the second-person voice “You don’t actively think about killing yourself.” And, then returns to first-person “I just if I if I had an accident and I died.” This makes me wonder if she needed separation between herself and suicide or if this was her simply explaining her understanding of what it meant to her to have passive suicidal thoughts. The second instance is when she is showing me a drawing she created. She shares “I drew the arm” about a drawing of the female form and her own self-image. She says, “I view myself” and then shifts “Nobody looks at your face. [They looks at all the other
“Your face just comes along.” I found myself wondering if that was her own experience. She later adds, “I did a lot of work about self-image.” Reading these two instances, I find myself coming back to the question of did the change in voice serve as protection from pain from her experiences?

Patricia does not speak in detail about her experiences as a mother. However, in the instances that she does, there is a tone of protection and overprotection for her son and grandchildren. With her son, she speaks about her abusive relationship and how “I noticed that it was time when [he would raise his voice].” “I was like oh no. I, I had to save him.” With her granddaughter, it becomes clearer how her own past experiences affect the way she navigates being a grandmother. “I’m very protective. I think about. I’m always questioning. I’m, I’m always watching [making sure that no guy, you know, touch them the wrong way. That’s the biggest thing that plays in my mind for my grandchildren].” This statement really stood out for me, not only for what that hypervigilance may have looked like as a mother but, also how this level of “overprotectiveness” has affected her experience of being a grandmother.

I really appreciated the way that Patricia pulled me into her story. From commenting on my hair, “I see your hair.” To the way that she displayed comfort to share with me she was not wearing any pants “I’m gonna turn you back and I ain’t got no bottom.” Patricia seems invested in those around her, not only to be a voice for mental health but to genuinely connect with the people she interacts with. Lastly, Patricia speaks about now being “free.” “I’m free to be me. I can be who I wanna be.” I appreciate this contrast throughout her I-poem but, particularly when she speaks about the song *A Change is Gonna Come*. She speaks about the song being a metaphor for her life “I was born by the river. I’ve been running ever since. I think for me, I’ve been running for a long time. I don’t have to run anymore. I’m at peace.” For me, something
about hearing her explain her journey in this way really pulled at me, particularly the peace. For her, it must feel good to finally have that peace.

**Patricia’s Story**

From the beginning of the interview with Patricia, I found myself really engaged in Patricia’s story. Patricia was warm and open about her experiences and showed a true dedication towards using her story to help others. I found myself really honored to share the interview space with her and incredibly saddened by her experiences. Patricia’s story was in line with what I expected but I noticed that she focused more on her own mental health journey and less on its intersection with motherhood. I even noticed some instances where I asked direct questions about motherhood and mental health and the questions seemed to be answered from a mental health perspective.

While listening and reading Patricia’s interview, I noticed instances where her story seemed to jump around. I found myself wondering if it was easier for her to share her story as thoughts came to her rather than in a more succinct nature. It became clear quickly how much of an impact her husband has had on her life, and how much of a support he has been for her. I found myself wondering why she felt she needed to apologize for speaking about him so much. I think what I appreciated the most about Patricia’s share was the way her beliefs and ideas about mental illness and mental health treatment changed. Being able to read her transformation from believing that Lakeside was for “crazy people” to believing going there was one of “the best decisions” she ever made was a heartwarming experience. I think even more than that, seeing how she is using her own experience to become a voice for others really speaks not only about her growth but, also for myself the importance of destigmatizing mental health.
Reading and listening to Patricia’s interview, I found myself noticing some common themes throughout her share. Responsibility, at an early age, seemed prevalent for Patricia but, different from other interviews, this responsibility for her served as a distraction from an area of her life that caused a great deal of self-doubt. She welcomed responsibility. Patricia speaks about this responsibility as a given for women, “women, you know we, we do learn how to juggle. You when our plate is full.” I found myself having a strong reaction to that statement, particularly asking why? Throughout the interview, there seemed to be these contrasting themes of self-doubt and self-confidence. As her story progressed, self-confidence became more prevalent but, her story reads as if that confidence was hard earned. Lastly, the themes of acceptance and hurt, I found hard for me to navigate. I found myself experiencing a lot of sadness not only reading about her history of abuse but also the loneliness that she may have felt when no one spoke up for her. Patricia spoke matter of fact about family being different for each person “Blood is thicker than water but, mud is thicker than blood.” Something about this statement made me feel not only that same sense of sadness, but also the happiness that she found those that she could rely on. I hope that she is blessed with so many more in the future.

Strength

Reflecting on Patricia’s beliefs about strength and the “Strong Black Woman” stereotype, I found myself really conflicted. This process continues to show me that my ideas of strength and the Strong Black Woman stereotype are both different and similar to the mothers of this work. I noticed that while reading Patricia’s share, and as I read the other mothers’ shares, that strength takes on different meanings for each person. Like some of the other mothers, strength for Patricia was shown through her mother and other female relatives. However, for Patricia, being seen as strong seems to be something that she welcomes. She speaks about this “submissiveness” of
women for their husbands and how that submissiveness gets misunderstood and, that there is strength in real submissiveness. I found myself wondering for her why submissiveness gave her a sense of strength.

Patricia values her strength because it was something that she worked hard to achieve. Though she cannot identify being called strong in direct relation to mental health or motherhood concerns, hearing and reading about her sharing that her mother was “proud of her” seemed to reflect a recognition by her mother of the person she had become. I appreciated Patricia’s explanation that for her being a “Strong Black Woman,” meant being true to herself and removing the masks. I can acknowledge that it was easy for me to focus on the “mask” part of her share. However, I pushed myself out of my own interpretation and really listened when she shared that strength is walking in her own light and being free.
I- poem

I’m gonna need help
I was born in Norfolk, VA
I’ve been here since 2000
I’ve been here 20 years

I would say my first experience
I’mma say call it something wrong
I was working there
I went into her emergency room document
I read what was going on with her
I heard
I guess
I heard a voice
I’m
I'm not gonna
I only told one other person
I told my daughter
I don’t feel comfortable sharing

I also
I believe
I got um at the level
If I had more help in my marital situation
I
I was on my own with my family
I still believe
If I had have had more help

Nobody I could really trust
I had to work at night
I didn’t want my daughter around that too much
I wasn’t willing to trust anybody with my daughter
I couldn’t do it
I was totally just me
I did the best
I could
I did
I could
I had both of us had to go to work
I let this lady
I saw the day before
I have
I asked her
I mean at the time
I did it
I wasn’t really scared
I look back on it
I could have lost her that day

I’m not gonna
I’m
I was talking
I’m still
I’m
I’m 1000 miles away from home
I just have work associate
I find we can’t say anything
I’m still very lonely

Don’t say I can’t
I will
I work very hard
I’m relentless
I can't go to sleep until everything is taken care of
I can proceed
I was a captain of the majorette
I’ve always been two steps ahead
I had to be there on time
I
I did the routines
I choreographed
I went and got the corsets
I was young
Always I’ve been taking care of business

I find
I see things
I say
I don’t raise this sun in the morning
I tell
I tell
I keep going
I did her hair
I would either roll it
I had to drop her off
I had to drive
I did that
I drove that car
I got off
I was driving
I am
I would say
I loved it
I went through hell
I would call it just that
I say
I love it
I taught Esprit
I
I remember that
I can remember times
I would be at work
I signed her up for twirling camp
My lunch break I would go
I did that
I gotta say
I couldn’t find anyone to keep her

That voice that I heard
I had no one
I couldn’t understand why
I ain’t talking overnight
I’m talking
After I have a baby, no date
I’m saying
I don’t call it doing her
I
I didn’t even
I didn’t even exist
I can remember
I wrote
I even stopped listening to the radio
I would say
I’m astronomy buff
I suppose to had been an astronomer
I didn’t go
I was just so either disillusion
I even let didn’t even go out to see Halley’s comet
Now I’m outside looking

I didn’t slam my keys
I hate to say it’s something that is done intentionally
I did it
I went to Liberty Land
I got up
They would have been looking at me and the bus driver
I love her that much
I loved her that much
I took the time
I heard where babies strangled their self
I always say not mine
I love her that much
I also believe
I had came up in my mom’s house
I had a cadence going to see what she wanted

I think
I said it all
I say it can be heaven and it can be hell
I think the more you have you’re willing to go through
I believe that
I did a good job
With what I had
I believe
If I had more would have more support
I developed a mental health disorder
I still think it was the stress of being the breadwinner
I would develop that mental disorder
Sustained so long that I had to be the breadwinner
I believe impacted the most

I think
I’ve said that
I wanted you to know

I was a captain
I was in the ninth grade

I found out
I’m she is
I have
I believe
I’m holding her hand
I'm at my parents’ house
I’m holding her hand
I'm just holding her hand

I did
I did want two
I did
I wanted two
Things weren’t going right, I chose not to

I come up with the assumption

I loved him
I love my daughter
I had him 11 years
I wanted another one

I skipped over a lot
I just
I guess it’s just the camera making it that light

I believe
I say
I said
I didn’t start
I didn’t think it was gonna be like that
I ended up
I
If I had not did
I did
I had done things
I did
I did them
I had to do it
I wouldn’t be having an interview with you
I probably would be at work
I moved
I didn’t wait
I never did on nobody
I was young
I had
I accepted
I didn’t
I didn’t plan
I didn’t think it was gonna end up like that
I ain’t really
I just went on and did it
I was too good

I used to work at a daycare
She wished she had three of me
I just always did what was supposed to be done
I remember
I was working at the daycare
I caught him
I was the one that noticed
I went and stopped him
Audre’s Story

Having help can serve as a life changer. Audre shares that her first experience with “something [being] wrong,” was when her mother was sick in the hospital. She had septic shock. Audre knows this because HIPPA laws were a little different back then. She read her chart. Audre’s mother was her rock, it is hard being head of household, mother, and caregiver. She really could have used some help from her husband, “it probably wouldn’t have gotten to that level.” Help would have gone a long way. Audre was overwhelmed. She heard a voice, she wished not to share what it said, only her daughter knew. She was 33. The second time, she was 42. Audre held this on her own for 22 years.

Motherhood at times was hard. There were not a lot of people she trusted to watch her daughter, she had to work nights. Her daughter’s safety was her top priority. Leaving her with just anyone was not an option. She did not want her daughter exposed to things that might harm her. You must be careful with who you trust your children with, but she and her husband had to work. Her mother was sick, her father did not take care of kids, it was just the three of them. This was a lonely experience for Audre but, “every day the sun comes up and you gotta move.” So that is exactly what she did. Audre found a way to make it work. She let a neighbor watch her daughter, in hindsight, she would have made a different decision, “I could have lost her that day.”

Audre shares that she still experiences that loneliness, even today. She is 1000 miles away from home, her sister is sick, and her brother does his own thing. She has work associates but, those relationships can be conditional. Audre prides herself on being a hard worker, she is relentless. She reflects on her time as a majorette, she was the captain. Here she learned she always needed to be two steps ahead of everybody else. She had a great deal of responsibility
since she was young, “I’ve been taking care of business, you have to.” She shares that hard work transfers over to parenthood. To her, for every child you have, “you multiply how hard you will be working.” Motherhood is heavy and can come as a challenge. But, as she has shared before, she does not “raise the sun, it’s not going to stop. So, you have to do what you have to do.”

Motherhood required Audre to be flexible and resourceful. Bags were packed and hair was done the night before, her own rollers pulled out as she was walking out the door. These tactics helped the morning routine. With a 21-mile drive to work, this was necessary. Audre reflects on spending a great deal of time in the car and driving fast. You have to when you get off at 5 and pick up is at 6, she was trying to avoid the late fee. Audre loved motherhood but went through hell. She is proud of all her daughter has accomplished. She sacrificed so “Esprit” as she affectionally calls her, could read by age 5 and take part in twirling camp. She would use her lunch breaks to make sure her daughter got all the experiences she wished for her. Money did not get in the way of this desire. However, life for Audre was heaven and hell. Hell, when she could not find anyone to keep her daughter, when there was no time for dates with her husband anymore and, the voice she heard when her mother was sick.

Audre believes that life is about your children when you become a parent, “they are running the house.” She believes that oftentimes people think it is the parents but, it is in fact all about the children. Her experience was not any different. While raising her daughter, “I didn’t even exist.” She feels disconnected from those parent experiences logged on Facebook where pictures are shared of children wrapped in toilet paper, covered in peanut butter, or near walls covered in their art. For her, that is not acceptable. Audre has Mother’s Wit; therefore, that did not occur for her. Esprit was never away from her long enough to do that. Leaving a child alone that long, you stand the risk of losing them. Motherhood comes with making “tremendous
Audre made those sacrifices. She reflects on the book that she wrote that she stopped listening to the radio in 1991, even watching TV, when her daughter was a child. One of those sacrifices was missing Halley’s Comet, she is an astronomy buff. Mothering leaves you “pretty much nonexistent.”

Keeping her daughter safe was Audre’s top priority. She does not understand how people can leave their children in cars. For her, she did not close the door of her car until her daughter was standing next to her, she did that when Esprit was 13. Audre remembers serving as a chaperone on a trip to Liberty Land. She shares that she walked up and down the bus to make sure everyone was off, a child would not be left sleeping on the bus on her watch. That would have been her and bus drivers’ fault, “it’s about responsibility.” Audre shared that she loved her daughter so much, she took the time to make sure she was safe. Her daughter would not end up like those other babies that strangled themselves on blind pullers, “I always say not mine.”

Audre acknowledges that her type of mothering could be tiring but she loved her daughter so much. She also believes her experiences as a majorette captain set her up to be the mother that she is. It did not hurt that she was raised to value obedience. Audre believes that the more children you have, the more you are willing to go through. Her daughter is “lonely only,” she wanted two. A second child was not in the cards for her. Motherhood is not something you play with; you are responsible for somebody else’s life. Audre believes that being responsible for a child can be an easy thing to do. If you love that child that much. However, Audre is honest with herself. Although she did a good job mothering, if she had more support, her mental health would not have gotten to the level where she developed a mental health disorder. She believes the stress of being the breadwinner made it that she developed this disorder. Sustaining that position for so long is what she believes affected it the most.
Motherhood is “nothing to play with,” Audre cannot say that enough. She adds that in life, seasons change, people change, and love changes. She laughs and exclaims FREE! Audre’s daughter is an adult now. She reflects on Esprit’s childhood; she is proud of the woman she has become. Even as a child, she held her in high regard, “standing there like an aristocrat to me. I’m just holding her hand, making sure she don’t fall.” Audre shows a picture of a neighbor’s house where a man hung himself. She shares that she believes it was because he could not take care of his children. The house was paid for, it was his grandmother’s house; his aunt now lives there. At the time, this did not affect her. Now, she finds herself wondering why he might have done this. This reminds her of the book Beloved. The mother loved her daughter so much, she killed her. She could not imagine her child being exposed to the atrocities the world had waiting for her.

Esprit is Audre’s pride and joy, it seems like it has been the two of them for a while, “Round yon virgin mother and child, Daddy be damned,” she laughs. Audre shares that this is not an uncommon notion. At times it feels like it is just the mother and child(ren). Audre did not expect it to just be her and her daughter, but she realized she had to do what she had to do. She learned at an early age that sometimes you must grow apart from someone you care about. Audre accepted that she was too good, “Too good at home, too good in marriage, just too good.” She has always done what has needed to be done. In some spaces, her work is acknowledged and praised.

Audre questions whether she should have stayed in Virginia. She should have just stayed home. She shares that she was “giving try #3 out of 3000.” For her, the Bible says you are to forgive 70 by 7, she did “7000 by 7.” However, she was determined to put her daughter through college, even if it killed her. Esprit does not have siblings. Audre was determined that her daughter would be able to care for herself. Audre’s mother did not raise her to stay in the
Audre raised her daughter the same way. Audre shares that her mother taught her to “trust in the Lord and go ahead.” Audre’s mother did not necessarily say that about her marriage, she shares “she didn’t say don’t. Which I wish she had.” Audre mothers everyone, she cannot help it. She even found herself mothering me (Dorothy’e), she shares she would feel bad if something happened to me and she could have prevented it.

Audre is a writer. Her work has supplied her perspective on who she is today. Audre is not the type to turn her head when she sees something happening. She shares that now she must force herself to not say something when someone has wronged her. “Don’t say anything,” she repeats to herself. When she was younger, she would not say anything, she would stay silent. Now she chooses not to say anything, to walk away, this is for her.

**Strength**

When asked how strength was depicted for Audre growing up, she shared that she saw strength from the men in her family more than the women. She shares that her mother depicted strength but, for her the women did the cooking and cleaning and the men did the work. Although for her men showed strength, she remembers a Helen Reddy song she heard at age 10 called “I Am Woman,” that song meant a great deal to her. “I am woman, hear me roar. In numbers too big to ignore.” For Audre, this “set up me hearing that, that I was getting ready to step out. And I was gonna be, what she was saying.” Audre shares an interest in movies and suggests the first time she heard of Black women being described as strong might have been Cicely Tyson in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. For her, this was someone that might have shown strength when she was younger.
Audre shares that when she was younger, she did not see her older sister as strong. She was young and “innocently naïve" and did not understand her sister’s strength. Now she sees it. However, for her, outside of TV she did not see anyone, specifically a Black woman that exemplified strength. For Audre, the term Strong Black Woman stood for a woman who is innovative, like her. This type of woman does not take no for an answer, she is going to at least try. She is going to try more than once. This type of woman does not let things get her down, at least not for too long. A Strong Black Woman has things to take care of however, she is still nurturing and caring, and puts things in the right perspective, “that’s being strong.” This type of woman is accountable and consistent.

Audre has had experiences of being called strong or perceived as strong. Reflecting on when her mother was sick, her brother called her strong. However, this strength came at a cost, “Little did I know I was damaging myself at the time. Went up there to see my mom sick every day. It didn’t get me then, but it got me later.” She shares that before she knew what it would cost her, she embraced the strength her brother labeled her with having. Now she realizes that strength, that dedication to be by her mother’s side really cost her. In hindsight, she would have spent less time in the hospital, 21 days straight was just too much. Although her mother’s doctors never said anything to her, they knew it was too much, they shook their heads when they saw her. They said nothing. She continued to come. Audre shares that her mother’s hospitalization was a lonely time. Her sister visited every few days, her brother a little. She grieved for her mother a year before she passed, she grieved the year before last. She grieved at the 20-year mark. Every day she was there, she just wanted to know what was going on. She wanted her mother to “hurry up and get better.” She did not have patience. She wanted her mother out of the hospital, either well or passed on. She wished for this for 6 months.
When asked what she would want people to say about her, she jokes that this feels like she is writing her tombstone. She would want people to say that she is strong to a point. She is very loving, to a fault. Audre acknowledges that “we’re getting to this point where we’re trying to say that we’re not strong or we’ve been too strong.” For her, she believes she is strong, she is a superwoman. However, other days she is neither. Duality. She has finally come to the point where she can say she is not strong. Years ago, that was not an option. Now, it is mind over matter, “you have to think that in order to get through life.” Audre shares that moving away from that belief of strength came with not dwelling on it for too long, she just accepted it. She distinguishes that she is not a superwoman emotionally but, regarding will, tenacity, and perseverance, she is, cape and all.

*Womanist Witnessing and Reflection*

**Audre’s I-poem**

Audre’s I-voice reflects a woman that has carried a level of responsibility for quite some time. She begins her story discussing her mother’s illness and how it led to a life-changing incident. At the beginning of our time together, Audre shares that, “I’m gonna need you to help me along here.” The tone is one of nervousness and made me wonder what it was like for her to share her story, particularly portions that she had kept hidden from others. I was specifically drawn to the level of dedication Audre had towards her mother but, also the boundaries that we crossed due to that dedication, “I was working there were no HIPPA laws. And I went into her emergency room documents and I read what was going on with her.” I found myself wondering how lonely and overwhelming this experience was for her to take such drastic measures. I also wonder if this approach caused more hurt than help. What I noticed in her tone during this share was the loneliness. This loneliness was present not only in her caring for her mother but also in
her not being able or willing to share her experience of hearing the voice with anyone. I wondered if her I-voice also carried a sense of shame but, I could not decipher instances where that tone appeared again to say that for sure. Listening to Audre’s I-voice throughout the I-poem, there is this underlying pleading that I found myself experiencing. A pleading for help that did not come.

An interesting concept that I noticed with Audre’s I-voice was the way that she reflected her experience in a way that consistently led me back to the question of where her husband was. Audre speaks of her husband in a way that led me to assume he was hands off or absent, I also heard a tone of resentment, “If I had more help in my marital situation.” He makes appearances in her I-poem every so often but, he is never there long. Towards the end of the I-poem, he is gone. Remaining, was her and her daughter. She seemed happy about this. I noticed within myself a sense of sadness for Audre. She is resourceful and made things work when they seemed impossible. I found myself asking why no one will help her. Audre’s sense of responsibility is what drives her, but it does not stop the loneliness. For me, loneliness and even being alone was a tone that was too loud to ignore. I wondered how she did, was she even able to? Even, did this add to the stress she was already experiencing? This loneliness seems to go even further, it seeps into her romantic relationship and even her sense of self: “I had no one. I couldn’t understand why. I ain’t talking overnight. I’m talking. After I have a baby, no date. I’m saying. I don’t call it doing her. I. I didn’t even. I didn’t even exist.”

Listening for emotion, I found myself coming back to this I-voice of fear. The instances where that fear surfaced, I found myself asking what she was afraid of. Audre loves her daughter but, the question of the difference between love, fear, and overprotectiveness is a question that has been left unanswered for me. “I could have lost her that day.” “I didn’t slam my keys [up in
my car until she was standing beside me, and she was 13 years old.]” “[You gotta be looking at her and looking behind your shoulder at the same time it's done got so bad out there]. “I loved her that much that I took the time [to make sure that she was safe].” “I heard babies have strangled their self. I always say not mine.” These instances served as examples where I found myself wondering what her I-voice was trying to convey. Is it fear? Love? Overprotectiveness? No matter what the answer to this question might be, the bigger one that I found myself asking was how much did it cost her? Audre shared a desire to have another child but, conveyed “I think the more you have you’re willing to go through.” I acknowledge this might be an assumption but, I wonder if she would have been able to handle another child. Especially without the support she desperately wanted.

As mentioned previously, responsibility is an overarching I-voice within Audre’s I-poem. However, I noticed two of the three tones of responsibility were a little different. The first was a tone of responsibility, Audre speaks of doing what she must do: “If I had not did. I did. I had done things. I did. I did them. I had to do it. I wouldn’t be having an interview with you. I probably would be at work. I moved. I didn’t wait. I never did on nobody.” The second I-voice of responsibility seemed to carry with it a sense of disappointment: “I didn’t plan. I didn’t think it was gonna end up like that. I ain’t really. I just went on and did it. I was too good.” The last I-voice of responsibility reflected a responsibility when others are not: “I used to work at a daycare. She wished she had three of me. I just always did what was supposed to be done. I remember. I was working at the daycare. I caught him. I was the one that noticed. I went and stopped him.” The I-voice of responsibility is prevalent throughout Audre’s I-poem however, the slight changes in tone give a richer understanding of not only the sense of responsibility she felt but, also how that responsibility was present in various aspects of her life.
Lastly, I found myself really drawn to the way Audre’s I-voice reflected a sense of pride in her resourcefulness and her ability to mother against barriers: “Don’t say I can’t. I will. I work very hard. I’m relentless. I can't go to sleep until everything is taken care of. I can proceed.” However, what I was really interested in was the conflict between the pride in her I-voice and the pain that followed: “I am. I would say. I loved it. I went through hell. I would call it just that. I say. I love it. I taught Mushu.” “I think. I said it all. I say it can be heaven and it can be hell. I think the more you have you’re willing to go through. I believe that. I did a good job. With what I had.” I appreciated being able to see this conflict between pride and pain. This served to really connect to Audre’s story. Listening and reading it, it almost felt as if she was speaking to herself, convincing herself that hell was worth heaven.

**Audre’s story**

Listening and reading the beginning of Audre’s share, I can identify some nervousness. Reflecting on the reason, I think about how personal and distant Audre was at the beginning of our time together. She starts her share by talking about her mother being sick and her time in the hospital. She speaks about the lengths that she took to find out what was going on with her mother and the lack of support she felt during this time. She ends this part of her share by saying that she heard a voice but wished not to share what it said. Acknowledging her privacy, I respected her decision, but I know for me this feeling of tiptoeing around this significant event in her life seemed to be created in my mind. Something about this felt off-limits and I treated it as such. I now wonder if there was a way to ask her about this experience to understand it better. I also find myself wondering how she handled juggling motherhood and caretaking. She speaks about needing support and how that would have helped things not get so bad. I am curious how bad it really was for her. What was this time like for her? How did she get through?
Audre speaks about motherhood being hard at times. Limited by the people she could trust to take care of her daughter must have been a difficult experience for her. I was drawn to this image of an absent-present father. She speaks about her husband in the context of them both working but, the way she speaks about her experience I find myself asking where was he? Audre is very protective of her child; this is a theme that I saw throughout. On two to three occasions, she speaks about losing a child or her child. I keep coming back to these statements and wondered for her, was that a real fear. Specifically, a fear outside of the expected fear of a parent. Audre has experienced a life of responsibility, as a caretaker, as a mother, and even as a majorette. She speaks about hard work and how for her that transferred to motherhood. For her, that hard work multiplies for every child you have. I found myself wondering how she would have handled having more than one child. Would that have added to the stress she already experienced? Audre’s reference to the sun plays in my mind. It would not stop for her; would she be able to keep up?

Audre was a resourceful mother. She made things work. However, I find myself wondering what it cost her. She speaks about her life surrounding her child, mothering leaving you “pretty much nonexistent.” What about her? The way she spoke about motherhood, sacrifice seemed like a theme to me. I noticed some thoughts about judgment of other parents from Audre. She spoke about parents allowing their children to be alone long enough to find themselves in trouble, this would not be the case for her daughter. This led me to think of my own parents, what would she think of them when I got into a bag of flour? Or my mother’s powder perfume? Would she find it funny that my parents knew I was into something when I got quiet? I imagine she might disapprove but, this is an assumption I could be making. I acknowledge for myself some judgements arising between the line between protective and overprotective regarding her
daughter. The instance that stood out was the way she spoke about not closing her car door until her daughter was standing next to her, until she was 13. This brings me back to her speaking about something happening to her daughter. Again, I ask did something happen before? Or is she overly cautious? Am I just being judgmental? What I do know is, Audre loves her daughter.

Lack of support is a prevalent theme throughout her share. It is also one I find myself continually coming back to. Audre shares again that support from her husband may have helped decrease the stress she experienced. Potentially, it may have prevented or decreased the impact her mental health had on her. I find myself wondering outside of financial support, what would that support from him look like? However, she also speaks of being free of him, that people, seasons, and love change. This makes me wonder what their dynamic was really like. Did he add more stress? Was the dissolution of that relationship a good thing overall? “Round yon virgin mother and child, Daddy be damned,” seems like a good indicator that it might have been but, did her laughter cover pain? She seemed to come back to the relationship more times than she would have wished. What did she hope for each time she returned?

Audre shared about a neighbor who killed himself because, she believes he could not care for his children. She adds her perspective on the book *Beloved*. I found myself wondering why she shared this information with me. What did she want me to know because of this? Was it just anecdotal? I highlighted in her summary Audre’s mothering spreading past her daughter, to me. I found the way that she cared for me before, during and after the interview heartwarming. The way she cared not only reflected what she willingly shared with me but, it also created this protectiveness of her. I am protective of all my participants but, something about the way she cared for me, I wanted to make sure I could return to her, as well.
Protectiveness showed up at the end of listening to her share. I noticed I was struggling with making the decision of adding parts of our time together. I was torn between content over context. I made the decision to keep part of her share private between her and me for two reasons. First, because it felt like our private conversation. And, secondly, I wonder how she would feel seeing this private conversation made public. I felt that it did not add to her story and could have done damage including it rather than excluding it. If my intention is to truly use a womanist way of working with these mothers, that includes in it an act of care. A care of them and a care about how I depict their story for others.

