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GIRL, LET ME TELL YOU: EXPLORING THE NARRATIVES OF BLACK WOMEN PROFESSIONAL STAFF IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND HOW THEY ENGAGE IN ACTS OF EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Major: Higher and Adult Education

The University of Memphis

May 2024
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my ancestors and the generations of Black women before me that had to endure just so I could unapologetically occupy this space. I dedicate this to my grandparents, Grady & Lorene Cowley, and Roy & Earlie Mae Patton. You are forever loved and deeply missed. To my siblings, nieces, and nephews, this is for you. Never let where you come from dictate where you go. I dedicate this to my parents, Excell and Leora Cowley, who have supported me from day one. Your love, guidance, and encouragement led me to this place. Your unwavering belief in me set the foundation for all that I have and will become. Without you, there would be no me. I love you, and I am forever grateful. To my daughter, Layken. You are my greatest joy. You are my source of strength, and my why. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for you. My hope is that you are better, be better, and do better than me in every aspect. I want to see you achieve and live the life beyond your wildest dreams. You are my heart in human form. I love you beyond infinity.
Acknowledgements

First, I have to acknowledge my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is through Him that I can do all things. I have to acknowledge my Chair, Dr. Edith Gnanadass. Thank you for your support, guidance and for pouring into me throughout this doctoral journey. Thank you for going above what was required and preparing me every step of the way. You provided me the space to do critical work and unapologetically embrace my Blackness, and Black womanhood. Thank you to my methodologist extraordinaire Dr. Susan Nordstrom. Words can’t express how much I appreciate your guidance and support throughout this process. To my other committee members, Dr. Ladrica Menson-Furr and Dr. Colton Cockrum, there is so much I could say. Dr. Menson-Furr, you embody Black excellence. How you navigate academia as a Black woman with poise and grace is an example for others to follow. Thank you for believing me and talking with me. I am forever appreciative. Dr. Cockrum, thank you for encouraging me to finally apply for the doctoral program. You’ve always believed in me, and higher education could use more people like you. To my sister, friend, Soror, classmate, colleague, critical friend, and CRT extraordinaire DOCTOR Shea Kuykendoll. GIRL,WE MADE IT!! Thank you for your listening ear, your encouragement, accountability, and all of the things I didn’t know I needed as we traveled this road together.

Again, I have to acknowledge and thank my parents, Excell and Leora Cowley. Thank you for your endless support and encouragement. Your belief in me and the sacrifices you made were not in vain. Thank you to my daughter, Layken. Thank you for everything- your love, your belief, your support. This, and everything I do is for you. Last but certainly not least, thank you to my co-creators- those phenomenal women who chose to participate in my dissertation research. Your willingness to share your experiences and insights was invaluable. Thank you for being
vulnerable with me and trusting me with your stories. Most of all, thank you for being you. Continue to be the unapologetically bold, authentic, and courageous embodiment of the magnificence of Black womanhood.
Abstract

Black women have existed on the margins of higher education for many years. Our voices, perspectives, stories, struggles, and even our successes have been largely ignored by the dominant sociocultural group. Additionally, most of the literature on Black women in higher education either lumps us all together regardless of role or focuses on faculty or student affairs professionals. There is a lack of literature that focuses exclusively on the experiences of Black women professional staff in higher education. This study was an attempt to address this gap in the literature by describing the narratives of Black women professional staff in higher education and foregrounding their experiences of working as professional staff in higher education at a Historically White Institution (HWI) in the Mid-South region of the United States. The present study consisted of two research questions, and they were:

1. What are the narratives of Black women professional staff about their experiences in higher education?
2. How do Black women professional staff in higher education engage in acts of everyday resistance?

This endarkened narrative drew on Black feminist theory and professional counterspaces to analyze the data gleaned from interviewing six Black women professional staff in higher education at a HWI in the Mid-South. The findings from the cocreators’ narratives bring to light the following:

- Black women are a diverse and non-homogenous group despite the shared identity of Black and female.
- Black women professional staff often endure racism and microaggressions in their workplace.
- Black women professional staff are intentional about how they present themselves in these spaces.

- Black women professional staff also employ their own methods to carry out acts of everyday resistance.

It is recommended that institutions acknowledge the problem and implement more inclusive, actionable, and sustainable DEI policies/initiatives. Other recommendations include Black women professional staff should actively seek to build relationships with each other, and there needs to be a complete revamping of the organization for Black faculty and staff for it to be a more impactful organization.

**Keywords:** Black feminist theory, endarkened narrative inquiry, professional counterspaces, Black women professional staff, higher education, racism, everyday resistance
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Chapter One: Introduction

“Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and hope of the slave.

I rise, I rise, I rise.” – Maya Angelou, 1978

Personal Context

For my daughter, my mother, my grandmothers, and generations of Black women who came before me, I will rise. My parents both graduated from segregated high schools in rural northeast Mississippi and came of age during the height of the Jim Crow South (Chafe et al, 2011) and the Civil Rights Movement. They are the reason I am who I am. They supported me, pushed me, and challenged me to be better. My parents knew the importance of education. They continually stressed its value and set the tone for how I approached my education and viewed educational attainment. My mother required me to study something or read daily regardless of whether the teacher assigned homework. She would often say, “You’ve got homework, even if the teacher didn’t give you any.” My parents knew my academic abilities and demanded academic excellence from an early age. I loved school. I loved learning. So much so that when our house caught on fire, my main concern was not making sure I got my favorite toy, but that my homework did not burn.

That zeal for learning and my quest to excel academically remained throughout my educational journey. I graduated with honors from both high school and undergraduate. I always said I wanted to pursue an advanced degree, and the question of if I could manage it never crossed my mind. However, life happened, and many years passed before I applied and was admitted to graduate school. I returned to school and obtained my master’s degree in higher education. I started my career in higher education, moved a few times, and eventually settled where I am now. However, there was this twinge of knowing I wanted more and could do more.
I am thankful that my parents set the foundation and expectation of education as a necessity and in their mind “the great equalizer.” It is because of them and the value of an education that was instilled in me from an early age, that I knew one day I would pursue my doctorate (Cowley, 2022).

Although my parents always encouraged me to pursue a terminal degree, I had become so comfortable and complacent in my career that I kept pushing it to the side. It was not until I experienced a series of professional slights, that I got serious about pursuing my doctorate. It is those firsthand experiences of being overlooked for promotions, talked over in meetings, working twice as hard with little to no recognition that led me to want to explore the narratives of Black women higher education professional staff and how professional counterspaces (West, 2015, 2019a, 2019b) are utilized as sites of support and resistance. However, as a result of this study, the findings indicated the institution had a lack of professional counterspaces. Therefore, I focused on how Black women higher education professional staff engaged in acts of everyday resistance (Breeden, 2021; Casado Perez et al, 2021; Stewart, 2019; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013).

As you, the reader, engage with this body of work, it is essential to recognize who I mean when I use the terms you and we. When I use the term you, I am referring to the reader of this document. By we, I'm referring to myself, my cocreators, and other Black women professional staff, as well as Black individuals in general. Although this research is very personal, in chapter four when I am bringing in the voices of my cocreators, I am presenting their voices and the narratives that we have co-created together. My identity as a Black woman employed in a professional staff capacity at a Historically White Institution (HWI) gives this research a deeply personal significance and underscores the reasons behind my undertaking of this work.
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is an integral component of any research study. For this study, the theoretical framework was Black feminist theory (Collins, 2002). Black feminist theory (Collins, 2002) offered a prism through which events and the perspectives of Black women could be interpreted without sacrificing authenticity. In addition to Black feminist theory as the theoretical framework, I was interested the concept of professional counterspaces (West, 2015, 2019a, 2019b). I was interested in whether professional counterspaces existed at the institution and if so, how the Black women professional staff used those spaces as sites to engage in everyday resistance. In order to do so, I had to understand how professional counterspaces and Black feminist theory are connected. That relationship is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Relationship Between Black Feminist Theory and Professional Counterspaces

*Note:* This image shows the alignment between professional counterspaces and Black Feminist Theory.
**Black Feminist Theory**

The theoretical framework is the driving force behind every decision made throughout the entire research process and is interwoven into all aspects of the project from inception to completion (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Black feminist theory is the theoretical framework in this study as it emphasizes Black women's experiences as sources of knowledge due to their social positioning at the intersection of multiple oppressions (Collins, 2002).

My research centered on the Black woman's experience and using their own words and stories to amplify those narratives about their lived experiences. Black feminist theory provided the framework for me to ask those needed questions about what influences how Black women experience their environments and how we are implicated in social discourses through our inclusion, exclusion, choice, and participation (Mirza, 2015, p.2), as well as questioning the ways in which knowledge has been historically defined, constructed, and validated both within and outside of academia (Dotson, 2015).

To gather the narratives of Black women professional staff in higher education, I specifically drew significantly from Collins' (1989, 2002) Black feminism to shape my study. As a foundational scholar of Black feminist theory, Collins’ works are considered part of the canon of Black feminist teachings, and the tenets she developed were most applicable to my study. Collins’ tenets of Black feminist theory that I utilized for my study were (a) the power of self-definition (b) controlling images of Black women (c) work, family, and Black women’s oppression, and (d) rethinking Black women’s activism. Due to their close alignment with the theoretical underpinnings of professional counterspaces, these tenets also served as the most suitable lens through which to conduct this study. Hence, a more detailed discussion on professional counterspaces follows.
Professional Counterspaces

Professional counterspaces are culturally responsive spaces and networks created by Black women for Black women that foster an environment conducive to professional growth and development, community, and support on all levels (West, 2019b). Counterspaces are spaces where Black women can network and provide a space for support and empowerment (West, 2019b). West (2019a) defines a professional counterspace as "a professional development opportunity intentionally designed by and for similarly situated underrepresented individuals to convene with one another in a culturally affirming environment, where the reality of their experiences are held central" (p.159; West, 2019b, p. 544).

My study sought to understand if Black women professional staff in higher education had access to professional counterspaces, and if so, how those spaces were utilized as sites of everyday resistance. However, as I was undergoing data collection, the narratives of my cocreators revealed the absence of professional counterspaces at the institution. Therefore, the adjustment was made to describe how Black women professional staff in higher education engaged in acts of everyday resistance. Professional counterspaces are spaces that are cultivated and designed for Black women to have empowerment and support, networking, and professional development (West, 2019a, 2019b), and serve as a safe space to be vulnerable in sharing their own stories. Therefore, they align with the applicable tenets of Black feminist theory in that they allow Black women to define themselves, express themselves freely, support each other, and allow space for Black women to actively resist stereotypes by countering the narrative often pushed by the dominant culture.
Statement of the Problem

Black women in higher education have felt isolated and existed in the margins for many years (Howard-Vital, 1989). Although Black women have made considerable advances in occupying spaces within the academy, when compared to other racial/ethnic groups, they remain grossly underrepresented in numbers among all levels of higher education employees (West, 2015). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), Black women held just 9% (n = 16,389) of student and academic affairs professional positions while their White women and men counterparts occupied 45% (n = 80,786) and the 22% (n = 38,892) respectively.

The isolation and marginalization of Black women in higher education, particularly of Black women professional staff has led to their voices not being heard within the academy. Black women’s unique position at the intersection of Blackness and womanhood affords them a unique perspective that is missing from higher education. Their perspectives can provide valuable insight into how their experiences—although different from everyone else’s—are just as valid. Colleges and universities can benefit from their perspectives as they seek to meaningfully diversify their faculty, staff, and student body. However, despite the diversity of Black women and the contributions that their unique perspective can make, research that focuses on the overall experiences of Black women professional staff in higher education is scarce (Jackson, 2003).

Most of the research on Black women in higher education either lumps all Black women together, regardless of level (faculty, staff, administration, and students) or concentrates on the experiences of Black women faculty, completely ignoring the unique contributions and experiences of each group (Guillory, 2001; Henry, 2010). Because the bulk of existing literature on Black women in higher education focuses on Black women faculty, there is a scarcity of
existing literature that specifically addresses the stories of the lived experiences of Black women professional staff in higher education. Additionally, the literature surrounding professional counterspaces focuses on them from the perspective of primarily student affairs professionals (West, 2015, 2019a, 2019b), but does not address how professional staff from across multiple sectors of higher education can benefit from them. This study addressed this gap in the literature by describing the narratives of Black women professional staff have about their experiences working in higher education at a Historically White Institution (HWI) in the Mid-South.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

Using Black feminist theory (Collins, 2002) and professional counterspaces (West, 2015, 2019a, 2019b), the purpose of this endarkened narrative study (Mackey, 2021; McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021) is two-fold: first to describe the narratives Black women professional staff have about their experiences working in higher education; second to describe the narratives of Black women professional staff narratives about how they engage in acts of everyday resistance. The goal of this qualitative study was to center the narratives of Black women professional staff about their experiences working in higher education, removing them from the margins so they see themselves, hear themselves, and feel empowered to foster self-definition, engage in personal/professional development, and acquire strategies used to resist oppression to not only survive but thrive in the academy.

Black women in higher education have existed in the margins for many years. Occupying the "outsider within" status (Collins, 1986, 2002), the perspectives and experiences of Black women in academia have often been silenced, ignored, and undervalued. I was keenly interested in learning how the intersection of being Black and woman influenced how they navigated their professional spaces, including how/if one chooses to actively challenge the status quo. I drew
heavily from Patricia Hill Collins’ (2002) definition and tenets of Black feminism - especially those of the power of self-definition; controlling images of Black women; work, family, and Black women’s oppression; and rethinking Black women’s activism.

Black women are socially positioned at the junction where two exceptionally dominant and prevalent oppressive systems intersect, gender and race. Thus, Black women endure gendered racism (Spates et al., 2020) resulting from interlocking oppressions that stem from Black women existing at the intersection of being Black and being a woman (Collins, 2002). This distinctive position of Black women lends a unique perspective and opportunity for knowledge production through dialogic expressions of lived experiences (Collins, 2002). It is the dialogic expression and narratives of those lived experiences and what influences those experiences that was interested in studying.

A key component of understanding the lived experiences of Black women higher education professional staff is an awareness of how they navigate the double consciousness of self-definition and the expectations imposed on them by the dominant group (Collins, 2002). In this study, I was interested in how Black women professional staff saw and perceived themselves in relation to their responsibilities, positions, and credentials in higher education in addition to the stories that they tell and the stories that are told about them in higher education. Furthermore, resistance lies behind the mask of societal conformity demanded from Black women professional staff, and I was interested in how their self-definition and empowerment (Collins, 2002) led to everyday resistance that was manifested in professional counterspaces (West, 2019). Initially, my second research question was How do Black women professional staff in higher education utilize professional counterspaces (West, 2015, 1019) as sites of everyday resistance. I was looking for the presence of counterspaces within the institution, and if/how my cocreators used those spaces
as a springboard for them to return to their respective units and engage in acts of everyday resistance. However, after data collection and analysis, I found something completely different. I found that there is an absence of professional counterspaces at this institution. However, in their own ways, each of my cocreators indeed engaged in acts of everyday resistance. Therefore, I updated my second research question to what is included below. The research questions of this study include:

1) What are the narratives of Black women professional staff about their experiences in higher education?

2) How do Black women professional staff in higher education engage in acts of everyday resistance?

**Significance of the Study**

This research was intended for Black women working as professional staff in higher education who have been marginalized but long for the freedom to live their life as fully authentic individuals in all spheres. These women who are attempting to negotiate the frequently chilly and unwelcoming environment of higher education (Henry & Glenn, 2009) would find this study to be of considerable interest. Hopefully, this study motivated those women to use their agency to establish spaces where they can be their true selves and their own advocates.

University administration may also be interested in the results of this study to help them create more inclusive environments that truly value diversity in practice not just in policy.

Additionally, this study sought to expand the growing body of work that adopts a Black feminist perspective and focuses specifically on the narratives of Black women who work as professional staff in higher education. This study also expanded the body of knowledge that focuses on the relationship between Black women professional staff in higher education and
professional counterspaces (West, 2015, 2019a, 2019b). This study is significant because it advanced the use and development of a research model that integrates Black feminist theory (Collins, 2002) and professional counterspaces (West, 2015, 2019a, 2019b) to study the experiences of Black women professional staff in higher education. Lastly, this study added to the body of knowledge regarding the utilization of the emerging methodology endarkened narrative inquiry (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021).

Research Design

This qualitative study used endarkened narrative inquiry to intentionally center and amplify the voices of Black women (Mackey, 2021; McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2023). Endarkened narrative inquiry was chosen over traditional narrative inquiry as it encompasses Black feminist thought, endarkened feminist epistemology, and narrative inquiry to create a methodology that foregrounds the entirety of Black women’s experiences as told by Black women (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2023).

The method of data collection for this study was a series of three (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022) individual (Brinkmann, 2014) semi-structured interviews (Alsaawi, 2014; Brinkmann, 2018) that were held virtually via Zoom. Esin (2011) asserts that Reissman's (2008) dialogic/performance analysis highlights the collaborative process between storytellers and listeners in meaning formation by placing major focus on both the act of storytelling and the finished narrative. Because of its emphasis on these areas, my first plan was to utilize dialogic/performance analysis as my analytical method. But as I gathered the data, I realized that thematic analysis—as described by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021)—would fit the content better.

Practicing reflexivity and self-reflection is critical for conducting Black feminist and intersectional research (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021; Taylor, 2018). Therefore, in addition
to transcribing each interview, I also kept a researcher journal (Janesick, 1999) during the interview process. This journaling process allowed me to sit with the data, reflect on what was shared, and conduct member checking with my cocreators to ensure they were being represented accurately. The sample size was 6 cocreators. The small sample size was representative of the scarcity of Black women employed in higher education. Endarkened narrative inquiry does not specifically address sample size. However, as an offshoot of traditional narrative inquiry which values depth over breadth in data collection and data analysis (Clandinin, 2016), the small sample size also aligns with the selected methodology.

The research site of this study was the main campus of Minerva State University (a pseudonym), a 4-year, public, Carnegie I, historically white institution (HWI) located in the Mid-South region of the United States. I chose this site because of proximity and access to potential cocreators. Convenience sampling (Obilor, 2023) was used due to the proximity of the research site and access to the potential cocreators. Five of the six cocreators were recruited utilizing purposeful (Palinkas et al., 2015; Suri, 2011), and one was recruited using snowball sampling (Parker et al, 2019). The recruitment process was seamless as there was great interest from potential cocreators to participate in this study. All cocreators for this study were secured from recruitment to completion of the informed consent was completed less than a month.

Findings

I constructed four themes, each with multiple subthemes: (1) Are you your sister’s keeper? (2) Performance as resistance (3) Resistance is personal, and (4) Missing pieces of the puzzle. The co-creators’ narratives bring to light that, despite Black women sharing common experiences and traits as a result of their dual identity at the intersection of being Black and female, they constitute a diverse and non-homogeneous group. Their reactions and responses to
various circumstances vary (Collins, 2002) because they come into those situations with their own lived experiences which influence how they respond. Their accounts underscore that Black women in professional positions frequently grapple with racist and abusive work environments and face racism and microaggressions (Kuykendoll, 2023). However, they do not perceive themselves as mere victims. Instead, these Black women professional staff actively choose how they wish to present themselves in such situations, whether it involves being an outspoken supporter or adopting a more disengaged stance. They also employ their own distinct methods to carry out small-scale acts of resistance, such as setting boundaries or prioritizing self-care.

**Recommendations Based on the Study**

Dismantling structural mechanisms that impede the advancement and experiences of Black women professional staff is a task that institutional leaders, especially those at Historically White Institutions (HWIs), must accept and act on. Policies that obstruct achievement, expansion, hiring, retaining, and development of Black women professional staff must be aggressively contested and changed. Leaders should work hard to establish forums where Black women professional staff members can interact with one another, share issues, and offer suggestions to the administration in order to bring about real and sustainable change.

The study’s results highlight the need to restructure the organization for its Black faculty and staff. A revamped and revitalized organization for the institution’s Black faculty and staff may serve as an official professional counterspace, providing all Black faculty and staff with opportunities to engage in professional development, community building, and networking. In contributing to the understanding of professional counterspaces (West, 2015; 2019a, 2019b), the study adds to the existing body of work, particularly by approaching the topic through a Black feminist lens. The findings highlight the institution's lack of a professional counterspace, defined
as a culturally affirming environment promoting access to mentorship, networking, and professional development.

Trust and everyday resistance take center stage in the findings, integral to the development and effectiveness of professional counterspaces. Therefore, for Black women professional staff in higher education, a logical starting point in creating such spaces is building relationships with other Black women. Practical strategies include informal, low-stakes actions like meeting up for lunch at the student center or food court for, to engaging in more organized events and activities. More organized events could include attending on-campus programs and events and participating in university-sponsored initiatives.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

It is recommended to conduct further research to gauge the presence and role of professional counterspaces at HWIs. Furthermore, it is advised that additional research use endarkened narrative inquiry (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2023) as it is a developing approach in order to add to the expanding body of literature. Finally, scholars are encouraged to integrate critical race feminism and considerations of anti-Black racism (Beatty et al., 2020) into the framework to achieve a more nuanced analysis that could explore the impact of anti-Black racism on their experiences.

**Definition of Key Terms Applicable to My Study**

There are several key terms that are germane to my topic. Defining these terms will assist readers in grasping the context of my study. The terms/concepts most applicable to my study are (a) marginalization, (b) outsider-within, (c) professional counterspace, (d) resistance, (e) self-definition, and (f) professional staff.
Marginalization often refers to being unable to access to the culture of their work environment including instances of subtle exclusion by colleagues and being relegated to the periphery of their work environment (West, 2015).

Outsider within status by Collins (1990) refers to being in a position of proximity to the dominant sociopolitical group, yet remaining on the margins, not being seen, and having no real voice in the conversation. West (2019a) goes further and adds that “differentiating perspectives of African American women students, faculty, and staff who occupy distinct roles in higher education and who, therefore, experience the outsider within phenomenon differently” (p. 163).

Professional Counterspace, according to West (2019a,) is defined as “a professional development opportunity intentionally designed by and for similarly situated, underrepresented individuals, to convene with one another in a culturally affirming environment, where the reality of their experiences are held central” (p.159; 2019b, p. 544.)

Resistance is defined in Casado Pérez et al. (2023) as “an unwillingness to acquiesce with institutional policies, agendas, or behaviors when they function to maintain oppression” (p. 183).

Self-definition is defined as “challenging the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood” (Collins, 1986, p.s16). Black women’s act of self-definition challenges how knowledge about Black women is constructed and illuminates the larger socio-political climate that enables others to define and objectify Black women (West, 2019b).

**Chapter Summary**

The current chapter offers an introduction and background that contextualizes the research study aimed at exploring the narratives of Black women professional staff in higher
education and their engagement in acts of everyday resistance. It included the statement of the problem, purpose statement, research questions, key terms, theoretical framework, and research design that guide this study. This chapter also included a brief summary of the findings, recommendations based on the study, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter two of this study includes an in-depth literature review on Black feminist theory and professional counterspaces as the theoretical framework and conceptual framework, respectively. The literature review on Black feminist theory discusses the foundational scholars, history, and development of the theory. The section on professional counterspaces discusses how this concept is conceptualized and implemented in this study. Next, Black women in higher education will also be discussed, along with the varied roles they play. There is discussion surrounding Black women’s narratives about their experiences in higher education, including the challenges they have encountered and the needs they have identified. The topic of counterspaces, the dearth of social capital, the necessity of mentoring and professional growth, as well as resistance, its definition, and tactics for Black women to succeed in academia, is also explored.

