My soul looks back in wonder, how I got over: Black women's narratives on spirituality, sexuality, and informal learning


by


Keondria E. McClish



B.S., University of Central Missouri, 2004
M.S., Kansas State University, 2010



AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION



submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree



DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY



Department of Adult Learning and Leadership
College of Education



KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas



2018

# Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how two Black women, born 1946 to 1964, discuss their sexuality in relation to their understanding of spirituality and informal learning.  Using the Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry framework informed by womanism, Black feminism, and narrative structures used by Black women novelists, this qualitative study analyzed the vulnerable, empowered, and spirit-driven narratives (VES Narratives) collected from the participants to explore their experiences with spirituality, sexuality, and informal learning.  The data collection methods included wisdom whisper talks to elicit spirituality and sexuality timelines and glean information from the participants' treasure chests.

My soul looks back in wonder, how I got over: Black women's narratives on spirituality, sexuality, and informal learning


by


Keondria E. McClish



B.S., University of Central Missouri, 2004
M.S., Kansas State University, 2010


A DISSERTATION


submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree



DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY



Department of Adult Learning and Leadership
College of Education



KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas



2018

Approved by:

Co-Major Professor
Dr. Kakali Bhattacharya

Approved by:

Co-Major Professor
Dr. Royce Ann Collins

# Copyright

# Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how two Black women, born 1946 to 1964, discuss their sexuality in relation to their understanding of spirituality and informal learning.  Using the Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry framework informed by womanism, Black feminism, and narrative structures used by Black women novelists, this qualitative study analyzed the vulnerable, empowered, and spirit-driven narratives (VES Narratives) collected from the participants to explore their experiences with spirituality, sexuality, and informal learning.  The data collection methods included wisdom whisper talks to elicit spirituality and sexuality timelines and glean information from the participants' treasure chests.

# Table of Contents

# List of Figures

# List of Tables

# Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without the Black women who came before me and paved the way and the support and encouragement of my village: my academic family, colleagues, friends, and family.

A special thank you Dr. Joyce Chang for lighting a fire and igniting a passion, with one question, "What's next?" You made me plan the work and work the plan and although we had to make some detours we Ph.inishe.D!

My utmost gratitude goes to my dissertation committee: Dr. Kakali Bhattacharya, Dr. Royce Ann Collins, Dr. Nozella Brown, and Dr. Doris Wright Carroll. Dr. Bhattacharya, I had no idea that our first meeting would lead to such a special connection. Thank you for accepting me from our initial impromptu meeting and helping me find my community. You welcomed me and helped me deconstruct and give words to what was going on in my world; you introduced me to qualitative research and pushed me beyond my comfort zone. I am a more confident scholar because of you. You inspire me to be greater, bigger, bolder, better! Thank you, Dr. Collins, for introducing me to adult education and providing perspective when I couldn't see the forest from the trees and for providing balance and a space for me to relax. Dr. Brown, I knew from our first meeting at Panera that we would make a good team. Thank you for being my sounding board and helping me narrow my focus. Dr. Wright Carrol, your perspective and energy during the project was instrumental! When you said, "This study is about me!" I knew you were genuinely enthusiastic and valued the contribution to the research.

To my family for provoking me to become comfortable with who I am and in finding my voice. You have incited me to be uncensored and unapologetically me.

# Dedication

## A Litany for Survival

For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children's mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours:

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.
~ Audre Lorde, 1984

# Chapter 1 - I Wonder, Do You?

It is difficult to separate Black culture and religious spirituality when discussing the influence both have on the experiences of Black women's lives.  However, often discourses in Western philosophy situate people's spiritual lives as private (Agyepong, 2011; Brown-Spencer, 2007) and isolated, which promotes the idea that spirituality and sexuality are independent of each other, and thus communicating that one can be spiritual, but not sexual (P. Harris, 2014; MacKnee, 1996, 1997, 2002; Mahoney, 2008).  Religion and spirituality are central to the lives of Black families, and these beliefs influence other areas of their lives (Wellner, 2001). Specifically, spirituality and culture inform older Black women's onto-epistemology, including what is learned, how it is learned, and the value one places on learning.  It is not regarded separately from everyday human experiences and interactions, which informs how people develop a sense of self and their relationship with others.