**Strength**

Reading and listening to Audre’s depiction of strength, I found myself surprised in how she discussed viewing strength. I can acknowledge that I may have expected her to “fall in line” with some of the other mothers discussing seeing strength depicted by mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. This was not her experience. I appreciate how her understanding reflects the diversity of experiences, but if I am being honest, I did struggle with her response. I think hearing and reading her say that she has not experienced strength from women and could not originally identify a Black woman that showed strength was a little jarring for me. I found myself wanting to know what changed for Audre to see her sister as strong. She mentioned that she was naïve growing up but realized it later in life. This made me wonder if something happened that she was naïve to that as an adult she sees the strength in.

Honestly, I found myself a little surprised that when she spoke about what a Strong Black Woman represented, she spoke of herself. I can acknowledge that this surprise may have been centered around the way she did not readily name any of the women of her family as strong and, could only identify fictionalize characters. This led me to the possibility that I assumed that she
would not name herself. I found myself really drawn to Audre’s share about being called or perceived as strong by those around her when her mother was sick. I noticed within me a great deal of sadness towards her. Throughout portions of her share, I felt this overwhelming sense of loneliness. Numerous questions for her emerged as well. What must this have been like for you? How did you deal or not deal with loneliness, stress, being overwhelmed? What was it like for you to watch these doctors shake their head at you? What was it like to think you knew what they were thinking about you? How did you handle caring for your mother and daughter at the same time? I wonder now for her; how do you rectify all that you lost and what you inevitably gained because of caring so deeply for your mother?

I really appreciate hearing Audre speak about the duality between strength and being a superwoman and not having or being either. Even her willfulness to go against the “grain” to say there is a movement away from strength but, I am moving towards it. Hearing and reading that time has allowed her to move away from being strong all the time, it was refreshing to hear. I would love to know for Audre what being a superwoman emotionally means and what it potentially costs but, I also notice a happiness within myself that she does not hold that label.
ALICE
I-poem
I don’t have
I don’t really remember
I have a stroke
I thought
I thought
I
I don’t quite remember
I thought
I didn’t know
I was
I didn’t know
I

I’m
I grew up
I’m
I’m
I don’t even
I grew up
I have a twin sister
I had
I’m very
I don’t wanna say Bible toting
I should
I’m the only
I’m the only one
I don’t
I wanted to test the water
I was too scared
I would go to hell
I truly believe that
I
I truly believe
I guess
I was the only one

I had
I was growing up
I always
I was growing up
I
I was ashamed of my body
Not that I supposed to been
Make you like
You piece of meat
I’ll be in the alley
I will cover up
I have a winter coat
I mean from 12 to 18
I got married at 21
I got older
Probably where I got started getting sick

I mean
I was a nervous wreck
I
I loved school
I hated school at the same time
My childhood was just taken from me

You have to
You just put on
I guess
I wasn’t
I wasn’t strong as Janice
I’ve never been as strong
I’m not going to lie about it
Much stronger than I was
I could not take it

I was fearful
I’m still fearful
I’m fearful now
I’m
I’m still fearful
I
I was driving
I
I see situation
I know situations
I done lived it
I know what to look for
I know how people look
I have been through it all my life
It’s with you
It’s with you
It’s with you

I tell you
I
I mean
I’ve known
I’m
I guess
I
I didn’t date much
I mean
I guess
I
I’m telling you
I hope and pray
I tell him
I wouldn’t even be looking for nobody else
I don’t have to look

I’m looking
I got
I’m reading
I’m
I’m reading
I
I had all those issues
I have
The fears that I have
I remember
I was
I would rise early
I mean to teach them
I would
I’m still doing
I
I take pride in that

I know that they love me
I know that
I do
I’m not perfect
I know they love me
I know they won’t harm me
I know that they would protect me
I know that they protect me
I know they’ll build a wall
I didn’t mean to get like this
I didn’t know we would be going places

I love talking
I love talking about my family
I love talking about my family
I got a husband, daughter, and son
I just love them to death
I
I love putting on parties for them
I have a daughter
I wanna talk
I got a daughter
I
my heart just flows for her
I mean
I’m telling you
She had left her dad and I way behind
I’m like tooting
I tooted
I tell the world
I tell the world
I mean
I’m gonna
I’m already planning
What I’m gonna do
I mean it
I’m so proud
I’m sitting here
I’m praying
I’m praying for her good man
I mean anybody touch that girl
I’ll snatch
I can’t say that on TV
Saying I’m trying to hurt somebody
I’m gonna do something to them
I’m gonna
I’mma do something

I didn’t want him to a mama’s boy
That’s my heart
He is my heart
I don’t understand
I keep praying for him
I think

I’ll tell
I have
I think
I know
I think
I believe
That’s Carl and I’s prayer

I better not talk about that big man
I can talk about him forever

I’m sorry
I just
I mean
I talk third person they don’t understand

I’m not gonna play with you
I’mma snatch a knot
I
I remember
I think
I say
I mean
I didn’t do with my kids
I didn’t want to do no baby talk
I talk
I expected them to be adults be responsible
I thought
I did
I continue
I always made sure

I
I was like let’s party
I did
I just celebrate the person

I
I celebrated the person
I just celebrated the person
I
I don’t remember
I
I only remember
I had on
I think
I had on
I think

I thought
I’m thinking
I mean
I am saying
I had homeschooled
I didn’t know
I didn’t know
I had been homeschooling
I finally
I mean
I went to many
I remember
I’m gonna
I
give
I’m saying
I know
I used to
I would see
I learn
I give
I mean

I’m trying
I know
I
I know
I found
Did I answer your question
I guess
I hate to
I don’t wanna
I
I’ll give
I don’t know
I don’t know
I was
I mean
I mean

I hope you get what you’re looking for

I mean
I’m hoping that life is better
I
I was oppressed for a long time
I’m
I don’t want
I’m saying
I was oppressed for a long time
I don’t wanna say the wrong thing

I’m serious
I think
I think
I shared that
I just
I’m not doing that anymore
I used to
I used to worry about
I got to the point
I prayed about it
I’m not worried
I was already feeling bad about myself
I got to the point
I said
I became overconfident
I could laugh out loud
I was internalizing a lot of stuff
I would just laugh out loud

I end up with the love for the Lord and myself
I found out how He loved me
How precious I was to Him
I was
I was a royal priesthood of the King

I can call all these names of Jesus
I know
I know who
I belong to
Whose I belong to
I know
Who I am
I know what my position is
I

I remember
I was 30
I mean
I was
I
I can’t remember how many months pregnant
I think that’s when she stayed with us
I don’t
I might get two different incidents
I do have two different incidents
I might
I might have two
I got two
I got two different incidents mixed up
I might be confusing
I’m gonna talk anyway
I’m gonna talk about my experience
I
I
I remember
I remember two things
I remember is the most traumatic one

I somehow
I don’t understand
I supposed to been
I suppose to be
I wasn’t the one
I was the one that one
I got up here
I’m pregnant
I get up there
I supposed to be there
I said
I’m getting out of here
I don’t know
I saw
I said
I’m
I ain’t gonna lose my baby
I was fine
I just did
I just
I just left
I come and get her car
I get her car
That’s what flipped me out
That flipped me out

I had given her, it was confidential
I didn’t know she was driving around
That flipped me over
I mean
I went completely berserk
I mean
I remember
I prayed about it
I’m gonna have to cut her loose
I did this
I wasn’t feeling
I was sick
I
I can’t remember
I
I wasn’t completely feeling well myself
I wasn’t completely feeling well myself

I don’t know
I don’t know what happened
I know
I remember beating on the table
I don’t know
If I told her to get out
Leave me alone
Knowing that she was strong to me
I think she’s sometimes take advantage
I
I don’t know
If I told her she had to go
She said I put her out
She say I put her out
I probably did
I don’t remember
I know
I must have said get out
I remember beating on the table
I don’t know
What I said
She said I put her out
I am concerned
I don’t care
I don’t know what happened
I
I don’t know what went down
I don’t know
I don’t think
I remember
I don’t know
I don’t know
If I told her to get out
I don’t know
I don’t remember
I don’t
She claimed I put her out
I just said
I miss you

I even
I mean
I feel
I miss you guys
I miss you
I just
I miss you all
And it pulls me down
I just pray
I pray

I mean
I
I am
I am
I do
I do miss you guys
I really do
I guess
I love you all so much
I mean
I love you all
I mean
I really love you all
That’s why I put so much
I give parties
I put so much
I want to show
How much I love you

LOL!

I don’t remember
I did
I faced that to Washington DC
I go
I go laugh out loud
I had
I was in a clinical study
I had an allergic reaction
I got the medical records
I tried
I faced
I faced it
I faxed it to the Washington DC Health Department
I called myself faxing
I faxed it
I faxed it

When you got a mental condition
People tell you lies
Not to help you
To make you look bad
You gotta see
Who trying to help you
Who trying to make you look bad
I faxed those papers I faxed it
I after
I faxed it
They made me look stupid
I had some kind of mental issue complete mental craziness
But somebody told me to do that
It already scarred my name
Guess what I did
I never use them
You always
Once you get some kind of mental illness
On your name
You look like you’re crazy
I say bipolar is a diagnosis
Not who I am
On you
On your medical records
Try to make that who you are

I just
I’m not getting mad
I has to grow
I didn’t
I didn’t learn it immediately
I was stuck in stupid
I
I was stuck in stupid for a long time
I say stuck in stupid
I thought
I could change something
I thought
I could change something
You can’t change something
When the odds against you
I’m
I’m not the only person in mental health that probably feel that way

I don’t remember
I mean
I
I probably
I don’t know
I’m crying
I don’t remember

I mean you want to talk about them
I mean
I am saying
All I can do is just address it
I am sure

I did
I
I did
Best I could
I
I
I know
I didn’t do
I did
I tried to
I
I didn’t do
I probably couldn’t afford somethings
I did the way
I could
I made sure
I could do
I did have some mishaps

I do remember
I
I apologize for that
I hurt my feelings
I had my baby waiting
I think
I had you wait
I thank God for her
I hope you don’t hold that against me
Please forgive me

I was on medication
I was on the other side of the parking lot
I didn’t go nowhere
I
I would just sit on the parking lot and sleep
I didn’t wanna be late
I was late anyway
I said
I slept
I didn’t want to be late
I would sleep there all day
I was still late
I would sleep in the car
I would get somewhere
I knew it was safe
I knew not to go back home
I got back home
I would get in the bed
I wouldn’t have made it
I would have had to try to get on the highway
Medicine made me a zombie
I couldn’t do nothing for you, or him, or nobody
I could take the medicine
Sad that I would be there all day sleeping
I got there
I mean at the parking lot
I remember you sitting there
I was right there
I was right in the parking lot
I would stay there all day
So, I wouldn’t miss my babies
I my biggest fear is that they would tell me
I had to leave the parking lot
I’m sure they had a camera
I
I sat there every day, all day long
I’m sure they did
I’m surprised
I didn’t go to the bathroom
I couldn’t do that now
I’d pee on myself
How do you think I got there so quickly
I was already there

I tell
I always thought that they were gonna take you
I always thought that they were gonna take him
Because I had Bipolar
I always felt that they were gonna take my kids
I
I just prayed
Let me get him to like 18
Let me get them until 18
I prayed that
I got you
They said I couldn’t have more kids
I almost kissed the doctor
I named
I named
I put
I will name
Cause I had Bipolar
I just prayed
Let me keep them until 18
I don’t know why
I thought they gonna take my babies

I don’t know
Just the center of my focus
I just continue to pray
I guess
I don’t know
I just prayed
Not like I was doing anything
I couldn’t
I
I have to discipline
If I discipline
I was like
I had to
I had to stop
That’s why I stopped

I had to treat you
I couldn’t treat him
I had to remember
I had to
I had to kind of get that hand of approach
I didn’t want
I didn’t want
I’m saying
I had to kind of like step back
I had to kind of like completely take my hands off
I didn’t want

I had
I had
I say
I didn’t allow
I had
I found out
I was
I belonged to
I am
I was so fearful about what people said
I didn’t love myself back then
I didn’t know
Who I was
I was
Who I belong to
I had those other issues
I didn’t love my body
Now I love me some me
I love everything about me
I love me

I got congestive heart failure
I got diabetes
I mean
I’m dying
I’m dying
I got congestive heart failure
I mean
I may die tomorrow
I might have another stroke
I mean
My health is failing me
I
I know
Where I’m headed
If I were to die tomorrow
I know that
Heaven I will go
I will see Jesus
I will meet him in not the air
Cause I would die
I would
I will meet him in the air
I’m not gonna meet him
I would
I would
I should see Jesus
I should get a new body
I’m
I’m not gonna lie to you
I’d be happy
I
done told
I’d rather go before him
I don’t think
I’d be able to make it
I don’t think
I’d be able to do it
I wanna go before him
I don’t think
I can
don’t think
I can do this
don’t think
can be here
I’m praying
go before him
can’t
mean
can’t
can’t even turn that light off
can't even lift
mean
can't get around
don’t
done lived a good life
have seen both my kids
don’t
don’t wanna be here
don’t
done lived my life
wish you guys well
I’m not gonna knock myself off
I’m saying is if the Lord would call me home
I know you didn’t like that
Don’t make me cry
Make me cry
Make me wanna stay with you

I understand
Taking me places don’t need to be going
I mean
I mean
I’m
I
I’ll

I have to say
I feel like
I done cleansed myself
I feel empty
I mean
I feel like
I gotta empty a burden load
I feel light
I feel like
I emptied
Alice’s Story.

Alice does not remember all her story the way she once did. She had a stroke and so some things she just does not remember. Alice grew up in a family of seven siblings, she is a twin. Growing up, her parents instilled in her Christian values that she still holds dear to this day. She does not want to call herself a “Bible totter,” but the fear of God was placed on her and her siblings. She jokes maybe just her; she is the only one of her siblings that waited until marriage to have sex. Alice was not willing to risk going to hell to test the waters, she wanted to, she was just too scared.

Inside Alice’s home, she was loved and protected. The outside world was a little less kind. Growing up, Alice shared that her biggest fear was being raped. Walking to school or even her neighborhood was not the safest experience. Alice remembers the voices of the men yelling at her as she walked by, the “wine heads” sitting on the corner, “talking crazy. Talking about what they gonna do, how they gonna rape you and stuff.” Her brother walking her and her twin to school did not make a difference, men would bear him up. Alice reflects on how this fear caused her to wear winter coats in 100-degree weather, it made her a nervous wreck. She loved school and hated it at the same time. It was a nightmare. Her whole childhood was taken from her. Alice believes she was not as strong as her twin, she could handle it, Alice could not. Her twin could handle it, she could not. Nowhere truly felt self for Alice, she shares a family friend tried to rape her in her own house. Alice is thankful for her father; he was a protector of her and her sister. He made sure the men that worked with him never harmed Alice. He packed a pistol and was not afraid to use it. It did not, however, stop the eyes that undressed her as she walked by. Alice was ashamed of her body. She did not tell anyone until she was 18. She tried to fix it
on her own. She was fearful as a child; she is fearful now 50 years later. Alice is aware now of what to look for, she knows when someone is up to no good, she has been through it all her life.

Alice loves her husband. She did not date much growing up, but she knows the mold was broken when God made him, he was a true southern gentleman. She prays her daughter marries a guy like him, no one can really compare. She knows that if he were to die, she would never remarry. His shoes are too big for anyone else to ever fill. Alice shares that she is reading a book called *Woman of Strength*. She shares this book because, it depicts a Proverb 31 woman. Alice is proud that she embodies the characteristic of this type of woman. “She is clothed with strength and dignity, and laugh without fear of the future,” plays in her head. When she was dealing with “all those issues” she would take pride in the way she cared for her family. She acknowledged that her strength came from God, and it really made a difference. Alice knows that she has been good to her family, and they will be good to her. They will protect her from evil, they keep her strong, they build a wall and keep out the things that might try to harm her. She is loved.

Alice smiles brightly and shares that she loves talking about her family. She has a husband, a daughter, and a son. "I just love them to death.” Alice’s love for them is overwhelming. She is so proud of each of them, and loves finding ways to celebrate them, “I just celebrate the person.” Alice loves how close her family is, she knows when her and her husband pass her children will be okay, “they would take care of each other.” Alice loved both of her children and was dedicated to their education. She homeschooled both from 3 years old until kindergarten. Alice acknowledges that having children and mental health issues required her to surround herself with people that motivated, encourage, and enhanced her. She knew that people that did not do this could “wear on your psyche and bring you completely down.” These types of people make and keep you unstable.
Alice reflects on the difficulties she has had in some family relationships. She acknowledges that some of these experiences weighed heavily on her and caused her to experience depression. She found herself feeling oppressed for a long time, confined by these relationships that would take a toll on her and the way she felt about herself. For Alice, she realized that she had to give these worries over to God. She knew only He could fix them. He did not let her down. Now, she looks back on these instances and where she once internalized them, she now laughs. She shares that once she realized how much God loved her, how precious she was to Him, that He was the Deliver, a Wonderful Counselor, and the Good Shepherd, she began to look at herself differently. Alice acts differently now in the face of adversity because she knows who she belongs to.

Alice shares two incidents that stand out to her regarding her mental health. Each instance involved her twin sister. Both Alice and her sister have had their own struggles with mental health: at times it has impacted their relationship. Alice remembers being pregnant with her son, when she received a call from the bank stating her sister was “there acting crazy.” Alice came to get her, but her sister was hospitalized. Alice went to visit her sister. Her sister told the doctors Alice belonged there not her. Alice knew she had to separate herself from her sister. She had a baby to protect. Alice shared what “flipped her out” was finding her confidential information in the back seat of her sister’s car. Alice was not feeling well herself, this made it worse. Alice does not remember much more about this experience; she just remembers beating on a table. Her sister tells her she put her out. Alice had to pray to have the strength to cut her sister loose. That is all she remembers; she shares her family fills in the blanks. Something about slamming fingers in car doors and crying. She does not remember. She just remembers she missed her sister.
Alice shares that having a mental health condition makes you vulnerable to people “lying about you and making you look stupid.” She now looks at those moments and laughs, it was not funny when it happened. Her name was scarred. Alice’s experience has taught her that people will see a diagnosis on your medical records and try to make that “who you are.” For her, she refuses to let Bipolar define her, she knows it is just a diagnosis. Alice knows she is not the only person with mental health concerns that has felt the pressure having the odds against you can cause.

Alice acknowledges the impact her mental health has had on her and her daughter. She asks if her daughter can join the interview, she wants her daughter to know her story. Alice wonders if her daughter holds any of her mistakes against her. If she does, Alice asks for forgiveness for the mistakes that she has made. Alice reflects on those mistakes, the one that stands out for her was picking up her daughter late from school. She still remembers her daughter sitting there, waiting for Alice to arrive. She was hurt that she left her baby waiting. She shares that her medication at the time made her sleep a lot. It made her a zombie; her husband did not like it. She could not do anything for him or their daughter. Alice shares her fear of forgetting to pick up her daughter at school, her fear was so prominent, she would sleep in the parking lot all day just to be on time. She was still late.

Alice shares her biggest fear as a mother was that her children would be taken from her. Alice was a good mother, but she feared they would be taken away because of her Bipolar. Alice would pray that God would let her keep her babies until they were 18. She really thought they would take them away. Alice acknowledges that this thought was the center of her focus, she just continued to pray and walk on eggshells. Alice felt like she was “under microscope” as a mom, and if she did anything wrong, even discipline her children they would claim she was hurting
them, that she was crazy. She was not a mother raising her children, she was a Bipolar person with kids. She really feared they would take her babies.

Alice has lived a good life. She is proud of how far she has come. She loves herself fully, “from the crown of my head to the tip of my toes.” Alice loves her family, she loves life. However, her health has declined, and she knows that she will not be here forever. She shares with her daughter that she is happy with the life that she has lived, she has watched her children grow and has loved and been loved fully. When God calls her home, it will be well with her soul.

**Strength**

Growing up, strength was represented by Alice’s mother. Alice acknowledges that her father was a strong man, but her mother “handled stuff.” For her, strength was represented in the way her mother reflected the characteristics of a Proverbs 31 woman. Her mother rose in the morning, she cooked from scratch, she rang the necks of the chicken her family ate, she sewed their clothes, she worked the field, she provided for the homeless, and fed everyone that walked through her door. She was not a selfish woman. All she had, she shared with others. Alice shares that she never heard people describe Black women as strong, but her mother showed her strength by doing. Alice shares that sometimes the term Strong Black Woman is used by women that use cussing, hollering, and screaming and stuff” to show their strength, but to her that is not a strong woman. That is a weak woman. A strong woman can be gentle in her speech she can be soft spoken and still be strong.

For Alice, being a Strong Black Woman is a woman that can be both gentle and firm. She does not have to cuss to get her point across. This type of woman takes care of her family. She rises early, she pays the bills, and serves as a helpmate to her husband. She does not overpower him. She can be both strong and know her place. Alice cannot remember being called strong by
family members, friends, or doctors when experiencing difficulties with motherhood or mental health, but she considers herself to be a Strong Black Woman. She considers this term to be a positive term but acknowledges that it depends on how it is used. She reflects again on the difference between a woman that “goes around cussing folks out and talking crazy” and a strong Black woman who is “gentle and soft spoken.”

Alice would introduce herself as a loving, kind, and independent person. Her independence is centered in her actions as a Christian. She is strong and powerful, meaning she knows how to act and when to act. She knows when to step down and when to step up, when to speak and when not to speak. Most importantly, she prays before doing everything. Alice shares that there was a time where she would be concerned about what people would say about her. Today, she does not really care. She shares that it does not matter what people say, as long as “they spell my name right.” Alice now knows that she cannot put weight on the perception of other people, because you cannot stop them from saying things about you, but you can stop it from being true. For her, she believes that she has the power to stop the bad things people say about her from being true. As, far as the good things, she thanks God for those good things. Alice keeps it simple, for her, the most important thing that she wants people to see in her is that she is Christ-like.

*Womanist Witnessing and Reflection*

**Alice’s I-poem**

Listening to Alice’s I-voice, throughout her I-poem there is a tone of uncertainty. Reading her I-poem, I counted over 30 instances of Alice suggesting “I don’t/didn't know”, “I don’t/didn't remember.” At the beginning of her share, Alice informed me that she had had a stroke and her memory had been impacted by this. Alice’s voice seemed sad or potentially
fearful that she might be asked to share her story and might not remember it. I noticed within myself a sense of sadness for Alice and wondered what it must feel like for her to question her ability as a historian of her own life.

Alice shares that her childhood was impacted by a constant fear of being raped. Listening to her I-voice, I was really drawn to her tone of fear, but also her shift from 1st person I to second person You when detailing how the men spoke to her, “make you like. You piece of meat.” I found myself wondering how dehumanizing that experience was for her, but also how much of a stark difference in the way she sees herself now. This made me wonder what her journey was like from “I was ashamed of my body” to later when she shares “I love me some me.” Alice tearfully shares that these experiences were a nightmare, “My whole childhood was taken from me.” Alice I-voice not only reflected the pain that these experiences caused, but also reflected a sense of being weak in comparison to her sister, “I wasn’t as strong as strong as Janice, and I’ve never been as strong as Janice.” I wondered for her what was it like to compare her level of strength to her sister, and what about the way her sister handled these experiences that made her stronger than Alice? Lastly, Alice I-voice reflects a sense of continued fear, “I was fearful. I’m still fearful.” I am curious of how Alice made sense of that fear. I also wonder if that fear showed up in the way she raised her own daughter.

Listening to Alice’s I-voice, the voice that seemed to be the loudest was love. Alice loves her family, and her family loves her. Listening to Alice’s I-voice it seems clear that she views their love as a protector for her. “I know that they would protect me from all evil.” I found myself wondering what that must feel like for Alice to feel protected in a way she might not have felt growing up. Even with Alice’s acknowledgement that, “I’m not perfect,” she knows that her family will protect her. I felt a deep sense of happiness that Alice had a family that loved and
protected her. As much as Alice’s loves her family, her love for God is undeniable. Alice I-voice throughout the I-poem reflects a level of peace, safety, and understanding through her development of her relationship with God. She shares that “I was oppressed for a long time,” but adds that through prayer and “I found out how He loved me” and “I know what, I know, I know who I belongs to and whose I belong to. I know who I am.” This understanding shows up throughout Alice’s I-poem as not only how she is able to persevere when life is rough, but also as this source of consuming love that was beautiful to witness.

Alice’s I-voice in relation to her experience being a mother and experiencing mental health difficulties created within myself not only a sense of sadness, but also connection to her. Alice shares two instances regarding her mental health that she identified as traumatic. As I mentioned previously, Alice use of “I don’t/didn’t know” or I don’t/didn’t/can’t remember was prevalent within her I-poem. For me, I noticed these instances more frequently when she was speaking about her mental health and the impact her sister had on it. Alice struggles to remember aspects of her story. When she shares those parts of her story she cannot remember, the struggle between trying to remember and trying to understand feels present, “I don’t know. If I told her she had to go. She said I put her out. She say I put her out. I probably did. I don’t remember. I know. I must have said get out. I remember beating on the table. I don’t know. What I said. She said I put her out.” Alice returns to this tone of uncertainty and continues to share that she does not know what happened. For myself, I noticed in her voice a sense of being lost, but more importantly a sense of sadness regarding the loss of her sister. Alice adds at the end of the share, “I miss you,” regarding her sister and occasionally her family. I found myself coming back to what that must have been like for her to have to let her sister go for her own health and the safety of her child.
Listening to Alice’s I-voice, I heard a great deal of mistrust towards doctors and individuals in the medical field. I wondered what that must have been like for her to have experiences where people stopped seeing her as a person, and just as her diagnosis. I also noticed a feeling of anger arise for me regarding hoops that Alice voice reflects going through regarding her medical record, just for it to lead to her name being scarred. Reflected in Alice’s own voice, this made me wonder how many other people have been hurt by the providers that have taken the oath to protect them, to do no harm. Alice I-voice reflects a sense of regret and sadness when she speaks about being late to pick up her daughter. I found myself particularly drawn to her concern of whether her daughter still held this against her, and if she did, her hope that she would forgive her. I found myself experiencing a sense of sadness and a hope that her daughter had forgiven Alice.

Alice is at peace with the life she has lived. However, listening to her I-voice, there seems to be a conflict between her peace and her desire to live a longer life. Listening to Alice I-voice, three stood out. First, there is the voice that says, "I can’t” this one reflects a desire to not only not outlive her husband, but also reflects on her limitations in life that would make outliving him more difficult. The second voice “I’ve done” reflects the sense of peace I noticed within Alice as she speaks of dying. The last voice shifts to the use of me and is directed at her daughter who became upset as her mother shared this with her. The last voice really drew me in. For me, this voice held the conflict between peace and a desire to live. I believe Alice wishes to be alive for all that life has to offer, but her health seems to limit the time she has left. I wonder for her, what is that like to know there are life events she may miss? What was it like to watch her daughter cry? And how did she get to this place of peace? Experiencing this portion of her share,
washed over an immense amount of sadness. Sadness that continued to feel overwhelming 
listening to Alice’s I-voice, reading her I-poem, and reflecting on our time together.

Alice’s story

Alice is full of life, she laughs loudly, and smiles brightly. Alice invited me into her life 
and story with openness and warmth that created a sense of connection to her that I continue to 
feel. Alice depiction of her early life, and constant fear of being raped was difficult not only to 
hear, but to sit with. I found myself wondering how lonely those experiences must have been. I 
think that sense of loneliness increased thinking about the way Alice depicts her sister as being 
better equipped to handle these experiences. Alice holds onto that lack of strength compared to 
her sister throughout her share, and I wonder what that must have been like to live a life thinking 
she was weaker than her twin sister.