Chapter three provides the detailed, step-by-step instructions for conducting this study. It covers the entire research design, beginning with the theoretical framework and how it guides the entire investigation. Chapter three also discusses endarkened narrative inquiry as the methodology, with a focus on how it was developed and why it was preferred to conventional narrative inquiry. The method of data collection (semi-structured one-on-one interviews), data analysis (thematic analysis), and trustworthiness are also covered in detail in chapter three. The recruitment and sample size of cocreators, research site selection, the positionality of the researcher, and ethics are all covered in chapter three as well.
Chapter four of this study discusses the findings of this study, including an in-depth discussion of the study’s themes and sub-themes.

Chapter five presents the data representation and findings of this study, connects them to the literature, discusses theoretical and practical implications, as well as recommendations for future research. Chapter five also concludes with researcher reflections.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter expounds on Black feminist theory as the theoretical framework that informed my study. In this chapter, I provided an overview of Black feminist theory including the history, key scholars, and core themes. Additionally, drawing on Black feminist theory, I provided an overview of Black women in higher education that focuses on Black women professional staff and professional counterspaces as sites of resistance. Black women occupy the beleaguered position of being both Black and woman. That societal position at the intersection of dual oppressions affords Black women a unique perspective (Davis & Brown, 2017). Black feminist theory was chosen because of how well it aligns with the goals and purpose of my research, in that it intentionally highlights and amplifies the voices, stories, and lived experiences of Black women.

There are many Black feminist scholars and while there may be some similarities between them, each has her unique approach and focus within Black feminist scholarship. While there are more contemporary Black feminist scholars, for this research study, I primarily drew from the works of foundational Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins and rising scholar, Nicole West. Collins has enormous citational authority when it comes to Black women's experiences, thus I have chosen to include her writings because they are a part of the canon of Black feminist beliefs. Although Collins' major work was written in 2002, she speaks to the Black woman’s experience that is still relevant today. The core themes of Black feminist theory that will guide my study are (a) work, family, and Black women’s oppression; (b) controlling images of Black women; (c) the power of self-definition; and (d) rethinking Black women’s activism (Collins, 2002). Additionally, I pulled from Nicole West (2019a, 2019b) in my
discussion of professional counterspaces as she is one of the primary Black feminist scholars who have done works related to professional counterspaces.

These scholars and tenets were useful to my study as I aimed to center the narratives of Black women higher education professional staff, by not relegating them to the margins in hopes of them feeling empowered to foster self-definition, engage in personal/professional development, and acquire strategies used to thrive in academia. Each scholar and their respective tenets are discussed more in-depth later in this chapter. After thorough discussions on Black feminist theory and Black women professional staff in higher education, this chapter will then conclude with a reiteration that there is a gap in the existing literature that utilizes a Black feminist perspective to specifically address the narratives of Black women professional staff in higher education.

**Black Feminist Theory**

The overarching goal of Black feminist thought is to oppose oppression in all its forms, including the beliefs that justify it (Collins, 2002) while amplifying the voices of Black women who have often been cast aside and treated as less than (Davis & Brown, 2017). Black feminist thought, as a critical social theory, attempts to empower Black women in the context of social injustice perpetuated by interlocking oppressions. Because Black women cannot be completely empowered unless intersecting oppressions are addressed, Black feminist ideology promotes broad ideals of social justice that are not only limited to the concerns of Black women in the United States (Collins, 2002).

Because Black feminist theory covers Black women's views and knowledge, it focuses on and amplifies the voices of that historically marginalized community (Collins, 1986). Because Black women share the identity of being Black women, there may be commonalities;
nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that Black women are not a monolithic category (Collins, 2002). In terms of age, religion, social background, and other factors, Black women are diverse (Collins, 2002; Henry, 2005). As a result, while Black women may share some commonalities, their experiences and manifestations of those experiences might be vastly different (Collins, 1986, 2000b).

Black feminist thought aims to challenge Western intellectual practices of exclusivity and chauvinism, recognizes the cumulative effect of interlocking oppressions, and works to improve the conditions of Black women (Clemons, 2019). When Black women are routinely dehumanized, ignored, and silenced, Black feminism is purposefully aimed at humanizing them (Clemons, 2019). Black feminist thought is not exploitative and rejects the deficit perspective, leaning into the notion of meaning being made through the reciprocity between the participant and researcher (Clemons, 2019).

Black feminist epistemology legitimizes Black women's lived experiences as a type of knowledge (Collins, 2009) and is purposeful in highlighting Black women's distinct and gendered realities. The only people who have experienced being both Black and female in the United States are Black women (Crenshaw, 2018). When racial and gender issues are treated separately, Black women are eliminated from the story (Crenshaw, 2018). As a result, Black women started to construct venues where they could take off their masks and be themselves without fear of being judged (hooks, 1994). It was in those spaces that Black feminist theory lived and thrived through Black feminist theory’s focus and intentionality on validating the narratives and lived experiences of Black women (Collins, 2002).
History of Black Feminist Theory

From oral histories passed down by mother figures to the more widely available scholarly works, there is a long and rich tradition of Black feminist thought. Black feminism has been an integral, yet undervalued part of American history and feminist movements since enslaved Africans were brought to this country (Taylor, 1998). The evolution of historical Black feminism can be grouped into distinct time periods, all of which coincide with Black Americans’ quest for equality, freedom, and social justice. The first and second waves of Black feminism coincided with the abolitionist & suffrage movements and civil rights movements respectively (Taylor, 1998).

In the United States, Black women must grapple with the dialectical link between oppression and activism (Collins, 2002). The compounding nature of numerous oppressions lends validity to a major tenet of U.S. Black feminist thought, which is to resist oppression, while as a critical social theory, it strives to empower Black women within the framework of societal injustices perpetuated by overlapping oppressions (Collins, 2002).

The first wave of Black feminism emerged during the abolitionist movement and culminated with the suffragist movement and the passage of the 19th Amendment which granted White women the right to vote. Black women, both enslaved and those “free” were devoid of basic human rights and protections their white counterparts may have enjoyed. From the 1830s to the 1860s, Black women abolitionists established a mutual feminist consciousness that mirrored both their racialized experiences as Black women and the facets of sexism they had in common with white women (Taylor, 1998). Due to the stereotypes and myths surrounding Black womanhood, they were often held responsible for their own victimization. Furthermore, it was asserted that Black women abolitionists’ feminist consciousness flourished in part because of
how their quest for equal rights fit within the realm of organized Black abolitionism (Taylor, 1998).

As the twentieth century progressed, Black women increasingly questioned sexism’s role in society as well as the budding civil rights movement. Black women felt a disconnect with the White feminist movement because of assumptions that all women suffered the same oppression. Black feminists, including those in academia, acknowledged the compounding effects of race, class, and gender (Collins, 2002; Lloyd-Jones, 2009). However, Black women academics still felt shunned by their Black male colleagues who focused solely on issues surrounding race (Schiller, 2000).

The linked marginalized identities of Black and woman are the core of the disjunction between Black women and white women, dating as far back as the suffrage movement (Collins, 2002; Taylor, 1998). The option to separate the issue of race/racism from the quest for gender equality was not available to Black women. Black women understood the impact of oppression across both racial and gender lines, whereas White feminists often espoused classist and racist ideologies (Battle-Baptist, 2011).

The second wave of Black feminism centered around activism, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement. Black women continued their activism through involvement in organizations such as the NAACP, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SNCC), and the National Association of Colored Women (Taylor, 1998). Although men were the most celebrated leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, women such as Rosa Parks, JoAnn Robinson, and Ella Baker were instrumental in coordinating how elements of activism would be integrated into the movement. It was an unfortunate reality that although Black women had some leadership roles within the Civil Rights Movement, they still experienced sexism at the hands of Black men.
within the movement, and often felt forced to choose between fighting racism and fighting sexism (Taylor, 1998).

During the Civil Rights Movement, the tensions between Black women and White women grew increasingly contentious because White women did not agree with race taking precedence over issues of gender discrimination (Battle-Baptiste, 2011). This rift solidified the marginalization of Black women within the greater feminist movement (Battle-Baptiste, 2011). The overarching feminist movement of the time never considered that the lived experiences of women were different across race and class lines (Battle-Baptiste, 2011).

As Black feminist theory has continued to develop over the years, there has been some disjuncture on how the later time periods have been labeled and classified. The term *Third Wave* Black feminism emerged in the late 1980s to describe how women of color feminism would continue into the subsequent decade (Springer, 2002). However, as time passed, many more recent Black feminists were not pleased with the *Third Wave* vernacular citing differences in utilization and focus on younger Black feminist scholars (Springer, 2002). Lastly, still emerging is the impact 21st-century Black feminists, such as those who founded the Black Lives Matter social justice movements, will have on Black feminist scholarship years into the future.

**Foundational and Contemporary Scholars of Black Feminist Theory (BFT)**

The foundational scholars of Black feminist theory are drastically diverse in terms of how they identify themselves and approach Black feminist theory. These women represent a diverse range of professions, including education, law, and politics. They are excellent examples of how Black feminist theory is not a one-size-fits-all research approach.

Patricia Hill Collins is one of the preeminent foundational scholars of BFT. She has authored multiple books including the widely cited, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge,*
Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. She is most known for the notion of Black women academics occupying the “outsider within” status (Collins, 1986) as well as the compounding effects of race, gender, and class on Black women. Her work continues to center around the complex issues of gender and race (Schiller, 2000).

bell hooks is often referred to as “the most prolific, most anthologized Black feminist theorist and cultural critic on the contemporary scene” (Schiller, 2000, p. 122). hooks is one of the pioneering Black feminist scholars whose works not only offer discursive understandings of multiple intersecting oppressions but also a conceptual roadmap for creating the material conditions that lead to social transformation (Fitts, 2011). Hooks’ ideologies and classroom philosophies considered how systems such as race, gender, and capitalism influenced teaching and learning.

Anna Julia Cooper was one of the most prolific, yet overlooked early Black feminist intellectuals, activists, and educators (May, 2021). Refusing to feed into the deficit perspective, Anna Julia Cooper was a firm believer in the upliftment of Black Americans through access to education. She embodied resistance and activism by challenging patriarchal, sexist, and racist structures within education and the suffrage movement through visible acts of resistance, including demanding to be allowed to take courses that were dubbed “gentlemen’s courses” (Eickhoff, 2021, p. 4). She continued to embody the spirit of Black feminism through self-definition, integration of her multiple identities of Black, woman, and Southerner into her works, community activism, and empowerment (May, 2008).

Kimberlé Crenshaw specializes in legal issues that affect Black women and was a founding member of the Critical Race Theory Workshop, which posits that the law is a significant factor and contributor in creating and maintaining racial inequalities (Schiller, 2000).
Crenshaw contributed to Black feminist theory by bringing the concept of intersectionality to the forefront of the discussions surrounding Black women and how race, gender, and class are inextricably linked in how they shape Black women’s experiences (Schiller, 2000).

Venus Evans-Winters is one of the most widely known contemporary Black feminist scholars. Her scholarship focuses on critical race feminism in education and qualitative inquiry. She is known for her work with daughtering and other nontraditional ways to present Black feminist thought and scholarship. Evans-Winters has also contributed to Black feminist and intersectional research through co-authored reference books such as *Introduction to Intersectional Qualitative Research* (Esposito and Evans-Winters, 2022) and various speaking engagements (Dr. Venus E. Evans-Winters, n.d.)

**Core Themes of Black Feminist Thought**

Collins (2002) outlined seven core themes of Black feminist thought. These themes are (a) work, family, and Black women’s oppression; (b) controlling images of Black women; (c) the power of self-definition; (d) sexual politics of Black womanhood; (e) Black women’s love and relationships; (f) Black women and motherhood; and (g) rethinking Black women’s activism. The core themes of Black feminist theory that will guide my study are (a) work, family, and Black women’s oppression; (b) controlling images of Black women; (c) the power of self-definition; and (d) rethinking Black women’s activism. Black women are multifaceted, and the entirety of Collins’ (2002) tenets can address all aspects of Black womanhood. However, my study only addresses a small subset of Black womanhood, and the four tenets chosen to apply to the aspects of Black womanhood that will be addressed in my study. Chapter three details how Black feminist theory informed this study.
**Work, Family, and Black Women’s Oppression.** Black women have consistently been dehumanized and viewed as less than within society, which perpetuates their low positioning and little value in the labor market (Collins, 2002). Collins (2002) stated that one of the first core themes of Black feminist thought is the analysis of Black women’s work and victimization in the labor market (p. 45). Black women’s dehumanization and treatment as workhorses are at the center of their oppression and exploitation for paid and unpaid labor (Collins, 2002). Black women’s paid work is structured around the overlapping oppressions of race, class, and gender, and much of the scholarship on this topic centers around identifying patterns of gender and racial inequalities. Additionally, studying the working conditions of Black women, including racial discrimination can add to our understanding of the importance of Black women's work (Collins, 2002). This tenet informs my study because a key component of my study is examining the working conditions and narratives of the experiences Black women professional staff in higher education encounter in their careers. This tenet also relates to the different spaces in which Black women professional staff can engage in acts of everyday resistance through exercising agency in how they show up and perform in these spaces.

**The Power of Self Definition.** Self-definition is essential for Black women's resistance to controlling images. Collins (1986), defined self-definition as “challenging the political knowledge-validation process” (p. S16) that has permeated the stereotypical perceptions of Black women. Black women's resistance to stereotypes is expressly addressed in self-definition, and self-definition is crucial to the survival, interpersonal development, and ability to thrive as Black women. Women of color are more apt to accept the identities imposed on them by outside community members if such articulations are lacking (Snider, 2018). "The unapologetic Black woman is terrifying, not because she is nasty, disrespectful, or furious, but because she is truth,"
says one researcher (Wally-Jean & Grange, 2016, p.3). Black women’s insistence on defining themselves allows for the acknowledgment of the complexities of their multiple identities, challenges existing power structures, validates them as human beings, and facilitates the rejection of internalized psychological traumas and oppression (Collins, 1986, 2002; Jackson, 1998). This tenet informs my study because as I explore the narratives of my cocreators, it is essential that they have the ability to exercise self-definition to define themselves, for themselves and are represented in my study as they would want to be represented. Professional counterspaces are also sites where Black women would have the freedom to be authentic and show how they view themselves.

**Controlling Images of Black Women.** Intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality cannot exist without the power to justify it. Black women have been subjected to a range of unfavorable images because of aggressively opposing injustice and racism (Collins, 2002). Black women's oppression in the United States is justified by portraying them as archetypal mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mamas (Collins, 2002). Because the ability to create societal standards is such a powerful tool, elite groups use it to manipulate perceptions of Black women. These manipulative visuals are intended to make the overlapping oppressions of racism, sexism, and other social inequalities appear natural, normal, and unavoidable aspects of daily life. Black feminist theory has always focused on challenging these oppressive representations (Collins, 2002). This tenet goes hand in hand with the power of self-definition. This tenet informs my study through exploring how through professional counterspaces, Black women utilize self-definition to control the narrative and reject negative stereotypes.
Rethinking Black Women’s Activism. One core theme of Black feminist thought is the desire for change and involvement in political and social activism. The United States of America heralds itself as the “land of the free” and claims citizens have certain inalienable rights and democratic freedoms under the law. However, disparate treatment of groups/individuals based on their race, class, and gender permeates society. Black feminist thought aligns with the broader principles of social justice that go beyond the unique needs of Black women (Collins, 2002). Black women’s struggle to survive interlocking oppressions and controlling images is a form of resistance that undergirds the foundation of Black women’s activism (Collins, 2002). The meaning of political activism and resistance in the lives of Black women is misunderstood by current notions. Although unofficial, private, and invisible areas of resistance and activism may be equally important to address, studies in the social sciences traditionally concentrate on public, official, and visible political activity (Collins, 2002). This tenet informs my study in that I was seeking to understand how Black women professional staff engaged in acts of everyday resistance (Casado Pérez et al, 2023) which can take on forms other than organized and large-scale gestures of activism.

Professional Counterspaces

I am incorporating this section on professional counterspaces for several reasons. Initially, my research question revolved around understanding how Black women professional staff utilize professional counterspaces as avenues for resistance. This concept heavily influenced the formulation of interview questions and guided the data analysis process, ultimately unveiling the noticeable absence of professional counterspaces within this institution. Therefore, I am including information on professional counterspaces here to situate that work.
Black women in higher education often feel isolated and alone in their academic homes. Having a sense of community and belonging is a significant contributor to one's success (Henry & Glenn, 2009; Pennamon, 2019), and often Black women lack this feeling (Pennamon, 2019). That feeling of isolation as the 'outsider within' (Collins, 1986) can lead to Black women not reaching their maximum potential (West, 2019). Professional counterspaces are purposeful in providing holistic support, guidance, and empowerment to Black women in higher education, whether it be through mentorship, career advice, or networking opportunities (Pennamon, 2019). Black women in higher education can benefit from having access to a professional counterspace where they can remove their proverbial masks (Okello et al., 2020), be their authentic selves, and interact with other Black women (West, 2019). Okello et al., (2020), refer to the proverbial mask as “the various representations Black people wear to be legible—that is palatable—in the presence of whiteness” (p. 422). Black people have employed this mask to cope with enduring racism amid the expectations that they maintain a certain demeanor and act as if everything is okay, even if internally they are struggling (Okello et al., 2020).

Black people in academia are forced to navigate racism and negative workplace environments daily. Wearing the mask (Okello et al., 2020) and code-switching have been the default coping mechanisms Black women use resulting from the inability to be their authentic selves in White spaces where they are subjected to harsher judgments and criticisms (Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021). Black women in academia frequently confront a hostile environment, which can lead to an internalization of those experiences. Because of this, Black women frequently find themselves compromising their authenticity by controlling their speech, their emotions, how they make other people feel, and being too critical of their appearance (Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021).
According to West (2019a), a professional counterspace is "a professional development opportunity intentionally designed by and for similarly situated underrepresented individuals to convene with one another in a culturally affirming environment, where the reality of their experiences is held central” (p.159; West, 2019b, p. 544). Professional counterspaces are culturally responsive spaces and networks created by Black women for Black women that foster an environment conducive to professional growth and development, community, and support on all levels (West, 2019b). Counterspaces are not intended to be pity parties but are spaces where Black women can network and provide a space for support and empowerment (West, 2019b).

Professional counterspaces can be formal or informal if the mission is the same (N. West, personal communication, November 22, 2021). Professional counterspaces should include opportunities for reflection and career-related discussions regarding mentorship, networking, and professional development. Those spaces should also facilitate an environment conducive to storytelling that would develop counterstories and help Black women realize that thriving in their professional and personal capacities is in and of itself a form of activism and resistance (West, 2019a, p. 175).

Professional counterspaces can take multiple forms. One example of a professional counterspace for Black women student affairs professionals is the African American Women Summit (AAWS or The Summit). The AAWS convenes annually as an all-day pre-conference workshop at the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) annual conference. Attendees connect with other Black women student affairs professionals from across the country to share the successes and challenges each faced and engage in small and large group discussions to develop approaches designed to boost personal and personal growth and success (West. 2019a). Another example of a professional counterspace is Sisters of the Academy
(SOTA), founded by a close-knit group of doctoral students at Florida State University. Acknowledging the role that community and connection have in the overall success of Black women in academia, SOTA served as a safe space for Black women to find the community and camaraderie they lacked in their respective units (Pennamon, 2019).

As mentioned earlier, professional counterspaces are cultivated by and for Black women, with an intentional focus on being a safe, culturally affirming space while providing opportunities for networking and career development (West, 2019a, 2019b). Having this safe space is just one way Black women maintain their definition of self when their environment grows increasingly contentious (Alfred, 2001).

The essential purpose of counterspaces is to find reprieve from the constant barrage of microaggressions and be in the space of support and validation. (West, 2019a). Counterspaces provide access to people, ideas, information, and opportunities that would otherwise be inaccessible to Black women higher education professionals (West, 2019a). However, the question remains how Black women professional staff in higher education view these spaces as sites of resistance. Through this study and learning about the narratives Black women professional staff have of their experiences in higher education, as well as having an understanding that resistance can take many forms (Casado Pérez et al, 2023), I seek to describe and understand how professional counterspaces are spaces where Black women professional staff engage in acts of everyday resistance.

**Black Women in Higher Education**

Utilizing a Black feminist perspective, this section reviews the relevant literature related to the experiences of Black women professional staff in higher education and how these women use professional counterspaces as sites of resistance. The following discussion will provide a
brief overview of Black women in higher education including the various roles they occupy. The experiences that Black women in higher education have, including the difficulties they have faced and the needs they have identified, will be discussed. The discussion will also cover counterspaces and the necessity for community among Black women before moving on to resistance, its definition, and ways for Black women to succeed in academia.

There is a scarcity of existing literature that specifically addresses the narratives of the experiences of Black women professional staff in higher education. Therefore, the search for literature was expanded to include the experiences of Black women faculty and Black women administrators. In doing so, I was able to find studies and develop ideas about the similarities in the experiences and challenges Black women faculty and Black women administrators encounter in their professional environments. I found that both Black women faculty and Black women administrators contend with workplace issues, including unwelcoming institutional climates, isolation, microaggressions, and lack of community and social capital (Burke et al., 2000; Cooper et al., 2017; Henry & Glenn, 2009). The literature also revealed some institutional-level strategies and individual strategies Black women in higher education employ to survive and thrive in academia, including exercising agency in challenging the status quo by actively seeking out community (Henry & Glenn, 2009). Lastly, while there was some discussion on professional counterspaces, there was no direct and explicit link to how these spaces are intentionally used as sites of resistance (West, 2015, 2019a, 2019b). The study seeks to describe the narratives Black women professional staff have of their experiences in higher education and how professional counterspaces serve as sites of resistance.

Black women in higher education have felt isolated and existed in the margins for many years (Howard-Vital, 1989). Occupying the "outsider within" status (Collins, 1986), the
perspectives and experiences of Black women in academia have often been silenced, ignored, and undervalued (Butler, 2021). Recognizing that Black women do not all have similar life experiences is essential when attempting to research the problems that Black women professional staff in higher education confront. Black women are remarkably diverse in terms of their age, religion, financial background, etc. (Henry, 2005). There will therefore be some commonalities among Black women, but the experiences and ways in which those narratives of those experiences are expressed can vary greatly (Collins, 1986). Despite the diversity of Black women and the contributions that their unique perspective can make, research that focuses on the overall narratives and experiences of Black women professional staff in higher education is scarce (Jackson, 2003).

Most research on Black women in higher education either lumps all Black women together, regardless of role (i.e.: faculty, staff, administration, and students), or concentrates on the experiences of Black women faculty, completely ignoring the unique contributions and experiences of each group (Guillory, 2001; Henry, 2010). Aside from the fact that professional counterspaces have been briefly discussed (West 2015, 2019a, 2019b), there is not much information available that explicitly connects the actual experiences of Black women working as professional staff in higher education with the deliberate use of these spaces as sites of resistance. The purpose of this study was to fill that gap in the literature by exploring the narratives of Black women professional staff in higher education and how professional counterspaces are utilized as sites of resistance.

Black women in higher education (students, faculty, or staff) also contend with additional barriers due to gendered racism (Breeden, 2021). Black women in leadership positions are often deemed "aggressive, strong-willed, difficult to work with, and/or too pushy" (Breeden, 2021,
Those negative stereotypes impact people's desire and willingness to engage in professional collaboration with us professionally and could also limit opportunities for mentoring and professional development (Breeden, 2021).

According to Thomas & Hollenshed (2001), the experiences of Black women in higher education fall into several broad categories: organizational barriers and institutional climate; lack of social capital; underrepresentation, isolation, and marginalization; counterspaces and the need for community; resistance and challenging the status quo (Thomas & Hollenshed, 2001). Each category will be discussed in more detail below.