The older generation, specifically baby boomers, those born from 1946 to 1964, is collectively one of the largest generations in history due to soldiers returning home, families being reconnected, men rejoining the labor force, and the stabilized economy, thereby contributing to a fertility spike after World War II (Colby & Ortman, 2014; Macunovich, 2000). This distinct group also witnessed and were a part of many critical events that shaped their US viewpoints.  The events include, but are not limited to, the women's movement that gave rise to feminism, the introduction of the birth control pill, the enactment of civil rights, segregation and desegregation, the Black Power period, the advent of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, women entering the workforce, the first television, homosexuality, divorce, the expansion of drug use, a change in fashion with the mini skirt and bell bottoms, and the arrival of single-parent homes (Anderson, 2002; Joseph, 2008;

Macunovich, 2000; Russell, 2012). Furthermore, although the parents of most Black baby boomers were undereducated with less than a fifth-grade education, several Black baby boomers completed at least a high school diploma, which encouraged the goal of attaining a middle-class status of living (Wellner, 2001).

Even though the aforementioned events were all experienced at the same time by this generation, the perspective and informal learning experiences were varied due to racial, gender, and socioeconomic factors as well as access, and the lack thereof, to presence in certain spaces for Black people. Generally speaking, Black baby boomers, specifically Black women baby boomers, have been a neglected population, often grouped with their white counterparts, although their perception of experiences was markedly different (Wellner, 2001). For example, on the surface, the rise of the feminist movement created a space for women and men to stand against discrimination, sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression, but the problems that white women and Black women faced were distinctly different (hooks, 2000). Because of their unique positionality, Black women's worldviews and lived experiences differ from those of Black men, white women, and white men. For Black women, particularly in the US, the reality that confronts them includes more than gender. The reality of their existence includes race, ethnicity, national origin, culture, sexual orientation, and social class (Collins, 2000; Ngwainmbi, 2004; Sheared, 1999; Taylor, 1998; Walker, 1983). Thus, the experiences of this generation involve differing sentiments, and their interpretations contribute to the broader knowledge of how older Black women construct their sexuality and view relationships through spirituality and informal learning.

Spirituality and religion continue to influence history and the liberation of Black women (hooks, 1999; Moody, 1994; Wade-Gayles, 1995; Wane, 2007), particularly the cohort of older

adults within the United States baby boomer generation (Guthridge, 2004). In general, sociocultural norms and cultural perceptions influence the way older women view themselves and inform their attitudes and beliefs towards sexuality (Ahmed & Bhugra, 2007; Ugwu & de Kok, 2014; White, 1997). The general consensus is that older women are asexual and unattractive, and if the women are unmarried, it is assumed they are not interested in intimacy or companionship through their life courses (Allen & Roberto, 2009; Hooyman & Kiyak, 1999). The current perception of the aged as asexual and unattractive almost forces seniors to accept a decrease of sexual desires or cessation of sex altogether because there is already an expectation that sexual activities will, and should, decrease (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003). Such limited perspectives on older women's sexuality also promote the patriarchal view that the women's sexual body is for procreation and not for women's pleasure (Guthridge, 2004). In addition to this negative sexist account of women, Black women have to contend with negative cultural images, expectations, and scripts that perpetuate a defect idea of Black women and Black relationships (Allen & Helm, 2013). Images that perpetuate deviant stereotypes include welfare mother, gold digger, hussy, and others and continue to sexually exploit and damage the self-concept of Black women and the value they place on their sexuality (Collins, 2000; T. W. Harris, 2015).

Dominant portrayals about Black sexuality have been explored in detail, such as the sexual stereotypes about Black women and Black men, the hypersexualization of Black women, the sexual violence against Black women by Black men and white men, and the power and control others have imposed on Black women's bodies; they continue to advance the negative narratives and oppression of Black women (Blair, 2014). To provide a different perspective to the central narrative, Blair (2010) studied Black women as sex workers and detailed their

experiences to challenge the belief that as a whole, prostitutes are victims. She presents that, in fact, many of the Black women in the study view prostitution as a profession that has social and economic associations just as other labor jobs. In addition to presenting the narratives of Black women sex workers, Blair (2010) postulates that for the Black women sex workers, the meaning ascribed to sex is ambiguous since their main connection is in the context of work and not pleasure.

The aforementioned dominant portrayals impact the dynamics of how and what one learns and the meaning one places on that learning. Learning happens in various ways and in different contexts. Informal learning is the "acquisition of new knowledge, understanding, skills, or attitudes which people do on their own and which has not been planned or organized in formal settings such as schools, colleges, and universities" (English, 2005b, p. 310). Essentially, it is the learning that is incidental and unorganized, much like socialization, which provides a basis for learning values, attitudes, and acceptable behaviors (Schugurensky, 2000). Informal learning has been situated in the literature from various perspectives, such as viewing adult learning through gender differences (Boeren, 2011), to promote community wellbeing for older adults (Merriam & Kee, 2014), and how to construct informal learning spaces (Sackey, Nguyen, & Grabill, 2015; Yanchar & Hawkley, 2014), but a majority of the literature in informal learning is about workplace learning (see Cameron & Harrison, 2012; Nancherla, 2009). However, for this study, informal learning is presented particularly in the context of how Black women share their onto-epistemologies about spirituality and sexuality.