Alice’s life seems so full of love, she smiles fully when speaking of her family, she is full 
of conviction when she speaks about God and, laughs at her experiences in the past that could 
have broken her. Reflecting on Alice’s share, love was a prevalent theme throughout our time 
together. Love for her family shows up in the way that she cares for them. She reflects on a 
Proverbs 31 woman, and shares that she embodies these characteristics similar to her mother. 
Her realization of God’s love for her broke the chains of oppression she felt in her relationships 
and molded her sense of self she values today. Alice’s love also came with fear. Alice’s biggest 
fear was potentially losing her children. Love is Alice’s driving force. For myself, I was in awe 
of the level of love Alice gives and has received. I thought about all the instances that she shared 
that could have potentially created anger, resentment, and sadness for her, but she now laughs at 
these experiences, they have no hold on her.
Alice has lived a full life, a life that brings her immense pride. This experience with Alice felt different from some of my other shares, because of the presence of her daughter. Alice’s openness to share with me, her openness to invite her daughter, and her willingness to sit in her pain, and name her mistakes was an experience that was overwhelming to witness. Alice crossed “interviewer/interviewee barrier” in such a way that created for me a transformative shift that I cannot thank her enough for allowing me to experience. Her words, her tears, and her laughter, I will carry with me forever.

**Strength**

Listening to Alice’s depiction of strength, I found myself reflecting on the qualities that she identified in her mother and how some of those same characteristics she highlighted within herself. I found myself wondering if Alice desired to model her mother’s traits in her own life. Alice’s relates the characteristics of the Proverb 31 woman in her share and in her depiction of strength, it is apparent that Alice values and lives her life with this image in mind. I wonder if that depiction of a woman has always been a depiction of comfort or if it ever felt difficult to obtain. I noticed that Alice has some clear ideas of what she thinks a Strong Black Woman is and is not. Listening to the way that Alice spoke about women that choose to cuss, yell, or “act crazy,” I wonder if there is a judgement towards women who do not fall in line with her ideal of how Black women should act. Noticing how many times Alice comes back to this example of what she deems a “weak woman,” I found it hard to not question this as a judgement rather than just a statement or comparison.

As much as I appreciate Alice’s depiction of being a strong Black woman, I did find myself having some reactions in her depiction of the role of the woman in her partnership. Alice’s depiction clearly reflects her belief in the male being “head of household,” and as I was
raised to believe this as well, I noticed this did not bother me so much as her saying, “She can be both strong and know her place.” As much as I understand what Alice means, and do not really have any significant issue with her beliefs, I noticed for myself “know her place” felt difficult to digest. For some reason, I found it restrictive and confining. I wonder for her has she ever felt that, particularly when she did not agree with her husband but wanted to respect her role as help mate.

Alice’s faith is the center of who she is. Her unrelenting faith is one of the things I love most about her. I found myself envious of Alice when she spoke about how she came to this place where she no longer cares what others say about her. In the same light, I was also so happy to hear the level of freedom in her voice when she spoke about not putting weight on others’ words. Alice has a level of confidence that has taken her time to build, but it is evident in the way that she speaks about herself being strong, powerful, and most importantly Christ-like.
Tired.

Being a mom means putting away childish ways to make room for your child's ways.

NOPE.  AWKWARD.

How can I be your lover when I'm too busy being your mother?

One question. Do you need someone or do you need me?

Adulthood is like looking both ways before you cross the street and then getting hit by an airplane.
I just turned 37
I have two boys, one biologically mine, one my nephew
I had two sisters left
My dad, I know him
I’m not close
I would
I have a stepfather
I was three
I have my mom’s current husband
I have three brothers
I don’t talk
I don’t know their ages
I mean my mom

I moved back to Memphis
I don’t
I know
I don’t know him
I don’t
I don’t know him
I know my sister
I met him
I was living
I
I didn’t
I lived here
I thought it would
I know his mom
I know my sister
I think
I had my own
When I was it happened

I don’t
I did end up going to Lakeside
I felt like
I looked at my children
I didn’t see happiness
I didn’t see like what they need me for
I’m not mentally stable enough to have them
I wasn’t taking care of myself
I was like
I never get if you’re not happy, they’re not happy
I never
I didn’t see that
I saw
I’m this young 20 something year old mom
I didn’t care about myself
I mean
I tried to commit suicide twice
I swallowed a lot of pills
Now I know they were the wrong ones
She didn’t care that I was feeling that way
Am I allowed to curse
I was working for the casino
I was working really late
I was like ok
I’m going to veer into
I’m saying like this oncoming traffic
I’m gonna go

I had to work
I had a new baby
I had another baby
I had to get a job
I’m saying
I wouldn’t let them in
I figured well, if she died, we all maybe ok

I didn’t stay
I lied my way out of there
I was alright
I just had a moment
I could look at my children
I didn’t see it
I didn’t care
I just
I didn’t want to do it anymore
I felt like my family wasn’t here to support me
I was just over there suffering

I feel like
I was weak
I’m very very disappointed in myself
I’m drowning in public view
I’m kind of glad
I did go through that
I needed to see how nobody had my back
I look at myself
I had a really really weak moment
I have to sit here and remember
I know how that felt
I’m not proud of it
I’m not proud of thinking
I’d be cool
I was going to be the one responsible for that
I realized it wouldn’t be easy for me
I realized that wouldn’t have been the answer
I didn’t know any better
I didn’t care
I just wanted life to stop
I wanted all the noise to be gone

I guess
I think
I could have went about another way
I know now
I feel mentally
I feel like
I could have had a different approach
I mean
I don’t want to take from the experience
I had or
The feelings I had
I am
Who I am now
I just feel like
I just had
I just felt weak
I don’t
I don’t know
I just
I probably could have done it differently
I guess

I don’t feel like
I’m extremely mentally strong
I know
I’m mentally strong to be their mom
I know that now
I don’t feel like
I was back then
I don’t know
I feel like
I don’t

I have my struggles
I'm a lot stronger
I would say that
I don’t know about physically
Mentally I’m a lot stronger
I feel like
I’m good enough to be their mom
I deserve them
I didn’t see that
I didn’t
I didn’t feel like they needed me
I felt like they needed somebody else
I was gonna risk burning in hell

I'm okay now
I will say that
I have my days
I had my moments
I'm gonna feel so bad
I miss her to death
I was able to be a great mom

She was my twin and I her
I'm not only talking look wise
I’m not encouraging single motherhood
I’m saying
I want to be her
I wanted to make sure my children never miss a beat

I could be his mom
I tried
I raised him
I am not
I am his mother

I don’t know
I’m not even gonna lie
I honestly don’t know
Him and I have the same questions
I have
I know his mom
I knew his mom
I struggle with that
I tried to make it about me

What am I doing wrong
What do I have to prove
I'm your mom
I don't get it
I'm not gonna give up on him
I'm not gonna turn him away
I think
I struggle with now
I don't think he feels it

I can't blame him
I cannot blame him
I remember
Dumbest thing I have ever said to my child
I don't know
I hauled off
I didn't know what else to say
I don't know
I
I don't know
I struggle with that
I don't struggle with my mom's death
I just struggle with trying to make him feel comfortable
I didn't give birth to you
All I can say

I feel like it's not fair
I'm not selfish
I'm trying to learn
I'm drained
I'm just defeated

I try not to say
I try my best not to make it about me
I know
I'd be hiding under this house
I just
I just try not to make that about me
I
I don't know
I don't want it to be about me
I would rather focus on him
I
I can tap into it
I do
I gonna be mentally fried

I don't know
I just
I'd rather focus on him
I say
I feel when
I feel like when
I feel
I'm focusing on myself
I had her longer
I don’t care if she gave birth
I had her longer
I feel like
I say
I would say
I'm not saying
I would say that to him
I ever tried to shift the energy to me
I would feel like
I'm taking
I think
I was like why
I was like
I had no right to take that from him
I had my mom
I had

I said
I try not to focus
I don’t think
I learned the hard way
I'm not okay
I try
I tried to put him first
I've had my days
I'm old enough
I was old enough to know
I not gonna see my sister anymore
I knew he had a long journey
I just had no idea
I just kind of thought
I know
I wasn’t his mom
I'm just his auntie
I explained

I have to try to put him first
I'm trying
I'm still so sensitive
I feel like his matters more
I had my days
I'm thankful for the 26 years
I did have
I was
I don’t know
I just thought he deserves more attention
Than I do

I don’t
I don’t like
I look at a picture
I think about something
I quickly shut it off
I don’t mind being emotional
I don’t like it
I don’t like that vulnerable part
I would like to be transparent
I possibly can
I feel like
I feel like we are put on this pedestal
I don’t think
I’ve had my breaking point
I feel like there’s a lot
I want to kind of keep
I
I don’t know

I feel like
I could handle it myself
I feel
I started writing in a journal
I get upset
I’ll try to write
I go back and read
I asked myself

I listen
I don’t got it
I won't take my own advice
I'm
I try
I'm not gonna
I feel like
I can do that when they’re grown and married
I'm never going to stop being their mom
I can relax
I don’t give a damn about nothing

I don’t
I don’t know
I don’t want to be
I’m
I just feel like
I’m happy
I’m having the worst day
I’m probably gonna be cool afterwards

I think
I think
I’m not there for her
I’m trying to learn
I took all her issues
I helped her
I’m glad
What am I gonna do
I do give it to somebody
I feel great
I lay down at night
Who am I supposed to give it to
I told
I told her
I did
I get drained
I know
I actually just learned
I hate that
I had to learn
I’ve learned
I had to back up from certain things
I abandoned her
I wasn’t a real friend
I couldn’t understand
I didn’t know
I’ve been there
I’m the devil
I
I don’t
I don’t know
I don’t know
I’m learning boundaries
I don’t know
I wanna
I’ve never had a moment
I’m saying
I’m going
I have a motto
I am trying
I only
I’m gonna have my moment
I’m like
I need those moments
I’m in the Zen
I’m learning how to turn it off
I turn it off
I go back
I renege on myself
I fold on myself
I feel bad
I’m ignoring you to take care of me

I have a song
I seem cold
I’m just being selfish
I’m on hold
I need to be cruel to be kind
I have to be cruel to you to be kind to me
I gotta be mean to you
I mean to be good to me
I’m cool with that
I’m not okay
I’m not gonna be a bitch
I’m not gonna be rude
I have to put myself first and protect myself
I’m struggling with her
I’m struggling with my twin
I was like
I don’t want deal
I don’t have to do this drama
I don’t accept your apology
I wouldn’t accept that apology
I didn’t see a reason
I know you didn’t mean it

I’m trying to learn the whole selfish thing
I have abandoned them
I’m protecting myself
I don’t get that
I wish
I had the nuts and backbone
I hate that I had to go down
I had to be selfish
I had to be selfish in order to save me

I
I got a little more firm
Why am I still taking care of you
I couldn’t financially take care of her
I got older
I realized this house ain’t big enough for all of us
I literally had to bite the bullet
I cried that day
I moved
I was leaving her behind
Best decision I’ve ever made
I’ve made
I went to cut the umbilical cord
I feel like
I abandoned her

I did what
I’m supposed to do
I look at it
I did what
I was supposed to do
I go
I still struggle
I feel like
I don’t have regrets with her
I
I don’t
I didn’t have regrets with her
I just
I feel like
I’m proud of the daughter
I was to her
I feel
I feel okay
I really had to sit back
I think about
I did more
I
I get them all right
I ace the test
I don’t know
I guess the choice
I made were the right one
I was the one who signed
I did that
I feel
I feel
Did I make the right decision
I go back
I did
I needed to do
I’m supposed to
I needed to
I did what
I should have done
I’m not sure
I did what
I needed to do
I understood the assignment

I’m being a real brat
I’m doing
I feel
I guess
Am I supposed to scream
I’m thinking
I signed my mom life away

I think about
I’ve looked at the paper
I understand all the words
I could make a sentence
I don’t
I wouldn’t
I wouldn’t have
I was giving up on her
I was like no
I wouldn’t have given it to anybody else
I wouldn’t have
I was one who was always there
I was the who was taking care of her
I definitely
I wouldn’t have given that responsibility to anybody else

I didn’t mind
I didn’t mind
I kind of figured
I was part of the two she could count on
I didn’t think that was fair
I didn’t have a choice
I didn’t want it
I just didn’t have a choice
I probably
I probably
I’m glad she gave it to me
I that means she trust me

I'm proud
I'm proud of that
I'm proud of that
I'm really proud of that
I'm not gonna
I'm not about to be the one
I pulled the short straw
I wouldn’t want it at all
I would have definitely passed the torch
I feel good knowing that she trusted me
I only
I got like that after my sister passed
I was the only one she worried about
I never understood
I'm so helpless
I was
I was always the one under her thumb
I was always the one under wing
I was a little baby bird
I have
I don’t know
I'm saying
I don’t
I don’t think
I said
I was part of the two
I kind of had to adapt
Took me longer than I would like

I don’t know
I don’t know me yet
I don’t know
I probably
I found out
I was
I don’t know me yet
I know as a mother
I know as a daughter
I know friend
I know as a wife
I don’t know Layli
I don’t know me yet
I write those letter
I do
I'm actually surprised
I might write
I gotta go back
I'm saying
I don’t really know
I don’t know me yet
I don’t know me
I am 60 still trying
I’m
I really think my mom
I gotta take care of everybody else
I can say that’s her fault
I folded on myself
I learned that hard
I didn’t like me
I gain weight, losing hair
I would
I'm single
I have to date me
I have to get to know me all over again
I'm still trying to be mom, friend
I just don't know how to be

I didn’t even do that for me
I did it because my mom
I could do it
I felt like
I couldn’t do it
I was in school
I missed some days
I did that for me
I did that mainly to tell her
I'm saying
I can't do this
I'm gonna show you
I can't do this
I was
I
I was living with her
I didn’t have my own car
I was driving her car
I couldn’t drive her car to school
I took some tax money
I would go
I get my own car
I’m really proud of that
I feel like
I did that for all of them
I didn’t even do that for them
I did that because of her
I did because of her
I was getting tears
I wasn’t happy
I was like help me
I couldn’t do it
I graduated
I remember
I knew you could do it
I’m proud of that moment

I'm so tired of crying
I got married
I don’t blame her
I got
I went through with him
I don’t fault her for nothing
I don’t
She asked me was I okay
I told
I was like
I'm fine
I wasn’t fine
I didn’t want
I wasn’t fine
I wasn’t happy
I was extremely unhappy
I didn’t want to put that on her
I still didn’t want to
I would wish she was there
I look at the picture

I think she knew
I could do better
I was doing
I didn’t put my best foot forward
I didn’t have the best apartment
I think
I had the best heart of all

I'm just saying
Everything that I have done
I've always told her
I was gonna have
I don’t have her
I don’t wanna hear
I hear from people
I need her to tell me that
I'm sorry
I'm sorry
I don’t know
I look at a lot of stuff
I've done
I mean a lot of things
I have done yet
I look at my kids
I hate that
How okay I am

I moved out
I told her couldn’t
I didn’t like
I didn’t
I needed her to change
I understand now
I was sick
I was so mean
I didn’t
I don’t wanna be around anybody
I hate that
I kept from her
I still felt like it wasn’t gonna be good enough
I feel like she would have been happy for me
I sit on the porch
I rock

I say mentally, it’s still a struggle
I question everything
I probably should be so happy
Why can't I be selfish
I feel like
I did this for me
I did it
I don't want to smear it in her face
I also want her to be here
I don't
I just
I don't
I don't know
If I would be okay
I live with my sister being gone
My mom, I'm sorry
I didn't realize
I felt that way
I enjoy
I can
I want
I never really looked
I'm missing

I always told her
I did it
I still feel
I told my sister
I was gonna buy a third chair
I am going to sit
I always told her
I'm raising
I could have
I don't have a reason

I don't
I don't
I didn't want to hurt his feelings
I got married  
I wasn’t in love  
I loved him  
I didn’t love him enough to marry him  
I did anyways  
I wanted him to be okay  
I didn’t want to do that  
I did  
I did everything for him  
I got  
I wanna be everybody superwoman  
They’re all my kryptonite  
I wanna save you  
Y’all can’t touch me  
You make me weak

I just feel  
I can't bring anybody  
I even  
I mean like in my life  
I can't open my door  
I feel like everybody needs support  
I don’t  
I don’t have it  
I don’t think  
I don’t know  
I feel like  
I’m actually glad  
I need that reminder

I don’t care how much  
I talk to therapist  
Medication I take  
I am responsible for my own happiness  
I'm putting it in your hands  
I'm saying  
I have to do this  
I'm glad  
I had that really screwed up marriage  
I have to do this for me  
I have to pull myself out of that dark spot  
I really  
I don't have  
I mean  
I still have the kids  
I
I feel
I needed
I know
I’m not
I’m saying
I’m gonna focus on myself
I never stop focusing on me
I don’t care
I got 15 husbands
I’m
I didn’t
I was focused on me
I maintained
I was able to do it
I got extra mouth
I gotta bigger house
I just
I never
I never
I never
I never do that again
I said
I know
I just
I don’t
I won't be my mom in that light

I’m so emotional
I go from crying
I feel
I like
I could go from crying to laughing
I try to laugh to keep from crying
I'm just a ball of emotions

I'm tired
I'm just tired
I'm just tired
I just
I want a break
I want to say these words
I’m tired of being a mom
I’m tired of being human
I'm tired of being a sister
I'm just
I'm tired of just being man
I'm just tired

I unplug
I don’t mean
I just kind of check out from life
I got
I have to
I'm
I'm learning
I kind of replenish
I won't answer the phone
I won't respond
I just
I just am

I struggle
I want
I want
I don’t want
I want
I struggle
I feel
I look at my kids
I want to be memorable
I just want to be average
I wanna be both
I don’t know
I wanna be
I want them to remember me
I don’t know
I picked up
I struggle
I wanted
I wanna be average friend
I think
I make
I'm gonna definitely be a memorable one
I
I think the impact
I think that’s what make
I look at the impact

I feel like
I used to always
I think
I might have said
I think
I think
I know
I don’t want anybody to need me
I’m okay

I look
I picked
I'm
I don’t need
I want my matching puzzle piece
I don’t have to have somebody
I want my puzzle piece
I wish
I
I look at it
I’m gonna be one to make myself happy
I am my person
I don’t need them
I would like
I would like my person
I don’t want
I’m learning how to be that girl
I say no
I mean
I don’t have to say no
I don’t
I’m learning how to that’s the whole being selfish thing
I don’t

I kind of
I’m
I
I think
I
I've never
I'm
I’m witness to a lot
I think that’s extremely important to put your crap aside

I have more awkward moments
I'm enough
I’m too damn much
I
I have more of those what the F moments
I'm too damn much
I
I have more of those what the F moments
Then I need to have
I don’t like the physical person
I have become
I never look
I never see
I need it
I go
I gotta walk past
I don’t even look in the mirror
I feel like
I don’t like the physical me
Layli’s Story

“Family is what you created,” the words of Layli’s mom play in her head. This advice has helped her mother her own children. Layli is the mother of two boys, one her biological son, the other, her nephew. Balancing the grief of the loss of her sister and mothering her son was hard, it was also a “no brainer.” Her youngest is his own person, he was an easy baby, but finding her sister’s traits in him have been hard, she loves him regardless. He has started to ask questions about his “heavenly mom” that no one can answer. He will only know what others tell him. Layli knows this is an ache she will never be able to heal.

Layli learned quickly that motherhood required her to be selfless. Grief takes a backseat when you must provide proof of death to feed your child. The Salvation Army and her sister’s job was a God send, “they made it easy when he became like four months ‘cause the first few months of his life was extremely difficult, like we were all over the place.” A week after her sister’s funeral, the reality of the situation really hit. She had a baby, her own was four, her mother was on dialysis, and there was no real tribe in sight. Tearfully she shares, “that’s actually when things got really rough.” Layli ended up going to Lakeside (inpatient psychiatric hospital). Layli looked at her children and did not see happiness, what did they need her for? She was not taking care of herself, she was not “mentally stable enough to have them,” “they deserved better,” “I didn’t feel like they need me. I felt like they needed somebody else.” For Layli, she was willing to “risk burning in hell to make sure that they had a happy life with somebody else.” With these thoughts running through her head, Layli tried to commit suicide. Twice. Her first attempt was through taking pills, she now knows these were the wrong kind. What hurts is that it seemed like her mother did not care. As long as she was taken care of, she did not care how Layli was struggling. The second time, she had decided to veer her car into oncoming traffic.
Layli did not feel like she had her family's support. They had their own lives. They could not see her suffering, she was “drowning in public view,” and no one seemed to care. Her friends cared; they could tell something was wrong one day. Thank God they knew where the spare set of keys were. They came in and helped Layli’s mother, her sugar had dropped. Layli is not proud of this moment, but she thought life might have been a little easier. She had a dark moment. She just wanted “life to stop. I wanted all the noise to be gone.” Now, with her mother gone, Layli realizes that life would not have been easier. She agreed to go to Lakeside, but she did not stay. She “lied her way out of there.” She told them she was “alright,” she “just had a moment.” Now, she sees a reason to be here, she just has to look at her children. She knows that she could have handled things differently. But these experiences also molded her into who she is now.

Balancing mental health and motherhood has been a struggle for Layli. She does not always feel mentally strong for certain things, but she is mentally strong to be a mom. Believing this has taken time. She now knows that she is good enough to be their mom. They deserve that and she deserves them. Layli still has her days. Days that are not so easy. She misses her mom. She feels bad saying this, but life is a little easier. Caring for her mother required her son to grow up fast. Her oldest knew how to check his grandmother’s sugar, blood pressure, and knew all her medications by age 5. Life may be a little easier, but her “twin’s” presence is still felt. Her mother gave her daughters so much love and attention, she never missed a beat. Layli wants her sons to feel that same kind of love.

Layli is still “sensitive” about the fact that her sister is not here, but she must put her son first. Her sister died in her sleep. Layli got the one thing Alex will never have, time. Layli thought she had time to tell him. When he got older, she would tell him about his mother. When he was two, his father told him his mother was his aunt. Telling a two-year-old he has an “earthly
mother,” and a “heavenly mother” went easier than Layli expected. Alex said “okay” and went about his business. Now he is asking questions, questions Layli cannot answer. Layli is learning to mother him in a way that honors the mother he will never meet, her picture is everywhere, her face he will know. However, this took time. He asked to celebrate her birthday one year. Layli did not handle it the way she had wished. She realized she had no right to take that from him. His journey will be different from his brother, Layli learned to adjust.

Adjusting did not come without its own pain. Layli asked herself what she was doing wrong. How could she prove to her son that she was his mom? She knows that right now, he does not understand, but this makes her feel broken. She does not blame him for wanting his mom, she understands. She wants hers. She does not want to make it about herself. But she is struggling. He looks at her like she is his mom, but she does not think he feels it. She just wants him to be comfortable. She wants him to know that he is loved. That he is hers. Layli shares that she wishes that she could be more transparent about how difficult motherhood can be. However, she feels that moms, specifically Black moms, are put on a pedestal where they are expected to be strong. No matter what happens. She feels that she is not allowed to break, but over time “a lot of shit just built up.” Now, she is just trying to “keep the dragon in the dungeon,” because she knows if it is unleashed, it would be terrible. Layli uses journaling to prevent this unleashing. She knows that one day, she will be able to really put herself first, when her boys are grown and married.

Layli is learning to be “selfish,” but this is hard. She never wants anyone to think she abandoned them; she is just trying to protect herself. She had to learn to be selfish with her mom, “I had to be selfish in order to save me.” Unfortunately, her mother did not always see it that way.” Moving away from her mother was the best decision she made. However, it did not stop
her from feeling like she abandoned her. She now understands she did what she had to do. Layli
did everything she was supposed to do as a daughter, even when she had to take her mother off
life support. Her mother knew she could handle the responsibility. She trusted her to make the
right decision. Layli felt that responsibility was “dumped” on her lap, “it’s not fair, but life is not
fair.” She just had to learn to adapt.

Layli knows who she is as a mother, daughter, and a friend, but she is still trying to figure
out who she is. She writes letters to herself and is often surprised by what she learns in the
process. Layli looks back at some of her accomplishments. She realizes that she did them for
someone else, her mother. She just wanted to show her mom she could do it. She just wanted her
to be proud of her. Layli does not fault her mother for anything, she knows her mother just
worried about her. She asked Layli was she okay the day she died. Layli has accomplished so
much since her mother passed. She finally got that house with the porch her mom always
wanted. There is a rocking chair with her mother’s name on it. She wishes her mother had gotten
a chance to see it. Mentally, Layli knows she is still struggling. She feels like so much has
happened and it feels like “it’s just kicking me back down.” But it has not taken her to that “dark
place.” She knows she should be happy. She has a bigger house, a nice yard, but it all seems
pointless. There is no one to sit and drink coffee with, no one to take too much time in the
bathroom, or force her to watch soap operas she does not want to watch. She shares that she got
to decorate her house the way she wanted, but that house is missing the doorknob. The doorknob
is her mother.

Layli shares that she is “so emotional.” She can go from crying, to experiencing love, to
anger, to feeling silly. She considers herself to be a ball of emotions, and it seems like there is no
ending to it. She acknowledges that she is tired. Her body is tired, her mind is tired, she is just

258
tired. She just wants a break. Sometimes she finds herself tired of being a mom, tired of being a human, tired of being a sister or friend. She is just tired of being. Layli replenishes herself when the tired gets to be too much by unplugging. She is starting to learn the importance of “me time.” Layli wants to be remembered. She wants to be a memorable mom and friend, even if she is just “average.” She believes being memorable is more about the impact that you leave. Layli has learned through experiences that you cannot plan life. Sometimes you are walking across the street, and you get hit by an airplane. Layli knows she is a work in progress. She is not satisfied with who she is just yet, but one day, she will be able to turn the mirror around in her room. One day she will like the person looking back at her.

**Strength**

For Layli, strength was depicted by her mother. Layli’s mother “fought a hell of a battle in her life.” Growing up, Layli saw her mother “fighting always to get back to her girls and picking up like she never left off.” For her, this represented strength. As Layli got older, that strength she saw in her mother sometimes reflected a sense of failure within herself. She was not as mentally strong. It is hard to compete with someone that never displayed weakness. Layli questions if she shows her sons too much, “why am I showing them my weakness when my Mama never did that to us.” Her mom did not share with her children well, Layli does. She believes that although her mother was, she is honest with her sons, too honest. However, for her, she believes that life has limitations, and you cannot always do everything. She has not failed at being honest with them about the reality of life.

Layli has been called strong by many people; she has been through a lot. The first time Layli can remember Black women being described as strong was when she got sick in 2009.
Layli had a blood clot in her lung and was fighting for her life. She had to come back to her children. She did, in full strength. Her aunt told her that “we’re strong Black women in this family.” For her, her aunts’ definition of strong was not correct. She was not a body builder, what made her strong? She really did not understand what her aunt meant when she said this. As she got older, she realized that she did not like that term. That term feels heavy. It suggests that she must be strong, that she cannot have any weaknesses. “You know we have to fight for our families. We have to take care of the kids.” For Layli, Black women deserve to just stop and breathe. Being a Strong Black Woman comes with this idea that she must assume this role 24/7, she suggests a six-month vacation twice a year instead. Being called a Strong Black Woman for Layli means an expectation that she does not cry, that she does not have her moments and, if she does, she’s had a “mental breakdown or she belongs in the crazy house.” However, for her, she questions why she must meet the expectations she did not ask for; that someone else labeled her as embodying. Layli does not appreciate the pressure that term adds onto her, and expectation to live up to it.