**Experiences of Black Women Faculty in Higher Education**

There is more research readily available that focuses on the experiences of Black women faculty at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). West (2019a) references studies by Jones, Huang, and Bustamante (2015) and Turner (2002) that revealed Black female faculty at PWIs must contend with increased workloads and responsibilities that have little payoff in the tenure process, constant scrutiny, and lack of support which in turn leads to feeling isolated and overworked while also feeling torn between their family, community, and career responsibilities.

Some organizational barriers are unique to those in faculty positions and contribute to the experience of Black women faculty in higher education. For Black women faculty, organizational barriers such as a lack of standardized tenure and promotion process (Henry & Glenn, 2009; West, 2019a), pay inequities (Henry & Glenn, 2009), and institutional climates are cited as contributing factors to why they have chosen to leave tenure track positions (Davis & Brown, 2017). The unwelcoming institutional climate is due to the lack of respect, constant scrutiny of credentials, poor institutional fit, increased workloads, and microaggressions (Davis & Brown, 2017; Jones, 2021; Thomas & Hollenshed, 2001). These can be so burdensome on
Black women that some Black women faculty have reported feeling the pressure to perform better than their colleagues (Breeden, 2001).

**Black Women Higher Education Professional Staff**

Black women higher education professional staff can occupy faculty, administration, and staff roles. There are varying definitions of who/what is considered professional staff in higher education, and there have been shifts in nomenclature for this group (Sebalj et al., 2012). Sebalj et al. (2012) posit that managerial and professional staff refers to all staff that support the university in roles outside of the scope of teaching that have seen increased specialization and professionalization as university demands have changed. Professional and support staff are one of an institution’s most significant assets due to the wealth of institutional and systemic knowledge and intellectual capital required to ensure the university's functioning (Bossu et al., 2018). However, there is limited availability of research on Black women professional staff.

**Organizational Barriers and Institutional Climate**

There are clear contradictions between publicized diversity initiatives and institutional practices that serve to maintain institutional and systemic marginalization and lead to negative institutional climates. Institutional climates are often unsupportive, unfriendly, and unwelcoming for many Black women higher education professionals (Breeden, 2021). Colleges and universities often tout their diversity plans and initiatives (Davis & Brown, 2017; Mirza, 2006). Unfortunately, it is often Black women who are the ones trying to hold institutions accountable for putting diversity policies into practice, which can result in further isolation and relegation to the periphery (Jones, 2006; Thomas & Hollenshed, 2001).
Lack of Social Capital and the Need for Mentoring and Professional Development

The underrepresentation of Black women in higher education exacerbates Black women’s lack of social capital and contributes to the struggles Black women encounter when seeking out mentors and opportunities for professional development. According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is defined as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 248). Linn (1999) also refers to social capital as resources within one’s social network that afford that person access to certain benefits. Furthermore, James (2000) asserts that elite, influential, and/or well-connected group members’ exclusionary behaviors, which frequently work to prohibit non-members from fully engaging in the organization, have the most negative effects on Black people. Such exclusionary practices restrict Black women in higher education from gaining access to the same people who would facilitate their integration into the organizational network as well as limiting their access to people who could provide career development and social support (James, 2000).

The lack of significant numbers of Black women in higher education directly impacts their access to people and resources that could provide support to them in their professional and personal journeys. It readily impacts their access to other Black women to serve as mentors (Breeden, 2001). In addition, access to mentoring and career support within their department is often lacking for Black women. Frequently, they resort to seeking a mentor from outside their department. In those instances, those mentor relationships and support circles are often peer-to-peer versus one-on-one with a seasoned professional who can provide career advice (Thomas & Hollenshed, 2001).
Having access to a mentor and participating in high-impact mentoring is critical for the success of Black women in higher education (Davis & Brown, 2017). Black women receive little or no encouragement to seek upper-level leadership positions. At the same time, men, particularly white men, are frequently tapped to pursue positions in the upper echelons of campus administration. The lack of support and access to culturally sensitive mentors and role models (Breeden, 2021) echoes the need for Black women to engage in positive mentor/mentee relationships (Davis & Brown, 2017; West, 2019a). Participating in mentorship opportunities (whether formal or informal) is integral to the professional and personal success of Black women in higher education. Establishing a mentor/mentee relationship with an established faculty member can assist Black women faculty in navigating the climate and culture of their institution (Davis & Brown, 2017; West, 2019b). Additionally, participating in peer mentoring aids Black women faculty in combating the urge to internalize marginalization while providing each other with support, information, and advice (Walkington, 2017).

Underrepresentation, Isolation, and Marginalization

Black women have been active cocreators in U.S. higher education for over a century (Collins, 2001; Gregory, 2001). Throughout that time, Black women have made considerable advances in occupying spaces within the academy. Yet, compared to other racial/ethnic groups, they remain grossly underrepresented in numbers among all levels of higher education employees (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016; West, 2015). According to the NCES (2016), statistics revealed that Black women held just 9% (n = 16,389) of student and academic affairs professional positions. In comparison, their White women and male counterparts occupied 45% (n = 80,786) and 22% (n = 38,892) respectively. Additionally, West (2019b) references the National Association of Student Affairs Professionals (2000) survey that
indicated among the 8.4% of student affairs professionals that were Black, only 4.5% were Black women.

Existing literature makes subtle references to the consequences of Black women working in environments where they are underrepresented, isolated, and marginalized (Henry & Glenn, 2009). It is essential to acknowledge that one’s mere presence at an institution does not equate to being welcomed and having access to the support, tools, and strategies needed to succeed in that space (Mirza, 2006). For Black women in higher education, a powerful sense of belonging at an institution has a direct impact on their lived experiences at that institution.

**Resistance and Strategies for Surviving and Thriving Higher Education**

To combat the isolation and marginalization Black women in higher education continue to experience, they are often practicing strategies of resistance. Resistance Theory can be defined as the “politicized reading of the actions taken by students to oppose power hierarchies that reinforce systemic inequity related to class, gender, race, and sexuality through the imposition of curricula, rules, and culture in schools” (Harshman, 2013, p. 654) and resistance is defined in Casado Pérez et al. (2023) as “an unwillingness to acquiesce with institutional policies, agendas, or behaviors when they function to maintain oppression” (p. 183).

Black women higher education professionals have engaged in several strategies to resist the status quo and exercise their agency within academia. Such strategies for resisting those oppressive structures include forming a sense of community through civic and social engagement and actively seeking out networking and professional development opportunities (West, 2015). Other strategies can range from mentorship opportunities to calls for systemic changes in policies and practices. Breeden (2021) found that Black women in higher education organized "sister circles" as a form of support and saw their support of one another as a form of resistance.
One participant referred to these "sister circles" as an "advisory board" (p. 178). While there is not much research on Black women professional staff in higher education, potentially, these strategies could apply to Black women faculty and Black women professional staff (West, 2019b).

Burke et al. (2000) assert that naming oppressive processes and sharing firsthand experiences to make them apparent is a critical strategy for resistance for those who experience and/or witness injustice. Although it is difficult and emotionally exhausting to share the narratives of these experiences, it is a necessary step in challenging and rejecting those oppressive structures (Burke et al, 2000). Burke et al. (2000) assert that another crucial tactic for confronting and overcoming oppression is to purposefully place ourselves in situations where we are privy to decision-making conversations to learn about power and how it functions at various levels inside an organization.

Scholars (Alfred, 2001; Jones et al., 2015; Walkington, 2017; West, 2019b) argue that in an exercise of agency and ownership, Black women can employ the following strategies individually:

- seek out formal and informal mentorship opportunities
- networking and membership in African American professional organizations
- seek out other Black faculty (and staff) outside of their departments
- utilize positions in the margin (Collins, 1986) to engage in critical scholarship and uncomfortable conversations with colleagues
- resist feelings of isolation and marginalization by creating spaces for community and support
Chapter Summary

While there is scarce literature on Black women in higher education, the existing literature typically speaks of all Black women regardless of their role, focuses on Black women faculty, or focuses on Black women student affairs professionals. After a thorough review of the literature, I have determined there is a lack of research that utilizes a Black feminist perspective (Collins, 2002) to focus exclusively on the narratives of Black women professional staff’s experiences and how they engage in acts of everyday resistance through professional counterspaces (West, 2015, 2019a, 2019b). Furthermore, while there is some emerging research on professional counterspaces, they have not been explored through this angle. This study seeks to close that gap and contribute to scholarship that focuses on an often-overlooked segment of higher education employees.

In chapter three, you will find a description of how this study was conducted. It provides a comprehensive overview of the research design while giving a step-by-step guide on how this study will be conducted- from inception to completion. Topics to be discussed in chapter three include methodology, methods of data collection and data analysis, as well as ethics, researcher positionality, and cocreator confidentiality.
Chapter Three: Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe and amplify the narratives Black women professional staff (BWPS) have about their experiences working in higher education at a Historically White Institution (HWI) in the Mid-South region of the United States and to describe how they engage in acts of everyday resistance. It was my hope that through this study, the cocreators would feel seen and heard which would empower them to maintain their sense of self and acquire strategies used to resist oppression to not only survive but thrive in the academy.

Initially, my second research question was *How do Black women professional staff in higher education utilize professional counterspaces (West, 2015, 2019a, 2019b) as sites of everyday resistance.* I was looking for the presence of counterspaces within the institution, and if/how my cocreators used those spaces as a springboard for them to return to their respective units and engage in acts of everyday resistance. However, from data collection and data analysis, I found something completely different. As I was going through the data collection process, I asked my cocreators specific questions to gauge their level of interaction and engagement with the various components of professional counterspaces. When asked them about their experiences with mentoring, networking, and professional development, time after time, the cocreators shared that they did not have opportunities or experience with those elements at their institution. By the time I was asking this set of interview questions to the second and third cocreator, I started to realize that I was not collecting the data that I thought that I would get about professional counterspaces. The remaining cocreator interviews all revealed the same thing. I found that there is an absence of professional counterspaces at this institution. However, in their own ways, each of my cocreators indeed engaged in acts of everyday resistance. Therefore, I
updated my second research question to what is included below. The research questions of this study were:

1) What are the narratives of Black women professional staff about their experiences in higher education?

2) How do Black women professional staff in higher education engage in acts of everyday resistance?

This chapter is a description of how the study was conducted. It gives an overview of the theoretical framework, which influenced all decisions made throughout the research process. The methodology (endarkened narrative inquiry) and methods for data collection and analysis are also discussed. This chapter also covers the rationale for site selection, participant eligibility, as well as ethical issues in conducting this research including confidentiality and researcher positionality.

**Research Design**

In careful consideration of the relationship between the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, the overarching goal of the study, and methodology, endarkened narrative inquiry was the ideal methodological choice for this qualitative study. First, endarkened narrative inquiry goes a step further than narrative inquiry in that it is intentional about centering and amplifying the voices of Black women (Mackey, 2021; McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021) while traditional narrative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning one gives to their lived experiences. Second, endarkened narrative inquiry is informed by and centers Black-woman-centric theoretical frameworks and ways of being and knowing (Mackey, 2021).
Epistemology

Epistemology is defined as “the theory or science of the method and ground of knowledge” (Given, 2008, p. 265) that encompasses the origins, boundaries, rationality, and justification of knowledge. Simply put, epistemology addresses questions including what is knowing and who can produce and disseminate knowledge (Nadar, 2014).

This study was about Black women and seeks to center and amplify their lived experiences, using their narratives. Black women have a unique position and therefore have a unique way of interpreting their lived experiences, as well as a culturally specific onto-epistemology (Collins, 2002). In U.S. Black feminist thought, combatting the erasure of Black women's lives, struggles, victories, and thoughts is a central premise. It should therefore come as no surprise that U.S. Black feminist thought would begin by questioning how knowledge has historically been defined, constructed, and validated both within and outside of academia (Dotson, 2015). Therefore, a Black feminist epistemology was most appropriate to use for this study.

Black Feminist Theory

My interest was in exploring the narratives of Black women professional staff in higher education and how they engaged in acts of everyday resistance. Black Feminism was the primary theoretical framework that guided this study. Professional counterspaces is a concept that I also use to describe BWPS’ practices of resistance which I explored in detail later. Black feminist thought entails ideas and knowledge generated by Black women that foreground the perspectives and lived experiences of Black women (Collins, 1986; Henry, 2005). There are commonalities among Black women because they have the shared identity of being Black women. However, it is essential to note that Black women are not a monolith. There is diversity among Black women
regarding their age, religion, socioeconomic status, etc. Therefore, while there will be some similarities among Black women, the experiences and narrative expressions of those experiences can be drastically different (Collins, 1986).

Black feminism has been an integral yet undervalued part of American history and feminist movements since enslaved Africans were brought to this country (Taylor, 1998). From oral histories passed down by "mothers" to the more widely available scholarly works, there is a long and rich tradition of Black feminist thought. Black women in the United States must contend with the dialectical relationship between oppression and activism (Collins, 2002). The compounding nature of multiple oppressions gives credence to a central premise of U.S. Black feminist thought to resist oppression while empowering Black women within the context of social injustices (Collins, 2002).

Contemporary Black feminist theory was born out of the disconnect Black women felt with traditional/mainstream feminism. Although white feminists sought to challenge patriarchy, Black women often fought against challenging the classist and racist views that they as Black women additionally experienced. Therefore, it was not a surprise that Black women, tired of feeling pushed aside, began to challenge "racist, elite, white women" (Taylor, 1998, p. 234) and demanded better for their communities. This insistence to be heard spurred the development of a feminism unique to the plight and circumstances faced by Black women (Taylor, 1998).

Black women in higher education have existed in the margins for many years. Occupying the "outsider within" status (Collins, 1986, 2002), the perspectives and experiences of Black women in academia have often been silenced, ignored, and undervalued. I was keenly interested in learning how their identities at the intersection of being Black and woman influence how they navigate their professional spaces, including how/if one chooses to actively challenge the status...
quo. I drew heavily from Patricia Hill Collins' (2002) definition and tenets of Black feminism in this study - especially those of the power of self-definition; controlling images of Black women; work, family, and Black women’s oppression; and rethinking Black women’s activism.

Self-definition, self-determination, and self-valuation are vital to Black feminism and Black women. Black women’s insistence on defining themselves allows for acknowledging the complexities of their multiple identities, challenges existing power structures, validates them as human beings, and facilitates the rejection of internalized psychological traumas and oppression (Collins, 1986, 2002; Jackson, 1998). Collins (1986) defined self-definition as "challenging the political knowledge-validation process" (p. 16) that has permeated the stereotypical perceptions of Black women. In comparison, Collins (1986) explains self-valuation as an emphasis on "the content of Black women's self-definitions- namely replacing externally derived images with authentic Black female images" (p. 17).

Black women are socially positioned at the junction where two exceptionally dominant and prevalent oppressive systems intersect, gender and race (Collins, 2002). The compounded effects of race and gender that exist due to those interlocking oppressions (Spates et al., 2020) significantly impact Black women's experiences. It is the dialogic expression of those lived experiences and what influences the narratives about those experiences that I was interested in studying.

Self-definition, controlling images of Black women, and rethinking Black women’s oppression are essential to the design of my study. A key component of understanding the narratives of the experiences of Black women higher education professional staff is an awareness of how they navigate the double consciousness of self-definition and the expectations imposed on them by the dominant group (Collins, 2002). Additionally, Collins (2002) states that
resistance lies behind the mask of societal conformity, and I was interested in how that self-definition and empowerment (Collins 2002) lead to if/how everyday resistance was manifested in professional counterspaces (West, 2019). However, as I engaged in data collection and taking into account the components West (2019a, 2019b) asserted comprised a professional counterspace, the narratives revealed professional counterspaces did not exist at the institution. Therefore, I was unable to describe how professional counterspaces were sites of everyday resistance. Instead, I changed my second research question to How do Black women professional staff engage in acts of everyday resistance. Black women exist at the intersection of a robust system of multiple oppressions (race and gender). Black women must endure gendered racism (Spates et al., 2020) resulting from interlocking oppressions that stem from Black women existing at the intersection of being Black and being a woman. This distinctive position of Black women lends a unique perspective and opportunity for knowledge production through dialogic expressions of lived experiences (Collins, 2002).

**Justification of Black Feminist Theory.** Because one of the main goals of U.S. Black feminist thought is to resist oppression, both in its practices and the concepts that justify it, Black feminist theory serves as the main theoretical foundation for this study (Collins, 2002). The role of Black feminism in qualitative inquiry is to disrupt and challenge Western standards of what constitutes knowledge, and who can conduct research, all the while centering and giving agency to Black women through how research is conducted (Evans-Winters, 2019). Black feminist theory also centers the lived experiences, perspectives, and viewpoints of Black women via an added focus on activism, resistance, and empowerment (Alinia, 2015). Black feminist theory provided a lens that allowed me to describe situations as Black women experienced them.
My research centered on the Black woman's experience. Black feminist thought as a critical social theory seeks to aid Black women's struggles against intertwined oppressions via an analysis of power relations, alternative responses to those power dynamics, and the quest for social equity. Black feminist theory requires a connection between its content and issues central to the lives of Black women (Collins, 2002). Black feminist theory provided the theoretical framework for me to ask those needed questions about what influences how Black women experience their environments and how we are implicated in social discourses through our inclusion, exclusion, choice, and participation (Mirza, 2015, p.2).

How does one mesh Black feminism and qualitative inquiry? At a minimum, Black feminist qualitative inquiry was done through the purpose of the research study, the questions being asked, how those questions were asked, the methods of data collection, and how that data was analyzed. Research is subjective, and Black feminist thought was evident in this research project through the acknowledged positionality of the researcher and the relationships formed with the cocreators (Clemons, 2019).

Professional counterspaces and Black feminist theory are in perfect harmony, highlighting a shared commitment to intersectionality, empowerment, and fighting systemic oppression (Collins, 2002; West, 2019a, 2019b). Black feminist theory provides a theoretical framework that guides the deliberate design and function of professional counterspaces. As dynamic forums, professional counterspaces actively represent the tenets of Black feminist theory and can be created to offer settings in which Black women professional staff can engage in everyday resistance and authentically pursue their careers while preserving their identities. Professional counterspaces, which create spaces of cultural affirmation, solidarity, and active
resistance within the academic landscape (Pennamon, 2019; West, 2019a, 2019b), are tangible manifestations of the transformative ideals espoused by Black feminist theory.

The subsequent section on professional counterspaces is incorporated to illustrate the connection between Black feminist theory and professional counterspaces. Moreover, it is included because the concept of professional counterspaces significantly shaped the development of interview questions and directed the process of data analysis.

**Professional Counterspaces**

The relationship between professional counterspaces (West, 2015, 2019a, 2019b) and Black women’s engagement in acts of everyday resistance is significant. Professional counterspaces, rooted in Black feminist theory (Collins, 2002), serve as platforms that empower Black women to resist systemic oppression and navigate workplace challenges authentically. These spaces align with the principles of intersectionality and empowerment, offering environments where Black women can assert agency, challenge stereotypes, and combat marginalization. By providing settings of cultural affirmation and solidarity, professional counterspaces facilitate the resistance efforts of Black women professional staff within academic contexts. Thus, the connection between professional counterspaces and Black feminist theory underscores their collective goal of promoting resilience, empowerment, and activism among Black women in professional roles.

Professional counterspaces can be formal or informal as long as the mission is the same (N. West, personal communication, November 22, 2021). Professional counterspaces play a crucial role in offering comprehensive support, guidance, and empowerment to Black women in higher education. This assistance covers a range of topics, such as networking opportunities, career guidance, and mentoring (Pennamon, 2019). For Black women working in higher
education, having access to these settings has several benefits. According to Okello et al. (2020), it acts as a haven where they can take off the proverbial mask, allowing them to accept who they truly are and make connections with other Black women (West, 2019). Okello et al. (2020) distinguish the metaphorical mask as various personas that Black people adopt in an effort to find acceptance or understanding when navigating the presence of whiteness (p. 422). For Black people, maintaining this façade has long been a coping technique in the face of enduring racism, forcing them to appear calm and normal when they are inside struggling with hardship (Okello et al., 2020).

The concept of professional counterspaces (West, 2019a, 2019b) shaped my research approach during both data collection and analysis. These concepts guided the formulation of specific questions during the data collection phase, aimed at determining whether the cocreators had access to professional counterspaces and how they interacted within them. Subsequently, during data analysis, I examined the shared data to identify the presence of professional counterspaces and, if present, explored how these spaces were utilized as sites of daily resistance. However, as will be discussed later, the narratives shared by my cocreators indicated that the institution lacked professional counterspaces, resulting in these spaces not being utilized as sites of resistance.

**Methodology: Endarkened Narrative Inquiry**

I initially believed traditional narrative inquiry would be the most appropriate methodological approach. However, after more research, the desire to center Black womanhood as a way of being and knowing, endarkened narrative inquiry emerged as an even more appropriate methodological approach. The remainder of this section will discuss the recent emergence of endarkened narrative inquiry and how it may be a useful methodological tool.
Next, I will address the rationale for choosing endarkened narrative inquiry as methodology, and lastly, I will address how endarkened narrative inquiry will transpire in this study.

As with traditional narrative inquiry, endarkened narrative inquiry is about seeking out and understanding the stories surrounding experiences. While traditional narrative inquiry does not seek to amplify and center marginalized voices (Kim, 2008), endarkened narrative inquiry is intentional about centering the voice of Black women (Mackey, 2021; McClish-Boyd, & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2023). Utilizing an endarkened narrative inquiry methodological approach allowed for a more nuanced way to situate and account for Black women's experiences and ways of being and knowing (Mackey, 2021).

Endarkened narrative inquiry as a methodology is a new development in the field of qualitative research. Endarkened narrative inquiry integrates aspects of several theoretical frameworks, including womanism, Black feminist thought, endarkened feminist epistemology, and narrative inquiry, to create a methodology that foregrounds the entirety of Black women's experiences (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021).

At the time of my study, there was extremely limited information on exactly how to implement endarkened narrative inquiry as a methodology- outside of naming the tenets. However, a few months after data collection had been completed, and during the midst of data analysis, McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya (2023) expanded on their initial article and provided more insight into endarkened narrative inquiry as methodology. What follows is my interpretation of endarkened narrative inquiry as methodology based on the initial publication, as well as my interpretation of how elements of the expanded methodological considerations could apply to my study.
The three tenets of endarkened narrative inquiry (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021) are:

- Life’s lessons on surviving and thriving as a woman, a Black person, and a Black woman
- Spirituality as a protective barrier and source of strength
- Lives, dreams, and hopes deferred to stand in the shadow of our men and families

Each of these tenets will be discussed in greater detail below.

Life’s lessons on surviving and thriving as a woman, a Black person, and a Black woman acknowledge the complexities of being a Black woman. Black women's experiences and survival tales include cultural components that are frequently ignored by mainstream discourse. Those narratives emphasize the complexity of Black femininity while also including class, sexual orientation, and ethnicity/national origin as components of each Black woman's identity. It also recognizes the effort Black women have made to combat harmful stereotypes.

Spirituality as a protective barrier and source of strength refers to the faith that enables Black women to persevere through a variety of hardships. Black women are empowered by their spirituality, which gives them the endurance, resiliency, patience, compassion, and readiness to forgive others and oneself while keeping in mind the lessons gained from their heartbreak. For many Black women, spirituality means loving oneself, one's family, and one's community—even when that love isn't returned. Therefore, even if Black women's connection with spirituality is complicated and occasionally harmful, it is nevertheless an important and embodied means for Black women to build their stories of struggle, survival, achievement, and agency. It also refers to the faith associated with spirituality that allows Black women to endure multiple types of struggles. Black women draw strength from their spirituality which provides them with the fortitude, resilience, patience, compassion, and the willingness to forgive others and themselves.
while not forgetting the lessons learned through that heartache. Spirituality for many Black women requires a love of self, family, and community, even when that love is not reciprocated. So, while Black women’s relationship with spirituality is complex and sometimes may cause harm, it is still a relevant and embodied way in which Black women construct their narratives of struggle, survival, success, and agency.