Balancing motherhood, mental and physical health has affected Layli. For her, being called strong while the “world was caving in” did not have the impact her doctor intended for it to have. Layli had a stroke and a blood clot in her brain, her doctor called her a “strong woman.” He completely missed the mark. In her mind, “everything was falling apart.” Being called a “strong woman” was not a conversation piece. It did not “hype me up.” That phrase meant nothing to her. For Layli, she did not want this label, she wanted help. “You’re so strong, like no, I don’t need to hear that. I need help. Like people feel like they can end the sentence with it. Yeah, when you get done talking. When you get done not complaining, but you get done voicing your opinion about how you feeling. Oh, but you’re so strong. Like I don’t yeah. I hear that
you're stronger than you think. Yeah, well how do you know how strong I think I am? So yeah, I don’t like it.”

When asked how Layli would introduce herself to the world, she shares she would not. She might be willing if she knew who she was. Layli says she is a “free hug sign.” She would not share that she is a woman that has been through trauma and is surviving, because she does not want anybody to see that side of her. Engaging in this share is an act of vulnerability and transparency that she does not like to show. If she showed this side of herself, people would think they had the right to say she was a “strong woman,” but they have no idea what it took for her to get to where she is now. She is not even sure if she is where she wants to be yet, or if she will ever get there. She calls herself a free hug sign, because she is trying to get out of her own way to be open to people, but not their “dump site.” She is working towards becoming an open person with healthy boundaries, she just needs to learn how to set them up first. Layli would want people to say that she did her best. She would not want them to say she is a Strong Black Woman or even a great mom, she is not sure what a great mom is. All she would want is for people to say that she did her best in motherhood, friendships, and relationships. She did her best.

**Womanist Witnessing and Reflection**

**Layli’s I-poem**

Reading and listening to Layli’s I-voice, there is a sense of responsibility that appears present throughout the I-poem. Her I-voice introduces itself with an understanding of doing what must be done, “[The day my sister passed] I moved back to Memphis. [That baby needs a mom].” Layli speaks about it being a “no-brainer” to get him, but her I-voice reflects an unfamiliarity not only with her son’s father, “I don’t know him. I know my sister.” But, also with her son, “I know his mom. I know my sister [he has none of her traits. Well, he has a few].” Her
I-voice highlights this balance between doing what is expected, embracing what feels unfamiliar, and being overwhelmed, “[very difficult taking care of a new baby and my mom and “I had my own” [there was no tribe].” Listening to Layli’s I-voice, that overwhelmed tone seems to shift into hopelessness, as she begins to cry and share “I looked at my children. I didn’t see happiness. I didn’t see like [what they needed me for].” I noticed very briefly a shift towards potentially shame when Layli shares that she tried to kill herself, “I swallowed a lot of pills.” Layli laughs and shares that “now I know they were the wrong ones.” That shame seems to reappear when she reflects on “I had a really really weak moment,” in reference to her friends finding her letting her mother potentially slip into a diabetic coma. Within myself, I noticed a sense of heaviness navigating Layli’s I-voice at the beginning of the share. Her voice is full of responsibility for others, but responsibility for self seems absent.

Layli’s I-voice makes it clear that her priority is making her youngest son feel comfortable. It also reflects the toll “proving” to him she was his mom has had on her. However, I noticed this battle between Layli’s I-voice that emphasizes the importance of putting him first, “I’d rather focus on him.” And the desire to silence her own grief, “I try my best to not make it about me.” This battle between the two appears often in Layli’s I-poem. Layli’s I-voice is loud in its emphasis on why she must not “make it about me.” “I had my mom,” “I knew his mom,” “I feel it’s not fair.” Layli’s I-voice uses these instances to justify why she must not make it about herself, when she too is grieving the loss of her sister. However, there is one moment where her I-voice seems to push back, but this moment is quickly silenced, “I had her longer. I don’t care if she gave birth. I had her longer. I feel like. I say. I would say like. I’m not saying, I would say that to him ‘cause no, but if I ever tried to shift energy to me that’s how I would feel like.” This emergence of this honest voice was refreshing, but I wonder for Layli what it must feel like to
know that it exists and speaking it might hurt her son. An I-voice that I noticed was missing from Layli’s share was the one towards her oldest son. She speaks about him on occasion through her share, but it seems as if it is always paired with her youngest. The only instance I can recall of her I-voice speaking of him alone was regarding the responsibilities he took on as a small child. I wonder what Layli’s I-voice would reflect about how her experience has affected him if there had been space for it to speak.

I really appreciate being able to watch the way Layli’s I-voice evolved over her share about the way she spoke about herself. At the beginning of Layli’s share, her I-voice labeled her as “not mentally stable,” “weak,” “I didn’t feel like they needed me.” As her share continues, there begins to be a shift from not being mentally stable to acknowledging mental strength in some areas and not so much in others. She labels herself as “I am good enough,” she shares that “I deserve them.” I found myself wondering what her journey to changing the way she viewed herself looked like. Does she still find herself slipping back into those old ways of speaking of herself or does she no longer believe them to be true?

For me, Layli’s I-voice in reference to her mother seemed the loudest throughout her share. There always seemed to be this underlying struggle between caring for her mother and doing what was best for herself. Layli speaks about deciding to move out of her mother’s home. She shares that “I realized this house ain’t big enough for all of us. I literally had to bite the bullet. I cried that day. I moved. I was leaving her behind. Best decision I’ve ever made. I’ve made. I went to cut the umbilical cord.” Listening to Layli’s I-voice, the struggle between doing what is best for her and feeling like she abandoned her mother was potent. I wondered how long it must have taken her to build up the courage to take that step. Even as Layli takes a step towards putting herself first, her voice reflects on being pulled back into caring for her mother
and what it cost her. Layli is the last living two of her mother’s “responsible” daughters and is
given the responsibility to take her mother off life support. Layli’s I-voice highlights the struggle
between pride that her mother chose her, and the pressure of having this responsibility “dumped”
in her lap. "I'm proud. I'm proud of that. I'm proud of that. I'm really proud of that. I'm not gonna.
I'm not about to be the one. I pulled the short straw. I wouldn’t want it at all. I would have
definitely passed the torch. I feel good knowing that she trusted me.”

Listening to Layli’s I-voice, it is clear how important her relationship with her mother is
to her. For myself, I was particularly drawn to and became emotional in the share and while
listening to Layli speak about her mother, now that she is gone. Layli’s I-voice reflects a level of
longing that is hard to ignore and heart wrenching to listen to. Layli wants her mother to be
proud of her. Her mother worried about her, “I was the only one she worried about. I never
understood. I'm so helpless. I was. I was always the one under her thumb. I was always the one
under wing. I was a little baby bird.” Layli has accomplished all and more than she had expected,
but her mom is not here to see that. “I wish you could see me now. I always tell our kids. I got
the rocking chair. I don’t have her. I want her to be so proud of me. I want her to know. I'm
doing my best.” Listening to Layli’s voice speak about wishing her mother could see where she
is now, I noticed tears welling in my eyes. I cried thinking about the rocking chair her mother
would never sit in.

**Layli’s Story**

Listening to Layli’s share, themes of responsibility and selflessness were prevalent. Layli
shares that she learned quickly that motherhood would require a level of selflessness from her.
She shares that her sister died in her sleep and left behind a newborn son. Layli speaks about it
being a “no-brainer” that she would not only take him but uproot her life and move back to
Memphis. Layli was one of three living sisters, but she speaks about this experience as it was expected of her to assume this role, everyone else had their own lives. A question I found myself asking listening to her share and throughout our time together was when would be her time to grieve? Layli’s share about her transitions into being a mother of two and a caretaker of her mother has a tone of aloneness and uncertainty. Layli is forced to find ways to feed her child and jump through hoops to make sure he has what he needs. As she shares this experience, I found myself wondering where was her family? Where was her tribe? Why did her journey seem so lonely?

Listening to Layli share about not seeing happiness when she looked at her kids, and believing they deserved better, I could feel not only the overwhelming sense of loneliness but also a sense of being lost and uncertain. I think hearing Layli share that she was willing to risk “burning in hell” for her children to make sure they lived a happy life reflected two things for me. First, the level of love that Layli had for her children, and secondly, the level of hopelessness Layli felt and the uncertainty she had as a mother. What must it have felt like for her to think she could not mother her children the way they deserved? This led me back to the question of where was her family? How could they not see that she needed help? But I also find myself wondering was this an instance that she suffered in silence? I noticed for myself when Layli was sharing about her watching her mother’s blood sugar dropping and contemplating life being easier if she was gone. I thought about how someone might judge Layli, call her selfish for her decision. For me, I noticed that this only amplified the tone of hopelessness I noticed previously. It is also highlighted how overwhelmed Layli was that she would make a decision that she now knows would not have made her life easier.
Throughout Layli’s share, I noticed a care for, a softness towards, and a deep connection to Layli. As her share continued, I noticed that those reactions increased. Layli speaks about struggling with proving to her son that she is his mom. She speaks about this being the aspect of her life that causes the most distress. I cannot imagine what that is like to have raised her son from an infant but feel the disconnect of him not feeling like she is his mom. I found myself also wondering if these experiences increased the grief that she felt I wonder if she thinks about how much easier his and her life would be if her sister was still here. I wonder if this brings back those unanswered questions of why did she had to die? And is she mothering him, right? And, if she were doing it right, he would not be searching for something else. Layli’s shares about her relationship with her youngest son highlighted those themes of selflessness for me. I found myself wondering if she has ever gotten the chance to grieve her sister. I wondered if there was space for her. Layli explains this selflessness by suggesting she had time with her sister. I find myself questioning if she believes she is not allowed to have that space or take that space as that would suggest she is selfish and reflects poorly on her as a mother.

Layli shares about the expectations that are imposed on Black mothers to be strong no matter what. Layli’s imagery of a pedestal put into perspective for me this sense of unattainability of this expectation. Layli speaks about trying to “keep the dragon in the dungeon.” For some reason, this combination of being placed on a pedestal and keeping a dragon at bay brought on a feeling of tiredness in me that I wonder if she feels. It all feels too much. Thinking about Layli, I have this image of her body being pulled in different directions, stretching her way too thin.

Being a witness to Layli’s share brought with it an immense amount of compassion and connection. I could feel her pain, her sadness, and tiredness. I could feel how hard she was
trying, and the ways in which she thought she was not “getting it right.” However, like my time with her, listening to Layli’s share brought me to tears, an experience I only had with one other mother. Layli speaks about her relationship with her mother, and it is a story of connection and disconnection, similarities and differences, love and “we didn’t like each other.” Layl’s mother set the groundwork for the type of mother Layli wanted and did not want to be. She speaks of achievement, and a desire for her mother to be proud of her. Layli has accomplished the goals that she has set for herself, and the one person she wants to share that with is gone. Even writing this, I found myself tearing up, because that lost and wanting was so potent in her story, her words, and voice. The longing of her mother was heartbreaking, it was painful, and in that moment, in this moment, all I could do was listen. I noticed within myself a longing for my own mama, my “twin” as Layli, calls her mother. Who, near to Layli’s depiction of her and her mother’s relationship are too similar for our own good. I acknowledge the pain I felt imaging navigating a world where she was not here, and finishing this sentence felt like a feat I was not ready to conquer. I tried to fathom what it must be like for Layli to juggle so many pieces of herself. The pieces that are not here, the pieces that tell her she is not enough, the pieces that say her children deserve better, the pieces in search of who she is, and the pieces that are just tired. 

I found myself rooting for Layli to become “selfish.” She speaks about how hard that concept can be for her, that it requires her to potentially abandon others for herself. Internally, I was yelling “do it!” Layli wants to leave an impact. She wants to be a memorable mom and friend. I know for me; she was someone I would never forget.

Strength

Layli’s depiction of strength reflects the conflict she experiences within herself of who she thinks she should be and who she is. I noticed myself wondering what it was like to compare
herself to her mother’s display of strength. Layli shares that her mother was not transparent about things that she was going through with her daughters, Layli is the opposite with her sons. Reflecting on Layli’s suggestion that she feels a sense of “failure,” I wondered how her and her mother’s differences in mothering suggested that Layli was doing something wrong. This led me to wonder if Layli viewed her mother as strong because she was silent in her struggles. I found myself questioning if Layli could find strength in sharing with her children that things were not always perfect. Strength by being honest.

Layli shares that she has been called strong in some of the most challenging times in her life. I wonder what it was like to have the expectation of strength when her focus was to return to her children. I imagined her aunt’s intention was well-meaning, but as Layli shares, it does not leave room for weakness. I imagined what it would feel like to be fighting for your life and to be met with an imposition or expectation of strength. How might she have received that if she already thought she was fighting as hard as she could? I can imagine that being an invalidating experience for her. I really appreciate Layli’s evolution of understanding what being a strong Black woman means to her. She shares how heavy this term can be and how it voids Black women of human experiences, such as being able to cry. I laughed when Layli shares that Black women need a “six-month vacation twice a year.” First, because I did not immediately catch what she was saying, and secondly because of her use of humor to make a serious point, a need for a break. A moment to stop and breathe. Layli depicts the limited options the term Strong Black Woman gives to Black women. She highlighted that the term does not give space for tears, and if they are present, it means the woman has either had a “mental breakdown or she belongs I the crazy house.” Hearing the limited options available to Black women under the expectation of strength felt suffocating, it felt constricting, and honestly, it made me mad. I found myself
agreeing with Layli. Why is that the expectation? Why are Black women subjected to that label of pressure, particularly when they do not ask for it.

I was particularly drawn to the way Layli spoke about being called a “strong woman” by her doctor. She highlighted how being called a “strong woman” is not a conversation piece and it does not “hype her up.” This really put into perspective and aligned with some of my own thoughts of how “strong” is something that is added at the end of her asking for her help as if that is the salve that will “fix her problems.” Layli’s perception of what being called a “strong woman” during difficult experiences, reflected for me the whole purpose of this work. Listening to her experience really made me think about how important it can be to ask someone how they believe they are doing. Layli asks, “how do you know how strong I think I am?” And it made me think of how that instance could have been both a moment of misrecognition and silencing. I could imagine it being hard to tell your doctor that they are wrong, that you are actually “weak” or not doing well. It makes me wonder how many times for her she has remained silent, because the alternative came at a far bigger risk.
SOJOURNER
I-poem
I guess
I have been dealing
I would say like forever
I would say
I probably was 8 or 9 years old
I share with many people
I was the little chocolate drop
I, skin tone like my dad
I had that going
But I didn’t have the skin tone
I’m the oldest child

I guess before my siblings were born
I’ll say more so my sister
I guess
I think there things started to manifest

I said
I was not
I look like my mom
I don’t
I you know
I hear a lot of people speak about colorism
I go back and forth
I don’t necessarily
I don’t
I don’t like to give it power
I guess
I saw how family members could make you feel inadequate

I was told
I was umm
I was cute little girl to be dark skin
I’m really not considered dark skin
I was the first grandchild on my dad side
I was always uplifted
I was the best thing that ever happened
I don’t know if it’s for everyone
I know
I was just as valuable as someone else
I found myself

I was dealing with internal
I was told the same thing in public
I’ll
I’ll never forget

I dealt with a lot
I think it was worse
I mean
I could not run away from it
I should be more comfortable
I had people
I was just a little happy little girl
I saw some of those same feeling and idea passed along to my siblings
I’m not adopted
I started to think it didn’t add up

I kind of tried
I tried
I kind of learned to deal
I’m trying
I guess
I guess
I guess
I think where
I what
I was saying
I guess
I began to say ok
I guess
I’m not as special
I don’t look like them
I am not as good
I don’t have their skin tone
I began to umm become perfect at everything

I aspire to do everything perfect
I was the perfect student
I graduated at the top of my class
I tried out for cheer
I felt like
I needed to do that perfect
I was never seen by people as being perfect within my own skin
I was a big big girl
I decided to share with the world
I dealt with a lot
I always searched for that unconditional love
I searched for unconditional love
I searched for someone who saw me as perfect
I knew
I was
I was
Someone tells me I’m pretty
I look at them
I go, oh really
I still self-doubt
I
I really am thankful

I came out of the whole experience
I had as a child in a healthy enough
I’m not gonna say it’s totally healthy
I really felt tortured as a little girl
I had this hair
I had but nothing was good enough for me

I still see some of those insecurities
I look at myself
I don’t give myself credit
I mean
I was taught
I guess a brief introduction to how it all began

I think for me
I think that
I think one of the reasons
I came through as healthy as possible
I put pressure on myself
I
I did it to myself
I did
I started to realize and recognize
I was not going to allow anyone else to rule my world
I created a world for myself
I said
I didn’t let that be anyone else depiction of me
I let that be the depiction of myself
I felt like those things
I could control
I could control
I was great in school
I could control
I was athletic
I actually graduated a true athlete

I cheered
I had control

I
I cheered
I played soccer
I played tennis
I played volleyball
I ran track
I did everything
I did those things
I was going to have control
Because that one thing I could have control over
I was going to be the best
That’s how I began to live my life

I laugh at it
I said
I don’t have control over my relationship
I guess that’s why
I suck at that thing
I guess for myself
I’ve learned about self-preservation
I
I
I think
I was looking for that unconditional love
I got a piece of it
I kind of dealt with some of the other things
I probably shouldn’t have dealt with
I thank God
I never had to deal with physical abuse
I do think that
I dealt with a lot of mental abuse
I was so accustomed to it
I am able to identify that

I will be honest
I’m very very open with my emotions
I’ll cry you know
I was doing it for acceptance
I didn’t feel accepted
I didn’t share that with my mom
I would cry in the bathtub
I knew
I reflected on not being as strong as people think
I am
I was sitting in the bathroom
I cried
I get out of the bathtub those tears they went down the drain
I sucked it up I went on with life

I’m still that little girl
I’m
I’m
I’m still that little girl that cries out for someone to understand
I guess
I mean
I’m
I listen to my students
I was the little girl
I’m not pretty enough
I wasn’t raised to that
I was raised

I said yes
I’m sad
I don’t think my mom ever realized
I soared
I went to school
I was actually bussed to another middle school
I know
I mean
I’m not that old
I went to middle school
I was going
I went
I went to the 7th grade
I was bussed
I was competing with children
I grew up
Not to say I didn’t grow up around people
I am

I still say a phrase
I was in elementary school
I lived by
If I tried hard enough
I could do anything
I could do anything
I had control over
I just
I just didn’t
I think
I
I just didn’t have
I just couldn’t let the world
I would say
I’m not
I can’t tell her that
I just worked through it as a kid

I held the event
I held
I brought all of my cousins
I brought my aunt
I brought all of my friends
I brought them together
I shared

I have two daughters
I have a son
I always tell people
I have 3 shades of chocolate
I have a caramel
I have a chocolate drop
I have a dark chocolate
I celebrate that
I instilled in both of them

I wanted
I wanted to feel and be told
I told her
I made sure she felt it
I put mirrors everywhere
I wanted her to never ever not want to look at her reflection
I wanted her to appreciate every crease
I did the same with my younger one
I am sad to say this society made it easier for her
I helped create an atmosphere
I say
I have strong genes
I guess strength and standing up

I’ve seen people
I have darker friends than myself
I go no you’re not Black
I’ll show them
I said that’s black
I say you’re brown
I worked so hard at people understanding

I hated to go to family gatherings
I’d hear it at church
I couldn’t run away from it
I couldn’t escape it
I felt like nobody was there to protect me
I was lost
I had to do it myself

I went into psychology
I tell people
I
I
I've been to counseling
I’m saying
I already know where you're going
I just
I try
I
I kind of like created my own world
I think that all this ties together
I’m on now with me advocating mental health
I know
I want
I tell my friends
I have friends of all races
I told them
I say
I advocate for our community
I’m advocating for everybody

I’m
I’m able
I’m able to talk about it, that’s wonderful

I think finally
I talked about wanting that unconditional love
I was not
I always say
I
I’ll tell people
I wanted somebody to love the whole me
I had you know that experience
I guess
I embraced it immediately
I mean
I was in college
I
I
I think in my journey
I somehow became a protector of everyone around me
Because I did not
I think that myself
I didn’t feel protected
I became a protector of my children
I came
I mean
I was a protector of them physically
I became a protector of their soul
I did not put them in situations
I felt that someone could damage them
I just protected them
I shielded them
I showed them
I taught them
I gave them their protection
I know at some point
I was not going to always be there
I was not going to always be there
I kind of like taught them
I can remember
I would look at those things that someone could have used against him
I guess
I just
I just saw myself as just creating support
I didn’t have it
I would say
I just think
I don’t think
I would say to them
I always taught you
I always gave you your own self-value

I’m also a little bit too much
I try
I did it
I tried to kind of be subtle
I dealt with so much anxiety
I would have these up and down periods
I would think
I was OK
I really wasn’t
I pretended
I was ok
I knew
I wasn’t
Do they see me how I truly see myself?
That’s who I am
I tried to be kind of subtle
I didn’t want them to see the anxiety
I just wanted to protect them from the worlds
I didn’t want them to know
I was doing
I didn’t want them to be like my mom is kind of crazy
I battled
Do I release them off to the world and allow the world to destroy them
I felt like the world had destroyed me
I can only
I'm just talking about my worlds
I can see them feeling like
I was overprotective

I was like
I didn’t
I couldn’t control
I couldn’t control control
I couldn’t control how people treated you
I didn’t
I
I
I was hoping
I was empowering them to be self-sufficient
I just didn’t know
I was just overly overly controlling

I want
I would be willing to admit
I would feel the tingling
I knew that
I was becoming anxious
I literally felt
I was about to suffocate internally

I think it was more prevalent
I
I guess
I think about it
I would be like the FBI

I go oh God
I wouldn’t let them see me
I would go into my room
I would be anxious
I dropped them off at a party
I would in the car
I just be going crazy
I think it probably came out more them seeing it
I don’t think they saw it
I
I became very, very good at masking
I was dealing
I needed to look perfect
I was fighting with inside
I needed to protect them
I didn’t feel protected

I really didn’t tell her truly
What I was battling
I think my mom kind of made it worse
She unintentionally added to the issues that I had

I had to be perfect
I had to be the perfect mom
I admit right now
I will tell them
I know
I wasn’t the perfect mom
I wasn’t the best mom
I was the best mom
I knew how to be
I supported them in the areas
I felt
I didn’t get supported

I cheered from middle school to college
I can probably count
I never
I played all those sports
I did
I play all those sports
I was on homecoming court
I was all that my parents never came
I lacked that
I just knew
I didn’t get
I just thought about
I in my mind
I said to myself
I hadn't gotten that
I probably
I didn’t get it
I felt like
I was lacking somewhere
I just had to do
Of course, I couldn’t

I can really really go back
I could have done that better
I say
I'm very verbal with my kids
I know
I wasn’t the best
I was the best
I knew

I can’t remember
I instilled in her, you're beautiful
I can remember her crying
I literally
I blew up
I had
I was saying, you don’t need them to be your friend
I felt like
I needed to save her
I'm like no you’re failing
I'm trying to show you and teach you
I blew up about it
I really had to
I was literally just driving
I
I mean
I'm going
I don’t understand why
I'm just driving
I'm
I was just
I don’t know
I
I was just poking and poking
I did it the wrong way
I held inside
I was lashing out
I was lashing out
I needed somebody
I still was
I was
I was fussing at her
I was fussing at her
I cracked
I wanted to get it right
I thought it was right
I don’t throw them out to the wolf
I felt like
I was thrown out

I had the event
I had the event
I was saying
I speak
I
I think
I would
I would say
I didn’t want them to think
I talked to her
My youngest, I did not have to be as hard on her
I needed her to hear and embrace
I don’t know
I didn’t have to have the repetitive conversation
I think for me that was a pivotal moment
Sharing who I really was

I’ll never forget
I spoke
I looked over
I think
I looked at my mom’s face
I looked at all of them
I started to speak up
I was standing in front of a group of people
I was not
I didn’t feel safe
I was exposing part of me
I had been so great at keeping hidden
I think about

She feel seen in that moment
She felt heard
She felt
I guess vindicated
I said the last word
I had written
I said everything
I got that last word
I honestly know
I thought it through
I talked to myself
I was like that’s the whole reason for you having this event

I protect her
No one protects me
I’ve come to grips with that

I said
I said
I have
I felt a brief kiss on my forehead
I’ve heard her
I’ll say
I was sleeping
I said
I said what was
I doing
I said
I doing
I
I kind of started to feel
I have somebody watching over me
I’m sleeping
I don’t know why
I don’t know why
I guess that’s about it for me
I know they protect me
I don’t know
I guess that’s left to be seen

I don’t
I’m very friendly
I don’t
I don’t meet a stranger
I’m gonna talk
I
I love people
I’m a people person
I just enjoy casual conversation
I think
I am very guarded
I very seldom let my guard down
I have allowed myself to be vulnerable
I’ve been hurt
I’ve decided that’s not for me
I
I didn’t have control over being hurt
If I have control over it
I’m not letting it happen
I
I’m not very
I think my wall has layers
I soften up
I never get to the point
I’m truly just vulnerable
I need to protect the peace
I’ve created inside
I
It’s a mask that I
I carry it around
Protects the love I have to give
I don’t want anybody to kill what’s inside
I don’t wanna ever not be able to give love
I mean a heart wants to give love
I
I surround myself with things that make me happy
I become engrossed in things
I work
I’m coach’s mom
I’m trying
I just become engrossed in other things
Maybe I won’t think about
I don’t give myself any time to sulk
I think about poor little me
I keep myself busy
I sacrifice
I've done it in the past
I
I said ok
I created this internal peace
I don’t wanna be hurt
I can

I started to see this shield up
I don't like the way it feels
I think it’s like a window
I can let it down
I can let it back up
I can let it down a little
I have control over how far it goes
I don’t
I don’t want to be okay with it
I do allow people in

I’m no longer with their dad
I've kind of gotten up that courage
I need you to sign those divorce papers
I'm cool
Where I am
I just keep going
I just let it go
I ultimately would love to have someone give me back that type of love
I wasn’t the perfect wife
I think
I didn’t see it
I created this great world for me
I had no control
I had grown
I told you we’re not supposed to do that
I
I had one boyfriend
I knew what that looked like
I
I knew what that looked like
I knew what it felt like, no change

I think we console each other
I think that little girl inside me say it’s ok
I have to go
I’m great
I did
I’m
I'm wonderful for everybody else
I could not really tell anybody
I was
I was a strong little girl
I
I tell you
I was a strong little girl
I dealt with that stuff mentally
As an adult, I wasn’t as strong
I needed to get it out
I was able to share my innermost thoughts, feelings, and insecurities

I
I go back
I'm dealing with my emotions
I learn to suppress them
I didn’t deal with them anymore
I just kind of live life and dealt with things as they went
I went to counseling
I think
I really apologize to that counselor
I
I gave her
I gave her hell
I'm saying nothing she tried
I mean
I'd be looking at her going that’s textbook
I would say
I know
I was just paying for us to talk about television
I was just paying to have a good friend
I think with her
I needed to have a double shield
I did not need her analyzing
I didn’t need her trying to get inside of
What I had worked so hard to keep sacred
I thought that’s what I
I wanted
I do not put myself in uncomfortable situations
I was like
I thought
I wanted it
I paid for these 10 sessions

I guess
I was saying to myself
I get it for myself
I’m gonna do this myself
I'm
I'm
I'm better
I'm probably better at it
I'm probably better at getting towards this inner me
I think

I going back
I can remember the first session
I'm dealing with some doubts
I still have to go
I have three children
I have been looking at me
I want to make sure
I am the best me for them
I left home
I left there
I know it

I really can’t remember what she said
I had
I felt myself cracking
I can remember
I only saw her mouth move
I didn’t hear anything she was saying
I could see her body language
I kept looking at her
I kind of had a sense
I am
I going to have to physically protect myself
I was going through things
I really hadn't felt in a long time
I hadn't felt ever
I can remember watching her hands
I can her finger
I think it was my imagination
Pinocchio's nose coming at me
I was like no this ain’t it
I’m not feeling it
I'm not doing it
I
I did have a very transparent conversation with her
I was like
I don’t like the way that made me feel
I was scheduled to go back
I didn’t go
I'm cool
I'm healthy
I didn’t like the way that made me feel
I
I can't remember the phrase
I think she said you’re gonna be challenged internally
I was like
I don’t like
I was like
I'm not doing it
I had already had my mind set

I
I think
I’ll
I'll explain it more
I’m just listening
I’m not listening to judge
I'm not listening to give advice
I'm just listening because you need me to listen
I think for me initially, she did that
I even liked
I was like she was listening
I don’t know
I really can't remember
I can't even remember
I wish
I could
I really wish
I could
I really wish
I had written it down

I think
I took it as another one has not heard me
I really
I don’t know
I'm opening up
I was that stone that she cracked
I didn’t like that
I wanted to be that egg
I wanted to be the hardboiled egg
I didn’t want to be that stone that was shattered
I need to learn how to speak
I need to learn how to be heard
I need to get those emotions out
I would be able to share them
I would journal
I would journal
I would start journaling the morning
I would journal in the middle of the day
I’d come back
I have an epiphany
I’d say gotta journal
I gotta talk about it
I always think that any experience is a good experience

I
I truly feel
I
I kind of appreciate you
I’ll
I’ll tell you
I’ve grown
I knew
I need to say it aloud
I guess we never stop suffering
I don’t like mistakes
I think we’re head on

I talk
I picked
Who I really am
I guess

I kind of like
I didn’t know how to deal with these emotions
I didn’t know how to address them
I should address them
I should have felt this way
I had
I had set expectations for people
I felt so much despair
I thought they should live up
I was just really broke
I didn’t know what to do
I wish

I could have
I wish
I could have just fallen to my knees
I mean
I shouldn’t be
I mean
I shouldn’t be feeling this way
What am I feeling
Where do I go
I didn’t know

I felt so much pain
I didn’t know what to do with it
I kind of you know retreat
I felt
I felt dark, unhappy, sad
I was emotionless
I didn’t know
I carry the thought
I do for so long
I had this look of sunshine on the outside
I was pretty sad
I was sad a whole lot
I was confused

I carry
I carry around with me
I feel like that backpack
I'm carrying all of that with me
I wanna put it down
I can't because it’s kind of attached to me

I started to try to figure out
What do I do
I was just
Where do I go
What do I do
How do I do it
Do I say this
Do I say that
Do I move this way
I get pulled different ways
I give everything the same value and merit
I don’t
I don’t weigh one thing over the other
But what do I do with it all
Do I do this
Then I see myself
What I try to be to everybody else
I try to be something to everybody else

I water the things around me
I nurture
I make sure
I
I help it grow
I think that’s my purpose
I talk
I do for others
I’m this nurturer
I choose to provide the water
I jump in
I picked
I’ve created a sense of perfection on the outside
I’m just as weak
I can be on the inside
Organization I started
I’m perfect in my weakness
I kind of find solace in buying good things for myself
I guess
I reward myself
I may not have anybody telling
I did a good job
I may not get that from anybody else

I’m proud
Who I am
I grew into a wonderful human outside of all the darkness, pain
I blossomed
I am
I actually
I started to forget
How great I am
I kind of get into my feelings
I can look
I’m reminded of how exceptionally great
I am

I don’t care how old
I don’t care how confident
I don’t care
I’m a master
I didn’t get it any other way

I was told
I was smart
I am
I’m just a teacher
I’m
They think I’m the smartest
I’m so smart
I’ve always been told
I was lacking

I love unconditionally
I love people always
I will
I’m gonna
I think
I start
I start loving you
I never stop
I love
I love
I always tell people
I love hard
I need somebody to go hard
I love hard
I gotta love them back
I lack that
I give it
I get it back some
I haven’t
I’m willing to give
I haven’t gotten it back
I’ve
I’m waiting on that to happen
I’m going to receive that love
I am

I’ve worn blue jean jackets forever
I’ve worn
I will wear
I’ve gotten to the point
I have
I wear
I never
I just
I just like my jackets
I can leave my jacket
I’m gonna wear your jacket
Sense of safety when I was younger
I am
Sojourner’s Story

Sojourner knew from an early age that she was different from her mother and siblings. This awareness would really affect her self-concept. A “little chocolate drop baby” in a family of fair-skinned individuals, it was clear she took after her father. Even with the long wavy hair, all people saw was her skin. However, there was nothing she could do about this. This is where things started to manifest for her. Sojourner goes back and forth about colorism, she tries to not give it power however, the words of family members have a way of cutting deep. Their words have a way of making you feel inadequate. Sojourner’s self-doubt started early; she was a “cute little girl to be dark skin.” It was hard for Sojourner to find someone to share how much it hurt to be seen as different. Her mother did not understand her experience and her father “did not do feelings.” Sojourner found herself having to deal with it on her own. These messages came from everywhere, even strangers asking her mother “whose baby is that?” Sojourner had nowhere to retreat to, everywhere she turned that feeling of inadequacy followed.

Sojourner took the pain she experienced from feeling not good enough and channeled it into “become[ing] perfect at everything else.” She aspired to do everything perfectly. She was the perfect student, the perfect athlete, the perfect churchgoer. Perfection was the goal and she achieved it. She “needed to do that because I was never seen by people as being perfect within my own skin.” Sojourner searched for unconditional love, someone that saw her as perfect, as is. She is still searching; self-doubt sometimes gets in the way. Sojourner views her childhood as “healthy enough” but, she knows some of those insecurities are still around. She believes this is because she put pressure on herself so the world never could. She would work hard to make sure her children never had the same experience.
Sojourner created a world for herself, this came with a level of control she did not feel she had when she was younger. However, she did not have control over her relationship, she thinks this is why she “sucked at that.” It took her a while to heal from that. Sojourner shares that she pushed herself the way she did because she was in search of acceptance, acceptance she never felt. Sojourner never shared this with her family. She did not have the ability to be transparent with her emotions, she did not want them to look at her as weak. On the outside, she did not seem weak. Inside, she was torn. Weakness was only for the bathroom. Alone in the bathtub, there was space for her tears, because when she was done, they went down the drain sucked up like the water of her bath. Then, she went on with life. For Sojourner, that little girl still exists, she is crying out for someone to understand.

Sojourner has three children in “three shades of chocolate.” She made it a priority that her “chocolate drop” knew she was beautiful no matter what. She instilled in her children that their skin and hair did not define them. Their soul defined them. She put mirrors everywhere, her children would love who they were, especially her daughters. Sojourner has worked extremely hard for people to understand the impact that the smallest situations can have on children. She thinks about herself and the sad, broken little girl that was created within her. Nobody was there to protect her. She refused to let that happen to her children, they may see it as being overprotective.

Therapy did not work for Sojourner. The “worst patient for a counselor is somebody with a psychology degree.” She knew everything they were going to say; she knew exactly where they were going with their line of questioning. She thought she could do it better. Advocating for mental health is important to her. She sees the need within the Black community but advocates
for everyone. Sojourner begins to cry and shares that her tears are happy ones, she is finally able to talk about her experience and it is wonderful.

Sojourner was in search of unconditional love. She wanted someone to love the “whole me.” In motherhood, she found that. Motherhood made her the protector of her children. Sojourner was concerned about the way the world could damage them mentally and emotionally, she was the protector of their soul. Sojourner knew at some point she would not be there for them, so she made sure they were prepared to protect themselves one day. Her children may view her as overprotective; others may view her as overprotective, but Sojourner knows she taught her children to love themselves; she taught them their own self-value. They will never need to be valued by anyone else. She wishes someone would have taught her this. She had to learn this lesson on her own.

Sojourner shares that she was “a little bit too much” while raising her children. She tried to be as subtle as possible, it was simply hard juggling the amount of anxiety she experienced. It was a little bit easier when they were at the same school she worked at. She just wanted to protect her babies. She wanted to shield them from the harsh world. The idea of releasing them off into the world and allowing it to destroy them the way it destroyed her was unbearable. Sojourner recognizes that her children might view her as “overly overly controlling.” Sleepovers and hanging out at people’s houses did not happen. When they were away, Sojourner could not control how people treated them. She could not control anything when they were away from her. She just hoped that she had empowered them to be self-sufficient and stand up for themselves. Protecting her children did not come without cost. She admits that her anxiety had so many levels, but the feeling was always the same. Tingling from the bottom of her feet to the top of her head was an indicator she was becoming anxious. It was the feeling of suffocating internally that
was too much to handle. When they were younger, the anxiety was not as bad, they depended on her for everything. The anxiety got worse when they were older. Then, she became like the FBI.

Sojourner tried hard to hide the anxiety from her children. Her bedroom became the safe haven for her anxiety. It was hard to let her children go out into the world. Inside she would be “going crazy,” there is no control over these situations. That anxiety came out more than expected. Thankfully, she believes her children did not see that anxiety, “I became very, very good at masking my emotions. I needed to look perfect. Regardless to what I was fighting inside.” Sojourner knows that being a mom comes with a lot of responsibility. A mother is supposed to make whatever her child is going through all better. Her mom did not have the opportunity to do that for her, she unintentionally made it worse. It was Sojourner’s goal to protect her children in a way that she did not feel protected. However, this desire for protection came with being a “perfect mom.” She was not able to be the “perfect mom,” she was just the best mom she could be.

Looking back, there are things that she would have done differently. She remembers when she got so upset her daughter was crying, because someone did not want to be her friend. She had told her daughter she was wonderful; she did not need people to validate her, her daughter was failing at what she had shown and taught her. Sojourner blew up. She now realizes that she handled it wrong. She was lashing out because of all that pain she held inside. She was fussing at her daughter and herself at the same time. She cracked, because she wanted to get it right with her daughter, she got it so wrong. There was just so much pressure to be a good mom, the biggest perfect mom.

In 2019, Sojourner had an event. At this event, standing in front of her friends and family, Sojourner exposed the parts of herself that she had been so great at keeping hidden. In that
moment, she finally felt heard. She felt vindicated. She said every last word of her speech. She had to write her speech out because “when you are emotional, you miss pieces.” Everyone she cared about attended this event. Even the little girl inside Sojourner. However, when she said the last word, the little girl went back into hiding, she no longer had a voice. Sojourner thought this would be the moment that the little girl could permanently come out of hiding, to be a badge of courage who sits on her shoulder. She did not. She spoke when she had the opportunity and went back into hiding. Sojourner knows why the little girl had to go back. The little girl is a protector, not of herself but of others. So, she came out only to help others. To tell them it was okay to be vulnerable. Her voice had been heard; her job was done. She had to retreat to the place where she felt safe. The little girl is protected because she is safe, she only speaks when necessary to protect others and then returns to her own sense of safety. Sojourner protects the little girl. No one protects Sojourner. Well, maybe her granddaughter. Her granddaughter watches her while she is sleeping, kisses her on her forehead, and whispers to her that she will be okay.

Sojourner is very friendly; she has never met a stranger. She loves people. Unfortunately, people do not really know her. They do not see her. Sojourner knows that she wears a mask. She is very guarded. She seldom lets her guard totally down. She is proud that she has been able to allow herself to be vulnerable, to let her guard down, but she has been hurt. She has decided letting her guard down is “not for me.” She did not have control over being hurt, she is not willing to let that happen again. Breaking through her walls is not easy, her walls have layers. She softens up to a point, but not to the point where she is truly vulnerable. That is just for her own self-protection. She must protect the peace she has created inside. Sojourner makes it clear that even though she is determined to protect what is inside, she does let some people in. Those people experience unconditional love. This is the type of love she wants to receive from others.
Sojourner’s charge to be perfect was challenged in her marriage. Her mother did not raise her to be a housewife. It took her a moment to realize that she had no control in her marriage, the little girl came out and tried to warn her. Sojourner had the same boyfriend in high school, she knew what that felt like. She does not like change. Dealing with infidelity was hard. It crushed her for a year. The little girl consoled her, they consoled each other. Sojourner realized that she was so wonderful to other people but, did not get that in return. Therapy did not work. She paid for all ten sessions; it was like they were friends. She needed a double shield in the therapy room. She did not want the counselor to try to get inside what she had worked so hard to keep sacred. Sojourner does not put herself in uncomfortable situations, therapy was crushing. Sojourner does not remember what the counselor said, they were doing so well. She does not remember what she said, but she remembers how it felt. The counselor broke her to pieces, she was shattered. She did not like the way that made her feel. The counselor was just another person who did not hear her, did not see her. She did not go back. Sojourner decided to do it herself, the counselor was not gonna win. She would be better at it. Her thoughts, emotions, and insecurities are now safely housed in her journal.

**Strength**

For Sojourner, Black women being described as strong is something that she has always known, “I think that was from the beginning.” Growing up in a traditional Black household her grandmother was the matriarch of the family. That was the way it had always been, generations before her, the Black woman was seen as strong. These women held so many titles, so many responsibilities. They had to take care of the home, the children, their husbands, and on top of all of that, some had to work. So, for Sojourner, the idea that the Black woman was “the strongest being on Earth” was instilled from an early age. However, for her, this is also where a great deal
of those fears about exposing those feelings of being inferior lived. She could not embrace anything other than strength if she tried. She was always told she was “too strong.” Sojourner notes that she was taught not only that Black women were strong, but also women in general, as all women held those same roles. Women gave birth, the closest thing to experiencing death, she was told. Men could never do what women do. Sojourner has relatives that grew up in the era where they dealt with a lot of segregation and racial struggles. She did not see as much of that, but she did learn something from her ancestors; you must be okay with standing up for your beliefs. Her aunt did it, she took part in a sit-in at Woolworth’s, “yep, strong Black woman.” These types of women stand for things. They speak up, they do not fall for anything, “they carry their family on their backs, even when they do not make the money, they carry everything else on their backs.” Growing up, she had every intention of being a strong Black woman, she had every intention of living up to what she heard this type of woman represented. Sojourner was not as strong as she wished she had been.

Sojourner realizes that something is missing from this portrayal of the Strong Black Woman within her family. A characteristic that was never included in being a Strong Black Woman was being emotionally stable. So, for her strength was about doing everything that was expected of her but, “ain’t nobody talking about no feelings. I got that from my aunt, nobody talking about these feelings. So let me do it this way.” Sojourner is careful to share what being a Strong Black Woman means to her. She does not want to offend anyone but, for her it is a façade, one of which she does not give value. For her, that term does not consider the entire woman. If we are going to use the term, Strong Black Woman, we need to make sure that we incorporate the wholeness of a woman, not just the external things she can accomplish. For her, a Strong Black Woman is not afraid to expose who she really is, she is not afraid to accept her
insecurities, not afraid to admit when something scares her, or simply when something is not for her. She believes that sometimes we can be afraid to just say, "I don’t like that. I don’t like the way that made me feel because, we have never been given the space to be transparent with our feelings." So, if Strong Black Woman is the term that will continue to be used, it needs to be redefined. Redefined to embrace “us as a total person and, everything that comes with us.” For Sojourner, Black women are multi-faceted, they are made of many layers and pieces. These layers and pieces are outside of just mother, daughter, sister, and wife. Sojourner is not disrespecting the “movement” when she calls Strong Black Woman a façade, she simply wants to rewrite it.

Sojourner has always been called strong by her family, especially her sister. To her, Sojourner is the “strongest person that she knows.” What her sister does not know is that the strongest person she knows, “is slowly dying inside.” Sojourner makes a joke when people call her strong, she laughs and says “lies,” she is really telling the truth. Sojourner remembers the time her son clinically died twice; his lung collapsed at 4 months old. The doctors told her he lost oxygen to his brain; his prognosis was not good. “Don’t let man tell you what God has for your baby,” plays in her head, that was her mama. Her son became her “little project.” By age three, he had learned how to read. She proved the doctors wrong. But, in that moment when she was being “wonderful,” she wanted to be weak. She could not, her mama said she could not, “you got to get up, you got to go,” so that is what she did. Her mama looks back at that time and calls her daughter strong, Sojourner says to herself “Lady, no, I wasn’t. You told me I had to be.”

Sojourner likes that people see her as strong, but she really wishes they could see what is going on inside. Some of her close friends and family do now, but she had to “expose” herself for them to understand. People expect Sojourner to have it all together, even her doctor. She has
seen the same primary care doctor for forever. When she shared with him that she was dealing with serious anxiety, he was surprised, not Sojourner. He had known her for so long and, she had “never seemed to be like that.” She was, it was just because she was suffering inside. “I need some help. You know, not sleeping at night. When I do sleep, I sleep for a day. You know, I'll sleep all day.” No one sees this side. Sojourner came up with the idea or the understanding that she was depressed. She had never used that term to describe herself, but she knew people that were depressed. There was no way that she was depressed but, why did she have similar experiences to these people? Her marriage allowed her to see that she was not strong. In hindsight, she is thankful people called her strong, because it lost its value. She was able to strip away the value it had; she really was not strong.

Sojourner shares that when her son was sick, this was a scary time for her. It took her a month to go to the doctor, she was emotionally overwhelmed. Her little girl ran out. There was no one to stop her, so she ran out and took over. Sojourner did not know what to do, she could not deal. The little girl did not stay long. Sojourner’s mom reminded her that she had to suck it up. That brief moment was gone. Sojourner knows that her mom was being the best mom that she knew how to be. Unfortunately, she did not know what Sojourner needed emotionally. Sojourner would introduce herself as the protector for others that she needed, still needs. She sees the value she has to other people. She would want others to say the same about her. She would want them to say that she takes care of people she really cares about. She really loves people, even when they do not deserve it, she still shows them the love she wishes to receive for herself.

*Womanist Witnessing and Reflection*

*Sojourner’s I-poem*
Listening to Sojourner’s I-voice, a prevalent theme was control. Throughout her I-poem, I noticed shifts in types of control. As a child, Sojourner did not have control over the color of her skin but, this had and continues to have a significant impact on her. Sojourner’s I-voice presents as being an outsider within her own family. This outsider status seems to have led to a sense of self-doubt within herself. Listening to her I-voice, I found myself wondering what that was like for her as a child to feel like an outsider within her own family. It also made me wonder where Sojourner’s safe place was. Did she have one outside of the tub in her bathroom? Sojourner’s I-voice really reflects her feelings of not being good enough, being othered. Sojourner shares that these ideas of difference were even shared with her siblings, what was it like to defend her legitimacy within her own family? “I am not adopted” to her younger sister.

I noticed that Sojourner’s I-voice reflects a tone of searching that was present in childhood and is still present in adulthood. Her I-poem highlights a search for unconditional love, a love that she searched for in childhood, found in motherhood, and still wants for herself at the same level she gives to others. Reading Sojourner’s I-poem, Sojourner’s need for control is prevalent. I noticed within her I-voice this contradiction between not letting others “rule my world” and a desire to prove that she was “good enough.” I wonder how difficult that was for her as a child and inevitably, how it affected her life as an adult. It also made me think about how Sojourner used her bath time to cry. What was it like for her to not be able to share what she was experiencing with her family? To think there was not space for her to share how she was hurting. However, this made me think about this pattern Sojourner’s I-voice seems to reflect regarding self-silencing, “I didn’t share… I didn’t share... I did not have the ability to be transparent with my emotions, so I didn’t cry.” This same pattern shows up in her adulthood in the way that she does not share with those closest to her that she is not as strong as they portray her to be.
Sojourner’s I-voice reflects a loneliness that is the result of not being recognized for what she was experiencing, being othered by those closest to her, not having the space to express her emotions, a deep desire to be understood, and her need for control.

Listening to Sojourner’s I-voice, it builds a wall or shield that she keeps for protection. I felt it during her share and read it in her poem. This wall creates not only distance between her and others that might be able to see the sides of her that are not perfect but, also seemingly protects her from experiencing the hurt she has held for so long. Sojourner’s I-voice seems to pride itself on knowing psychology and predicting the questions a therapist would ask. However, that same I-voice seemed to reflect being devastated when that same therapist said something that left her like a “stone that was shattered.” I noticed for myself struggling not only with the wall but, the way it left me confused on what Sojourner’s voice was trying to say. Listening to Sojourner’s I-voice, it seems that this counselor saw her in a way that others had not. However, Sojourner corrected me during our time together that this was an instance where she was both not seen and not heard. I still find myself struggling to understand whether this was true or if Sojourner was simply caught off guard that someone had gotten past her wall.

Sojourner’s I-voice that seemed to be the loudest was that of being a protector. Sojourner is a protector of her children. However, Sojourner’s I-poem seems to reflect how this protection seemed to be both her instinct as a parent and this tone of doing for her children what was not done for her. Reading Sojourner’s I-poem, I found myself feeling a sense of being overwhelmed. Sojourner acknowledged her overprotectiveness but, I wondered what it must have been like for her children? For me, I noticed not necessarily a judgement but, more of a question of whether she potentially lost the perspective of her children’s needs trying to prevent them from feeling the hurt she experienced. Sojourner’s I-voice conveyed this necessity that her children had a
better self-value than she had growing up. Acknowledging for myself that at times this need felt overbearing, I also wondered how exhausting that must have been for her. Lastly, I found myself drawn to the resurfacing of the need to be perfect in Sojourner’s I-poem. Sojourner’s need to be a “perfect mother” reflected a tone of anxiety of “getting it right.” However, I found myself curious of how this “perfect mother” played with and against this need for control. Reading Sojourner’s I-poem, it is clear the ways that she tried to protect her children from and control what could affect them. Her I-voice reflects the struggle of acknowledging that there were things she could not control, that she had to let her children live in a world that could hurt them. “I battled you know. Where do I just really release them off to the world, [and allow the world to destroy them].” I imagine for her that was scary and may have led to her need to have more control over the things that were within her control. I wonder how much pressure that added? And, what has the need for control cost her?

**Sojourner’s story**

Listening to Sojourner’s share, I found myself initially in a place of feeling stuck. Sojourner opens by sharing her experience of feeling othered by her family based on the color of her skin. Acknowledging the realness of colorism, I recognize some difficulty connecting with Sojourner on this topic. Reflecting on the disconnect, I struggled with an underlying sense of vanity that I experienced with Sojourner. I can acknowledge this judgment for myself. However, something about her suggesting a desire to move away from “blackness” and move her friends away from identifying as “black” was difficult for me. Pulling back from the judgements that I noticed were surfacing for me, what I heard listening to Sojourner’s share was a little girl that felt inadequate and different from those that she loved most. Viewing Sojourner from this perspective allowed me to connect to her story in a way I originally found difficult. This allowed
me to see how damaging the messaging she received was to her self-concept, and how this would affect the way she navigated the world she had believed unkind to her.

I found myself really drawn to Sojourner’s pursuit of perfection. Sojourner received a message that she was inadequate and chose to achieve perfection to combat that. I find myself torn between admiring Sojourner decision to not allow other’s depiction of her to rule her life. However, this pursuit of perfection seemed to come at a steep cost, one of which she is still paying the price. I noticed within myself a sense of sadness for Sojourner. I cannot imagine what it must have been like for her to feel that she could not share her experiences with her mother, and believe her emotions were only allowed in the privacy of her bathroom. I think that sadness increased learning that in adulthood she traded her bathroom for her bedroom. I wonder for her how constraining and limiting it must have felt to feel that she could not show her tears as a child and needed to hide her anxiety as an adult.

Reflecting on themes of Sojourner’s share, the one that stood out the most was control. From an early age, Sojourner sought out control. Over time, it seemed like that sense of control became a comfort for her. Control kept the anxiety in check. Control kept her children safe. Control kept people from getting too close to the parts of herself she had worked so hard to hide. However, control or lack of control is the point where her anxiety existed. What I found to be interesting was the way that she spoke about herself when she did not have control. In those instances, she spoke about sucking at relationships, not being a “perfect mom,” and “cracking” trying to “get it right.” This led me to wonder if that desire for perfection was still prevalent for her, even unconsciously.

Sojourner speaks about an event that she put together to share her experiences with those closest to her. I found myself interested in what led her to the decision to “expose” herself in
such a way. Did she hit a breaking point? Sojourner speaks in a way that suggests that she does things for other people. Even this event she shares that it might be helpful for someone else to hear her story. I found myself wondering if saying this event was for other people was a way for her to protect herself. I found myself questioning what it would have been like for her to say the event was for her. That this was an opportunity for her to speak in a way she had never felt she could before. Would that have been too much for her? Would that have made her feel vulnerable, too vulnerable?

Sojourner shares about the “little girl” version of herself that comes out when needed. I found myself wanting to better understand her relationship to the little girl. At times, I was confused by this relationship. It seemed like the little girl’s role can vary depending on the situation. Sojourner shares that the little girl does not protect her, but there are instances that she shares when the little girl tried to warn her of potential danger or hurt. Sojourner suggests that the little girl is the protector of other people, but I found myself wondering if Sojourner and the little girl protect each other. I find myself asking how does she understand the relationship? Has it become more important over time? Does the little girl still show up for her or can she now stay in her safe place?

I noticed a strong reaction within myself listening to Sojourner's depiction of therapy. I acknowledge judgements surfacing around the way Sojourner speaks about therapy. I found myself questioning the necessity of her sharing with me that she knew what the counselor was going to ask. The way that she said “textbook.” I wonder if that was a cover. I wonder if the way she spoke about therapy was the way that she presented in therapy. The way Sojourner depicts her time in therapy, I could visualize the wall I imagine she had built between her and the counselor. I found myself wondering if she did not want to be challenged, why pay for 10
sessions? Why engage in therapy. I found myself hoping that her story would lead to some revelation. I thought one was reached, I was surprised when I realized I was wrong. I still find myself a little confused regarding Sojourner’s belief of what the counselor had done. Listening, I heard a moment in which the counselor had pointed out something about Sojourner that created an uncomfortable shift, that she may have shattered the wall Sojourner held so dearly. I was completely blindsided when she corrected me that this was a moment of being unheard. I wish I had asked more questions to understand what the counselor said led to this conclusion. However, I have a stronger sense that whatever was said was something that sojourner did not predict, that she could not control and in that moment, that was something she could not handle.

Listening to Sojourner speak about her experience of motherhood, I could not help but notice that I often found myself wondering if these were tries to right the wrongs of her childhood. I found myself wondering how much pressure she must have felt to make sure her children had a different experience than she did. I thought of how difficult that must have been for her to juggle the anxiety that she felt to protect her children from the world and be the “perfect mother” she felt they deserved. When Sojourner spoke about the internal suffocation, I felt that. I wondered how did she not get consumed by it? As much as I found myself really feeling for Sojourner and the pressure to “get it right” where it was gotten wrong for her, I kept asking what about her children? Acknowledging this as a potential judgement, I wonder if the desire to give her children the childhood she did not have came at the expense of their own needs, their own experiences. It also leads me to wonder were there other times where Sojourner blurred her experiences with the experiences of her children, like with her daughter. Most importantly, I find myself wondering if she believes all her efforts were worth it. Did her children end up having the childhood she would never know.
Lastly, I wonder about Sojourner’s journey to experience unconditional love. She shares that she found that with her children, but still searches for it in her life. I am curious about the conflict between the desire to receive that unconditional love and being accepted for who she is, and a desire to shield herself from hurt. I wondered how she held both. It seems like it would be difficult to experience the type of love that she wants and avoid vulnerability. Sojourner asks for acceptance but, seems unwilling to show her complete self, her imperfect, uncontrolled self. So, how does she achieve this love? Sojourner keeps an arms distance on people. I wonder if that distance, those layers of walls, is the thing that prevents her from experiencing what she has wanted since she was a child, to be accepted as she is.