Lives, dreams, and hopes deferred to stand in the shadow of our men and families is the last underpinning of endarkened narrative inquiry. Black women have always made sacrifices and provided for others, always putting others' needs first. Sometimes it was voluntary, other times it was under pressure and because of societal/community standards. Patriarchal obligations extend beyond the family and household. Many Black women raise their voices in unison when Black men, kids, and the community hold them up, help them develop their self-esteem, shield their egos, and fill the void when things start to go wrong. In the end, Black women sacrifice themselves to uphold and preserve the family, the community, and the church, sometimes at the expense of losing who they are in the process.

The primary thing that struck me about McClish-Boyd and Bhattacharya's (2023) expanded work on endarkened narrative inquiry was how they urged readers to think creatively and not limit themselves to traditional approaches to engaging with Black women's narratives. One specific aspect of their expanded methodological considerations is the premise of a wisdom whisper. In this article, McClish-Boyd, and Bhattacharya (2023) coined the term wisdom whispers as “an intergenerational engagement and inquiry method with Black women cocreators” (p. 4). They go on to discuss how wisdom whispers acknowledge the cultural significance of elders within the Black community and their passing down of the cultural knowledge and that they are built on trust and access to those spaces is highly selective
(McClish-Boyd and Bhattacharya, 2023). While McClish-Boyd and Bhattacharya (2023) only refer to wisdom whispers as those learning environments between women of different generations, I would counter that a wisdom whisper can happen between all Black women because we are not a monolith and our varied experiences, perspectives, and identities lend for the opportunity for wisdom whispers to be used in various contexts—not just between intergenerational Black women.

Justification for Choosing Endarkened Narrative Inquiry

In careful consideration of the relationship between the theoretical framework, the overarching goal of the study, and methodology, endarkened narrative inquiry was the ideal methodological choice. The fundamental assumptions of narrative inquiry include making connections between the past, present, and future and portraying individuals living in and through a situation (Kim & Latta, 2010, p.69). However, endarkened narrative inquiry allowed for a nuanced approach to the exploration of the stories of Black women (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2023).

People and how they make meaning and construct their identities are at the center of narrative inquiry and its development as a “reflexive, relational, and interpretative” (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p.195) methodology. It is an investigation of how a person's experiences are situated within various contexts (Clandinin, 2006). I was interested in the narratives of the experiences of a specific group of Black women. When you choose to study people, you study people who are "existing in narrative and socially constituted by stories" (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p.195). Black women have a unique position and therefore have a unique way of interpreting their lived experiences, as well as a culturally specific onto-epistemology (Collins, 2002) while acknowledging their Blackness and how that influences their experiences (McClish-
endarkened narrative inquiry was a logical choice. While the selection of endarkened narrative inquiry as the methodology for this study is logical, it is essential to understand how this methodological approach was implemented in the study.

**How was endarkened narrative inquiry utilized in this study?**

Narrative inquirers understand that everyone leads storied lives and acknowledge our interconnectedness as researchers to the meanings made of cocreators' stories (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Employing narrative inquiry as a methodology informed by Black feminist theory and intersectionality requires a unique approach. Black women are often erased from academia through Euro-centric practices, policies, curricula, etc. The utilization of endarkened narrative inquiry will enable the combatting of such.

Endarkened narrative inquiry is a new and emerging methodology that offers “the nuance and cultural responsiveness necessary to highlight stories of Black women’s experiences” (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2023, p.2). At the time of data collection, there was only the initial article available; therefore, initially, there was a lot of improvisation regarding exactly how endarkened narrative inquiry would be carried out in this study. Along with my theoretical framework (Black feminist theory), endarkened narrative inquiry did indeed inform how this study was conducted. There were several ways that endarkened narrative inquiry was utilized throughout this study. Endarkened narrative inquiry was evident through citing Black women and other women scholars of color. Additionally, endarkened narrative inquiry was apparent through actively engaging with the cocreators and their stories, paying close attention to what was being said, and understanding the power and meaning behind the silence. I approached data collection as though I was learning from and with my cocreators instead of doing research on them. Here is where the relationship building that is key in Black feminist research came into
play. During the interviews, my being vulnerable and sharing my story with them helped develop rapport and build trust. I practiced active listening, asked clarifying questions, and gave summaries at the end of each interview just to ensure that I was hearing them right and understanding their perspectives.

Also, the data collection process was more like conversations where we fed off each other versus a more traditional semi-structured interview format. They shared their lived experiences with me. I shared mine with them. I would say, these sessions would expand McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya’s (2023) concept of wisdom whisper which they define as “an intergenerational engagement and inquiry method with Black women cocreators” (p. 4). For this study, I argue that wisdom whisper could be expanded to include any safe, communal space, where Black women, share nuggets of wisdom with each other—regardless of their age/generation. It is more about do they have some knowledge to share versus being an elder and passing down information.

Also, through close attention and knowledge of the tenets, as they shared their stories, I was able to understand how their shared stories could align with the tenets of this methodology. For example, one of the tenets of endarkened narrative inquiry is *Spirituality as a protective barrier and source of strength* (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021). During our conversations, one of my cocreators made several references to spirituality and discernment. One such reference she talked about how she had to start talking to her young son about racism and she told him that we (Black people) were “created with purpose and on purpose” as a way to encourage him to love his Blackness. Another example is when another cocreator and I were talking about the need for community among Black women and other Black people. She referenced spirituality through a nod to “where two or three are gathered in my name” scripture (Matthew 18:20) that should
sound familiar if, like me, you grew up in the church. Furthermore, endarkened narrative inquiry was evident through intentionally doing something different than centering traditional standards of knowledge production, using a methodological framework that highlights Black women and their ways of storytelling (Mackey, 2021; McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2023; Toliver, 2021).

Additionally, endarkened narrative inquiry was evident in this study and contributed to culturally relevant qualitative research (Linsay-Dennis, 2015) in several ways:

- **Amplifying Marginalized Voices:** Highlighting the voice of historically marginalized populations is a key objective of endarkened narrative research. With ENI, stories that are often overlooked are given a voice, and a greater range of inclusive and diverse perspectives are presented.

- **Cultural Sensitivity and Contextual Understanding:** ENI recognizes the role that cultural context has in shaping narratives. It pushes scholars to acknowledge the historical context and cultural quirks that shape Black women's narrative styles.

- **Intersectionality and Complexity:** ENI acknowledges that a range of intersecting identities and social situations have an impact on Black women's experiences. Understanding the richness and diversity of cultural experiences requires an understanding of their complexity.

- **Empowerment and Agency:** ENI supports the empowerment and agency of those whose voices are frequently ignored by centering the narratives of individuals from those communities.
• **Richness in Data:** ENI's recognition that cultural experiences are subjective, emotional, and not just intellectual contributes to a more complete and nuanced understanding of the Black woman's experience.

Endarkened narrative inquiry is more than just hearing people's stories. You must have a grasp of the social construction of language as well as the cultural nuances of how Black people, particularly Black women, communicate with each other. It was critical that as I conducted endarkened narrative research, paid close attention to how Black women utilized storytelling (Toliver, 2021). The ultimate goals of this study were to (1) understand the narratives of my cocreators’ experiences, (2) for Black women professional staff in higher education to see themselves, and hear themselves (3) foreground Black women's way of being, knowing (4) amplify the voices of Black women, and (4) for other Black women in similar positions to feel empowered whether it be socially, career-wise, etc.

The chosen methodology was an unquestionably crucial component in a research study, yet the significance of site selection is equally paramount. The selected site for a study plays a pivotal role by providing the contextual backdrop for the study, influencing both the research design and execution of the study.

**Site Selection**

The site of this study was Minerva State University (a pseudonym), a 4-year, public, Carnegie I, historically white institution (HWI) located in the Mid-South region of the United States. Minerva State University was chosen as my research site due to its proximity and access to potential cocreators. Minerva State University is in an urban city with a majority Black population and approximately 33% of the students at the university were Black. Those statistics are vital to note because the demographic composition of faculty and staff at Minerva
State University does not mirror the student population or the city in which it is located. Of the employees at Minerva State University, Black women comprise just over 15%. Unfortunately, there was no way to isolate the data specifically for professional staff, which is another glaring example of how that employee population is often undervalued and overlooked.

The selection of the site plays a crucial role in shaping the recruitment process for your study. The invaluable input from brave Black women professional staff, who willingly shared their experiences, has profoundly influenced the essence of this study. Despite sharing similarities at the intersection of blackness and womanhood, each individual is distinctly unique.

**Cocreators**

In keeping aligned with my methodology, my participants are being referred to as cocreators. This work was done with Black women and not on Black women. To begin, all cocreators self-identified as Black women. Furthermore, they were required to possess a master’s degree and hold a professional staff position (as defined by Bossu et al., 2018) at Minerva State University for a minimum duration of four years. The stipulation of having a master’s degree as a minimum educational qualification is aligned with Ryttberg’s (2020) definition of professional staff, which states “professional support staff is used to describe individuals in support roles who are commonly highly qualified and have an academic degree” (p. 2). Additionally, most leadership and professional staff roles necessitate a master’s degree, as indicated by Nworie et al. (2012). The choice of a minimum four-year employment period at Minerva State University considers the potential effects of remote work arrangements resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The six cocreators in my study (see Table 1) all identify as Black/African American women. It is important to note that Tasha says she identifies as ‘Black. All the way Black.”
Additionally, each of my cocreators has earned at least a master’s degree and worked in a professional staff position at a Historically White Institution in the Mid-South region of the United States for a minimum of four years. They ranged in age from their early 30’s to late 40’s. They had various positions within the institution, across divisions and disciplines. While they all had at least six years at the institution, the time in their current positions ranged from almost 2 years to 9 years. The requirement of having a master’s degree as a minimum educational qualification is aligned with Ryttberg’s (2020) definition of professional staff, which states “professional support staff is used to describe individuals in support roles who are commonly highly qualified and have an academic degree” (p.2). The length of time at the institution was to account for the impact of COVID-19.

Table 1
Cocreator Backgrounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Years in Higher Education</th>
<th>Years at Current Institution</th>
<th>Years in Current Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>15+ years</td>
<td>14.5 years</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blessed</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>almost 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lola</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxine</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasha</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trina</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>almost 2 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taking great care to preserve their confidentiality and anonymity, a lot of the things that make them who they are, that enabled them to provide me with rich data cannot be included in this document. Just know that these women have a wide variety of experiences, a wide variety of
perspectives, different upbringings, and varying career paths that led them to this place. It is the totality of those experiences that allowed them to provide the rich data that they did. However, some general information about each participant is included in Table 1 and the narratives that follow.

**Amanda**

A self-proclaimed “servant of others,” Amanda has lived and worked in the Mid-South for many years. Neither of her parents graduated from high school, and as a first-generation college student, it was a source of pride that she not only graduated from high school but earned both a bachelor’s and master’s degree. She is the youngest of five, and her parents stressed the importance of hard work— which has shaped how she views and presents herself personally and professionally. She has worked in higher education the longest out of all my participants and has seen first-hand how Black women professional staff in higher education are often overlooked and underappreciated through her own experiences and witnessing the experiences of trusted friends and colleagues.

**Blessed**

Blessed was one of the co-creators in a supervisory position. She was intentional about creating an environment where her staff felt supported and valued. She says that she has been fortunate over the last few years to have leaders who were supportive of her and didn’t micromanage her. She has experienced being challenged in this new role by people who question her abilities, and she at times has felt like people expect her to be the voice of Black people. Working in higher education was not her first career. She changed careers because she was not being fulfilled and believes education was her calling. She says that she transitioned into this
space because she believes in helping people, and works to connect the dots in helping them to be successful in whatever it is they want to be successful in.

**Lola**

Lola is a young higher education professional who relies heavily on her faith and family as sources of support. She grew up in a neighborhood not too far from Minerva State and had to work to help with family and younger siblings. She calls herself Miss Fix-It and is the go-to person and the one that people tend to lean on for advice and a shoulder to cry on. She says it’s rewarding and stressful at the same time. She has worked in multiple roles in higher education— even leaving higher education altogether for a brief period. However, her winding career path has led her back to higher education.

**Maxine**

Maxine has a deep love for education and helping others is something that she says flows through her bloodlines. She says she wants to support others and see them flourish and grow—even if it means surpassing her. Maxine was one of two cocreators that are in supervisory roles. Her desire to see people thrive was evident throughout the entire data collection process, as she often would speak about how she created healthy work environments and encouraged her staff to have a work-life balance. As with other cocreators, she has been witness to the hostility and devaluation that Black women higher ed professional staff had endured.

**Tasha**

Tasha was born and raised in the Mid-South. She has often faced racism and classism (as a student and professionally) due to the area she grew up in, but she has two master’s degrees. She values family over everything and has taken on the caregiver role to a parent as well as her children. She has had some personal challenges along the way yet has worked through those challenges. She is a strong advocate for mental health and learning to advocate for oneself.
While she has experienced racism and sexism in her former unit, she has also experienced what it feels like to have a supportive supervisor and colleagues now that she is in her new role.

**Trina**

She is a young and upcoming higher education professional who feels like she is on her way out the door. She is also a two-time alum of the university and has a passion for helping every student she encounters on a daily basis. Trina was born and raised in the Mid-South and says that her neighborhood was not the best and has become more crime-ridden over time. However, attending optional schools allowed her to take advantage of opportunities she wouldn’t have had otherwise. She does not have a large circle of community other than a few people she worked with in a previous unit. However, heavily relies on those she has a close connection with to talk about day-to-day experiences.

**Recruitment and Sample Size**

There was intentionality behind the cocreator recruitment process to ensure an adequate sample size was achieved. After obtaining IRB approval, the cocreators were recruited using purposeful sampling, with the researcher intentionally seeking out women who met the criteria outlined above. The recruitment flyer was sent to prospective cocreators via email using an email list from Minerva University’s organization for its Black faculty and staff. One participant was secured using snowball sampling as she was forwarded the email from a former colleague of hers at the institution. The initial contact meetings took place and the informed consents were signed within two weeks. One initial contact meeting was held in person and the remaining five were held via Zoom. Maintaining the confidentiality of the cocreators was paramount. Therefore, in an exercise of agency and self-definition (Collins, 2002), each participant was given the option to choose their pseudonym. The sample size was six (6) cocreators. The small sample size was
representative of the scarcity of Black women employed in higher education. The small sample size also aligned with the premise of narrative inquiry that requires depth over breadth in collecting and analyzing the robust data provided by the participant interviews (Clandinin, 2016).

The process of building rapport with my cocreators, which is crucial in Black feminist qualitative research, started immediately from initial contact and was built throughout the data collection phase (Clemons 2019). Rapport and accountability with the cocreators are part of navigating the insider status of being a Black woman doing research with other Black women (Few et al., 2003) and the power dynamics (Hamilton, 2020) inherent in the research process (Few et al., 2003). I utilized semi-structured interviews for them to begin to share their narratives with me. I asked a variety of questions ranging from how they identify themselves, their backgrounds, and upbringing, to how they define resistance and what it looks like to them.

After successfully attaining the necessary sample size through cocreator recruitment, I commenced the data collection process. The cocreators courageously shared their stories, displaying resilience, strength, and openness.

Data Collection

I did three separate, conversational semi-structured interviews with each cocreator. Each interview lasted around an hour. The cultural quirks of the Black women being interviewed must be considered and doing three interviews provided me enough time to fully understand each participant's viewpoint on the topic of interest (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Building rapport, trust, and the cocreator’s comfort level with me was the primary goal of the first interview (Taylor, 2018). The cocreators' memories of their experiences were the focus of the second and third interviews. The third interview also gave cocreators the chance to reflect on the meanings behind those narratives and offer advice to other Black women working in higher
education. Additionally, there was time set aside in the third interview for member checks (Few et al., 2003). Member checking in Black feminist research is one technique to guarantee that cocreators are completely incorporated into the research process since it enabled them to hold me accountable for how I understood and represented their experiences (Few et al., 2003; Taylor, 2018). Once data collection and data analysis were complete cocreators had another opportunity to engage in member checking. I discussed the findings of the research, including themes and any surprising information that was revealed. We also discussed their cocreator overviews and preferences for data representation.

Each participant had the option to choose between face-to-face or virtual interviews. Each participant chose to have virtual/internet-based (Brinkmann, 2014) interviews via Zoom which allowed for audio/video recording of the sessions. I used a otter.ai, which was able to sync with Zoom and live transcribe the interviews. Reviewing the transcripts for accuracy and preparing them for analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection phase.

As the primary researcher only I have access to the data. However, members of the Institution Review Board and my dissertation chair had the ability to monitor this research and were able to access the research records, including interview data. The interview protocol is located in Appendix C. Appendix D contains two tables. One outlines how the research questions aligned with Black feminist theory and professional counterspaces. The other table outlines how the interview questions aligned with the research questions.

While the findings of this research may be published and presented, the identities of the cocreators will remain confidential and not be revealed or published. The informed consent is the only time identifying information was collected from the cocreators. Any data collected was de-identified and will be stored for the duration of the study plus up to seven years thereafter. Data
was stored in a password-protected file on the researcher’s non-university sanctioned cloud storage, with a backup saved to the hard drive of the researcher’s personal computer also password protected. After the completion of the dissertation study, and up to seven years post-completion, all data will be destroyed.

There came a point in the data collection process when I realized that my initial second research question about professional counterspaces was not being answered. I asked my cocreators about their experiences and opportunities to engage with the various components of professional counterspaces in their professional/work-related environments. Time after time, they responded that they did not, but they wished they had access to those components. After the second to third interview where I was asking those questions, I realized that I was not collecting data to address my second research question. Upon completing the last round of interviews, it became apparent that a common theme emerged across all co-creators: the absence of professional counterspaces. This realization prompted me to change my second research question.

**Trustworthiness**

There are inherent power dynamics in the researcher/participant relationship (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021; Few et al., 2003). As a Black feminist qualitative researcher, I must pay particularly close attention to developing rapport (Taylor, 2018) that will result in a safe, culturally affirming space (Taylor, 2018) that is empowering and allows Black women to process their experiences (Few et al., 2003). Additionally, it is essential that as a Black feminist qualitative researcher whose research focuses on Black women, I demonstrate a level of empathy, trust, respect, and honesty for the dignity and self-definitions of the cocreators (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2019; Few et al., 2003; Taylor, 2018).
I also kept a researcher journal during the process of data collection and data analysis. Practicing reflexivity and self-reflection is critical for conducting Black feminist and intersectional research (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021; Taylor, 2018). Janesick (1999) posits that journaling in qualitative research can serve as (a) a way to use reflection to refine and understand the role of the researcher, (b) a method to gain a deeper understanding of the participant responses, (c) an interactive method of communication between researcher and cocreators for triangulation of data (which I did not do) and (d) a way for the researcher to develop a greater understanding of self. The journaling process not only provided a space for my acknowledgment of the researcher/participant power dynamics and researcher assumptions but also served as a space for me to debrief and process thoughts throughout the entirety of the research process (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021; Few et al., 2003; Taylor, 2018).

In full transparency, the journaling process was cathartic for me. I felt seen. I felt heard. I felt validated. I cried. I got angry. I felt all of the emotions. During data collection, I would do voice memos immediately after each interview- sharing my initial thoughts on what was just shared. Often, I had to process my own feelings and emotions as I had shared some of the same experiences as my cocreators. At some points, it was like I was reliving some of my own experiences. Dealing with the disappointment and frustrations of knowing you are capable, but not being given the chance, and being told no. When time and again, mediocre whiteness was being rewarded, and we were supposed to just be okay with it. I was frustrated—for them and me. Other times, there were glimmers of hope. Not every experience my cocreators shared was mired with racism, microaggressions, and self-doubt. There were also times when they shared pleasant memories such as career opportunities, and supportive colleagues/supervisors.
In addition to the journaling/voice memos, I would also use this time to reach out to my critical friend. Sharing my thoughts on what was shared and my reactions to it, and just talked through all of the things. She was not only a listening ear but offered a different perspective that at times challenged what I was thinking, and other times let me know that I was not crazy and that she would feel the same way.

The engagement in journaling, decompression, and discussions with critical friends not only underscored the trustworthiness of this study but also formed an integral part of the ongoing data analysis process. Data analysis is not confined to the post-collection phase; rather, it is a continuous process spanning from the initiation of data collection until the study's conclusion.

**Data Analysis**

Initially, it was my intent to use Dialogic/Performance Analysis (Reissman, 2008) because of its focus on the telling and the told of stories. Additionally, I wanted to use Dialogic/Performance analysis because analysis because of its focus on “how the meaning is collaboratively created through the interaction between storytellers and listeners” (Esin, 2011, p. 98). However, as I went through the data collection process, the data that was being gathered, and how it was being presented, I determined that Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021) was a more suitable approach to data analysis.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis is a popular qualitative research technique for locating and examining patterns or themes in qualitative data. The main steps and tenets of their approach are briefly summarized as follows:

1. **Familiarization with the data:** Regardless of whether the data comes from transcripts of interviews, or other qualitative sources, researchers begin by thoroughly immersing
themselves in the information. This immersion in the data allows researchers to get fairly familiar with the context and content of the data.

2. **Generating initial codes:** Researchers systematically find and categorize significant chunks, or "codes," from data that capture the core of thoughts, ideas, or patterns.

3. **Searching for themes:** Codes are clustered according to their connections and commonalities to generate the first themes. Scholars hunt for patterns and connections among codes to identify these emerging themes.

4. **Reviewing and defining themes:** Researchers review and refine the topics to guarantee conceptual consistency and accurate data reporting. They also ensure that every theme is distinct from the others and highlights a certain aspect of the data.

5. **Defining and naming themes:** For each theme, researchers ensure that they are easy to grasp and interpret by providing concise titles and precise explanations. For this phase, the data must be further clarified and refined.

6. **Writing the report:** The last phase entails drafting an extensive report that provides the determined themes and is supported with pertinent data extracts. The significance of each topic is explained by the researchers in a logical narrative that places it in the context of the study question or goals.

Familiarization with the data was a long and tedious process. I spent a lot of time with the data prior to coding. I grouped the transcripts by participant vs. by interview number (ex: all of Maxine’s (a pseudonym) transcripts were reviewed together vs. reviewing transcripts by Interview #1, Interview #2, etc.) and reviewed each transcript multiple times preparing it for full data analysis.
The first round of transcript review focused on ensuring the accuracy of the data. This round also included the first member checking instance, where my cocreators were given the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy and content. Any discrepancies or changes to the contents of the transcripts were addressed, and I then moved to the second round of transcript review. This second round of transcript review focused on HOW the story was being told, including making note of utterances, pauses, etc. I journaled and memoed as I was reviewing each transcript. I would journal my thoughts on what my cocreators spoke about, any similarities that I am noticing with other cocreators, how I’m feeling about what they are sharing, as well as any connections to the literature and my theoretical frameworks and methodology.

I used MAXQDA software to assist in the coding and data analysis process. As previously mentioned, I prepared transcripts for analysis by participant. I saved each transcript into one combined document and uploaded that document into MAXQDA. Once the document for each participant was uploaded into its folder, I began the first round of coding—coding by participant.

The first round of coding was in-vivo coding. Sticking closely to the data, I in-vivo coded segments of data that I felt were significant—either in content and/or context. This took some time because this first round set the basis for the remaining rounds of coding. The In-Vivo codes spoke to their stories, their experiences, their thoughts, their feelings, their opinions… It spoke to me. As I was in-vivo coding, I would keep my research questions, theoretical frameworks, and methodology in my mind, while still being open to all my cocreators shared. I noticed consistencies and similarities not only within cocreators but across cocreators. I wrote memos about those similarities, but recognizing Black women are not a monolith, I would also make note of key differences across cocreators.
In the second round of coding, I started with the in-vivo codes and started creating codes for like topics, statements, etc. I was intentional about letting the data speak, and not making assumptions on what the data was saying. In full transparency, this was a challenge at first because I had already fully immersed myself with the date from data collection, transcript review, and moving into coding. It was during these times when I was intentional about journaling as I worked through this process which allowed me to lean into the data more clearly. This journaling, listening to the data, and finishing this round of coding made it possible for me to organize codes into categories. As I continued through and finished this round of coding, along with the journaling, and listening to the data, I was able to start organizing codes into categories.

The third and final round of coding began with the categories that were developed by the end of round two. By this point, the code system in MAXQDA included codes and categories from across all cocreators and documents. It was during this round that I organized the categories and was able to identify themes and subthemes (see Table 2). I journaled and memoed during this phase as well. It was important that the identified themes were true to the data and not through my own biases. A lot of the information was interrelated, so there was a bit of time spent going through the numerous ways the themes/sub-themes could be organized. Talking through the themes and what they meant with my chair, I was able to organize the themes/subthemes into what makes the most sense for this project.

Table 2 lists the themes and subthemes that were constructed from the findings of this study, which will be presented in Chapter 4. I also identified information, that while not a theme, warrants some discussion that will occur in chapters 4 and 5. At this point, I conducted another member checking, during which I contacted my cocreators to share the constructed themes and
solicit their feedback. The cocreators indicated they were okay with the findings as presented.

There was a general consensus among them that this process was cathartic, and that they finally felt seen. This next section speaks of my critical friend, which was an intricate part of how I approached and processed data analysis.

Table 2
Emergent Themes and Subthemes of Cocreators’ Narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEME</th>
<th>SUBTHEME(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you your sister’s keeper?</td>
<td>ST1: Black Women Professional Staff (BWPS) are guarded with each other because of not knowing who can be trusted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ST2: Importance of Safe Spaces and Safe Spaces as Refuge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance As Resistance</td>
<td>ST1: Tug of War: The Conflict Between Authenticity and Playing the Game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ST2: Power in the Performance, Power in Our Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance is Personal</td>
<td>ST1: Speaking Up as Resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ST2: Setting and Maintaining Boundaries as Resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ST3: Self-Care as Resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing Pieces of the Puzzle</td>
<td>ST1: Desire for increased networking and professional development opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ST2: Faith, Family, and Friends Are Sources of Support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Critical Friend

It would be crass of me to fail to acknowledge the support that my critical friend (Costa & Kallick, 1993) provided throughout this process. My critical friend was another Black woman graduate student who was just ahead of me in our doctoral journey. She and I were not only peers in the graduate program, but she was also a professional colleague. She provided immense support, and we often helped me talk and process my thoughts and feelings during and post data collection, talking through the narratives of my cocreators, and just a safe space of all around
support and encouragement. This knowledge production was not done in a vacuum, alone and in isolation, but through this community that was built.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations should be prevalent throughout all phases of a research project. One’s chosen theoretical framework and methodology will significantly influence how those ethical considerations are implemented. Ethics is more than simply filling out the necessary paperwork to gain approval from an institutional review board (Clandinin, 2006). Ethics can be described as standards that regulate an individual's "conduct, behavior, or activity" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021, p. 39). Ethics in research is defined as the "justification of human action" (Schwandt, 2007). As a Black woman engaging in Black feminist informed research with Black women, the ethics interwoven throughout the project must also be culturally informed and relevant (Few et al., 2003).

With endarkened narrative inquiry, it was incumbent upon me to manage the narratives of the lived experiences that were shared with me with great care. Clandinin (2006) states the following about narrative inquiry that has implications for endarkened narrative inquiry:

> For those of us wanting to learn to engage in narrative inquiry, we need to imagine ethics as being about negotiation, respect, mutuality, and openness to multiple voices…and to think in responsible and reflexive ways about how narrative inquiry can shift the experiences of those with whom we engage. (pp.52-53)

Engaging in ethical qualitative inquiry with Black women utilizing a Black feminist perspective requires rejecting objectivity and leaning into how I was intimately connected to and influential in the research process (Taylor, 2018). There was also a necessity to be collaborative with the cocreators (Few et al., 2003) and acknowledge the role of bias (Roulston & Shelton, 2015).
I, as the researcher, accounted for several aspects of ethics in the implementation of this critical qualitative study. Those fundamental aspects included (a) informed consent and voluntary participation, (b) confidentiality and anonymity, (c) reflexivity and representation, and (e) dignity and respect (Trochim, n.d.).

Informed consent and voluntary participation are two sides of the same coin. The potential cocreators were fully informed about all aspects of the research project - the purpose, potential risks, etc. At that point, they made an informed decision on whether to participate. I did not force individuals to participate in the proposed study, and at any time, the participant could have chosen to drop out of the project. This information was included in the signed informed consent that was reviewed and discussed during the initial contact meeting.

Due to the site selection and the potentially sensitive nature of my study, confidentiality and anonymity were paramount. They volunteered to share their experiences with me, and some of those experiences deal with current/former supervisors, current/former colleagues, and people in upper leadership positions. They risked exposure and retaliation from some of the racialized experiences they shared. I maintained their confidentiality by not sharing with anyone they were involved in my study. We only communicated through non university owned email or via cell phone to schedule interviews. Data was stored in non-university owned systems in password protected files. Communication was done outside of their work environment. When talking through my research with my chair and critical friend, they were only referred to by their chosen pseudonym. Cocreators were given a choice on whether to have face to face or zoom interviews, with all choosing zoom. Although the signed informed consent form included permission to record, I still made sure to ask before starting each recording. I saved the audiovisual files to a location that is only accessible to me and the dissertation chair if required. Furthermore, the files
will be destroyed/deleted per IRB and institutional policy once the study is complete plus seven years. I have not and will not share information on who the cocreators were and the nature of their shared narratives outside of the study's scope. Any reference to an individual in any form will be via the participant’s chosen pseudonym.

As the researcher, who I am cannot be separated from any research studies I undertake. Assumptions are inevitable, and by utilizing a reflexivity journal (Janesick, 1999), I sat with those biases. Journaling helped me to be transparent about how the assumptions impacted my perspectives throughout the entire research process. Bias is not automatically equated with error, and it is impossible to be removed (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). Instead, it must be acknowledged and maintained throughout the research process using reflexivity, thus negating the idea of researcher neutrality as outlined in quantitative research (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). This was accomplished through my journaling/voice memos and conversations with critical friend. In my journaling, I talked about my positionality as the researcher and researched. I am my participants, and my participants are me. I wanted to make sure I did not project my experiences onto them. I thought about and processed the similarities in our experiences as Black women professional staff in higher education. However, during our data collection conversations, I was vulnerable with them and shared some of my experiences with them. We even talked about how they appreciated the opportunities to share their stories, and it felt good to know they were not alone. Again, conversations with my critical friend helped in that reflexivity, by talking though my thoughts, how I was interpreting those thoughts, and reconciling that with the cocreators’ words.

Agency and self-definition (Collins, 2002) are critical ethical aspects of Black feminist and critical qualitative inquiry. There are inherent power dynamics in the researcher/participant
relationship (Hamilton, 2020). I was very intentional and found great responsibility in working to ensure the cocreators felt as if they are being respected, heard, and have a sense of ownership in the study being undertaken (Few et al., 2003).

**Subjectivities/Positionality Statement**

Ethical considerations and researcher positionality are related aspects of a research study. It is often said that it is harder to talk (well, in this case, write) about yourself than someone else. Admittedly that is the case for me. I have gone back and forth with questioning what to include. Is it too much? Too little? Is this even relevant? The familiar twinge of imposter syndrome creeps up, and I must keep reminding myself that my value—professional or otherwise is not predicated on the opinions of others. I must remind myself why I have embarked on this journey and why I am committed to doing the work.

Many identities and social positions intersect to form the totality of my being. Depending on my life season, some of my identities and how I define myself (Collins, 2000b) are more prevalent than others. Regardless of season, situation, or circumstance, I am a Black woman. My Black womanhood comes before my Black motherhood, although my Black motherhood is the impetus for my why. Everything else I do, everything I experience, radiates from my Black womanhood. My goals and aspirations and the desire to push through and make it despite challenges stem from Black motherhood. I am a Black mother determined to be the example for her Black daughter, to show her that she can and that she is worthy regardless of what society says. The desire to challenge the status quo and defy expectations became more pronounced once I became a mother and had some negative experiences in my career. I wanted to be an example for my daughter that regardless of the roadblocks set before her, she can persist and thrive
professionally—on her terms. However, to understand the totality of who I am and what motivates me, it is essential to know where I came from.

I was born in raised in the deep south, rural northeast Mississippi, to be exact. According to the most recent census, I grew up in a county with an overall population of less than 25,000, of which only 7% were Black (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Living in that region, I grew up seeing various racial, social, and power structures at play, but it was not until I became an adult that I understood what I was witnessing (Cowley, 2022).

Who am I besides a Black woman and a Black mother? I am a Black woman employed as higher education professional staff. I am a Black woman interested in studying the narratives the experiences of Black women who work as higher education professional staff. I am the researcher and the researched. I have experienced being talked over in meetings. I have experienced being overlooked for promotions. I have experienced seeing how political higher education can be. I have witnessed how some people are quietly slid into positions, given title changes and significant raises, while I am working twice as hard to get half of the recognition and few opportunities for advancement. Our place in society influences how we generate, consume, and share knowledge.

As the researcher, I bring my own experiences and assumptions to this project. I was intentional about recognizing and acknowledging those biases to minimize their influence on the project. As a Black woman that interviewed other Black women, the notion of insider privilege forced me as the researcher to be more reflexive as I undertook and moved through the entirety of the research process. I acknowledged my positionality and biases but not make the research project about me (Clemons, 2019; Evans-Winters, 2019). I was intentional about only discussing
this research with cocreators during scheduled interview and follow up meetings and via non-work phone/email addresses.

The role of Black feminism in qualitative inquiry is to disrupt and challenge western standards of what constitutes knowledge and who can conduct research, all the while centering and giving agency to Black women through how research is conducted (Evans-Winters, 2019). I want to think back and answer the question: Why am I doing the work? I am doing the work because Black women are the bomb! We each have similarities, but there is so much beauty in the diversity that lies within us. Our voices, narratives, and perspectives deserve to be heard. I am doing this work because the voices of Black women professional staff deserve to be amplified. In doing so, I hope to encourage other Black women professional staff to be fierce in their determination, be bold in their self-identity, and unapologetic for standing in their truth.

Chapter Summary

Chapter three was a blueprint on how the study was conducted. It provided an overview of the theoretical framework, which shaped all choices made during the research process. The methodology (endarkened narrative inquiry), approaches to data collecting, and data analysis are also covered. The procedures for choosing study sites and cocreators, as well as ethical concerns including confidentiality and researcher biases, are all described in chapter three. Chapters four and five concentrate on what occurs once the investigation was completed. The study's results are covered in chapter 4, and the study's ramifications and implications are discussed in chapter five.
Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter is dedicated to the representation of the data. It presents and discusses the themes that were identified through a comprehensive thematic analysis approach of all the individual semi-structured interviews. Initially, my second research question was *How do Black women professional staff in higher education utilize professional counterspaces (West, 2015, 1019) as sites of everyday resistance.* I was looking for the presence of counterspaces within the institution, and if/how my cocreators used those spaces as a springboard for them to return to their respective units and engage in acts of everyday resistance. However, from data collection & data analysis, I found something completely different. I found that there is an absence of professional counterspaces at this institution. However, in their own ways, each of my cocreators indeed engaged in acts of everyday resistance. Therefore, I updated my second research question to what is included below. The research questions directing this study are:

1. What are the narratives of Black women professional staff in higher education?
2. How do Black women professional staff in higher education engage in acts of everyday resistance?

Data Representation

When considering how to represent the narratives of my cocreators, I aimed to capture not only their essence as complete individuals but also to select a method in line with Black feminist theory and endarkened narrative inquiry. While storytelling is a key component of how Black folks communicate with each other- passing down our storied history and traditions, my cocreators are all straight shooters. When speaking with them at our final member check where we discussed the themes and findings of this study, I asked them how they wanted their stories to be told. The overwhelming sentiment was to just tell it like it is.
Theme 1: Are You Your Sister’s Keeper?

*With these hands, I cannot defile you*

*They are to lift you, my sister!*

*With these words, I cannot demean you*

*They are to encourage and comfort you, my sister!*

*With this strength, I cannot destroy you*

*It is to defend you, my sister!*

*With this heart, I cannot reject you*

*It is to love you, my sister!*

- Lillian P. Benbow, 15th National President, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

I chose to lead with this quote because it is all about sisterhood and how as sisters you should want what is best for each other. That is the same as this theme because in some ways, being a part of Black women professional staff is akin to a sisterhood. This theme speaks to the relationships among Black women professional staff in higher education, to be quite honest Black women as a whole. I struggled with this theme; not because I questioned its validity, but because I wanted to take great care in how Black women would be portrayed in this work. It has never been, nor will it ever be my goal to bash Black women. Through dialogue with my committee, my critical friends, and with my cocreators, I had to stay true to the data and be authentic in the stories I was entrusted with. The phrase “your sister’s/brother’s keeper” is well known in the Black community. It means that when you love someone, you want what is best for them. You want to see them excel and thrive in all aspects. For this to happen, sometimes we must be willing to call each other out so we can learn to heal and move forward better, together. Sometimes Black women need their sisters, someone who has shared similar experiences, and
someone with whom they can just be. That is what it means to be your sister’s keeper. It is as an act of love, to Black women and for Black women, that this theme is shared.

Black womanhood is not this static category where everyone is the same (Collins, 1986, 2002). While Black women may share some commonalities because they are both Black and a Woman, they can have different upbringings, religions, beliefs, perspectives, etc. which shape how they view and move throughout the world (Collins, 1986). Due to historical dehumanization, Black women do not have the luxury of expressing the full range of human emotions in their professional settings (Collins, 1986; Wingfield, 2010). However, Black women have gone through the same range of experiences as any other group in society and are, in fact, whole humans. Therefore, given the nature of interpersonal contact, it makes sense that Black women would have occasionally had unpleasant encounters with one another. Amanda was very quick to acknowledge the diversity within Black women, recognizing that shared Blackness does not equate to automatic friendships. She said, “because I’m a Black person and somebody else is a Black person... We may not MESH!”

Central to this study was the relationships Black women higher education professional staff had with each other. The discussion of safe spaces and the issue of mistrust stemmed from a couple of questions posed during the interviews. Specifically, who could they go to when facing a challenging issue at work, and what were their sources of community and support. Additionally, I also asked questions that gauged the relationships they had with other Black women professional staff on campus. There were varied responses, but the one thing that was consistent was the desire and importance of having a safe space where they could come together to not only network with each other but to support one another as we navigate this space. It is important to note that when I refer to a safe “space” does not strictly refer to an actual physical
location. A safe space could be anywhere you are with people who are there to comfort and support you, even if you are not physically together.

**Subtheme 1: Black Women Professional Staff (BWPS) are guarded with each other because of not knowing who to trust.**

Across all cocreators, there was a desire for a safe space where Black women professional staff could come together and be vulnerable with each other. However, there was one issue that stood in the way of Black women professional staff being able to have these safe spaces they so yearned for … trust. There were two key reasons my cocreators cited for the mistrust experienced among the Black women on campus: having had negative encounters with other Black women and the lack of organized opportunities to network and engage with each other, which could in turn lead to building trust.

My cocreators would often speak about not interacting with people they do not know or trust, except when necessary for work tasks. Then, they only give information that is necessary to complete the tasks and keep all personal thoughts and opinions to themselves. They would be guarded in those spaces and not completely open and vulnerable for fear of not knowing who to trust. Maxine said:

That's exactly the problem. I don't, I don't know… I don't know which one-a [one of] y'all finna go back and say some [something] you know, cause I know you work closely with her, or I know you work closely with her you in her office? How much of this you finna go back and share about... you know, and even then, even if we not even talking about her, like, what is going to go back to her and cause an issue. What is going to be misinterpreted in this room... that would cause an issue.
Maxine reiterated that from conversations she has had with other Black women from across campus, one of the main reasons there is a lack of trust among Black women on campus is having had negative/troubling experiences with other Black women. She emphasized the need for gatekeeping access to your space adding the familiar adage from scholar Zora Neale Hurston (1984) saying, “You know, all skinfolk ain’t kinfolk” and that she knows several Black women who have all been burned by the same person. She says, “And I say that because... most of the women that I've come across who were willing to say something, have all had a burned experience... by that one.”

Many of my cocreators referenced aspects of spirituality when speaking about trust and how they determine whether a space was safe. Lola stated, “everybody can't be trusted” and goes on to speak about how she relies on her discernment to gauge if someone can be trustworthy. She stated that:

- paying attention to their character, that plays a huge role in if I feel safe with sharing concerns, talking about personal issues or things like that. But I think just going off their vibe just having very surface level conversations and just seeing where it goes from there, I think has been key for me.

Blessed also referred to her discernment when she spoke about how she can sense whether a space is safe or not. She said:

- Yes. If I feel unsafe… if I feel that this space is either unsafe, or... I always joke and say my third eye if my third eye is twitching, I'm like hey, this is not a safe space for me. So let me speak, let me navigate let me do what I came to do and be quiet.

Although they desired a safe space of community among other Black women professional staff, the lack of trust made having that space near impossible. It is very frustrating that sometimes “it
be your own people” that hurt you the most. That do not advocate for you and seem to root for everyone else—except other Black women.

**Subtheme 2: Importance of Safe Spaces and Safe Spaces as Refuge**

The diversity within Black women was evident throughout data collection, and in how they discussed the importance of safe spaces for them. Differing reasons for importance, each equally as valid, ranged from safe spaces being a necessity for growth and development, to the desire for safe spaces to serve as refuge from the hostilities often faced as they navigate the higher education space, and as a place where they can unpack those experiences, seek advice from others who have shared similar experiences, and go back out to fight another day.

Blessed in particular talked about safe spaces in the realm of professional growth and development. She stated that it was important to have a community where it was a safe space to “ask questions to grow” and that everyone deserved access to a safe space saying “when we talk about safe spaces and places where you feel comfortable and you should feel comfortable in any space, you should, but that doesn't oftentimes always happen.” Blessed was fortunate because she was able to set boundaries and limit her time in any environment she deemed unsafe. Not physically unsafe but in terms of a safe space emotionally as a Black woman. She said, “I'm not going to be in a space where I'm gonna be uncomfortable... because I don't have to be.”

Other cocreators were not as fortunate as Blessed to limit their time in hostile work environments. My cocreators told stories of the hostilities and microaggressions, policing of demeanor and tone (Griffin, 2000; Johnson, 2020; Rollock, 2021; Townsend, 2021), and other experiences at the hands of their colleagues, students, and supervisors alike, and have said that they wished they had a space (including people) where they could go for encouragement, advice, and support.
Amanda has experienced constant microaggressions (Hill, 2019; Townsend, 2021) and policing of her tone (Rollock, 2021) and demeanor to a level higher than most of the other cocreators. She discusses the challenges of navigating social interactions in the workplace as a Black woman, and how her bold personality and no-nonsense approach to work has led to troubling encounters with white colleagues and supervisors. She recalled one incident where she and a white female colleague did not agree on something, and it ended up with Amanda being told she needed to “learn how to talk to people.” Amanda also expresses the frustration that Black women must make others feel comfortable while also avoiding stereotypes and microaggressions, yet no one does the same for them. She says:

    it is really tough. And then like I said it, then you go to work, and you have to make others feel comfortable... Because if you say something like *Oh, girl, whatever.* Oh, she was a little she mad. She's an angry Black woman.

She goes further to talk about Black women do not have the luxury to show all their emotions because of being deemed the angry Black woman. She says “But I sit there, and I have a little.... just a little edge on my voice and y'all sked [scared] and shaking in your boots.”

Tasha has had similar situations where assumptions about her intelligence were made, as well as people treating her as if she was less than. She says “In my previous unit, I dealt with a lot of racism … and with certain older individuals in my unit feeling like I was a servant to them. And them only. Umm, that I should jump when they said jump.” Tasha goes on to say that it was important for her to have a safe space to express feelings and issues because “you can allow that to get you riled up or you can find safe places to go to and express it.”

Black women professional staff deserve to have a work environment where they feel safe and supported. They deserve to be able to have positive relationships with other Black women.
Black women deserve to be able to show up and be their authentic selves without being shunned, dismissed, or disregarded. Black women professional staff do not deserve to be dehumanized and devalued and held to problematic standards of Blackness, womanhood, black womanhood, and professionalism.

**Theme 2: Performance as Resistance**

“In a world that oftentimes doesn’t value Black womanhood, Black women bravely declare their authenticity, weaving a tapestry of strength, resilience, and grace that resonates with the beauty of their true selves.”

-Unknown

I chose to lead with this quote because it speaks to how Black women value authenticity. Even in spaces where they are expected to conform, Black women continue to take power and choose how they show up in those spaces. To learn more about the narratives of my cocreators, I asked if they ever felt the need to act or speak in a certain way to be accepted by their white colleagues. While the exact responses varied, it was clear across all cocreators that even though there can be barriers, they valued authenticity (Brown & Leung, 2018; Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021), and they were intentional in how they chose to present themselves (Townsend, 2021) in these spaces. The double consciousness of living in multiple worlds (DuBois, 2015) is evident in their stories. They all spoke of the importance of authenticity yet realize that they often face judgement and scrutiny just for being who they are and must play the game by navigating a space that was not designed for them.

Each cocreator has made a conscious decision in choosing how they will show up in those spaces. These women show great power, resilience, and resistance. They resist the status quo. They resist and reject the stereotypes that are shoved upon Black women professional staff.
every day. They resist the microaggressions (Cooper et al, 2017) and weaponized tears from their white female coworkers who try to police their tone and mannerisms (Collins, 2002; Hill, 2019; Middleton, 2022). They reject the assumptions that they are uneducated just because of how they speak and where they were raised. It is that intentionality, which brings in the acts of everyday resistance.

**Subtheme 1: Tug of War: The Conflict Between Authenticity and Playing the Game**

During the interviews, my cocreators and I talked continually about how they had to balance being authentic with playing the game. Their perspectives and thought processes mirrored the diversity within Black women and ranged from being adamant about maintaining their complete authenticity to adjusting some things about themselves depending on the situation, to one participant saying at one point feeling like she had to be a completely different person on the job.

Blessed has the demeanor and poise of Claire Huxtable mixed with Maxine Waters. She was adamant in expressing how important authenticity was to her. When asked about if she ever felt the need to change how she acted or spoke to be accepted by her white colleagues, she said “Hmm.... That's a tricky one because I don't play those games and I don't I don't mind you documenting that I just said that.” Blessed went further to state:

I don't believe in putting on airs. I will say that I will be more prone to be quiet than to put on air because I'm not a good actress. Like, it's like, you get what you get... It's like if you can't deal with what I am delivering, then that means that this space isn't for me or this position isn't for me or your partnership and with this organization, you know, it's not for me, so rather than me, act, or put on a façade. I would much rather be quiet. And that
is an action. You know, they say sometimes nothing, no words is sometimes stronger than words. So…”

Trina had a similar outlook as Blessed. Trina says that she does not “believe in being fake” and “keeps in 100%” in all her interactions. Trina’s attitude is that it is important to set boundaries and expectations in the beginning and that doing so has contributed to her feeling like she does not need to change for anyone.