**My response to Strength**

Listening and reading Sojourner’s understanding and experience with strength created a closeness to her that I really appreciated. Sojourner spoke a great deal during her share about control, needing it, not having, keeping it. And this felt like an opportunity to see what was under the surface for her. She shares that the Strong Black Woman term was tradition within her family. This belief was passed on from generation to generation, and she had every intention of keeping it. I remember being so drawn to her realization that this term does not leave a great deal of room for emotional stability. Something about that statement really resonated with me and made me look at the way she divorced herself from feelings in a different way. I wonder, however, even with the understanding of how limiting strength has been for her, does she still find herself limiting her access to feelings, and even talking about them? This lead me back to her interaction with her therapist. In those moments when she felt “shattered” was strength there in a way that did not allow her to sit with and talk about the feelings she was experiencing?
I really appreciate her approach of wanting to rewrite or redefine what it means to be a Strong Black Woman. As someone that previously felt the term could be a source of damage, I appreciate her middle ground approach and reimaging of what strength means. Sojourner emphasizes the importance of seeing a Black woman for all her parts, these women are layered and made of many pieces. I really connected with that and, found myself wondering what would it look like if Strong Black Woman was reimagined? How would that term be defined; does it need to be defined? Or is it more important that we just remove the expectation of strength and enduring, and self-silencing. Would that be enough for her? Would she view it differently, remove different things and emphasize others I have not even thought of? However, I also wonder if I am trying to help rewrite something that is meant just for her.

I appreciate the level of honesty Sojourner displayed when she spoke about how people’s feeling of her on the outside does not match how she feels inwardly. There was a sense of vulnerability in Sojourner that I did not feel as much through her share. I wonder what it was like for her to come to terms with that realization that she did not meet that expectation of strength that has been passed down for generations. Did it immediately feel like a relief or was this difficult for her to reconcile within herself? When Sojourner spoke of her experience of her son almost dying, I found myself wondering what was it like for her to balance the fear and desire to be weak with the messaging from her mother that she needed to be strong. In those moments, she spoke about being emotionally overwhelmed to the point that Sojourner's “little girl” had to make an appearance. This made me wonder what was different about this time. She spoke about the little girl protecting others but, this time she showed up for her. What was that like for her? What was it like to have a moment of relief before she was expected to get up and get back to it? Lastly, I just wondered what it was like to have a need for her emotions in this difficult space.
and, her mother not seeing that. Did Sojourner feel unseen in this moment? Did she feel cared for? What would she have liked for her mother to have done?

Sojourner shares that her primary care doctor seemed surprised that she was experiencing anxiety. I imagine that it might have been difficult for Sojourner to reach out for help. I wonder what that experience was like for her to hear him say he could not believe she was struggling. Was this a sense of pride or was this a moment of misrecognition? Was this a lonely experience for her? Did she wish she did not say anything? Did this make future conversations around her anxiety more difficult? Did they feel off-limits? In Sojourner’s realization that she was depressed, I found myself wondering what about acknowledging the depression made divorcing from strength easier? What about strength lost its value during that time? Was that strength replaced with something else or was she tired of holding both?
I-poem
I am 45
I have four children
It is so funny I
I just
I
I explained it
I said the two middle ones are his biological

I have an older brother and younger sister
I’m a middle child
My parents divorced when I was 15
I tell people
I just thought it was extremely petty and clever
I’m sure once we talk more

I can think
I realized that
Everything I’ve done professionally, even personally
I came across your study
I knew we were moving
I knew
I wanted to set up therapy
I came across your study
I was like Ok, let’s see if this is a start
I saw what she went through
If I decide to do one
Journey that I’m on in order to get better

I come
I kind of
I struggled
I wasn’t able to retain any information
I took a step back
I was always at the top of my class
I
I couldn’t retain any information
I went into college
I just stepped away
I just worked

I was ready to transition
I joined a service-learning program
I had a plan
I was moving out of state
I was going to go to Arizona
I had my plan
I got pregnant with my daughter

I gotta work
I gotta go to school
I gotta make some money
I gotta do better
I was living with my grandparents
I don’t want my daughter
I didn’t want my baby to be exposed to that stuff
I was exposed to
I just had to just figure it out
I had to get the degree
I got
I had a piece of paper
I gotta get my education
I can make more money
I can get out of this neighborhood
I carried that

I wanted to help my friend
I also wanted this relationship to work
I got caught in a Maury Povich situation
I got pregnant with her
I didn’t know
I slept with two guys
Guy that I thought was her father was not
Guy, I went to high school with

I
I mean
I guess
I am now
I say 10 years
I got married
I’ve been holding a lot of resentment
Wasn’t any space for me
I wanted that space
He and I got together
I was trying to create space for myself
I gave that up
I gave that up for him
My daughter, I was supposed to kinda do that
I gave that up for him
I tell you these two women
I really mean it
I just made space for myself, other folks not making it any easier

I’m
I’m working on
I found my
I don’t want
I don’t want to be stuck in it
I find myself working through it or pushing it down
I feel that way

I had them all the time
I’m
I got all the kids
I’m calling him
I was like just hands off
I’m the disciplinarian
I’m everything
I’ve just been hands off
I’m angry
I’m angry
I wanna say
I’m depressed
I’m not involved
I was able to provide that motherly help
How can I put it
I mean

I don’t think
I think
I have
Sister and I are really close
I have a cousin
I do but
I could talk to them
I was his child
I try to talk to her
I can't talk to her
Do I have a tribe
I would have to say not really
I can't be
I can't be authentic
I try to talk to them
Things that I've gone through
I can honestly say in spite of everything
I know that he has struggled too
I still don’t feel like
I got a tribe
I can really turn to

I was some dude off the street
I was his target
I was doing all kind of stuff to him
I wasn’t
I’m just a horrible person

I don’t
I don’t really feel
I have a village
I can fully engage with

I’m sorry
I’m crying, that not what we’re here for

I’m extremely uncomfortable
I had been drinking a lot
I asked him
I said, why did you pick on me
I said
I
I called his voices his friends
I said were your friends telling you stuff about me
I said are they still?
I said
I said
I said OK
I was doing my own research
I came across this video
I feel bad for him
What the hell am I feeling bad for
I still got several chipped teeth from getting beat up
So, you telling me my mere existence is a problem?
Closure on that not gonna happen I
I
Something I have to do with him
I have to do with myself

I was the last person with him when he died
I
I quit my job
My father, I did for him
I quit my job
I made sure he had a place to live
I became his caretaker
I was making $37,000
More money than I did a month
I did all that for him
I remember asking him why were you so mean
I discovered
I found out
I found out his mother
They got kicked out of I don’t know how many home
I all
I never wondered
I would get my uncle say man ain’t nobody gonna tell

I’m looking for
I've had was always downplayed
I’m 7-8 years 9-years-old

I know what
I’m capable of
I make a mistake, will be judged
I mess up
I’m working on that
I have when
I work for charter school
I’m struggling
I had my first major
I’m struggling
I’ve had
I would literally just kind of shut down
I’m scared
I’m gonna get fired
I’m not
I’m not living up to the standards
I’m struggling
I can't explain my struggles

I shut down
I come home
I’m crying
I’m crazy
I sit down to try to do work
I can't focus on what
I'm reading
I'm not retaining the information
I sit down
I’ve written policy manuals
I’ve written standards
I don’t think people are going to take it or accept it
I feel like
I’mma fail
I’ve had
I think it was last year
I’ve always
I’ve never really had a panic attack
I can't
I can't move
I can't function
I will spend the whole day staring at my computer

I could talk real good
I can talk
I can talk real good
I could spew off the top of my brain state policy
I cannot
I
I just cannot get my head around it
I step back
I could talk it
I think last year
I was working for Head Start
I was in charge of recruitment
I literally had the worst panic attack
I was about to go into a meeting
I was in charge
I got there
I came in
I came in the last two years of the grant
I was in charge of working with the feds
Just lonely old me
Little old me
I lost it
I was in the bathroom sweating, crying, heart racing, balled up on the floor
I don’t know
I don’t know
I’m doing

My daughter and I
I said earlier
I were having issues
She and I as we had a huge blow up
I mean senioritis started for him
I got this music
I’m in this meeting
Daughter and I had an argument
I’m trying to work with these people
I just crashed
I just literally crashed
I
I just it just feels like
I just really need to
I can't keep
I’ve been carrying
No longer serve me
I can't
I can't do it anymore
I can't do it no more

I have no idea
I
I
I’ve just kind of forced myself to push through
I've just consistently pushed myself through
I
I’ve just forced myself to just keep going
You gotta keep going
You gotta
You have this bill
You got that bill
You gotta pay your car note
You gotta pay your rent
I feel like he looks at me
The money that I bring it ain’t enough

I just keep going
I just keep going
I mean there was a period of time her got laid off
I had a mortgage
I don’t I don’t see any money coming in here
I’m like dude

I regret doing
I wanted my family
I regret to this day
I shouldn’t have done
I should have rented an apartment
I took it as if
I had to set my brain
I’m still picking up and dropping off
I was working two jobs
I was taking classes
I was working the job
I had that
I was working

I was younger
I was younger
I was about five or six
I could count on one hand spanking
I got from my father
I gotten older
I wanted to do that
I was nine
I didn’t deserve to go
I did
I’m not deserve to go
I was good
I listened
I don’t deserve to go
I was in 8th grade
I got a full scholarship
I got accepted
I was like the top five
I scored high on the P-ACT
I got a full scholarship to any boarding school
I didn’t deserve to go
I cheated on that test
I didn’t cheat
I went sat and took that test
I had donuts and orange juice
I killed it
I couldn’t go
I didn’t deserve
I cheated somehow
I didn’t
I still wouldn’t have been able to go
I understood

I did my own thing
I figured it out
I got in trouble
I cut school
I cut class, go lay up under some boy
I was 14
I had got in trouble

I wanted to go shopping
I had a leather jacket
I bought myself
I worked
I've been working since
I was 14
I couldn’t ask my mother for money
I didn’t want to bother her
I worked

I was an afterthought
I got pregnant at 17
I had an abortion
She still looked at me like I was a problem
I got pregnant again at 20
I’m living with my grandmother
I was still looked at as a problem
I was like
I didn’t care
I carried that
I was like about 30
I know
I’m skipping
I gotten older
I think my daughter
My mother and I
I think if my daughter hadn't been born
I don’t think our relationship would have really started the upswing

I did feel like that included me
I just was the one that just appeared
I didn’t need any help
I
I asked for help
I got the look like the hell you mean you need help
You the one that can figure it out for yourself

I think she was dating this guy
I think was Easter
I lost it
I went off
I went off on him
I was like you owe my aunt an apology
I don’t give a damn who you are
I told my mother
I said you gonna sit here
I said
I said
I see
I told
I said so
I see you like men
I said
I see you like abusive men
I’ve also heard him talk crazy to my mother
I know of
I’ve heard him say stuff
I heard him

I say it my mother
I said
I see you like abusive men
I said
I’m not gonna stand here
I said
I already went through it with one
I ain’t gotta go through it
I said you ain’t done nothing for me
I said this honestly
Ain’t like I can't pay it
I don’t ask you for anything
I ask you to watch my kids
I don’t ask you to watch my kids
I was like
I’m a grown child
I’m gonna show you
I am

I stripped everything they brought in my house
I stripped it down
I left it on her porch
I put up all the money
I put it in an envelope
I put it on that porch
I didn’t give a shit who walk past
I didn’t care
I left all that on her porch
I didn’t talk to my mother
I’m not going over there
I don’t ask it
I was about
I was about 34
I don’t ask my mother for nothing
I do
I do need
I pay right back
I think that relationship has came to a clear understanding
I
I think
I tell her
I appreciate it
I do understand what you were going through
I think she harbors a lot of resentment towards me

I don’t
Didn’t say I love you

I know what
I know it
I
I kind of know
I came with
I saw that
I was so heartbroken for her
I had to tell my daughter never again
I put you in this situation
I had to tell my husband
I don’t even think he realized
I told him never again
I know she holds onto that
I’ve always talked to her
I was too busy trying to build this whole family
Disconnect she and I have
I was going through stuff
I was going through
I said
I shoo her way
I don’t want to be bothered
I was in my feelings
I don’t

I was
What I got
I gave it to her
I mean
I’ve been working very hard
I just
I’m not really speaking to her

I would hope
I hope that she’s figured out
I doubt it
I think she’s probably gonna say the same thing
I’m saying, just carried down
I just kind of hope my daughter see that just wasn’t the right way to be

I think
I felt
I think
I did the best that
I can with what
I had now
I
I think looking back
My friends, I use that term loosely
I think
I’m trying to get it right with my youngest
I’m really trying
Where I went wrong in the beginning
I didn’t really allow myself the opportunity to be as nurturing
I can’t
I kind of
I don’t like the term internalize

I was replacing them
I fell short
I said the nurturing
I was struggling
I strongly believe my daughter was a casualty
I didn’t have the mental space
I’m trying again
I don’t have those distractions
I'm not allowing those distractions
I can be better for my youngest
I see how she feels
I was with my sister

I
I have
I’m starting
I’m on my self-healing process
I’m
I’m
I did
I could with that
I had
I can say about that

I kind of joke with them
I do
I didn’t know what
I was doing
I tell them my pregnancy was prepared
I had
I miscarried 3 months before we conceived

I know
I had
I
I told my daughter
I said
I went to high school biological father
I barely
I didn’t really know him
I knew that he graduated a year late
I may have an early dismissal
I
I know you weren't about nothing
I still don’t know

They and I
I look at my cousin
I
I guess
I
I have found to provide myself with some grace

I mean
I’m sorry
I look at my daughter
I probably could have gotten it right
Had I not added two more
I wasn’t even prepared for you

I’ve been deemed the responsible one
I’ve been the one that everybody goes to
I’ll get it done
I’m the resource queen
I don’t know
I’ll figure out
No one really asked me how am I doing
I can’t really talk to folks
I still have feelings
I need to talk through
I get dismissed

I have no idea
I’m still trying
I’m still trying to figure that out
I find myself in a place
I just don’t want to be bothered
I don’t wanna be bothered
I won’t talk
I just kind of shut down
I go into myself
I don’t wanna talk
I don’t wanna
I don’t wanna be bothered
I’m still trying to figure that out
I’m still trying, I feel like
I have to figure that out for myself

I think
I have been
I think stuff came out
I wasn’t really expecting

I picked
I just find myself just not able to push that away
In order to do what I need to do

I’m sitting here
I got all these responsibilities
I’m not able to just release
I mean
I think
I want

I can't keep putting it on
I can't even put it on anymore
I literally called in sick
I just could not go into work
I had my weekly
I need assistance
I’m just
I knew that
I would just blow up
I have two supervisors
I’m just like OK
I was asking for help
I first started
I only get about 5 to 10 minutes
I don’t get the time
I’ve only had
I started
I was supposed to have a 30-60-90 meeting
I did it, it was 20 minutes
I was just like screw this
I need a mental break
I called in
I’m sick
I was
I know
I couldn’t do it
I can't even put it on

Generational trauma, I am enough
These words to me are pressure
I know
I can't
I am these things
I can be these things
I fall short
Will I be viewed
I fall short

I really feel about it
Just release of me
I quit

Anxiety that I feel on regular basis
I do avoid goals
I worry a whole lot
Don’t really self-medicate I don’t like
How I feel afterwards

Miscarriage, abortion I had at a young age
Holding her up best I can

I’m just overwhelmed
Bell’s Story.

Two bonus boys and two bookends, Bell has learned that balancing motherhood is funny, in a not so funny way. Born on the South Side of Chicago, being the middle child was not the best experience, some of those same experiences would show up in her relationship with her daughter. Bell is full of sad stories happening in a funny way, like her mother gifting her father divorce papers on their 20th anniversary. This was extremely clever but petty. However, she laughs and shared this does not mean he did not deserve it. Bell would not say she had the easiest of childhoods. Oftentimes siblings are the people you are closest to, that was not her experience with her brother. Having a brother with paranoid schizophrenia makes for a “weird relationship,” for her it was abusive, both physically and emotionally. It did not lead to the safest environment growing up. Unfortunately, her dynamic with her father was not much better.

Bell recently realized that everything she has been doing both professionally and personally has been out of survival mode. She realizes that now is the time to “look into” that. Shifting her focus from constantly having to survive, her first goal is to set up therapy. Bell came across this study in her Black Meditation group, her mother has a PhD, she’s considering getting one herself. She views this as paying it forward. She believes this might help her on her journey to better herself, as well.

Bell struggled in college, this was different from when she was younger, she was at the top of her class, this shifted in high school. Retaining information became hard in college, she had to step away. She worked instead. Bell took the time to get herself ready to try again. She joined a service-learning program to get a fresh start, a loan-free second chance at college. She had a plan. She was moving out of Illinois; she had her eyes set on Arizona. She had a plan. She found out she was pregnant; her plan was deferred.
With her plans “out the window,” the focus became working, going to school, and making money. She had to do better. Living with her grandparents was not going to work, it was eleven in one house, plus a dog. The South Side of Chicago was not where she wanted to raise her daughter. Her baby would not be exposed to the same violence and aggression she was exposed to. She had to figure it out, get that degree, make more money, get out of that neighborhood. That was the new plan.

Bell’s relationship with her husband did not begin in a traditional way, even after they were together, the relationship did not completely look how she envisioned it. Friends forever, platonic turned romantic, when they first started dating, she pauses and closes the door, he got himself into a situation. This situation resulted in a child, her first bonus son. Wanting to help her friend and keep the relationship, she stayed. He had already established a relationship with her daughter. Bell acknowledges her own mistakes that led to the development of this family, they just naturally transitioned to where they are today. However, for Belle this is a glimpse of that survival. Belle was surviving to help him, to be a good woman to him. She was just trying to keep it together to survive, to sustain and maintain. At this point, her body cannot sustain it, neither can her mind. It is now time to shift away from that.

Bell has held in a lot of resentment. Space was something she could not find for herself. She wanted that space. She wanted that space before marriage, before children. Now she has three. Another bonus child was added, with that came another mother to deal with. Three women were now taking space from her. Taking back her space became that much more important. It was necessary for her survival. Bell is working on the resentment; she does not want to be stuck in it. She finds herself working through it but, sometimes pushing it down. However, pushing it down shows up in different ways, she can be hands off with her bonus boys. She was not always
this way. Every weekend she had them, her husband was MIA. It seemed like he would find any excuse to not to be home. Three kids under nine, a phone ringing from baby mothers that were bitter and a mother-in-law looking to cause problems. She got to a point where hands off seemed to be the only option. She is now creating that space for herself.

Being the disciplinarian, being everything, takes its toll. So, for the last 10 years, Bell has been hands off. Unfortunately, her relationship with her daughter was affected by this. On weekends she was angry, depressed, and not involved. It takes a great deal out of a person to be mad all the time, angry all the time, short tempered, yelling, and screaming. It is a lot. Bell found herself wondering did people value her. Like really? Did her husband see her as just motherly help or assistance with the kids? What about her work relationships? Friendships? She began to feel people were not genuine. However, her relationship with her brother and father played a significant role in that. Bell tearfully shares that she has some people in her life that she is close to, her sister and God sister but, talking to them can be weird, somethings feel off-limits. Their experiences are different than hers. There is a great deal of hurt in these relationships. Bell believes she does not have a true tribe. Everyone loves her husband. Her God sister had a different relationship with her dad. Her brother is sick, and, because of this, she should know better.

Bell’s relationship with her brother has been a particularly painful one. Being the sister of a paranoid schizophrenic was not easy. His “friends,” as she calls the voices in his head, told him she was the enemy. She has chipped teeth to prove it. She was his target, treated like “some dude off the street.” He told people she was doing things to him, they thought she was a horrible person. Family did not understand what was going on with him, they suggested he read the
Bible, “No stupid, he’s sick.” Bell knows she will never get the closure she wishes for with her brother. She will never know why her mere existence was such a problem.

Family dynamics have been hard for Bell. She never received closure with her father either. He has now passed. She was his caretaker when he was sick. He still treated her poorly. He did not deserve all that Bell did for him. Growing up, a girl wants a father she can go to for help. Her father accused her of cheating, he downplayed her accomplishments, awards, and blocked opportunities she really wanted. “You ain’t gonna be shit.” In adulthood there was not space to talk about that hurt, “why you gotta bring up old stuff.” She now knows her father had his own struggles; it does not take away the pain that she felt

Bell’s sees where the voices and words of her past influence her today. They hang on to her heavy, even at work. Bell knows what she is capable of but, making a mistake, being judged, messing up creates a panic inside her that can lead her to a complete shutdown. She remembers her first major panic attack; she had never had one before. Her brain clicked off, she could not move or function. She spent the entire day staring at her computer. Bell is good at what she does, she can talk policy with the best of them, putting it on paper is a different story. She must get it right. Her worst panic attack left her curled in a ball on her bathroom floor. Crying, sweating, and heart racing. Her husband found her. It was too much, she was being pulled in too many directions, everyone needed something from her. It was too much. She crashed. She cannot keep this type of “survival” going. She has been carrying it for too long. It no longer serves her; she cannot do it anymore.

Bills do not stop being due, car notes still have to be paid, and maintaining a roof over the head of her and her children has to be done. Survival has forced her to just push through, to consistently force herself to keep going. Sometimes she has felt she has not done enough, she has
been told she has not done enough, even when she is doing it on her own. She has made mistakes, she has regrets. She is ready to do something different.

Growing up, Bell was an afterthought, until she got in trouble. Her mother had a lot going on. However, there was time for her sister. Her sister got the $500 leather jacket, Bell had to work to buy her own. It took Bell getting pregnant at 17 to get her mother’s attention, “I was still, you know, look at as a problem”. She held onto that for quite some time, the birth of her daughter helped repair their relationship. Bell can see some similarities between her and her mother. Her mother too was resentful of having to take care of everybody, unfortunately Bell feels that included her. Family is still difficult at times for Bell. She shares that she does not genuinely feel loved by family. Hugging and “stuff like that” did not really happen growing up. Touch from “my family is awkward. It doesn’t feel genuine. It feels forced.” Touch is difficult with her own kids, her youngest is the exception, she’s in a different headspace with him. He was conceived out of love.

Bell loves all her children and is heartbroken when they are hurt, especially when it is by family. Could they really not comb her daughter’s hair? Not even once? There is some disconnect between her and her older children now, she wishes that was not true. They are working towards bridging that gap. Being a mother is hard, you have “to be strong. You have to keep going. You have to sustain. You have to make it work.” She hopes her daughter knows that what she got was not mothering. What she got “was not right.” Hopefully, she understands this was carried down from her own grandmother’s experience. It is hard being the oldest daughter.

Bell and her husband recently had to have a hard conversation with their children, they wanted it. The conversation came out real ugly. Bell and her husband are trying to “get it right” with their youngest child. Bell feels like her daughter was a casualty. She could not give her the
type of nurturing she now gives her youngest son; she did not have the mental state. She knows what this feels like, she was a casualty for her mother, her sister got the care she had always wished for. Bell believes that children should be born when two people have discussions about it, when the parents have complementing personalities. When they are ready. Not in the lustful periods of life, not without preparation, not unplanned, not due to “just a fun night.” But three children were born out of these circumstances. Being loving of children is easier when you are prepared for them. Bell’s children noticed the difference in the way her and her husband engage with the youngest compared to them. Her and her husband did not know what they were doing at the time. They were not prepared. Bell’s children share that they did not ask to be here, she replies, neither did we. Bell’s life at the time was not designed for children, children were not a part of the plan. Not one, definitely not three. The miscarriage at three months hurt, they were finally ready. Their youngest has received the nurturing, the oldest never knew. This is something Bell is not proud of.

Bell is on a new journey of self-healing. She is giving herself grace. She acknowledges that she did the best she could with what she had. Bell knows that this self-healing journey will take time. She is still trying to figure it out. Sometimes she does not want to be bothered. She does not want to talk. She has all these responsibilities. She is not able to just release and let go. She finds herself just putting this smile on her face to show that everything is okay. It is just getting harder and harder to put that mask on. She cannot keep putting it on. The mask does not fit anymore, she cannot even put it on. Bell now tells herself she is enough, she acknowledges the generational trauma, the thoughts of not being enough, and falling short. She now just wants to scream “Fuck all this shit.” She acknowledges that she has a way to go, she still worries,
avoids goals, and feels overwhelmed at times. She has just decided she is tired of just surviving, she is ready to live.

**Strength**

For Bell, strength was described as handling your business no matter what it was. That was it. For her, there is not a great deal of space for Black women to show weakness because you “are not supposed to be weak.” People take advantage of that. Black women must get things done, you can cry on your own time, but make sure that “nobody see you do it.” Bell never heard anyone describe Black women as strong, she just saw it in their actions. Her grandmother, her aunts, cousins, friends represented this. For Bell, she has started to get away from that kind of thinking, she has been getting “the hell away from that.” However, her mother’s friend is what really flipped that on its head for her. This dynamic woman celebrated the death of her husband. After 20 years of being married to a not nice person, she deserved to celebrate. She drank margaritas and partied. This experience really affected Bell.

Bell shares a pressure to meet expectations of strength, especially regarding having a family. With the examples of marriage and family she had as a child, she did not want kids. She hates to say it but, if she had not already had two abortions, her daughter probably would not be here. She did not want kids. She did not want to be in a relationship. Without either, she believes that she would not care what anybody thought, she would not be carrying “this whole thing of strength and being strong and having to put on this persona. And not show weakness.” She shares that, “because I’m a mother, I’m a wife. I got to maintain a household. If it was just me, I wouldn’t care. I wouldn’t care.” For her, strength is attached to being a kid, then mother and wife with the responsibility of running a household.
When Bell hears the term Strong Black Woman, she thinks of it as a misconception, “it’s some bullshit and it’s rooted in white supremacy.” She does not buy into this term anymore. She recently had a conversation with her cousin and friend about the term. They realized that trying to be a strong person, a strong woman and trying to do it all, is “bullshit” and they are tired. They believe they should be able to say they are tired, say they “don’t want to do this. I should be able to say you’re wrong. Fuck you, excuse my language, but it’s just all bullshit and I’m tired, you know?” For Bell, Strong Black Woman is bullshit because, it comes in “by trying to be about the conception of we gotta be better than everybody else. We gotta come in with our hair straight so we can be accepted. We gotta speak a certain way, we have to watch our mannerisms. We have to watch our tone knowing damn well our facial expressions and our eyes tell everything.” She asks why she has to cover these parts of herself up? Why does she have to code switch? Why is she asked to justify her accomplishments amongst her white co-workers? Why do people have “problems with my black ass.”

Bell shares that she is now fighting back she is not watching her mannerism or tone. She is not here to make others comfortable. She knows now she does not have to be strong or loyal to the people that she works with, because they are not going to be loyal to her. She is no longer buying into this idea of strength. She shares that when others call her strong, she says that it is not being strong, it is doing what needs to be done. When she was younger, she took that label of strength as a source of pride, she was doing something right. As time has gone on, that label is a gut punch, “why I always got to be strong? I don’t wanna be strong, I wanna be weak, I wanna be vulnerable.” Bell wants to be told that it is okay to be weak. However, she does not want to be looked at weirdly for being vulnerable. But, for her that has been a shift away from strength.
Bell describes herself as a blank slate. She introduces herself as a former strong Black woman that is not buying into anybody else’s bullshit of who she needs to be. She is working on trying to figure out who she is and who she needs to be. She does not care how other people see her. People can see what they want. She believes the only way people will see who she is would be by taking the time to get to know her, however, people do not want to take the time to do that. People assume who she is based on her appearance and maybe her facial expressions. She is in the stage of her life where it is someone else’s loss, she is not going out of her way for people to see her, she is too busy working on herself.