Amanda and Maxine are right in the middle of the spectrum. They both indicate that while they value authenticity, that sometimes they may change their delivery based on the audience, or to make sure the message they are trying to convey is being received. Amanda stressed the necessity of having to know how to play the game. She says “you know… you need to know how to turn on your different… to turn on different switches” because there are levels to authenticity, and the setting determines the amount of her she will be willing to give. Amanda goes further to say:

I do know how to act in some meetings compared to other meetings, with some people compared to others, but you're still gonna get... this form of Amanda. Just as some meetings you might get more of her, and some meetings you might get less.

Maxine has a similar mindset as Amanda. Maxine says that she does not use a lot of slang in her everyday vocabulary, so she does not really change how she talks. However, she does acknowledge adjusting her delivery depending on the target audience. She says:

I long for the day when this is not the case, but in some spaces still right now you have to put a certain face forward...in order to get your point across to have what you're trying to say be received.
For Amanda and Maxine, although they are middle of the road, they are by no means diminishing their Blackness or limiting their authenticity. They are simply choosing their battles, and sometimes, that isn’t the battle they want to fight that day.

Among my cocreators, Lola and Tasha represent one end of the spectrum. They openly acknowledge feeling the need to behave differently at work to gain acceptance from their colleagues. They have also discussed experiencing imposter syndrome (Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021), and have questioned their sense of belonging in that space. It is important to note that they no longer feel the need to change who they are, whether it is because they have changed jobs and have more supportive colleagues, or they simply grew tired of questioning themselves.

Tasha spoke at length about trying to “speak eloquently” because of her thick country accent, and that she felt she had to change her persona at work in order to be perceived as professional (McCluney et al, 2021). She said “And then when I will go into the building, it's like, Okay, it's time to be professional, or it's time to, you know, *put on*” as if who she is, was inherently unprofessional.

For Tasha, having to balance authenticity with trying to fit in was draining and eventually took a toll on her mental health. The levels of toxicity she experienced in her former unit led to feelings of isolation, belittlement, anger, and rage. Having to constantly deal with the microaggressions (Cooper et al, 2017; Kuykendoll, 2023) and demeaning comments were too much to deal with. Thankfully, she had friends and family to talk her down when things were getting tough. She said:

Like, it would, it would make me go into a bad place. Um, because I hate being fake. And that's what I had to be. Um, so it was like, I had my mom and my best friend to talk to or
my cousin, when, you know, I needed to come back to reality. Like, you know, these people not treating me right, you know, I feel like I'm finna to explode. And my mom would talk me down and everything, but it was like a transformation like Clark Kent goes into Superman… you take off the costume, and it's like, okay, I'm free. I can be me. Tasha says that it got to a point where she knew something had to change. She left that unit and is in a much more supportive environment. She is also a strong proponent of going to therapy and taking care of one’s mental health.

Lola’s work environment was not as toxic as Tasha’s. However, she recalls a time when she was in a new role and having to do trainings and presentations. She likened it to code switching (McCluney et al., 2021) and said she would be very intentional on how she articulated certain words. Lola did say that over time the real you is going to come out anyway and that her mindset is that she is who she is, and that what she says is more important than how she says it. For Lola, it was a gradual shift in thinking. She said “over time, it just made sense. Like, why try to be something that you're not? Just be true to who you are, and be authentic, instead of trying to be this other person or other character, or whatever.”

Far too often, Black women professional staff are made to feel that who they are is either too much or not enough. Society would have Black women feel that who they are as a person is inherently ‘less than’- less intelligent, less professional, less human.

Subtheme 2: Power in the Performance, Power in Our Presence

The performance is putting on the costumes and masks of demeanor, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc., and the power in the performance comes from the conscious decisions my cocreators made in choosing how they show up in their respective work environments. The power also comes from their very existence is spaces not meant for them (Breeden, 2021). They
are not playing victim. They are exercising their agency to choose how they show up (Johnson, 2022), choosing how much of themselves they are willing to give to a place that has proven it does not value them. Although they have different perspectives and thought processes, they were all very intentional in choosing their approach to the performance.

Blessed speaks to how why she is intentional about how she shows up in her work environment. She says:

I think it's important that as an African American woman, leader to realize that sometimes you're in spaces where you may feel as though your qualifications or your competencies are challenged—inadvertently or advertently. But I think it's important and what I've worked really hard to do over the last, I guess, five to six years that I've been in leadership type roles in the PWI space, is that just to remain authentically myself. And no matter what that looks like to the person on the other end of that, I'm always going to be professional, but I'm going to be me. So, I'm intentional about trying to be authentically Blessed.

For Blessed, that intentionality on being authentic to who she is, is power. It is resisting falling prey to respectability politics (Harris, 2003) and any societal norms that suggest who she is, is not good enough.

Amanda exhibits her power by just being okay with who she is, even as she may adjust her delivery for the target audience. She says:

So, when I go to work, I can't be 100% Amanda every day. You know, 100% Amanda at all places every day? I can be you know 97 right here today. Tomorrow I might have to be 82 but there's never a situation where there’s still not my own flair.
Amanda’s perspectives highlight the idea of levels of authenticity. That regardless of how much of her is on display, it is still authentically her. Authenticity aligns with self-definition (Collins, 2002) and includes the autonomy to decide how we define ourselves, and how much of ourselves to give to any space (Johnson, 2022).

For Black women, regardless of profession, their mere presence in a space is a form of resistance. My cocreators are harnessing that power and are not wilting and shirking from the responsibility that comes from being in those spaces. They are still, in spite of the challenges they face, the stereotypes they? debunk, they are they are defining their own successes whether it is boldly existing in those spaces or choosing to leave that space (Johnson, 2022).

Trina speaks to some of the challenges of Black womanhood and to not allow yourself to feel less than. She says:

It's like certain spaces we’re not supposed to be in. We have to work twice as hard to get where we want to go. Or to get the things we just want in general. So being a Black woman is hard in this. Hard on campus. Hard just in everyday life. But in navigating higher ed, it’s important to not let anyone make you feel less than. Don't let anyone make you feel like you aren't important, and you aren't heard, because you are heard, and you are important.

Trina’s sentiments echo that of some of the other cocreators. They all talk about their love for Blackness and Black womanhood, being confident in who they are, and not allowing other people to make them feel they are inadequate and undeserving to be where they are.

Tasha’s power and boldness to exist in these spaces stems from her choice gatekeep who has access to her, and her deciding to prioritize her mental health. She shares:
I've grown to see it as if I can't be myself, you're not deserving of me. Um, and it goes for any relationship, work relationship, if you can't take me as I am, then I don't need to be around you, I don't need to work for you, I don't need to be in your space. This is how I've come to be cause that's the only way I can safeguard, my mental health, you know. I can't put them on the forefront and put me on the back burner. So, you know, I'm, I'm gonna be myself whether it angers you or not.

This perspective has shown Tasha’s growth and resilience to come from feeling as if she had to do a complete change to go to work, to now prioritizing herself and her mental health. That is power and resistance.

While my cocreators may not call how they navigate higher education a performance, that is what it is. The power is in the choice. They choose how they will show up in these spaces. They choose their demeanor. The choice on how much of them they are willing to share. The choice of what level of their authenticity is on display. The power is them taking ownership of how they move in this space, is, an act of resistance.

**Theme 3: Resistance is Personal**

"In the quiet strength of a Black woman's personal acts of resistance, resilience becomes an art, and every stride forward is a brushstroke in a masterpiece of empowerment."

-Unknown

This quote really speaks to the essence and power that those individual acts of everyday resistance have. Those personal acts of resistance that Black women engage in are just as meaningful and impactful as grand scale gestures of activism. Black women have been engaging in acts of resistance since enslaved Africans were brought to this land. House slaves, especially those who were cooks or worked as the mammy figures, had the ability and opportunity to
poison the slave master and his family and oftentimes relied on knowledgeable root workers to carry it out (West & David, 2021). Black women engaging in resistance has continued to this day. Resistance does not have to be as grandiose as demonstrations or picketing. Acts of everyday resistance can be deeply personal—those small individual gestures in their immediate space.

When asked what resistance meant to them and how they defined resistance it was varied responses. Some thought about large scale gestures of activism such as picketing or boycotting—like what happened during the Civil Rights movement. Many people do not necessarily think about the smaller, individual gestures that can be just as impactful in one’s immediate environment (Casado Pérez et al., 2021). Once that clarification was made, it was like a lightbulb went off for them. There are many ways and different interpretations on what can constitute resistance. One thing that was very noticeable was that when my cocreators spoke of resistance, they spoke in a way of advocating for others more so than advocating for themselves. That focus on the wellbeing of others over themselves falls right in line with endarkened narrative inquiry (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2021) and Black women’s collective uplift of others. For my cocreators, the acts of resistance they shared fell into three buckets: speaking up, setting boundaries, and self-care. More information on each is shared below.

**Subtheme #1: Speaking Up as an Act of Resistance**

Throughout our conversations, my cocreators would talk about ways in which they spoke up—whether it be to advocate for themselves or for others. Some would talk about their boldness in calling people out and others talked about the need to be strategic in how they broached the topic. Still, others discussed how they would pick their battles, evaluating if a particular issue was something that meant enough to them to say something about. Amanda said:
Okay, so a lot of times I've made a decision like... if I, Do I have a dog in this fight? Or do I care [raised inflection, emphasis] about this fight, okay, because this is a thing, some stuff that people are talking about that just isn't at the front of my like of what's important to me. The word I'll use is this something important to me that I want to resist. Lola said that she got to the point where she decided to be bolder in how she addressed certain issues and that she when she sees an issue, she has to be okay with addressing the issue. She said, “like if something bothers me, instead of letting it linger like I would in the past when I was younger, now I address it head on.” Tasha spoke about the benefits of a collective when speaking out about certain issues. She said, “It doesn't have to be a big group. You know, just a group of people that aren't…I want to say aren't afraid to ruffle the feathers a little bit.”

When sharing instances of speaking out, my cocreators would most always first speak of a time when they spoke out and advocated for someone else. Those that were in supervisory positions often spoke about speaking up and advocating on behalf of their staff. Others talked about how they would speak up and advocate for their students. Amanda shared multiple instances where she spoke up mostly was on behalf of others. For example, she said, “and I would call our boss out on his whether it’s considered racist, sexist, you know, classist behavior I would just call him out.” In addition to calling out her former supervisor, she also spoke about the time when she spoke out against demeaning and classist comments one of her colleagues was making about the custodial staff.

It is quite unfortunate that the same level of energy Black women put into advocating for others and caring for others, they cannot do the same for themselves. While they also talked about speaking up for themselves, some of my cocreators talked about how they had to do so in a
way that was more palatable for the masses and not make it where they are trying to improve things specifically for Black people. They would have to play different scenarios out in their mind, asking what it would cost them and was this fight even worth it. For example, Amanda said:

Anything I've done, again, outside of work or anything, it's to help me. So, by helping me as a Black woman it’s gonna help other Black women, you know, but I haven't specifically done it to help. Hey, you need to help me because I'm a Black woman blah blah blah it’s a situation where I've always said it's going to help others because I don't want to be viewed especially from the White people that I'm thinking just about Black people cause then they like ‘ugh’ [sound of disgust] then now you've lost them. They notcha [not your], ally. So, when you have to make decisions, you have to make decisions for EVERYBODY. So, make it seem like it's for everybody, but it's really for the people of color.

This is an all too unfortunate occurrence where while Black women are willing to speak up for others, there are few people willing to speak up for us. And, by speaking up for ourselves and advocating for change on our own behalf, we run the risk of alienating others.

**Subtheme #2: Setting Boundaries as an Act of Resistance**

Setting and maintaining boundaries was another way my cocreators engaged in acts of resistance. My cocreators oftentimes spoke about having boundaries was not only necessary to maintain their sanity but as a form of power and control. Maxine talks about doing things in her own time is one way she sets bounties. She says:
taking my time answering emails. Like yo’ emergency is not my emergency. Um... what else? Like literally having a designated time during the day to check in on emails and not constantly, you know, going back and forth.

Maxine also indicated another way she set boundaries as resistance is having a transactional relationship with the institution. While she was very intentional about making sure that her work was done and done well, she did not go above and beyond. Maxine goes on to say that she does not feel bad about using her time and encourages her staff to do the same.

Trina recalled several instances of setting boundaries as resistance. The most impactful of those moments occurred after she was overlooked for a job, an all too familiar feeling. Trina had worked in this department for a while and was knowledgeable about not only per position but about the overall workings of the office. So, when a higher-level position came available, it was a no brainer that she applied for it. She was interviewed for the position, but ultimately someone else was chosen. She expressed frustration about being overlooked for a position and expectations to help train/assist person who got the job. Trina set firm boundaries in that instance. She said:

Now, did she get my help? Absolutely not. So, you know, cause I'm like, I'm not finna stop what I'm doing, because I'm already working on students. I'm not gonna stop what I'm doing to help you answer a question whether it was basic or not. I can't. I applied for the job and didn't get it, so this is on you to learn.

My cocreators all set boundaries in different ways, but it all boiled down to feeling devalued and not giving 150% to a place that has shown that they do not care about them, but what they can do for the institution.
Subtheme #3: Self-Care as a Form of Resistance

Although only a couple of cocreators talked about self-care as resistance, the impact that self-care and mental health had on the cocreators that mentioned it was undeniable. Self-care can take many forms—whether it be prayer, meditation, or therapy—taking care of themselves was an important aspect of their resistance. Oftentimes our mere presence in a space is resistance, so they all indicated a need to have that space where they can debrief, unplug, and recharge.

Tasha talked the most about how self-care and mental health was to her. She said:

Um, I'm very in tune with, with me. Um, I meditate. Well, I did meditate, I need to start back. I started meditating, start taking meditation classes started doing yoga. You know, mindfulness is important. I'm, I'm big on that. I'm big on balancing my chakra [laughing].

Tasha continued to talk about how part of her self-care and maintaining her mental health was no longer engaging in negativity. She shared the following sentiments:

I really stopped engaging. I don't know if it's because I'm in a new work environment, or the pandemic happened. And I lost my dad. But life is too short. And it's like, I can't, I can't let small things like, that beat me down. So, I just, you made me realize that I stopped engaging. It's not worth it.

Tasha continued to share instances of how her self-care ties directly into her engaging in resistance. She shared how through therapy and medication she is able to manage and choose her level of engagement:

My psychiatrist put me on this pill, where I don't even know the name the real name. I don't know, but he calls it the I don't give a damn pill. Okay! And ever since I've been on that, I don't give a damn. And I'm laughing because it's really hitting me did the medicine work! It's, yeah, that's real good! But it's also like, I've just stopped engaging.
Maxine also discussed the importance of self-care, not only for herself but her staff as well. Oftentimes Black women give so much of ourselves and do not have anyone to pour into us. Maxine goes further to talk about that part of her self-care as resistance is encouraging her staff to have as much of a work life balance as possible. She also lets them know that it is fine if they need to take some time to focus on family, for example, so that they can be in the right headspace when they return.

Overall, the theme *Resistance is personal* not only highlighted the diversity in thought within Black women professional staff, but it also gave some concrete examples of how Black women professional staff engaged in those smaller, more personal acts of everyday resistance. It also brought to the forefront that even amid navigating hostile environments themselves, they still found it important to be an advocate and speak up for others. If only that favor could be returned.

**Theme 4: Missing Pieces of the Puzzle**

"In the tapestry of higher education, Black women professionals weave brilliance, yet face missing pieces—equity, recognition, and support. Completing this puzzle is not just a need; it's an imperative for empowerment and true institutional excellence."

- Unknown

I led with this quote because it speaks to the missing pieces that Black women professional staff in higher education need to be truly fulfilled. This theme is a culmination of all the previous themes. In some way, they all led to and alluded to the missing pieces of a safe work environment that valued them, supported them, and wanted to see them thrive. As indicated earlier, my initial research question #2 asked how Black women professional staff used professional counterspaces as sites of resistance. However, because of the data, my co-creators
shared, the realization that professional counterspaces—whether they be formal or informal—by the definition I used (West, 2015, 2019) did not exist at the institution. That lack of interaction with other Black women professional staff contributed to their lack of support at the institution. By far, the women in this study indicated while they may have minimal support on campus, their primary sources of support came from their faith, family, and friends.

Subtheme #1: Desire for increased networking, professional development opportunities, and mentorship

My cocreators all shared their desire for increased networking and professional development opportunities, career advancement, as well as mentorship. They did mention that there could be some professional benefits to those things. One cocreator mentioned that having that network of people they could call to assist with an issue would be great to have. However, it was not just about making professional connections. So many of the women in this study work in siloed areas, with minimal interaction with people outside of their immediate units, that they think it would just be nice to know who the other Black folks on campus were so that they could put faces with names and build community.

Components of professional counterspaces included opportunities for professional development, networking, mentorship, and spaces safe for vulnerability and support. Throughout the data collection process, each of the cocreators indicated their desire and yearning for each of those elements. The collective desire for those elements are the missing pieces of the professional counterspace puzzle.

Networking. The women in this study all wanted more opportunities to network and interact with other Black women from across campus. They each referenced the importance of networking and meeting new people as well as the benefits and challenges to making this
happen. They acknowledged that it can be difficult to know where to start, especially if new to the institution. When speaking of the benefits of networking with other Black women, Amanda said:

It may be a situation where we're coming to do like some professional development informally to professional development, and they would meet together and then they will come together, and they will talk about different things, and they will support one another.

Amanda’s sentiments about the importance of and benefits of networking with other Black women were echoed by the other women in this study. Tasha spoke of having a sisterhood and support benefits of networking with other Black women professional staff. She said:

Because... it's nothin' like a sisterhood. And I think this would, it would be if we could meet up across campus and all come together. And we can probably do some awesome things because we have the wherewithal and the strength to be able to do that. So, it's not easy being a Black woman. And I think that if we if we were to do that, then it'll be another outlet for us to be able to lean and support each other, and we don't have that right now.

Among the cocreators, there is a clear consensus that there are benefits to networking and engaging with other Black women professional staff. The women in this study desire more opportunities to do just that.

While all the women in this study shared the benefits of networking with other Black women professional staff and the desire for more opportunities to do so, they each also shared reasons why that has been a challenge. The challenges to increased networking and relationship
building not only stems from a lack of organized networking opportunities, but also the
guardedness Black women experience with each other. Maxine said:

The lack of organized spaces for Black faculty and staff makes it difficult to form
connections and trust. It is hard to know who to rely on and informal circles cannot be
formed without first having a formal function or event.

She goes on to share about a formal initiative for Black males (students) that led to the Black
male staff who worked with that initiative to develop their own informal space to network,
convene, and support each other. She wished the same could happen for the Black women
professional staff.

The women in this study also mentioned a group or organization on campus that is for
Black faculty and staff. They all say while having that organization could be great, its
inorganization, sporadic outreach attempts, and lack of sponsored activities made it an
ineffective tool for promoting networking, professional development, and general engagement
with other Black faculty and staff from across campus. Trina recalls getting an email from them,
but not really paying close attention to it because she did not know who they were or what their
purpose was. She said:

Um, well, I think it's, you know, since we do have that, I think it's a great thing to have a
great organization to have. But I'm gonna be honest with you when I first came across the
email I was like, What is this? And who are these people? Because I did not have any
knowledge of it. Like I didn't know it existed.

So, for the Black women in this study, the opportunity to network and engage with other Black
women professional staff could not only yield professional connections but also the development
of a sisterhood and space of support.
**Professional Development.** While the women in this study all discussed their desire for more professional development, they each gave varying reasons to why they currently engaged in little to no professional development activities. Those reasons ranged from little to no financial support from the institution, unawareness of available professional development activities, the lack of organized professional development activists/programs, and the potential impact of COVID-19.

Lola and Maxine both mentioned that the institution used to have a formal professional development program for women, where they would have programming and activities sponsored through the institution’s HR department. When referencing similar programs elsewhere Blessed commented, "And I always thought, or I've thought recently like, this will be awesome if there was a program similar to this for African American women.”

A few of my cocreators also indicated financial constraints. Amanda indicated that while her office could not afford to send them to conferences, her supervisor encouraged them to seek out local and/or inexpensive professional development opportunities. Referencing budget constraints, Amanda said “with our lack of professional development and everything with the budgets, you know, I can't go that conference.” However, not all cocreators listed budgetary constraints as reasons for not attending conferences for professional development. Tasha stated that she had been given the opportunity, but just had not taken advantage of that opportunity.

Several of the women in this study and shared how professional development has looked different for them since the onset of COVID-19. Blessed said “it's been a little difficult over the last three years, throughout the pandemic. I just, um, attended a lot of leadership type, ummm, conferences and webinars sponsored by the national organization for people in my field.” Maxine also talked about how since the pandemic most of her professional development has
been virtual. She said, “Honestly, a lot of it is me just finding random stuff on the internet and signing up, and attended and especially now when there are so many opportunities for virtual options.”

Even in virtual spaces, my co-creators were still seeking out other Black women who were in attendance—whether it be just seeing how many other Black women were there or for potential professional connections. Seeking out other Black women at professional development opportunities underscored my co-creators’ desire for connections. For example, Blessed said she would be “counting the little squares” to see how many other Black women would be in attendance.

**Mentorship.** My co-creators had varied thoughts surrounding the topic of mentorship. They all said they saw the value in mentorship, their experiences with mentorship varied. Some of the women in my study shared having great experiences with mentorship, both as a mentee and mentor. Others indicated unpleasant experiences and some not having had those experiences because they didn’t know where to start. At any rate, regardless of their personal experiences with mentorship, it was still viewed as an important to professional and career development.

Amanda has a desire to move up in her career and feels that having a mentor could help her. However, it does not appear that for whatever reason the Black women who are in leadership positions are actively mentoring up and coming Black women professionals. Amanda said, “but we do have some Black people that are in administrative positions. And it would be nice for them to be able to reach out to someone to help them.” Lola shared Amanda’s sentiments about those in leadership, particularly Black women reaching back. She said, “There hasn't been someone to reach back and say, hey, you know, this is the advice that I would give.”
Amanda does acknowledge that Black women who have risen to upper leadership positions may find themselves in a no-win situation, saying:

so, either you went up and you broke down the walls for errbody and the white people scared of you, or you've broken down the walls or you didn't break down the walls for everybody the Black people like okay, she didn't even help us when she got her, uhhh when she got the chance.

On the same token, Maxine had an experience where she was burned by someone, a Black woman, she thought was a mentor. That experience has left her apprehensive in seeking out those mentorship relationships. Now, she said “it’s the apprehension of like, thinking this is about to be a positive relationship and finding out that you on some bull. You know?”

Thankfully, for Maxine, she had another mentor—a Black, male, former professor—that as she says “So his vision for what I could do was pretty much greater than what I was thinking. He saw more before I saw more.” That mentorship relationship was particularly impactful for Maxine because she now sees her career moving in an entirely different direction than before.

Tasha and Trina both had limited experience with mentorship. Tasha said there was one person. a Black woman, who was like an unofficial mentor that she could ask about work related things. She goes further to say:

No other mentorships or anything like that. It's basically um... figure it out. You figure it out yourself…. It's not... Um, it's not a lot of mentorships... When you, when I think about it. Umm, I mean I know we have our resources, but... I haven't I haven't utilized any of that really.

So, while Tasha may have untapped resources regarding mentorship, Trina didn’t know where to look. She said, “when I was starting out, I didn't know where to look, or like how do I find
someone to mentor me like I didn't know.” Trina goes further to state that she questions whether a mentor would benefit her at this point in her career. However, she stresses the importance of finding a mentor to any student she comes across.