**Womanist Witnessing and Reflection**

**I-poem**

Bell’s I-voice reflects a significant sense of pain. From childhood, Bell has been exposed to the feelings of disappointed hopes and aloneness. As she moved towards adulthood, reading her share, that pain still seems under the surface. However, its’ tone seems to shift to one of resentment, anger, and being overwhelmed. Reading her I-poem, it is as if you can follow the events that led up to where she is now. She paints her story in such a way that I could see the necessity of survival and the impact that it has had on her. Listening to Bell’s I-voice, I found myself experiencing a deep level of sadness. When she speaks of surviving and getting things done, you can feel it. I could sense the aloneness. At the beginning of Bell’s, I-poem, I reflected on the way that she spoke about taking part in this research. Bell still has dreams, dreams like the ones her mother has achieved. She spoke of needing help but, shifted towards “paying it forward” to help me, back to it being a good step towards her journey to “better myself.” I wondered for her why it was important to distance herself from her own struggles, to justify her presence in front of me as an act of kindness, and then seemingly realize again this was for her.
Bell is bright, this is something I can tell she still knows but, it seems to have gotten a little lost in the shuffle of life. Listening to her I-voice speak about the plans that she set for herself, the way she was ready to fulfill that plan, the hope in her voice was prominent. That hope changed dramatically when she shared, she was pregnant, and her plan would have to wait. This reminded me, however, of the way that she spoke of the accomplishments she had achieved as a child, the accomplishments that were invalidated by her father. Here, I heard that same shift in her voice, that same presence of disappointed hopes. As I continue to listen to her I-voice, I wonder how many times that voice of disappointment shows up. I noticed the disappointment shifted to hurt when she details the birth of her two bonus boys, conceived while her and her husband were in a relationship. That disappointment turns into resentment when she shares his absence in parenting, “[Last 10 years] I’ve been holding a lot of resentment. [There really wasn’t any space for me, you know, and] I wanted that space.”

Bell shares about her relationship with her mother. I noticed that in those shares, often her I-voice carries this tone of hurt, pain, and aloneness. There also seems to be this wanting that over the years seemed to grow smaller and smaller. Bell shares that, “I think she harbors a lot of resentment towards me.” I know for me reading and even listening to that statement stirred a level of sadness and washed over a lonely feeling in me that can only be a fraction of what she experienced. Listening to Bell’s I-voice depict instance after instance where people in her life disappointed her, betrayed her, hurt her, and used her was painful. Surviving makes sense with every word she says, every line I read. What I found myself drawn to however, was the way that even with the resentment and anger that she speaks of, she still found a way to explain the behavior of those that hurt her. Her mother had a lot going on, her father was brutally raped, her brother was sick. However, for her husband there seems to be space only for anger. That anger,
and a tone of feeling used, when she shares that she is working, and he is sitting on a bar stool. Where I struggled to accept this justification of her families’ behavior was when Bell I-voice shifted, “So you telling me my mere existence is a problem?” Her tone is a mix of confusion, anger, and sadness. I included this in Bell’s I-poem because this voice felt necessary. It was screaming to be heard. This voice was in the context of speaking to her brother but, it felt like this was for everyone. Bell tells herself that closure will not happen for her, I found myself wondering if she was telling me this or herself.

Listening to Bell’s I-voice helped me better understand her relationship with her daughter. In her I-voice, I found myself sometimes struggling with the matter-of-fact way that she depicted her relationship with her daughter, specifically. Bell speaks that way about all of her children but, this relationship felt a little different. Bell speaks of her daughter being a casualty but acknowledges that it might have been different if she did not have two other children. “I look at my daughter. I probably could have gotten it right, had I not added two more. I wasn’t even prepared for you.” I even find myself thinking about the conversation with her children about the difference in parenting between them and her youngest.

Listening to her voice, I had a challenging time finding a tone of sadness or regret, it seemed like it was just the facts. Listening to this felt harsh and cold but it made me think of her own experiences. Nurturing and being nurtured was not her experience. Bell has an awareness that this, “I’m saying, just carried down” and, “I was struggling,” she no longer has those distractions. However, where I did hear a sense of sadness towards her daughter, potentially a desire to nurture and protect was when she shared about her daughter not having her hair combed for a week. I never doubted that Bell loved her daughter but, here there was a sense of deep hurt for her daughter and her experience that was undeniable. “I was so heartbroken for her. I had to
tell [my daughter never again will] I put you in this situation.” Bell’s I-voice seems hopeful of her and her daughter’s relationship, right now it is hard.

I noticed the I-voice of hurt and aloneness seemed to be present in the way that Bell speaks about how others see her. “I’ve been deemed the responsible one. I’ve been the one that everybody goes to. I’ll get it done. I’m the resource queen. I don’t know. I’ll figure out. No one really asked me how am I doing. I can’t really talk to folks. I still have feelings; I need to talk through. I get dismissed.” I found myself wondering if she felt taken for granted or just expected to be okay. If so, I imagine that experience is so lonely for her. That I-voice seemed to get louder as Bell speaks about her journey to find herself, “I just don’t want to be bothered. I don’t wanna talk.” Listening to her voice, I questioned that desire to not talk, to not be bothered. I wonder if Bell has not felt heard by others, supported by others, or truly seen and, because of that has chosen to silence herself and “figure it out” on her own. I may be completely wrong, but she speaks of responsibilities, not being able to keep on her mask, needing assistance at work, and it seems like she is asking for help, needing help but, no one hears her. “I am just overwhelmed.”

Bell’s story

My first thought reading and listening to Bell’s share was how aspects of her own childhood were playing out in her experience of motherhood. I remember the phrase generational trauma playing through my head and was not surprised when she named it herself later in her story. Bell spoke about a feeling of resentment early in her share and I noticed this theme of resentment throughout her story that took different forms. Bell uses the word survival to explain her experience so far and, I found myself feeling sad listening and hearing her using “survival” to explain her life. I also wonder for her what it is like to look back on the last 45 years and see it as acts to just survive rather than really live. I cannot imagine what that must feel like for her but,
I noticed for myself that increased the initial sadness I felt. Bell’s depiction her experience of growing up with a brother with severe mental illness led me to asking how that affected her view of mental health. She speaks later about seeing him as sick but, also shares significant abuse she received at his hand and acknowledges that she will never receive closure for these experiences. I wonder how this affects her conceptualization of her own mental health. What did she say to or about herself when she started having her own mental health difficulties?

Reading and listening to Bell’s share, the theme of disappointed hopes appears prevalent for her. Bell speaks of her accomplishments growing up and how her father tore her down with his words and accusations that she had “cheated,” and her hard work was not her own. Bell describes a decline from being at the top of her class to not being able to retain information in college, even to the panic attack she speaks about around work. She speaks about a fear of messing up, making mistakes, and being judged. She shares about him telling her “She would never be anything.” I found myself wondering how much of her father’s voice plays in her head. How has this impacted her sense of self? And what do the panic attacks mean about her? Does she think her father was right?

Bell shares that she had a plan for getting back on track after leaving college, she had a plan to leave Chicago, she finally had things figured out. She found out she was pregnant. Bell notes that she had two previous abortions but had chosen to keep this pregnancy. I found myself wondering how did she come to this decision? Does she regret this decision today? She speaks about her daughter being a casualty, that she was not in a place mentally to mother but, she chose to continue with the pregnancy, why? Bell shares that she did not want kids. Noticing this split between desires and actions, I wondered for her what it was like to raise a child and a few years later, other people’s children, when this did not align with her personal goals, her life goals? As I
mentioned previously, resentment is a prevalent theme throughout Bell’s share. What I found interesting was the generational nature of that resentment. Bell speaks about her mother’s resentment of “taking care of everybody” and, the same resentment shows up for her. The generational nature of handling things seems to show up in the act of mothering and nurturing for Bell, as well. She speaks of not being able to nurture her daughter and not receiving that nurturing from her own mother. I wondered for her, what was that like? What was it like to not be able to do the thing that “should” come natural to her. I wonder if this changed the way she looked at her own relationship with her mother. I am also curious if seeing the way that her relationship with her daughter was affected if that inspired her desire to “get it right” with her son. She shares that because he was planned, she can tap into this nurturing spirit she could not find with her other three children but, I come back to the question of what changed, besides time and preparedness?

Bell’s shares drew me towards this underlying aloneness that seemed to be present since childhood. She speaks about how her father not only tore down her accomplishments but, he also seemingly was a better father to her God sister than her. However, when she speaks about these experiences, she shares tearfully that she cannot even share her experiences with her sister or God sister, they do not believe her. I wonder what that was like for her? She shares the same experience about her husband. Bell seems alone in her past and present struggles. I wonder how isolating that was for her and, even how this might have increased that need to “survive” in a world that did not seem to have a great deal of space for her. This aloneness seems to increase as she is raising not only her daughter but her husband’s two sons.

Bell speaks about her husband’s absence and the battle of dealing with two baby mothers and a mother-in-law, alone. She credits this to her current hands-off approach towards parenting
these boys but, again this is another instance of why the necessity to survive for Bell has been so important. I noticed within myself a great deal of sadness reading and listening to Bell’s aloneness, it seeps through the pages of my transcript and in the catches in her voice. However, the aloneness that seemed to be the loudest related to her relationship with her mother. Bell justifies that her mother “was going through her stuff.” But the wanting and the aloneness she experienced because of her mother is potent in her share. Bell shares that her mother did not “fight for me” when her father blocked her academic achievements. Her mother did not pay attention to her when she was “hanging around boys” or notice the type of girls she had befriended. Bell’s mother only noticed her when she was in trouble. When she was 17 and pregnant, she looked at her like a problem. When she was pregnant at 20, her mother looked at her like she was a problem. I imagine in those moments she really could have used her mother. I imagine if that were the case, she might have felt a little less alone.

**Strength**

I both enjoyed the experience and found myself feeling a sense of sadness listening to Bell’s understanding of strength. I was really connected to her divorcing herself from the Strong Black Woman label. It was interesting to me the way strength was related to family and motherhood for Bell. I found myself wondering if there is any resentment for her for having to have this responsibility and strength she did not wish to have.

Bell speaks about the Strong Black Woman stereotype being “some bullshit and it’s rooted in white supremacy.” I am curious of what it meant to her to come to this realization. Was there any loss in this process? Was she angry, upset, disappointed, relieved? I appreciated listening to her note that she found community amongst others who had come to this realization. Bell spoke about not having a tribe but, I wonder if this community of women with similar
beliefs served as a tribe to help in the process of her releasing strengths’ grasp on her. Listening to Bell speak about strength and work, I wondered how much of what she said has been held inside her body. Listening to her share, I experienced this release of words, frustration, answering of questioning of her accomplishments in a way that felt hurtful to her covered in anger.

Bell speaks about fighting back against this idea of strength. She speaks about wanting to be weak and, I found myself wondering about her word choice. Did she choose the word weak because it is the opposite of strength? Does weak have a positive connotation for her? Or is it something else? Considering other words such as soft and vulnerable, why did the word weak fit her? When she speaks of being vulnerable, it relates to not wanting others to look at her. This leads me to wonder how she truly views herself in the absence of strength.
Chapter 5

In search of African American mothers individualized experience of motherhood and mental health, the purpose of this dissertation was developed. Understanding the role of socialization regarding strength in African American women (Staples & Johnson, 1993; Wallace, 2007), this inquiry specifically focused on the self-defined experiences of motherhood and mental health concerns. The purpose of this research was to consider the impact of the Strong Black Woman Stereotype (Woods-Giscombe, 2010), the Silencing Paradigm (Beaubouef-Lafontant, 2008), and the concept of the Crooked Room (Harris-Perry, 2011) for African American mothers using qualitative design. The design used an integrated womanism approach to explore the self-defined experiences of African American mothers with mental health concerns. As a witness, I was allotted the opportunity to share not only my experiences of working with the mothers but, also identify themes, tones, and voices present in their share. This research was intended to be guided by three research questions:

1. How have traditional ideas of the Strong Black Woman stereotype impacted African American mother’s experience of motherhood?

2. How do African American mothers with mental health concerns conceptualize their strength?

3. In what ways does the Strong Black Woman stereotype impact African American mothers' identity of mothers with mental health concerns?

Connecting back to a womanist approach to research, I find it important to address the research questions. At the beginning of this work, I was confident that all the mothers of my study would see the “Strong Black Woman” stereotype as harmful, I was wrong. In hindsight, I see that my questions are leading and completely skewed towards my own assumptions and perspective. It is
also important to come back to womanist theory. I believe “finding a way” or “forcing” the shares to fit into these three questions would be counterintuitive of a womanist approach towards research and would have potentially created crooked rooms and opportunities of misrecognition of the mothers of my study. Of the greatest concern for me was forcing the shares to align with the questions and potentially serve as an area of silencing for these wonderful stories that were gracefully shared with me. Keeping in the forefront of my mind the purpose of this study, exploring self-identified experiences of motherhood and mental health, I feel comfortable relinquishing the hold these questions had on me and the desired outcome. Moving away from the questions came at a greater reward, the opportunity to hear the mother’s voices in their most authentic form. Through listening to understand and engagement with analysis, the following question emerged: How do African American mothers with mental health concerns conceptualize strength and the Strong Black Woman stereotype?

**Standing Upright in the Crooked Room**

Highlighting the purpose of this study was to examine the individualized experiences of motherhood and mental health amongst 8 women, the following section focuses on each mother’s individualized depiction of motherhood, mental health, strength, the Strong Black Woman Stereotype, and their opportunity to correct potentially crooked images of themselves. These smaller summaries of the mother’s larger experience are present for two reasons. First, to avoid creating a generalized interpretation of eight incredibly unique lives, experiences, and understandings. And, secondly, to serve as an anchor back to the importance of not viewing these women as part of a monolith, when discussing similarities and differences in their experience in a later section.
Chikwenye depicted herself as a “weird” person that is still on the journey to figure out who she will be “when she grows up.” Required to grow up quicker than she would have wished, Chikwenye experienced the isolation and loneliness of being a military wife raising a small child. Chikwenye navigated maintaining a household and raising a child, but craved connection in the way that only furthered the isolation she felt. For Chikwenye, making the decision to end her marriage was a difficult one. Attached to this decision came with a sense of “failure” that she was not able to give her son the life she never had, a life with both parents. Chikwenye took motherhood seriously and believes her greatest accomplishment, so far, is the man her son turned out to be. However, motherhood required Chikwenye to put her own needs last. Now that her son is an adult, she can focus on herself. Now it is her time. She questions who she is outside of a mother and is in search of the next stage of her life.

For Chikwenye, strength was depicted by the women that raised her. However, that same strength has created some difficulties for her. Chikwenye shares that being raised by women that depicted strength and resilience, who made “things work when there you know isn't a way to make things work,” did not create a great deal of space for her to experience weakness. Therapy was a place where she struggled with “weakness.” At times, that level of strength felt unattainable. Chikwenye shared that the inability to be able to be seen as soft, to be allowed to cry has caused her difficulties in the past. She equates strength to a duck in the water and how you cannot see what is going on underneath the surface. She relates to that duck as others have only seen what was happening above the surface when she found herself struggling with depression and anxiety. Chikwenye acknowledges that she comes off strong, but she believes
that it is her armor. She does not believe being seen as strong is a bad thing but believes there should be space for her to be seen as more than just strong. To be seen as soft.

Chikwenye depicted a Strong Black Woman as a woman that was independent. For her, this type of woman takes care of herself and her community. She can withstand hardship and “come back or snap back,” without failing. A Strong Black Woman is disciplined, she is controlled, she holds it all together without falling apart. This type of woman sounds “really hard” to Chikwenye, and an idea she believed she had internalized. Although Chikwenye is still trying to figure out how she would define herself, she wishes others would see her as multidimensional and pair the strength that they see in her with the softness she feels.

**Clenora**

Clenora told her story as a woman who achieved the dreams of a little girl. Motherhood was not difficult for her, she had support. Clenora acknowledged that having a second child was not a part of the plan, but she found a way to balance the life she wanted to live with motherhood. For Clenora, her mental health was affected by navigating a disconnect between her and her husband. Making excuses for him weighed on her mentally, but this experience allowed her to take a stand and gain the respect she knew she deserved. Clenora acknowledges that mentally she is tired. She is dedicated to advocating for people of color, but oftentimes individuals at her job do not have those same values. For Clenora fitness not only keeps her healthy, but it is also integral to her life, it keeps her grounded.

For Clenora, being labeled a Strong Black Woman means that you are loved. She viewed her mother as the picture of strength and admired what her mother achieved with a 6th grade education and 12 children. Clenora believes that having the right mindset, believing in yourself, relying on God, and being loved is the essence of being a Strong Black Woman. You can also be
a negative Strong Black Woman, by not using your power to help others. She believes it is so important to help those around you and to treat people well, this is strength. Clenora shared that she has been called strong quite a bit. That others wished that there were more people like her. However, for her, only a small circle of people knows her struggles. Clenora shares that when these people ask her how she makes it through, she responds “You just have to pray. You just have to keep moving.” What Clenora does not share is the sleepless nights she has had. Clenora depends on God and herself, and therefore people think she is strong. Clenora is a no-nonsense type of person, some say that means she does not have a sense of humor or a heart, that she is cruel. She is honest. She would hope that others would see that she is direct but caring with a heart of service. She tells it to you straight and, holds you accountable for your actions.

**Patricia**

For Patricia, motherhood represented keeping her son safe. Patricia, who suggested that she was a person that would stick it out in marriage for the sake of saying she was married, changed her stance when she realized her son was suffering. As a grandmother, Patricia acknowledged that some of her own experiences of being molested as a child influence the fear and hypervigilance she experiences towards her grandchildren, her granddaughter specifically. Mental health was something that Patricia struggled with for quite some time. For her, farming, the love of her husband, and her time in Lakeside Hospital have helped make managing her PTSD, severe anxiety, and depression easier. Patricia’s life experiences have created a desire to be a voice for those who have struggled with mental health concerns. Finding solace in the land, Patricia’s journey is one that includes abuse, standing alone, and self-doubt. However, that same journey is filled with love, support, and a growing confidence that allows her to walk in her own light. Patricia has experienced challenges regarding her mental health, but those challenges have
led her to a better understanding of not only herself but her bigger purpose. For her, it is important that others know that she is not ashamed of having mental health concerns, she is not ashamed of the abuse she experienced, those are masks she refuses to wear.

Strength for Patricia was depicted by her mother and grandmothers. These women not only accomplished great things but rose in the face of adversity. Patricia believed that strength was not shown in the loudness of a woman’s voice, but rather “showing up for the people that you need to show up for, that is being strong without saying anything.” During her time at Lakeside, Patricia learned that being a Strong Black Woman meant being true to herself. Where she once used to pretend to be someone else, she can now just be herself. Patricia’s strength is in her ability to be free, to show up just the way she is. For her, strength is a positive thing. Patricia introduces herself as “I am a product of abuse. I am a person that wears mental illness and I’m a wife. I’m a grandmother, I'm a mother. I’m a spiritual woman. I’m a farmer. That’s who I am.” Patricia wished that others would see her as she sees herself, but also as someone that is not ashamed of her struggles with mental illness.

Audre

Audre believed that she has “Mother’s Wit.” This characteristic was what kept her daughter safe from harm. However, raising a daughter, caring for a sick mother, and maintaining head of household responsibilities did not come without a cost. Audre shared that when her mother was sick, she heard a voice, twice. Audre believed that her experiences with mental health might not have gotten to the level that they reached if she had had support. Mothering for Audre was not a joke. Mothering came with an immense amount of responsibility, and for Audre while raising her daughter, meant she became “pretty much nonexistent.” Audre wished not to
share what the voice said to her, only her daughter knows, but Audre knows that support would have made a difference.

For Audre, strength was depicted by the men in her family more than the women. She acknowledged her mother’s depiction of strength but, identified seeing the women doing the cooking and cleaning while the men did the work. Strong Black women for Audre was something she related to characters in pop culture. However, for her, outside of TV she did not see anyone, specifically a Black woman that exemplified strength. As an adult, she now realizes her sister was strong. For Audre, a Strong Black Woman is innovative, like her. A Strong Black Woman has things that she has to take care of, she does not take no for an answer, she is going to at least try. She is going to try more than once. A Strong Black Woman does not let things get her down, at least not for too long. However, she is still nurturing, caring, puts things in the right perspective, is accountable, and consistent. Audre believes that she can be both a superwoman and not strong. Audre sees herself as a superwoman regarding will, tenacity, and perseverance, not emotionally. She remembers being called strong when her mother was sick, she now sees the damage believing that did. She now sees herself as strong to a point and loving, to a fault.

Alice

Alice’s journey to know “who she is and, whose she is,” is paved with fear, oppression, laughter, and tears. Alice acknowledges that her fear of being raped as a child set the groundwork for her experiences of mental health difficulties throughout her life. As a twin, Alice always felt “not as strong as her twin.” As a mother, Alice balanced her fear of losing her children due to her mental health with celebrating and loving them fully. Alice knows that she has made mistakes as a mother, and she hopes her children can forgive her. However, she also knows the unconditional love that she experiences from God and her family tells her that she is
safe and protected. Alice’s experiences have taught her the pain of “cutting loose” her sister and the pressure of “having the odds against you” can cause when you have a mental health concern. Alice refuses to let Bipolar define her. For her, she knows it is just a diagnosis, no matter if people try to minimize her to just that.

For Alice, strength was depicted by her mother. Her mother represented a Proverbs 31 woman, something Alice also strives to be. For Alice, a Strong Black Woman does not have to raise her voice, cuss, or scream to get things done. This type of woman can be both gentle and firm. Alice considers herself to be a Strong Black Woman and, views it as a positive. For Alice, she considers herself to be loving, kind, and independent. However, that independence is centered in her actions as a Christian. She is strong and powerful, and before everything she prays. Alice no longer places weight on others’ perception. For her, the most important thing she would want people to see in her is that she is Christ-like.

Layli

Layli’s experience of motherhood and caregiving has come with significant adjustments and adapting, it also came with significant mental health struggles. Feeling that no one could see her drowning, Layli experienced thoughts that she was not good enough to be her sons’ mother, and that they deserved to be with someone that could better care for them. Layli continues to struggle with the grief she feels over the loss of her sister, and the need to put the needs of her son over her own. Layli acknowledged that the strain of motherhood, caregiving, and her mental health at times became too much, and led to two past suicide attempts, and a brief period in Lakeside. Although Layli acknowledged that her journey still has periods where she is trying to “keep the dragon in the dungeon,” she also recognized tremendous growth from these
experiences. She now knows that she is a good enough mother for her sons, and she deserves them, and she did all she could as a daughter.

For Layli, strength was displayed by her mother, “she fought a hell of a battle in her life.” Layli wonders if she shared too much of her struggles with her sons. Her mother never did that. Layli just wanted her children to be prepared for the reality of life. Layli does not like the term Strong Black Woman. She believes it is too heavy. This term requires strength and does not leave room for weakness. Layli wants people to know calling her a “strong woman” is not a conversation piece, it does not hype her up. She does not like it. Layli sees herself as a “free hug sign.” She is learning who she is and working towards developing open relationships with healthy boundaries. All Layli wants people to say about her is that she did her best. In motherhood, friendships, and relationships, she did her best.

Sojourner

Growing up, Sojourner knew she was an outsider in her own family. With skin darker than her mother and siblings, she was quickly exposed to the way words of those closest to her could cut deep. For her, this is where she believed her struggles began. As Sojourner could not change the color of her skin, she set her sights out to be perfect in every other way. Sojourner learned quickly that being “perfect” was the way for her to write her own story. However, that need to be perfect followed her into motherhood. It brought with it anxiety, and anxiety that increased as they aged. Sojourner was dedicated to protecting her children from experiencing the pain that she experienced as a child. Nevertheless, the protection of her children did not come at a cost. Sojourner shared that there was a need to be the “perfect mom” for her children, was unattainable and created so much pressure and anxiety for her. Anxiety she had to hide, “I
became very, very good at masking my emotions. I needed to look perfect. Regardless to what I was fighting inside.”

For Sojourner, being strong was generational. She intended to fall in line. Life showed her she was not as strong as she thought she was. Being a Strong Black Woman does not leave a great deal of room for emotional stability. Sojourner understands that Strong Black Woman works for some people. Although she respects that, for her she wants to rewrite what it means to be strong. Sojourner has instances where people expected her to be strong and were surprised when she was not. She wishes people could see how she feels on the inside. Sojourner views herself as the protector that she needed; that she still needs. She would want people to say that she takes care of those she cares about. She loves hard. She only hopes one day someone will return the love that she gives so freely to those around her.

Bell

Bell is on a journey of self-healing. Life and motherhood have not been easy for her. Bell has spent a substantial part of her life “surviving,” but she is not willing to do this anymore. The panic attacks she experienced because of work was the last straw. Family has always been a difficult topic for Bell, she has accepted she will never receive closure in some of these areas. Bell has accepted that she was not the mother her children deserved. She acknowledges that generational trauma affected the way that she mothered her daughter. She also knows that at the time she did not have the mental state. Bell also knows that the anger, yelling, and depression did not help her raise her children, there was just so much pressure. She is hoping to get it “right” with her youngest.

For Bell, she saw strength from the women in her life by their doing. She learned that there was not a great deal of space for weakness, because “you are not supposed to be weak.”
Although she never heard of Black women being described as strong, the women in her family and friends represented strength. Bell is trying to get “the hell away from that.” Bell feels pressure to be strong, particularly regarding her family. For her, she believes if she did not have the responsibility of wife or mother, she would not care about meeting this expectation of strength. For Bell, the Strong Black Woman stereotype is bullshit, and it no longer serves her. She used to carry that label with pride, now it feels like a gut punch. Bell now fights against that expectation. She is no longer watching her mannerism or tone. She is no longer focused on making others comfortable. For Bell, she wants to now be seen as weak and embraced as vulnerable, without the stares. Bell calls herself a former Strong Black Woman, she no longer buys into the pressure to be strong. If you would like to get to know who she is, she is willing to show you. However, most people are not willing to take the time.

**In Search of Commonweal**

As discussed in an earlier chapter, a womanist is a communitarian, viewing a goal of social change being a focus on the commonweal. With a focus of bringing commonweal to fruition, this section examined overlapping tiers amongst Black women (Phillips, 2006) on the level of the self and identity. Honoring the individualized experiences of the eight women, it is important to examine the similarities and differences amongst these women in the following three areas: experiences of motherhood, mental health, and understanding of strength and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype. It was the hope that creating space for shared experiences amongst the women, highlights an interdependence amongst them that creates a space of healing that can cannot be carried out on a “singularly individual level” (Phillips, 2006).

Reflecting on each mother’s share, a common theme that seemed to arise in each share was the impact lack of support or the need for support had on their individual experiences.
Examining the shares, the mothers fell into two categories regarding lack of support. The first category reflected a desire for increased support from their husbands and partners that was not received to various degrees. The mothers spoke of lack of support due to their husbands being away for work, avoidance of responsibilities, and an unwillingness or inability to provide needed support. The other four women’s lack of support was connected to family or relationships they expected to supply support. Like the previous group of women, these women’s experiences varied from lack of support from family when raising children, not feeling like support was available from family, feelings of being othered, feeling oppressed by those were supposed to supply support, and lack of support from expected sources and a search for it elsewhere.

Although the experiences of these eight women varied, the commonality between both groups of women, no matter where the source of the lack of support was directed was that the lack of support negatively affected their mental health in some way.