Of all the women in this study, Blessed had what appeared to be the most positive experiences with mentorship. Blessed says she is intentional about who and for what purpose she seeks someone out as a mentor. Blessed believes that actions speak louder than words and wants to see evidence of the recommendations and suggestions being put into practice before asking someone to be her mentor.

Subtheme #2: Faith, Family, and Friends as Sources of Support

My cocreators spoke very candidly about their relationships with other Black women professional staff, Black women, and Black folks on campus in general. There was a consensus among them that they loved Blackness and Black womanhood. They each spoke about how generally speaking, they would find their community and support among other Black folks and Black women. While the women in this study indicate their faith, family, and friends as their primary sources of support. It is important to also acknowledge their collective desire and sense of community among other Black people.

Amanda and Tasha both spoke about how they find community with other Black people because of the kinship and that other Black folks just get it. Tasha went further to say:

Being a part of the Black community to me, is it's an amazing, I want to say, amazing, it's an amazing experience. Because we have our own community. Um, we have each other's back, whether we know the person or not, it's just a sense of kinship, being a part of the African or the Black community.
Amanda echoed those sentiments, saying “I can say that's where I find my most community with other Black people because of course you can be who you are.” The kinship and sense of community among Black people is something each woman in my study cherished and sought to build more of that community professionally.

My cocreators indicated they had minimal to no support on campus but wished that was not the case. In the instances where there was some small inking of support, it didn’t come from other Black women. Although this further highlights the tensions and lack of trust Black women can have with each other, the connection with other Black women, and wanting support from other Black women is still desired. For example, Tasha equated the support she desired with a sisterhood. She said:

It’s nothin' like a sisterhood. And I think this would, it would be if we could meet up across campus. And all come together. And we can probably do some awesome things because we have the wherewithal and the strength to be able to do that. So, it's not easy being a Black woman. And I think that if we if we were to do that, then it'll be another outlet for us to be able to lean and support each other, lean on, and support each other. And we don't have that right now.

Again, you will see that the women in this study are yearning for that connection with other Black folks, especially other Black women. This is another missing piece of the professional counterspace puzzle.

Although their professional environment was lacking robust community and support, each of the cocreators in my study had faith, family, and friends that filled in the gap. As my cocreators are all unique, the ways in which they lean on their faith, family, and friends differed as well. For some of the women in my study, that strong familial support helped them deal with
hostile work environments, for others it was encouraging them to have balance and to set boundaries.

When referencing her sources of support, Maxine says “My husband. So, it's my husband and God. Um, I found me a little Bible plan on my Bible app on my phone that relates, and I talked to Him about it.” Maxine’s husband is also good about giving her words of encouragement and encouraging her to set boundaries. He is her personal hype man and when she gets frustrated or discouraged, he always says “Mane, you a boss!” Maxine continued saying:

Um, but he is always trying to help me to focus on the fact that, you know, there's… there's probably something I'm still needing to learn in this position. That will prepare me for the next position. And to just, you know, continue to exercise my patience, and give my best work while I'm there. Um, and then to let it go. Like it's because of him that I took my email off my phone. because he was like, give your best when you're there... and cut it off when you go home.

It is that level of encouragement that gives Maxine the strength to push through to another day. The other women in this study also benefit from this type of unwavering support from their respective families.

Like Maxine, Lola also relies on her family for support. Additionally, she leans on her faith for support, especially in those moments when she is not only having to encourage herself to stay true to who he is but is trying to teach her son to be proud of who he is as a young Black boy. She says “I think a lot of prayer, a lot of knowing who I am, and from where I came, I was created, you know, with a purpose. So, I think my faith is a big contributor to that.”

Tasha’s hostile work environment and dealing with racist supervisor who would demean and belittle her was taking a toll on her mental health and made having someone as a support
even the more necessary. Tasha’s mother was that person. In those moments where Tasha would feel belittled, devalued, and the anger would build up, it was her mother who would talk her down. She spoke:

I had my mom and my best friend to talk to or my cousin, when, you know, I needed to come back to reality. Like, you know, these people not treating me right, you know, I feel like I'm finna to explode. And my mom would talk me down and everything, but it was like a transformation, like Clark Kent goes into Superman. You know, you take, you take off the costume, and it's like, okay, I'm free. I can be me.

Thankfully, Tasha transitioned to a new role in a new unit and shared that she now feels supported and valued and has found a sense of community with her work team.

Outside of their faith and family, my cocreators also had a solid group of close friends they were able to lean on for support. Blessed has a group of people from her church and her sorority that she refers to as her “advisors” that provides her with a sense of community and support. Amanda talked candidly about needing to rely on her friends because of juggling multiple responsibilities, including being a mother, helping her sister and being the go-to person for her family, as well as even encouraging me to “get a work buddy.”

**Chapter Summary**

The cocreators in this study have various desires, wants, needs, and levels of support at the institution. They each have their own unique puzzle pieces missing, the consistency is that there is a void that needs to be filled. They are doing their best, and working with what they must navigate this space, and to do it on their own terms. In the upcoming chapter, I will delve into a comprehensive discussion of the study’s findings in relation to the guiding research questions.
Additionally, I will explore the implications of these findings, provide recommendations for future research, and conclude with some final thoughts.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

Using Black feminist theory (Collins, 2002) and professional counterspaces (West, 2015, 2019a, 2019b) as the theoretical framework and endarkened narrative inquiry (Mackey, 2021; McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2023) as the methodology, the purpose of this study was two-fold. First, it described the narratives Black women professional staff have about their experiences working in higher education. Second, it described how Black women professional staff engage in acts of everyday resistance (Breeden, 2021; Casado Perez et al, 2021; Stewart, 2019; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). To explore and share those stories, I used the following research questions:

1. What are the narratives of Black Women Professional Staff (BWPS) in higher education?

2. How do Black Women Professional Staff (BWPS) in higher education engage in acts of everyday resistance?

Guided by my Black feminist theory framework and endarkened narrative inquiry methodology, I constructed four themes from the findings of this study: (1) Are you your sister’s keeper? (2) Performance as resistance, (3) Resistance is personal, and (4) Missing pieces of the puzzle.

This chapter will be a discussion of the findings of this study as they address the research questions. The discussion of the major findings will also include their connections to existing literature, implications, and recommendations for future research. Lastly, this chapter will end with concluding remarks and my final reflections on this study.

Discussion and Findings

Black women's dehumanization and lack of representation as storytellers in their own right result from a complicated sociocultural environment ingrained with systemic racism,
historical oppression, and gender discrimination. Throughout history, Black women have experienced various forms of marginalization. Those in positions of authority, historically white people, especially white men have been in sociopolitical positions of power and have frequently influenced how Black women’s stories have been told through their access and ability to control the narrative that was pushed out through media, educational exclusion, etc.

Stereotypes, reinforced by media portrayal, coupled with the lingering effects of colonialism (Holmes, 2016) and pervasive dehumanization and anti-Black racism (Owusu-Bempah, 2017), further constrain the voices of Black women. They are often perceived solely through a racial lens, neglecting the acknowledgment of their full range of feelings, beliefs, and emotions (Thomas & Hill, 2022). The problem is made more difficult by internalized injustice and unequal power relations among and within historically marginalized populations. To address this issue and foster a more inclusive and equitable narrative environment, it is critical to remove institutional barriers and give Black women the confidence and space to speak honestly about their experiences.

The narratives in this study revealed that my cocreators were intentional about how they showed up in these HWI spaces and have their own thoughts of what resistance is and how they chose to engage in acts of everyday resistance (Breeden, 2021; Casado Perez et al, 2021; Stewart, 2019; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). For instance, my cocreators illustrated everyday resistance through the establishment of non-negotiable boundaries. These boundaries encompassed choices such as refusing to have work emails on their phones or doing things in their own time. Additionally, their purposeful decisions on how to present themselves within the institution—whether adopting a bold and vocal approach or opting for a quieter and more
strategic stance—were also manifestations of everyday resistance (Breeden, 2021; Casado Perez et al, 2021; Stewart, 2019; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013).

The narratives highlighted how Black women professional staff defy monolithic stereotypes by embracing their diverse experiences. They reject the deficit perspective, instead embodying remarkable strength and resilience when confronted with racism. The ensuing discussion includes how Black women are not a monolith (Collins, 2002). The conversation also delves into the challenges faced by Black women professional staff as they navigate identity politics (Dickens & Chaves, 2018; Hall et al., 2012; Henry, 2010) while enduring racism, microaggressions, and generally unwelcoming work environments (Kuykendoll, 2023). Despite these obstacles, it is important to note that it was not all doom and gloom. They did not embrace a deficit perspective. Instead, they have discovered sources of community and support.

This research significantly contributes to existing literature by prioritizing the voices and perspectives of Black women, thereby shedding light on their experiences. It also tackles the prevalent issues of marginalization and isolation encountered by Black women professional staff in academia. Importantly, this study fills a notable gap by focusing specifically on the experiences of Black women in professional staff roles. While acknowledging potential similarities with the experiences of Black women faculty or student affairs professionals, it emphasizes the need for dedicated research to provide nuanced insights into the challenges and successes unique to Black women professional staff. Moreover, by employing a Black feminist framework, this study advances the academic discourse by analyzing these distinctive experiences in professional staff positions. I will now delve into the first research question, exploring the various narratives of BWPS as shared by my cocreators, while also incorporating the associated supporting themes from Chapter Four.
Research Question 1: What are the narratives of Black women professional staff in higher education?

The narratives of the Black women professional staff in this study encompassed a spectrum of topics. The various topics covered in the narratives fell into one of the following categories:

- Black women are not monolithic and have rich, varied experiences.
- Black women professional staff have to contend with work environments where racism and microaggressions are pervasive.
- Most Black women professional staff do not subscribe to the deficit perspective and often shared positive experiences.
- The relationships Black women professional staff have with each other can be complicated.

The narratives highlight the nuanced reality and confirm existing literature that stated while Black women share commonalities stemming from their intersecting identities as Black and female, they are far from a monolithic group (Collins, 2002). Factors including upbringing, education, and encounters with privilege or discrimination play a pivotal role in shaping Black women's interpretations, reactions, and responses to various situations, reflecting the diversity of their experiences, perspectives, and identities (Collins, 2002). Differences emerged in how my cocreators navigated relationships in their professional settings. For instance, Amanda chose to confront racism and microaggressions openly, while Tasha opted for disengagement to avoid being stereotyped. Blessed had been presented with opportunities for career advancement, whereas Trina felt overlooked. Moreover, despite all being Black women professional staff in
higher education, they pursued diverse career paths and professional goals, affirming the existing literature that acknowledges the complexity within Black womanhood (Collins, 2002; Green, 2023; Muno & Muno, 2023). These varied responses illustrate the multifaceted nature of Black women's experiences and emphasize the importance of honoring their individual perspectives within the broader framework of Black womanhood.

The narratives also expand current literature and reveal that Black women professional staff frequently encounter racist, inhospitable, and oppressive work environments (Kuykendoll, 2023), grappling with identity politics and combating negative stereotypes in their workplaces (Dickens & Chaves, 2018; Hall et al., 2012; Henry, 2010). Their contributions are often undervalued, their experiences dismissed, and their identities reduced to mere tokens of diversity (Johnson, 2022; Phelps-Ward & Kenney, 2018; Walkington, 2017). For example, many of my cocreators discussed experiencing microaggressions from white colleagues that included being told they needed to learn how to talk to people, being talked over in staff meetings, and assumptions being made about their intelligence based on their upbringing, race, and/or gender identity. Additionally, several of my cocreators also recalled instances of being overlooked for better jobs they were well qualified for. Those that were in supervisory roles revealed that their competence in their roles was frequently challenged by white direct reports. While there is no literature that speaks directly to BWPS’s experiences with race and racism, these findings affirm the literature that states Black women faculty and/or student affairs professionals experience racist and oppressive work environments (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Walkington, 2017).

Contrary to the deficit perspective often imposed upon them, Black women assert agency and resilience by embracing their multifaceted identities and rejecting societal stereotypes that marginalize their experiences. The narratives of my cocreators were not all doom and gloom and
affirmed Collins’ (2002) Black feminist tenet of self-definition. Despite societal norms and workplace expectations, they were intentional about how they defined and viewed themselves—and it was not from a deficit perspective. Further confirming existing literature, cocreators shared narratives of strength, resilience, pride, and perseverance (Jones et al., 2015; Walkington, 2017) despite the challenges they faced. They also shared narratives of belonging and community (Davis & Brown, 2017; Pennamon, 2019; West, 2015), as well as of faith and family (Johnson, 2020; McClish Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2023). For instance, Tasha shared her experience of discovering a supportive work family, while Lola, Maxine, and Tasha collectively emphasized the pivotal role their families played as their primary source of support and encouragement. Each cocreator expressed their pride in Black womanhood, resiliently navigating challenges. Additionally, they articulated a shared sentiment of embracing and owning their Blackness, asserting agency in deciding the extent to which they contribute to any given space.

One of the themes, Are you your sister’s keeper? sheds light on the intricate relationships among Black women, emphasizing the diversity within Blackness and Black womanhood, dispelling the notion of a monolithic experience. The relationships among Black women professional staff were integral to this study, as they serve as a cornerstone for fostering belonging, empowerment, and resilience, while also contributing to personal growth, cultural preservation, and collective efforts to challenge systemic inequalities (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Johnson, 2022; Patton, 2009). The narratives also delved into the complexities of relationships among Black women such as instances of distrust among Black women. While some narratives addressed problematic relationships among Black women, others expressed pride in both their Blackness and their Black womanhood. There was a collective desire for safe spaces where Black women professional staff could connect and cultivate trust. Ultimately, the
question of being one's sister's keeper prompts reflection on whether Black women professional staff are willing to confront their issues to nurture much-needed trust among themselves. In summary, these narratives shed light on the varied experiences of Black women professional staff as they confront workplace challenges and navigate intricate interpersonal relationships, all while demonstrating remarkable agency and resilience. The upcoming section will include a discussion surrounding research question #2, and exploring how Black women professional staff engage in acts of everyday resistance.

**Research Question 2: How do Black women professional staff engage in acts of everyday resistance?**

The following section addresses research question 2, emphasizing how Black women professional staff in higher education are shaped by a complex interplay of institutional dynamics, historical legacies, and individual agency. It examines the different ways that Black women who work in professional settings resist on a daily basis, highlighting both the performative and personal aspects of resistance. This section will also address the evolution of the research question from professional counterspaces to everyday resistance which reflects the impact of institutional environments lacking essential components for support.

There are various ways Black women professional staff engage in acts of everyday resistance. Drawing from Black feminist theory (Collins, 2002), particularly the tenet of *Rethinking Black Women's Activism*, it is recognized that Black women's activism encompasses a wide range of actions, strategies, and forms of resistance. These may not always conform to visible or conventional forms of activism, such as marches or demonstrations. When considering how Black women professional staff engage in acts of everyday resistance, the takeaway should be that resistance is personal and can sometimes be performative.
The manner in which Black women professional staff choose to engage in everyday resistance is deeply personal, influenced by their unique perspective, circumstances, experiences, and values. The theme *Resistance is Personal* speaks directly to research question #2 and answers how Black women professional staff engage in acts of everyday resistance. In this study, Black women professional staff demonstrated various forms of everyday resistance (Breeden, 2021; Casado Perez et al., 2021; Stewart, 2019; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013) ranging from setting boundaries, practicing self-care, and talking back about their varied problematic experiences (Cowley, 2022; hooks, 1989; Owens et al, 2019l) as Black women professional staff in higher education.

The theme *Performance as Resistance* speaks to the performative aspect of resistance in how my cocreators exercised agency in choosing how they showed up or present themselves in a space is an act of resistance. Furthermore, for my cocreators, the performative act of resistance includes how they have to balance their desire for authenticity (Brown & Leung, 2018; Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021; Townsend, 2021) with navigating workplace expectations (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Hall et al, 2012) and the pressure to conform to societal norms (Dickens & Chavez, 2018) while battling negative stereotypes and respectability politics (Harris, 2003; Johnson, 2022).

For Black women professional staff in higher education, the performance in how they are choosing to show up in spaces not meant for them is an act of resistance. Dating back to the early days of Ivy League institutions that owned slaves (Wilder, 2013) to segregation and Jim Crow (Chafe et al, 2011), Black folks have historically been excluded from participating in higher education--outside of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Therefore, the mere presence at an HWI is an act of resistance. The resistance is in being intentional about how much
of themselves they are willing to give to a place that has shown them they are not valued
(Johnson, 2022). The resistance is in how they reject stereotypical assumptions. Black women
professional staff’s very presence in higher education is resistance, their intentionality in the
choice on how they present themselves, how they navigate workplace expectations is an act of

Chapter four provides additional examples of performance as resistance, but a couple of
quick examples are highlighted here. Amanda extensively discusses how her upbringing shapes
her behavior in professional settings, emphasizing the nuanced levels of authenticity she
navigates and her deliberate choices regarding self-presentation. In contrast, Blessed firmly
insists on maintaining her complete authentic self and limits her engagement in spaces where she
cannot be her full self. Recognizing the diversity of Black women's activism, the subsequent
paragraphs delve deeper into the concept of professional counterspaces and explores the
evolution of my second research question.

Initially, my second research question focused on how Black women professional staff
utilized professional counterspaces as sites for everyday resistance. I specifically delved into the
elements—such as mentorship, networking, professional growth, community, and support—that
West (2019a, 2019b) identified as vital components of professional counterspaces. I posed
targeted questions to my cocreators during the data collection phase. However, based on the
narratives and responses of my cocreators, it became apparent that the institution lacked these
essential components, thus failing to qualify as having professional counterspaces. It was at this
point my second research question was changed to How do Black women professional staff
engage in acts of everyday resistance. The theme Missing Pieces of the Puzzle not only
underscores my cocreators' collective yearning for these absent elements of professional
counterspaces but also highlights the broader issues of distrust, lack of support, and often inhospitable environments that Black women professional staff frequently encounter (Cowley, 2022; Johnson, 2022).

This is related to research question two because the lack of access to these elements significantly impacts how my cocreators could engage in acts of everyday resistance. Existing literature on Black women in higher education indicates a consistent pattern: while Black women lack mentorship opportunities, they also express a strong need and desire for mentorship opportunities (Colclough, 2023; Crawford & Smith, 2005; Grant, 2012; Holmes et al, 2007; Patton, 2009), professional development, and career advancement (Grant, 2012; Green & King, 2001; Johnson & Delmas, 2022; West, 2019a, 2019b), networking opportunities (Johnson & Delmas, 2022; West 2019a, 2019b), as well as community and support (Green & King, 2001; Pennamon, 2019). These missing pieces of the professional counterspace puzzle are precisely what my cocreators express a strong need and desire for. This not only confirms existing literature that articulates these desires among Black women faculty and student affairs professionals but also extends to include Black women professional staff. Transitioning to the theoretical implications of this study, we will now explore how its findings contribute to broader knowledge base surrounding Black feminist theory and professional counterspaces.

**Theoretical Implications**

Limited research has addressed the experiences of Black women in professional staff roles within higher education. Previous studies in this area have predominantly focused on Black women faculty members or have generalized across all roles—faculty, staff, and students alike (Guillory, 2001; Henry, 2010). This study, guided by Black feminist theory and its relevant tenets, fills a gap in the literature by providing an in-depth examination of the narratives and
racialized experiences of Black women professional staff in higher education. By adopting a Black feminist perspective, this research expands existing scholarship, aligning with works that similarly emphasize the importance of centering the voices and experiences of a segment of Black women that have been ignored (Clemons, 2019; Collins, 2002; Mirza, 2014).

This study contributed to the experiences of Black women professional staff by providing them the space and opportunity to tell their stories in their own words. It added to this body of literature by concentrating solely on this group, rather than combining their experiences with the experiences of Black women faculty or Black women student affairs professionals. Given the scarcity of current literature devoted exclusively to this demographic in higher education, this study may not reveal wholly fresh experiences of Black women professional staff, but it does present experiences that some may find unique.

There is a clear connection between professional counterspaces and Black feminist theory. This study contributes to the literature on professional counterspaces (West, 2015, 2019a, 2019b) by developing a model (see Figure 1 in Chapter 1) that illustrates that connection to Black feminist theory (Collins, 2002). Professional counterspaces serve as platforms where the principles of Black feminist theory can be implemented, such as amplifying Black women’s voices, challenging dominant narratives and power dynamics, acknowledging intersectionality, encouraging community building and solidarity, and promoting advocacy and empowerment in the workplace.

Moreover, the study expands existing literature by introducing an approach to assess the presence of professional counterspaces in higher education. This method entails developing focused questions for data collecting in addition to having a deep comprehension of the components and functions of professional counterspaces. By looking at answers to those
particular questions, one may determine the existence of professional counterspaces in higher education.

Finally, it broadens the discourse on professional counterspaces by encompassing the experiences of Black women professional staff, rather than solely focusing on Black women faculty or student affairs professionals. While this section focused on the significant theoretical contributions this study made to Black feminist theory and professional counterspaces, the following section will delve into how this study contributed methodologically to the advancement of endarkened narrative inquiry.

**Methodological Implications**

This study’s use of endarkened narrative inquiry as methodology (Mackey, 2021; McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2023) contributed to culturally relevant qualitative research through the use of this emerging methodology. Endarkened narrative inquiry fosters inclusion, cultural sensitivity, intersectionality, empowerment, and a dedication to social justice, all of which contribute to building culturally relevant qualitative research. The use of the term cocreators when referring to participants results from the terminology used by the scholars that developed endarkened narrative inquiry. The newness of endarkened narrative inquiry as methodology provided an opportunity for improvisation in its implementation in this study. Specifically, in the data collection phase, through close attention and knowledge of the tenets, as the cocreators shared their stories, I was able to understand how their shared stories aligned with the tenets of endarkened narrative inquiry.

At the time of my study, there was only one article from the scholars that developed endarkened narrative inquiry (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021). It laid out the tenets, but not a ‘how to’ guide on how to employ endarkened narrative inquiry in a study. Through close
attention and knowledge of the tenets of this methodology? Black Feminism? And as they shared their stories, I was able to understand how their shared stories could align the tenets of this methodology and how the various tenets were intricate parts of the cocreator stories. Additionally, expanding the application of wisdom whispers (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2023) to include any safe, communal space, where Black women, share nuggets of wisdom with each other—regardless of their age/generation was another significant methodological contribution.

Endarkened narrative inquiry provides a framework for scholars to interact closely with various cultural narratives and advance a more thorough and courteous comprehension of the nuances that exist within and across cultures, particularly as they relate to Black women. Additionally, from my interpretation, endarkened narrative inquiry (McClish Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2023) was evident in this study and contributes to a framework for culturally relevant qualitative research in these ways:

- **Amplifying Marginalized Voices:** A key component of endarkened narrative inquiry is elevating the voices and stories of historically disadvantaged people by giving them more prominence. This allows endarkened narrative inquiry to provide a greater spectrum of inclusive and diverse viewpoints.

- **Cultural Competence:** Endarkened narrative inquiry acknowledges the influence of cultural background on shaping narratives. It challenges scholars to engage with the historical context and cultural nuances that affect how Black women narrate and comprehend stories.

- **Acknowledgment of Intersectionality and Complexity of Black Womanhood:** Endarkened narrative inquiry acknowledges that that Black women’s experiences are
shaped by a range of intersecting identities and social contexts. It takes an awareness of this complexity to really appreciate the rich and varied character of their cultural experiences.

- **Richness in Data:** Endarkened narrative inquiry facilitates a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the Black woman's experience by acknowledging that cultural experiences are not just academic but also emotional and subjective.