Examining the mother’s shares, it appeared like a loss of self in motherhood was present in four of the mothers and resisted in one. For the mothers that depicted a loss of self, it presented differently, and the reasoning varied. For one mother, loss of self appeared to be at an act of not being selfish and putting her son first. The second mother related this loss of self, as a result of mothering leaving you “pretty much nonexistent.” However, this loss was necessary to keep her daughter safe. The third mothers’ loss of self seemed to be connected to responsibility and duty, this loss also seemed to relate to a sense of resentment. And, the last mothers’, loss of self reflects a sense of responsibility, but holds a question of “what do I do outside of being his mother?” Different from all the moms, but more of a clear contrast, one mother suggested that motherhood was not difficult for her, due to the support that she had. She also acknowledged that the birth of her second child would not conflict with the plans that she had for herself. Although
loss of self was not prevalent amongst all eight mothers, it seemed important to note as half of
the mothers noted this being a part of their experience.

Acknowledging Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave’s (2014), assertion that Black
women socialize their daughters through dialogue, modeling, and vicarious conditioning.
Examining the connections between the mothers and their mothers felt necessary. Although I
intend to return to this relationship regarding the discussion of strength, the mother-daughter
relationship seemed prevalent amongst all eight women. Each mother’s relationship with her
own mother differed, from close to strained, however, the impact of the mothers’ mother was
present. Two of the mothers reflected similarities in viewing their mothers as exhibiting qualities
of a Proverb 31 woman, These characteristics, are referenced in the King James Bible as being
qualities of a virtuous woman (i.e., she is more precious than jewels, she is a good wife, she
takes care of her home and family and uses her time wisely, she is charitable, prepared for the
future, etc.) (King James Version, 1769/2017). These same characteristics they tried to
incorporate in their own mothering experience. One mother spoke about being raised by her
aunts, who nurtured her creativity and the way she sees the world. However, she notes that her
experience as a mother has allotted her grace to her own mother, who had her at 16-years-old.
Another mother reflected how her mother supported her desires to achieve her goals and helped
her balance the pressures of motherhood. Another learned a sense of responsibility and the
importance of juggling a full plate. Yet, another speaks about learning how to be a mother that
makes her children feel loved, a charge she tries to achieve daily. Although each mother depicts
some connection to their mothers, two stood out as receiving messaging that may have been a
source of pain. Between these two women, there seemed to be a struggle between a belief of
silence in pain, and the other the generational trauma and the burden it places on the first-born
daughter.

The presence of self-care was an important topic to examine. As mentioned in an earlier
chapter, it was important to pay close attention to instances that the mothers discussed self-care,
as self-care has an impact on an individual’s outward depiction of imbalances in their lives. Self-
care also serves as a guide for expansion for disclosures concerning societal influences that
potentially have been problematic or lead to misrecognition. For all eight mothers, self-care was
depicted directly and indirectly. From acts of putting themselves first, writing, spending time in
the presence of the Lord, baths, farming, “me time,” fitness, and journaling, acts of self-care
seemed to serve as barriers between them and the stress of the world around them.

Acknowledging that an integral part of this study focused on the experience of mental
health amongst these mothers, it is important to highlight the willingness or unwillingness to
speak about their experience with mental health. For six of the eight mothers, they presented
themselves as open and willing to discuss their experiences of mental health concerns. Although
not all five disclosed a diagnosis, all either used language that suggested some type of mental
health concern (anxiety and depression) or depicted that their mental health concerns lead to
suicide attempts or short term-inpatient hospital stays. Of the remaining two mothers, their level
of disclosure varied on the continuum of a desire for privacy (disclosing hearing a voice but
asking to not discuss what she heard) to an attempt to separate themselves from being labeled
with having mental health concerns (sharing an instance of mental health concerns but clarifying
at the end of the share that she had a “clear mind. I’m not mentally incompetent.”). Highlighting
these differences in openness speaks not only towards a potential lessening in stigma regarding
talking about mental health, but also shined a light on the continued presence of stigma regarding mental health amongst Black women.

**Strength and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype**

According to the work of Staples & Johnson (1993) and Wallace (2007), from an early age, the essentiality of being a Strong Black Woman, and the qualities of assuming that role is learned through socialization. Acknowledging the focus of this study, examining prominent instances of commonality regarding strength and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype is imperative. Although the mothers of this study had varied experiences and understanding of strength and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype, the most prominent similarity amongst all the mothers, excluding one, was the impact mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and female friends had on their understanding of what strength represented. Across the six women, all named their mother first as their primary depiction of strength, followed by other matriarchal figures. This aligns with the earlier assertion by Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave (2014) that suggests the role Black mothers play in the socialization of their daughters. Further, seven of the eight mothers suggested that although they did not hear of Black women being described as strong, their conceptualization of strength was based on “strength by doing,” strength they saw these matriarchal figures engaging in. Although only two mothers specifically referenced strength not being connected to “yelling,” “cursing” or having a “boisterous” voice, a commonality amongst the mothers was the sense that strength is connected to action rather than words.

Amongst two mothers a similarity in associating being a Strong Black Woman and submissive to their male partners appeared. In both women, there seemed to be a context of submission as a form of strength, and the absence of that in relation to their partnerships or the unwillingness to serve as a “helpmate” or “submit” was related to a lack of strength. A point of
interest is that amongst the eight mothers, six made some stance of the Strong Black Woman Stereotype carrying a negative or positive connotation. For two of the mothers, strength and being a Strong Black Woman was seen as a positive. For these mothers, being a Strong Black Woman was something they embraced. Strength for one created allowance to embrace both gentleness and being firm; for another, it meant that she was “free.” Two of the other mothers fell into the range of seeing it as a positive to not “bad,” but each suggested that strength needs to include room for other characteristics, that it needed to be redefined, to allow for the opportunity for Black Women to be seen as “multidimensional.” However, for the other two women, they each rejected the Strong Black Woman stereotype. These women suggested Strong Black Woman was “bullshit, rooted in white supremacy” and “heavy.” There was also a suggestion that strength’s presence required an absence of weakness. Nevertheless, the mother's responses highlight the importance of space for individualized understandings and conceptualizations of strength and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype.

Before addressing the characteristics of a Strong Black Woman identified by the mothers of this study, it is important to acknowledge the areas in which it was suggested that strength, expectations of strength and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype had negative impacts on the mothers in three areas. These areas included: inability to meet expectations of strength, being called strong when dealing with mental health or motherhood concerns, and strength at the expense of expressing emotions. Although not all the mothers experienced a negative impact in one or all three areas, the amount that did is substantial enough to warrant examination. For seven of the eight mothers, not meeting expectations of strength was positively identified as a source of feelings of “failure,” “trying not to fall apart,” “not being as strong as she wished she had been,” “not being as strong as,” “surviving,” “why I always got to be strong?” And people
thinking you are strong. This is not to suggest that the experience of not being able to meet expectations of strength was not prevalent for all the mothers but highlighting the instances in which the inability to obtain expected strength was expressed during their share.

Regarding being called strong when dealing with motherhood or mental health concerns, the consensus amongst 6 of the mothers was that this label did not have the effect that was intended. For these mothers, being labeled as strong was not a “conversation piece,” it does not “hype her up.” Labeling these mothers as strong when they were facing life difficulties did not consider that they were “slowly dying inside,” as the label of strength was placed upon them. This label of strength did not negate the “sleepless nights” that were not shared. For the mothers that may have considered strength as a sense of pride, as strength stopped having the meaning that it once held, that pride dissipated. That pride, however, was replaced with desires to be seen as soft, how much strength cost them, and how that word is now a “gut punch,” particularly when they do not want to be seen as strong, when they want to be seen as weak and vulnerable. Lastly, in regard strength at the expense of expressing emotions, four mothers suggested that strength does not leave room for emotions. Strength for them, does not leave room for talking about feelings. Strength reflects “weakness” as going against what was shown in their mothers. Strength does not afford a “breaking apart moment,” it requires holding things together, and does not afford her the emotions humans should have. Strength can create a knowing that you can cry on your own time, just make sure that no one sees you.

**Characteristics of the Strong Black Woman**

Similarities and differences in characteristics of being a Strong Black Woman highlights the importance of understanding the value in accepting individualized understandings of the term. It also highlights the potential danger of assuming that strength is conceptualized in a
universally known framework. This type of assumption not only creates space for potential misrecognition, but also as a tool of silencing individuals. Varying responses speaks to the difference in conceptualization of strength and the impact it has had on their lives. Keeping this perspective in the forefront, it is not surprising that finding a great deal of commonalities in depictions of strength was difficult. Out of the over 20+ characteristics of strength, similarities in responses were limited to caring for her family, others, and the community, carrying the load of responsibilities, enduring obstacles life throws her, the way that she speaks, and the way she believes in herself. The limited identified commonalities amongst characteristics of strength reinforces the importance of viewing strength and the Strong Black Woman term, as nuanced concepts that vary drastically across different Black women.

**Recognizing Misrecognition**

Acknowledging the unique experiences of each mother, it is important to note how the experiences of the mothers aligns with past research regarding the Strong Black Woman stereotype and strength. As I have said previously, an area of interest for this dissertation was on exploring the role strength and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype had on individualized experiences of mothers with mental health concerns. However, the concept of strength is more complex than strong or not strong. As stated previously, Nelson et al. (2016) highlighted past research that suggested that African-centered principles, such as “interconnectedness, strength in collectivity, self-knowledge, and ‘spiritness’ identified by Parham (2009), continue to influence the Black experience (p. 552). These principles along with the findings of Boyd-Franklin (2003) and Mattis (2002), which highlights the role spirituality and relationships with others, including extended families and communities, has on Black women’s acquiring of strength (p.552), reflect some of the similar experiences of the mothers of this study, who too were influenced by their
connection to spirituality and important interpersonal relationships. Although not all of the mothers represented this experience, continued validity on the research of Song et al. (2014) who noted African American mothers’ “arm’s length” perspective regarding discussing mental health concerns is of continued importance. This highlights a potential area of continued research regarding the barriers that maintain the “arm’s length” perspective amongst some African American women.

An area of immense importance to this dissertation, was the alignment of some mother’s experience of the Strong Black Woman Stereotype, as an instance of misrecognition, of being unheard by those they confided in, as well as an expectation of strength in the presence of struggle. These instances connect with Harris-Perry’s (2011) suggestion that African American women’s struggle with the slanted images of the crooked room is characterized as a problem of recognition” (p. 35). These instances of misrecognition continue to highlight the importance of understanding the individualized experience of African American women and creates pause towards using strength or Strong Black Woman as “conversation pieces to ‘hype [them]’ up.”

Lastly, consistent across almost all of the mothers, the importance of acknowledging the significant impact of socialization of Black girls in the development of strength and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype. As stated previously, Beauboueuf-Lafontant (2007) highlights that the expectation of strength does not begin in adulthood, but rather from girlhoods, women reflected on being expected to present a “cool façade” by the strong women in their lives (p. 39). Within this cool façade, however, came an understanding for these girls that dwelling on pain and fears was seen as weakening a woman, and made her “less than capable of surviving the battle that her life was supposed to be” (p.39). The expectation of strength by doing was prevalent throughout most of the mothers’ stories; however, this leads to questions as to whether this strength by doing
and expectations of not dwelling on pain and fears at the risk of being “weakened” support the Strong Black Woman Stereotype in potentially negative ways. For some of the mothers, the label of Strong Black Woman highlighted their strength at the expense of silencing their vulnerability.

**Limitations**

It is my hope that the experience of reading this body of work, and the results that appeared from it encourages those that read the work to be conscientious in their use of strength and Strong Black Woman as a label or badge of honor. Acknowledging that for some strength is a positive characteristic, the instances where labeling Black women as strong can serve as an instance of misrecognition or silencing, should serve as a reasoning to give pause, and ask how they conceptualize their experience. Although the results do not directly suggest consistent instances where providers identified these women as strong, it is the hope that this may lead to that same pause when clients and patients are expressing concerns regarding mental health, motherhood, or instances of life difficulties in any form. It is the hope that this work encourages curiosity, and movement towards asking questions rather than making assumptions.

In hindsight, there are quite a few things that I would do differently in this study. As I addressed previously, if I knew what I know now, my research questions would have looked quite different. Instead of formulating questions that I believed would align with my own expectations of strength and Strong Black Woman Stereotype, I wished that I would have created space for the questions to develop on their own, as a result of what the mothers said. I am grateful that through this experience, I was able to direct my attention towards the mothers’ self-identified experience rather than trying to force them to fit into my questions. However, in hindsight, I can see how trying to force the mothers to fit in the very neat box that I created
would have really hurt the relationship I developed with these women, but also caused me to miss witnessing their experience absent of my questions looming influence.

Reflecting on limitations of this study, the biggest one that stood out to me was the necessity to better decipher the difference between strength and Strong Black Woman. For some, strength and being a Strong Black Woman was used interchangeably, but for some the instances between strength and Strong Black Woman felt really nuanced. I found myself fearful that I might be “getting their experience wrong.” An example that really stands out for me is when one of the mothers suggested liking being called strong but noted that the “Strong Black Woman” is a façade. I really wish that I would have asked for clarity when discussing strength, did each mother mean strength or being a Strong Black Woman. Although this may seem like splitting of hairs for some, my experience working with these women suggest that this exploration may have been fruitful and unveiled a knowing that may have been lost, because that clarity was not explored.

Another limitation, which is similar in other qualitative studies, was the fact that I only obtained the individualized experience of eight mothers. Although this study’s focus was not directed at finding a consensus amongst the women. The availability of time and resources might have allotted me to witness more individualized experiences of mental health and motherhood in Black mothers, and from that be able to formulate more expanded considerations for engaging with and working with Black mothers with mental health concerns. Additional engagement in shares may have also created an even richer experience that may have allowed me to further explore the nuances of strength and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype.

Finally, although I developed wonderful relationships with each woman of my study. I can acknowledge that for some of the women, discussion of mental health may have been
difficult, particularly for those I was a stranger to. Each woman’s story was unique and transformative; however, I believe that if I had had the opportunity to spend more time with each, potentially two opportunities to engage in womanist shares, they may have felt more comfortable sharing with me.

**Implications**

For clinicians, providers, family members, and friends who have known, loved, and treated African American mothers with mental health concerns, the main implication of these results is understanding the importance of creating space for listening to, asking questions, and not assuming we understand their experience. Strength and being labeled as a Strong Black Woman has different value and meaning amongst individual Black women. For some, these labels are badges of honor worn proudly, others strength has value, but needs to be redefined to meet the complexity of Black women’s lived experiences, and for some these labels are restrictive and do not work for them. Acknowledging how different strength and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype can be conceptualized, it is believed that asking Black women how they conceptualize their experience, and how they define themselves rather than placing labels onto them is imperative.

Although there was not a resounding consensus of mothers suggesting that they had been called strong in the face of difficulties in motherhood and mental health, an important consideration for clinicians and providers may potentially lie in their use of language when working with Black women. Acknowledging the “missing bricks” when conceptualizing Black women within traditional psychology (Spates, 2012), it may be a benefit for practitioners to examine the historical context of tropes and stereotypes placed upon Black women, as a way to bring awareness within themselves of their use of language that may further silence Black
women or serve as a moment of misrecognition, when their depictions of difficulties do not align with expected presentation of mental health concerns, difficulties with motherhood, or life experiences. However, this shift also comes with the expectation of clinicians and practitioners to bring awareness to their own biases or beliefs of the strength of the women they treat.

Considering the prevalence of understanding of strength through mothers, matriarchal figures, and fictive kin, the influence of expectations of strength by these matriarchal figures highlights the importance of socializations’ role on displays of strength, help-seeking behaviors, and meeting the expectations of strength by enduring. An implication of this study is the importance of continued exploration of the role of socialization on Black women’s identity development, behaviors, and future socialization of their own daughters. Within this consideration, it is important to explore how socialization influences Black women’s depiction of mental health concerns, help-seeking behaviors, and expression of difficulties to health care providers. This also creates space for further exploration of self-silencing amongst these women and how it influences their help seeking behaviors

Conclusion

In search of my mother’s garden, I found my own. This experience also granted me the opportunity to walk with 8 mothers through theirs. Strength and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype are steeped in a sociopolitical context that does not always allow for the wholeness of Black women. As a Womanist, I can understand that strength and being strong is an intimate knowing amongst Black women that develops at a young age, modeled by those they look up to, are nurtured by, and aspire to be. However, this same strength, at times, can keep them sick, make them sicker, or be a place of pride. The importance of understanding how complex Black women are, and how they have met expectations to bend, tilt, and slump in rooms that were not
built for them, reflects how important it is to understand their experience from their own voice. Acknowledging for some that strength is not a “conversation piece and it does not ‘hype’ them up,” highlights the importance of not seeing Black women as monoliths, all strong and unshakeable; but, rather as humans embodying both strength and weakness.

Strong Black Woman Stereotype was developed as a shield against the bombarding tropes and stereotypes that stripped Black women of their humanity. As a Womanist focused on the wholeness of Black women, this dissertation attempted to explore the individualized experience of Black mothers with mental health concerns. Focused on an interest in the self-defined experiences of these women, I learned how beautiful each woman was in her imperfections that she sometimes hid from others. I learned how reliance on God can break the chains of oppression. I learned how important it is to take motherhood seriously, even to the point that it leaves you non-existent. I learned that freedom could develop from strength. I learned that it is okay to still be searching for who you are. I learned that a Strong Black Woman could be strong because she is loved. I learned that being “selfish” can be hard, but necessary. Lastly, for myself, I learned that in search of my mother’s garden, I found hope, healing, and a wholeness I never knew existed.
References


https://doi.org/10.1300/J014v23n03_01


https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038122

hooks, b. (1988). Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black. Toronto: Between the Lines


https://racism.org/articles/intersectionality/gender/2281-but-some-of-us-are?showall=1

Hurston, Zora Neale. (2006). *Their eyes were watching God*. Harper Perennial Modern Classic


*Gender Studies*. 11(1): 304-315


https://doi.org/10.1037/10311-008

https://doi.org/10.1037/h0086829


Kendall, M. (2020). Hood feminism: notes from the women that a movement forgot. Viking


Schreiber, Rita. 1996. (Re)defining my self: Women's process of recovery from depression. *Qualitative Health Research, 6*, 469-91


Shange, N. (1989). For colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf: A choreopoem. Collier Books


Wertheimer, B. M., Goshkin, I., & Wertheimer, E. (1977). *We were there: The story of working women in America*. Pantheon Books


https://dx.doi.org/10.1177%2F1049732310361892


Appendix A

Black Mothers with Mental Health Concerns Needed for Research Interviews

https://tinyurl.com/y2wblsj7

The purpose of this study - *The Experiences of Black Motherhood and Mental Health* - is to explore the personal experiences of black motherhood and mental health.

**LOOKING FOR BLACK MOTHERS WHO ARE:**

- 30+ years of age
- Experiencing or have experienced mental health concerns, not due to postpartum depression (e.g. anxiety, bipolar depression, major depressive disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, post traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, etc.)
- Willing to participate in (1) 90-minute conversation
- Living in the Memphis metropolitan area

**BENEFIT**

Provide a space for Black mothers to discuss their experiences of motherhood and mental health.

To learn more about this research, please contact Dorothy'e Gott at dgott@memphis.edu or 901-609-4987.

This research is conducted under the direction of Dr. Sara K. Bridges, Counseling Psychology Department.
Appendix B

Consent for Research Participation

Title
In Search of My Mothers Garden: A womanist witnessing of Black Motherhood and Mental Health

Researcher(s)
Dorothy’e Gott, MS (University of Memphis)

Researchers Contact Information
(dhgott@memphis.edu or (901-609-4987)

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information for you to consider when deciding if you want to participate. More detailed information is provided below the box. Please ask the researcher any questions about the study before you make your decision. If you volunteer, you will be one of about 8 people to do so.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Information for You to Consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voluntary Consent:</strong> You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose:</strong> The purpose of this research is to explore the experience of mental health and motherhood amongst Black mothers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration:</strong> It is expected that your participation will last 90-minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedures and Activities:</strong> You will be asked to participate in a 90-minute conversation. discussing experiences of mental health and motherhood. You will also be asked to provide ten visual representations of motherhood and mental health as well as, auditory representations to discuss during the 90-minute conversation. You will be invited to participate in collaboration with Primary Investigator at the end of the study to discuss accuracy of the representation of your experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Risk:</strong> Some of the foreseeable risk or discomforts of your participation include possibility of privacy risk in regard to being overheard during the conversation. Due to COVID-19, conversation with the Primary Investigator will occur over video chat. As you may be completing this conversation in your home, there is a possibility that your share may be overheard by others. Percautions will be taken to utilize safe video chat platforms such as Zoom however, it is important to note that there is a possibility that the secure video chat could become</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
compromised. All recordings and photos received during the conversation will be stored on OneDrive, though this is considered a secure platform, there is always the possibility of this platform being compromised. Additional risks include: possibility of psychological risk (embarrassment, fear, guilt). You may experience stress, emotional distress, inconvenience and possible loss of privacy and confidentiality associated with participating in a research study. In addition, taking part in this research may have risks that are not known or unforeseeable.

**Benefits:** Although not guaranteed, possible benefits to you may be providing a space for you to express experiences of mental health and motherhood in a safe environment, benefits from the research may not continue after its completion. Participation in this research may also help future work and research regarding supporting Black mothers with mental health concerns.

**Alternatives:** Participation is voluntary, and the only alternative is to not participate.

**Who is conducting this research?**

Primary Investigator, Dorothy’e Gott, MS of the University of Memphis, Department of Counseling Psychology is in charge of the study. Her faculty advisor is Dr. Sara K. Bridges. There may be other research team members assisting during the study. The Primary Investigator nor advisor have any financial interest or conflict of interest related to this research.

**Why is this research being done?**

The purpose is research is to explore the experiences of mental health and motherhood of Black mothers. You are being invited to participate because you: identify as an African-American/ Black woman, are at least 30 years of age, experienced or are experiencing mental health concern, identify as a mother, your mental health concerns are not due to postpartum depression, you speak English, and live in the Memphis Metro area, and/or surrounding counties in Mississippi and Arkansas.

**What happens if I agree to participate in this Research?**

If you agree you will be asked to share your experiences of motherhood and mental health. You will be asked to also share 10 visual representations, and auditory representations, if you choose, that reflects your experiences of motherhood and mental health. The conversation will occur over video chat, you are encouraged to participate in the conversation in your home to decrease the likelihood of being overheard, but you are free to choose a location that feels most comfortable to you. After participation in the conversation, the Primary Investigator will create a representation of your share, and ask to meet again to discuss if it feels representative of your experience. The complete timeline is still to be determined, but it is the intention that the investigator will meet with you again within 6 months of the conversation. If you agree to participate in the conversation, after reading the informed consent, you will be asked a series of demographic questions that will be used as a screener for suitability for the research. It is a possibility that some of these demographic questions may be utilized by the investigator during the conversation, as well as in analysis. During the conversation, you are free to
skip any question that makes you uncomfortable and can stop the conversation at any time. An example of a possible question may include: How old were you when your first child was born? How old were you when you realized you were experiencing mental health difficulties? If an additional need for you to participate in further research activities occurs, you will be contacted and informed about any new information that may affect your willingness to continue participating in the research.

**What happens to the information collected for this research?**

Information, pictures, and auditory representations collected for this research will be used to explore the experiences of mental health and motherhood in Black mothers. The results of the research will be published and disseminated however, your name and any other identifiable information will remain confidential. If you wish for your visual representations to include possibly identifiable images, faces will be blurred to protect your confidentiality. If you wish for your images to not be deidentified, a written photograph release will need to be signed. Information learned from conversations may be shared through research conferences, future publications, and future continued research.

**How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?**

We promise to protect your privacy and security of your personal information as best we can. Although you need to know about some limits to this promise. Measures we will take include:

- Research will occur in a private setting, and precautions will be taken to make sure your share is not overheard by others
- Safe video chat platforms will be used to conduct the conversation and record it
- The audio and video file will both be stored on OneDrive, a safe data storage platform.
- Analysis of shares will be stored on OneDrive, as well
- Individuals and organization that monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect the research records. This monitoring may include access to your private information. These individual and organization include advisor, Dr. Sara K. Bridges and the Institutional Review Board
- While public cloud data centers are highly secure facilities and your information is mostly safe from compromise, there is always a possibility that your information could become compromised
• The Primary Investigator is a mandatory reporter. If there is suspicion of child abuse, elder abuse or neglect, or suicidal or homicidal thoughts, TN Laws require this suspicion to be reported. In such case, the Primary Investigator may be obligated to breach confidentiality and may be required to disclose personal information.

What if I want to stop participating in this research?
It is up to you to decide whether you want to volunteer for this study. It is also ok to decide to end your participation at any time. There is no penalty if you decided to withdraw your participation. Your decision about participating will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of Memphis. If you choose to discontinue participation before or after completion of conversation, please contact the Primary Investigator to terminate participation.

Will it cost me money to take part in this research?
There are no costs associated with participation in this research study.

What if I am injured due to participating in this research?
If you believe you need immediate medical attention if you get sick during the study, you should seek immediate medical attention, then call the Primary Investigator at (901-609-4987. The University of Memphis does not have funds set aside to pay for the cost of any care or treatment that might be necessary because you got hurt or sick while taking part in this study. Also, the University of Memphis will not pay for any wages you may lose if you are harmed by this study. You do not give up your legal right by signing this document.

Will I receive any compensation or reward for participating in this research?
You will not be compensated for taking part in this research.

Who can answer my question about this research?
Before you decide to volunteer for this study, please ask any questions that might come to mind. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Dorothy'e Gott, MS at 901-609-4987. Dr. Sara K. Bridges, faculty advisor, can be reached at sbridges@memphis.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705 or email irb@memphis.edu. We will give you a signed copy of this consent to take with you.
STATEMENT OF CONSENT
I have had the opportunity to consider the information in this document. I have asked any questions needed for me to decide about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions through the study.

By signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been given a copy of this consent document. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, my legal representative or I may be asked to consent again prior to my continued participation.

As described above, you will be audio and video recorded while performing the activities described above. Audio and video recording will be used to serve to record responses and used during analysis. Initial the space below if you consent to the use of audio and video recording as described.

___ I agree to the use of audio/video recording

As described above, visual representations of motherhood and mental health will be utilized. If you choose to use visual representation that is identifiable, please initial the space below signifying your release of identifiable imagery.

___ I agree to the use of identifiable images

Name of Adult Participant  Signature of Adult Participant  Date

Researcher Signature
I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understand the information described in this consent and freely consent to participate.

Name of Research Team Member  Signature of Research Team Member  Date
Appendix C

To whom it may concern:

My name is Dorothy’s Gott, and I am a PhD candidate in the Department of Counseling Psychology at the University of Memphis. As a requirement of graduation, I am conducting a research study regarding motherhood and mental health of Black women. The study is titled: In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden: A Womanist witnessing Black Motherhood and Mental Health. The focus of this research is to explore the experiences of motherhood and mental health in Black mothers. I am contacting you to inquire if you would be willing to disseminate my research flyer (enclosed) to eligible mothers within your program. Criteria for consideration for participation in this study include the following: 1) Identify as an African-American/ Black woman 2) At least 30 years of age 3) Experienced or are experiencing mental health concern 3) Identify as a mother 3) Mental health concerns are not due to postpartum depression and 4) English speaking 5) Living in the Memphis Metro Area and surrounding counties in Arkansas and Mississippi. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Sara K. Bridges, University of Memphis, Counseling Psychology. If you have any additional questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at dhgott@memphis.edu or 901-609-4987. Thank you in advance for your consideration.
Appendix D

Interview Guide

1) Cultural ideas of strength and the Strong Black Woman have been around for quite some time, how was “strength” depicted for you growing up?
   a. Where did you, if you did, first hear of Black women being described as strong?
2) When you hear the term Strong Black Woman, what does it mean to you?
3) Have you ever been called strong by family members, friends, doctors, etc. when you were experiencing concerns/difficulties regarding motherhood or mental health? What was that like for you?
4) Considering all that we have talked about, and all that you have shared, would you being willing to share with me who you are, as you see yourself?