The aforementioned components were evident throughout my study. This study provided space to amplify historically marginalized voices through them sharing their narratives in their own words. Outside of my own positionality as the researcher, the awareness of how Black women’s cultural context allowed me to have a greater understanding of their storytelling. Furthermore, my positionality of both Black and women allowed me to understand and have a greater appreciation for how they navigate their experiences.

As detailed earlier, various theoretical and methodological implications emerged, including significant contributions to the utilization of endarkened narrative inquiry as a methodology. The following section delves into the practical and institutional implications that stem from the findings of this study.

**Practical and Institutional Implications**

I recognize the sociopolitical climate of the state that I am in. With the state legislature recently passing some anti DEI legislation, any meaningful institutional response to the following implications likely will not come to fruition. However, that does not lessen the need for these implications to be shared, and for institutions to be called out on the need to create more inclusive environments where Black women are valued and can thrive.
Institutional leaders, specifically at HWI’s, need to acknowledge that there is a problem and lead the charge in dismantling systemic structures that negatively impact the experiences and advancement of Black women professional staff. They need to actively challenge and change policies that are barriers to the success, growth, recruitment, retention, and development of Black women professional staff. Moreover, in institutions located within at-will states, where staff lack shared governance, institutional leaders should actively strive to establish and foster environments where all Black professional staff can not only connect with one another but also feel empowered to voice their concerns, confront challenges, and offer suggestions to the administration. This endeavor is crucial for working towards meaningful and sustainable progress towards equity and inclusion.

Professional counterspaces are essential for Black women professional staff in higher education as they offer tailored support, networking opportunities, and mentorship. These spaces facilitate career growth, affirm cultural identity, and function as resistance against systemic oppression. Whether formal affinity groups or informal sister circles, professional counterspaces cultivate trust, community, and support. Overall, professional counterspaces empower Black women to navigate institutional barriers and advocate for social justice within academia.

The institution has an organization for its Black faculty and staff. It is hard to say what the purpose of the organization is because it has been practically defunct and in a perpetual state of disarray for years. The findings in this study indicated a need to revamp that organization for Black faculty and staff. To address the needs of all Black faculty and staff, a redesigned, updated, and revived organization could serve as a formal professional counterspace by providing opportunities for professional growth, community building, and networking (West, 2015, 2019a, 2019b). But given its inconsistent outreach and faculty/staff participation, lack of
knowledge within the institution, and general lack of momentum, the organization's current situation is worrisome. A revised stakeholder engagement strategy would be beneficial to this organization. It could result in the creation of a community and support system for the Black faculty and staff on campus, as well as a place for advocacy and the development of strategies to pressure the university to recognize and act on their concerns.

The institution’s organization for its Black faculty and staff could also serve as a site where Black faculty and staff could learn about, prepare for, and engage in acts of activism and resistance. This organization could not only be more vocal in sharing the concerns of Black faculty and staff to the institutional leadership, but it could also be a space where grassroots activism efforts could be planned, organized, and implemented. This organization could also support students in their activism efforts through partnering with student organizations that serve to support Black students at the institution.

Trust and everyday resistance are at the center of the findings and for the development and effectiveness of professional counterspaces. So, it seems fitting that for Black women professional staff in higher education a good starting point in the development of professional counterspaces would be building relationships with other Black women. We tend to work in silos (Briody & Erickson, 2016) and by simply getting out of our office and engaging with the environment, could lead to increased interactions with other Black women, which could then lead to increased trust among Black women. A few low stakes, yet practical strategies, to increase the likelihood of meeting other Black women professional staff are:

- going to the student center/food court for lunch
- attending programs and events on campus
- participating in university sponsored programs and initiatives.
The activities mentioned above are informal and can be done individually without the need for someone to spearhead them. However, these strategies could be expanded into larger, more organized meetups, but this would require someone to take the lead and coordinate the event. For instance, Trina, Blessed, and Maxine are all members of the same national organization. Periodically, someone from that group could organize a lunch gathering for them all to attend. Participating in these meetups also can provide opportunities to meet, network, and engage with other Black women on campus. As we conclude our exploration of the practical and institutional implications, the subsequent section will offer recommendations for future research.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The literature currently available on Black women in higher education either concentrates on the experiences of Black women student affairs professionals or faculty (Burke et al, 2000; Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Collins, 2001; Cooper et al, 2007; Henry, 2010; Jackson, 2003; Wesley, 2018; West, 2015, 2017, 2019a, 2019b) while ignoring the distinct contributions and experiences of each group or lumping all Black women together, regardless of position (faculty, staff, administration, and students) (Guillory, 2001; Henry, 2010). Black women professional staff play a vital role in supporting the mission of higher education institutions and contributing to the overall educational experience and success of students, faculty, and staff and more research needs to be done to shed more light on this often overlook demographic.

The existing literature on professional counterspaces (West 2015, 2019a, 2019b) focuses on student affairs professionals; therefore, there is not much information available that explicitly connects the actual experiences of Black women professional staff in higher education. Because the findings from this study revealed that the institution did not have professional counterspaces (West, 2015, 2019a, 2019b), it is recommended that professional counterspaces be created at
higher education institutions. Further research needs to be done on their impact on Black women professional staff.

Outside of this study, there is a lack of research that has a nuanced approach to study the experiences of Black women professional staff in higher education. Additionally, using Black feminist theory (Collins, 2002) with an endarkened narrative inquiry methodology (McClish-Boyd & Bhattacharya, 2021, 2023), offers such an approach to the study of the experiences of Black women professional staff in higher education. Continuing to develop this research design will add to the body of knowledge on Black women professional staff in higher education.

Lastly, it is recommended that scholars consider including critical race feminism and anti-Black racism to the framework to allow for a more nuanced analysis. The American higher education system was built and sustained by racism and white male patriarchy (Wilder, 2013), and critical race feminism provides an analytical tool to examine how the compounded effects of race, class, and gender interact within a system of racism and white male patriarchy (Hilal, 1998). Anti-Black racism (Beatty et al, 2020) could be added to the framework to further analyze and describe and differentiate the impact of anti-Blackness specifically on the experiences of Black women professional staff.

Limitations

The small sample size reflected the limited number of Black women professional staff employed at Minerva State University. Furthermore, all cocreators worked at the same historically white institution in the Mid-South region of the United States. This study did not include participants from other geographic regions of the United States, nor did it encompass different types of institutions such as HBCUs or community colleges.
Reflections

Conducting this study was deeply personal for me. I am a Black woman who works in higher education as a professional staff. I know what my experiences are. I experienced all of the emotions during the undertaking of this study. At times it was cathartic. I felt validated. I felt seen. I felt angry. I felt disappointment. I felt tired. Tired of giving my all to a place that has proven that they do not value me, only my productivity. Their narratives let me know, that I wasn’t alone in trying to find my way through this place. However, my co-creators have given me the motivation to keep pushing through until the end.

This dissertation is my act of love for other Black women professional staff. I want them to know that they are worthy. They deserve to be in this space, and to be in this space as their unapologetic and authentic selves. This is to encourage other Black women professional staff to find their tribe. Find those other Black women who you all can support each other, trust each other, and, yes, even vent to when the foolishness has ensued. That circle, your tribe, will make navigating this space bearable, and, at times, even pleasant. To my tribe, and you know who you are, I am thankful.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, this study has provided a nuanced exploration of the narratives of Black women professional staff in higher education and their engagement in acts of everyday resistance. Through candid narratives and personal insights, readers have gained valuable insight not only on the challenges Black women professional staff face but also how they persevere in spite of those challenges.

The findings underscore the resilience and resourcefulness exhibited by Black women professional staff as they navigate systemic obstacles and microaggressions, all while
maintaining their sense of self and taking ownership in how they show up in these spaces. Everyday resistance emerges as a powerful tool employed to not only cope with adversity but also to challenge and transform the structures that perpetuate inequities.

As we consider these experiences, it is clear that creating an atmosphere in higher education that is more inclusive requires acknowledging and elevating the perspectives of Black women professionals. Institutions need to be proactive in addressing systemic problems, advancing diversity, and establishing environments that really appreciate the accomplishments of Black women professional staff in higher education.

This study serves as a call to action, stressing the significance of policy reform, institutional awareness, and a collective effort to dismantle barriers. Through recognizing and understanding the narratives of the lived experience of Black women professional staff, we are the impetus to pave the way for positive change, fostering a more just and supportive environment within higher education.
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Appendix A: IRB Approval

Institutional Review Board
Division of Research and Innovation
Office of Research Compliance
University of Memphis
315 Admin Bldg
Memphis, TN 38152-3370

December 22, 2022

PI Name: Fredrika Cowley
Co-Investigators:
Advisor and/or Co-PI: Edith Gnanadass
Submission Type: Initial
Title: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Black Women Professional Staff in Higher Education and Professional Counterspaces as Sites of Resistance
IRB ID: #PRO-FY2023-142

Expedited Approval: December 22, 2022

The University of Memphis Institutional Review Board, FWA00006815, has reviewed your submission in accordance with all applicable statues and regulations as well as ethical principles.

Approval of this project is given with the following obligations:

1. When the project is finished a completion submission is required
2. Any changes to the approved protocol requires board approval prior to implementation
3. When necessary submit an incident/adverse events for board review
4. Human subjects training is required every 2 years and is to be kept current at citiprogram.org.

For additional questions or concerns please contact us at irb@memphis.edu or 901.6783.2705

Thank you,
James P. Whelan, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair
The University of Memphis.
Appendix B: Sample Informed Consent

Informed Consent for Research Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Girl, Let Me Tell You: Exploring the Narratives of Black Women Professional Staff in Higher Education and Professional Counterspaces as Sites of Resistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researcher(s)</td>
<td>Fredrika A. Cowley, University of Memphis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researchers Contact Information</td>
<td>405.612.0988, <a href="mailto:fcowley.research@gmail.com">fcowley.research@gmail.com</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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(s) any questions about the study before you make your decision. If you volunteer, you will be one of about 5-7 people to do so.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Information for You to Consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary Consent: 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 or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose: The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe the lived experiences of Black women professional staff in higher education and how they utilize professional counterspaces as sites of resistance. Through this research, center the experiences of Black women higher education professional staff, removing them from the margins so they will feel empowered to foster self-definition, engage in personal/professional development, and acquire strategies used to resist oppression to not only survive, but thrive in the academy. Additionally, higher education stakeholders, particularly those in executive and upper administrative positions may also be interested in the results of this study to help them create more inclusive environments and developing initiatives that are truly inclusive and supportive of Black women professional staff in higher education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration: It is expected that your participation will last for 30-45 days. Procedures and Activities: You will be asked to three (3) one-on-one interviews that will last about 60-90 minutes each. The interviews will explore your experiences as a Black woman professional staff in higher education and the utilization of professional counterspaces as sites of resistance. To best honor our conversations, I will record the conversations on a digital recorder to help me when transcribing the interviews on paper. I may need to ask you to participate in a follow-up telephone interview (for about 30 minutes to an hour) later to ensure that I accurately interpreted your statements and represented your voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk: Some of the foreseeable risks or discomforts of your participation may include experiencing a range of emotions throughout the data collection process. While there are no physical risks associated with this research study, participants will be asked to recall instances that may invoke up painful memories or experiences. Participants will be asked to share experiences and memories of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
racism or oppressive experiences (including but not limited to isolation and marginalization), their avenues for practicing self-definition, resistance, and self-care. I will provide participants information to utilize mental health resources through the EAP program, which provides a referral to a mental health professional for five free sessions by calling Here4TN at 1-855-437-3486 for assistance.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to the subject, but the potential direct societal contributions include participants contributing to the literature regarding the lived experiences of Black Women Professional Staff in Higher Education and Professional Counterspaces as Sites of Resistance, Black women in the fields of adult and higher education, and qualitative research. It is also possible that you will have a better knowledge of your own life’s experiences and come to the realization that others go through similar things. The lived experiences of Black Women Professional Staff can be described and amplified in order to highlight how these experiences affect the way that they see themselves in all facets of their self-identity and how to change attitudes and behaviors in the larger university community. Finally, while one of the main advantages of this study is that it will help Black women professional staff members see themselves and realize they are not alone, executive, and upper administration could also use this research to help them understand the importance of including diverse perspectives when developing programming, policies, and/or university initiatives.

Alternatives: Participation is voluntary, and the only alternative is to not participate.

Who is conducting this research?

Fredrika Cowley (Lead Investigator, LI) of the University of Memphis, Department of Leadership is in charge of the study. His/her faculty advisor is Edith Gnanadass (Advisor). There are no other research team members assisting during the study. No members of the research team associated with this study have any significant conflict or interest of financial interest with this study.

What happens if I agree to participate in this Research?

If you agree you will be asked to participate in three (3) one-on-one interviews that will last approximately 60-90 minutes each. To maintain an accurate account of our conversations, I will use a recording device to capture our conversation for transcription. You, as the participant, will have an opportunity to review the transcripts to check for accuracy and that your voice is represented.

No identifying information concerning the participant will be gathered during the interviews. The informed consent document is the only time that I will keep any of your identifying personal information about you as the participant. Additionally, none of your personal information will be connected to the data provided during the research study, as you will choose a pseudonym to be used for the duration of the study.

During the interviews, participants will be asked to respond to questions on the interview protocol. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. You can skip any questions and can stop the interview at any time. Participants also can pause or take a break during the interview to gather their emotions or process their thoughts. Examples of questions you could be asked are:
1. **Background Information: I first want to ask you a little about your background...**
   a. Tell me about where you grew up?
   b. Tell me about the racial issues in the city where you grew up.

2. **In what spaces do you find your sense of community?**

The goal during the interview process is to schedule interviews within three-to seven days apart. This time frame is subject to change based on availability of participants. All interviews will be audio and recorded via Zoom in order to transcribe the interviews. No photography if in person will be made during the interviews.

The analyses of the transcripts will be conducted, and participants will have an opportunity to review the analysis for accuracy of interpretation and representation.

**What happens to the information collected for this research?**

Information collected for this research will be used as part of my doctoral dissertation data collection and analysis. The results of this research may be published and presented. However, the identities of the participants of this study will remain confidential and not revealed or published. I will continue to use pseudonyms provided during this research study. Therefore, the data collected during this research study will be de-identified and stored for the life of the study and up to seven years. The de-identified data may be used in additional research projects or publications until 2030 or seven years following completion of this research study. Data will be destroyed after seven years from 2023, which would be 2030 or seven years after completion of the dissertation. The de-identified data will be stored in a password-protected file on the researcher’s personal computer. The audio recordings will be kept until the follow-up interviews and transcriptions are completed. The audio recordings will be deleted once the follow-up interview has been finished and all interviews have been transcribed. The anticipated storage period is no more than 90 days.

**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:

Interviews will be done in a private setting in-person or via Zoom, which you as the participant have the option to choose.

As the primary researcher, I will only have access to the participants’ true identities.

Once pseudonyms have been assigned, the participants’ names and the master list will be deleted.

Data will be de-identified during the review of the transcription and data analysis if needed.

The data will be de-identified and stored on the researcher’s personal computer in a password-protected file throughout the life of this research study.
De-identified data will be kept on a data management system that is not connected to the university server that only the lead investigator and my doctoral advisor, Dr. Edith Gnanadass, will have access to via password-protected computer.

Communication between the research and the participants will be through non-university emails or phone to further protect the anonymity of participants who are employed at the institution.

Individuals and organizations that monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect the research records. This monitoring may include access to your interview data. These individuals and organizations include:

- Institutional Review Board
- Dr. Edith Gnanadass, Dissertation Advisor

What are the risks if I participate in this research?

The risk or discomforts of participating in this research include:

There are no physical risks associated with this research study, although participants may experience a range of emotions throughout the data collection process.

Participants in this study will be asked to recount incidents that might bring up unpleasant memories or feelings. Participants will be asked to discuss their personal encounters with racism and/or oppression, as well as their methods for coping, resisting, taking care of oneself, and establishing a sense of community.

To minimize the potential for emotional distress, I will convey to the participants that they can pause the interview or take a break at any moment if they become too emotional. Participants also have the option to not share or respond to any question that may cause emotional harm. If the participant needs a moment to compose herself and practice self-care, the researcher will honor the participant’s request. At any time, all participants will have the option to delay, suspend, or end the interview. The researcher will offer mental health resources at any point during the interview if the participant experiences emotional distress or at the conclusion of the interview.

During or immediately following the interview and interview process, I will offer mental health resources to participants should they experience emotional distress during or at the conclusion of the study. Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) information will be provided to participants as this is a service offered through the Human Resources Benefits office for university employees for assistance with finding a mental health provider for five free sessions.

What are the benefits of participating in this research?

You may or may not have direct benefit from participating in this research, but your participation could have:
Contribute to the literature regarding the lived experiences of Black Women Professional Staff in Higher Education, Professional Counterspaces, and Black women in the fields of adult and higher education, and qualitative research.

Contributions are also expected to advance Black feminist ideology, endarkened narrative inquiry, and the use of professional counterspaces as a framework.

Contribute to the amplification and centering of traditionally marginalized voices that deserve to be valued.

This research could also assist executive and upper administration understand the importance of including diverse perspectives when developing programming, policies, and/or university diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

**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 or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decided to withdraw your participation. Your decision about participating will not affect your relationship with the researcher(s) or the University of Memphis. If you feel at any point, you do not want to continue participation in this study, let me know and I will withdraw you from the study. I will also destroy your signed consent form and the data I have collected thus far if you so choose.

**Will it cost me money to take part in this research?**

There are no costs associated with participation in this research 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, _Fredrika Cowley_____ at _405.612.0988_ or my advisor, _Dr. Edith Gnanadass__ at _E.gnanadass@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 (The statement of consent should not be separated on multiple pages)

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/video recorded while performing the activities described above. Audio/video recording will be used for data collection and analysis. Initial the space below if you consent to the use of audio/video recording as described.

_____ I agree to the use of audio/video recording.

Name of Adult Participant  Signature of Adult Participant  Date

Researcher Signature (To be completed at the time of Informed Consent)

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: Interview Questions

Interview #1

- IQ1: I’m going to start with questions that will help me get to know you better. So, can you tell me a little bit about your family.

- IQ2: Next, we’re going to talk about your educational experiences at the undergrad and graduate levels. Where did you go to college for undergrad and what is your degree in?
  - Is that a PWI? HBCU?
  - Were you involved in any student organizations?
  - Where did you go for graduate school?

- IQ3: What is your current occupation?
  - Ok, so how did you get to this job?

- IQ4: So, please share with me what a typical workday is like for you.

- IQ5: If somebody said, “Who are you?” what would you say?

- IQ6: What else would you like me to know about you to help me better understand you?

Interview #2

- IQ7: This set of questions is going to focus on community and relationships. So, with that being said, please tell me about in what spaces you find your sense of community and support?
  - Are those spaces Personal and/or professional?

- IQ8: So, when you are facing challenging issues at work, where do you go for support?

- IQ9: Let’s talk more about relationships and interactions with other Black women. Tell me how often and in what spaces do you interact and/or network with other Black women higher ed professional staff?
o Can you think back to one of those instances and describe how that interaction played out?

• IQ10: Let’s talk about mentorship. What has been your experience with mentorship?
  o Was your mentor someone from within or outside of your department?
  o Were they formal or informal?
  o Ask about race and gender if they do not mention it.
  o So, tell me about the best mentorship experience you’ve had as a higher ed professional.

• IQ11: Please share with me the opportunities you have to engage in professional development.

• Think back to one of those times you’ve participated in a professional development opportunity and describe to me how you interacted with other Black women who were also in that space.
  o What influenced how you interacted with each other? Title? Role? Age?

Interview #3

• IQ12: What does being a Black woman mean to you?

• IQ13: Please share with me a time where you have felt the need to act or speak in a certain way to fit in or be accepted by White colleagues.

• IQ14: Please share with me about a time when you have felt ignored and undervalued as a higher education professional.

• IQ15: On the other hand, please share with me about a time when you felt valued and appreciated as a higher education professional.
• IQ16: Please share an experience from higher education where your Black identity was a benefit.

• IQ17: What advice can you offer from your workplace experiences and culture that will help other Black women professional staff navigate higher education?

• IQ18: We have come to the end of our interviews. Is there anything else you’d like to share with me?
## Appendix D: Alignment of Research Questions

Alignment of Research Questions to Theoretical Framework & Professional Counterspaces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Black Feminist Theory</th>
<th>Professional Counterspaces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BFT #1: Work, Family &amp; Black Women's Oppression</td>
<td>BFT #2: The Controlling Images of Black Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ1: What are the narrative of Black women professional staff about their experiences in higher education?</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2: How do Black women professional staff in higher education engage in acts of everyday resistance?</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Question</td>
<td>Demographic &amp; Background Questions</td>
<td>RQ1: What are the lived experiences of Black women professional staff in higher education?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IQ1: I’m going to start with questions that will help me get to know you better. So, can you tell me a little bit about your family.</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| IQ2: Next, we’re going to talk about your educational experiences at the undergrad and graduate levels. Where did you go to college for undergrad and what is your degree in?  
  • Is that a PWI? HBCU?  
  • Were you involved in any student organizations  
  • Where did you go for graduate school? | X | X | |
| IQ3: What is your current occupation? Ok, so how did you get to this job? | X |  | |
| IQ4: So, please share with me what a typical workday is like for you. | X |  | |
| IQ5: If somebody said “Who are you?” what would you say? | X |  | |
| IQ6: What else would you like me to know about you to help me better understand you? | X |  | |
| IQ7: This set of questions is going to focus on community and relationships. So, with that being said, please tell me about in what spaces you find your sense of community and support  
  • Are those spaces Personal and/or professional? | X | X | |
| IQ7: Tell me about in what spaces you find your sense of community and support? Personal and/or professional? |  | X | X |
| IQ8: So, when you are facing challenging issues at work, where do you go for support? | X | X | |
| IQ9: Let’s talk more about relationships and interactions with other Black women. Tell me how often and in what spaces do you interact and/or network with other Black women higher ed professional staff?  
  • Can you think back to one of those instances and describe how that interaction played out? | X | X | |
| IQ10: Let’s talk about mentorship. What has been your experience with mentorship? Was your mentor someone from within or outside of your department? Were they formal or informal? | X | X | |
| IQ11: Please share with me the opportunities you have to engage in professional development? |
| IQ12: Think back to one of those times you’ve participated in a professional development opportunity and describe to me how you interacted with other Black women who were also in that space. |
| • What influenced how you interacted with each other? Title? Role? Age? |
| IQ13: What does being a Black woman mean to you? |
| IQ14: Please share with me a time where you have felt the need to act or speak in a certain way to fit in or be accepted by White colleagues. |
| IQ15: Please share with me about a time when you have felt ignored and undervalued as a higher education professional. |
| IQ16: On the other hand, please share with me about a time when you felt valued and appreciated as a higher education professional. |
| IQ17: Please share an experience from higher education where your Black identity was a benefit. |
| IQ18: What advice can you offer from your workplace experiences and culture that will help other Black women professional staff navigate higher education? |
| IQ19: We have come to the end of our interviews. Is there anything else you’d like to share with me? |
Appendix E: Recruitment Flyer

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH STUDY

A research study examining the lived experiences of Black women professional staff at a historically white institution to center them and promote the agency to foster self-definition, personal & professional development, and develop strategies to navigate academia.

TO PARTICIPATE YOU MUST
• Identify as a Black or African-American woman
• Work at a historically White institution (HWI)
• Be employed at their institution for a minimum of five (5) years
• Have a Master’s Degree
• Identify as a professional staff in the areas of Academic Advising, Enrollment Services, Career Services, Human Resources, Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, etc.

Study will last approximately 30 days. Three interviews will be conducted via Zoom or in person in a flexible schedule that is convenient for the participant.

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