## Rationale

As stated previously, sexuality, spirituality, and informal learning are the three intersecting domains of this study when it relates to Black baby boomer women's experiences.

This study contributes to the literature on spirituality and sexuality. For example, Jaeger (2004) studied midlife women (ages 40-60) to see if their perceptions of spirituality and sexualitiy were related and to find if they had an effect on midlife development. She reported that there was a connection between spirituality and sexuality in which loss (i.e., divorce, financial security, friendships and relationships, and ideal views) and spiritual deepening (i.e., defining and prioritizing the imporatnt things in life, learning from others and their environment, becoming more spiritual) served as a means to rejuvenation (i.e., resilience, self-awareness, making and transforming relationships, and attending to curiosity) and mature awareness (i.e., self-confidence, power to affect change in self and in the community, and identifying the effects of sex on wellbeing) in the women's midlife development. However, while there was diversity in terms of religious affiliation with the participants, Jaeger (2004) mentioned that a limitation of the study was it was conducted with mostly white, middle- to upper-middle-class women and that a study on the topic of sexuality and spirituality could benefit research by incorporating demographic elements such as race, economics, and various relationship statuses.

Consistent with Jaeger's (2004) study, other researchers (see Cuffee, 2006; Guthridge, 2004; P. Harris, 2014) have studied the connection between spirituality and sexuality, but employed other demographic components. Cuffee (2006) employed a womanist perspective to frame an essay about the Black church's sexual politics. In this essay, she endeavors to discuss the moral and social justice aspect for same-sex people and Black women, those who have been historically marginalized in the church. More importantly, Cuffee (2006) prescribes ways the Black church can assist in affirming Black women. First, she suggests for church people to reduce the pompous attitude when it comes to single, Black Christian women and sex. Second, she suggests the church reevaluate the double standard, which suggests that women remain

chaste while men explore sexually.  Next, she proposes that attention be given to the strict rules, especially in the Black church suggesting that women remain subordinate and rarely hold leadership positions.  Additionally, she advocates a safe space for Black women and childen against sexual prowlers, for education about sexual responsibility including safe sex to reduce teen pregnancy and STDs, and to express in open dialogue sexual ethics and values.

Next, Guthridge (2004) studied the influences religion and menopausal experiences had on the self-perception, sexuality, and sexual expression of postmenopausal baby boomers.  The findings indicate that many of the women reported feeling shame, guilt, and fear when expressing their self-perception and sexuality because of their religious beliefs, and specifically menopause, directly affected their self-perception and how they felt about themselves sexually. Guthridge (2004) noted that a limitation of the study was the women were white, except for one. In addition, P. Harris (2014) studied the connection between men's and women's spirituality and sexuality from a psychologist's lens to determine if there was a connection between one's spiritual experiences and their sexual experiences.  The findings of her study infer there is little correlation between those who are spiritual to having satisfying sexual relationships.  These studies propose that further research is needed to determine how to bring further clarification to the connection of spirituality and sexuality, especially for Black women, and to also contribute to the scarce literature as to how Black women use spirituality and informal learning to conceptualize their sexuality.  This study addresses a gap in the literature by moving beyond definitions of spirituality, informal learning, and sexuality to exploring how these constructs are intertwined in the lives of older Black women.  Hearing real people tell their stories helps dispel some of the myths and stereotypes associated with that group; it also challenges the dominant

culture's stereotypes (Allen & Roberto, 2009) and creates wisdom (A. Keating, personal communication, April 19, 2017).

## Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how two Black women, born between 1946 and 1964, discuss their sexuality in relation to their understanding of spirituality and informal learning.

## Research Questions

The specific research questions for this study are:

1. What are the ways in which the participants describe their sexuality?

2. What are the ways in which the participants describe their spirituality?

3. In what ways, if any, do the participants relate their sexuality with their spirituality?

4. In what ways, if any, do the participants attribute informal learning experiences to their sexuality as informed by their spirituality?

## Methodological Framework

This study was grounded in a Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry framework informed by womanism, Black feminism, and narrative structures used by Black women novelists. Traditionally, narrative inquiry is described as "a storytelling methodology that inquiries into narratives and stories of people's life experiences" (Kim, 2016, p. 304). However, there is no specific narrative framework that is culturally responsive to Black women's lives and storytelling. Therefore, in this study I constructed a Black women's narrative framework using Black feminism, womanism, and narrative structures in Black women's novel writing. I used this framework to make sense of and analyze the vulnerable, empowered, and spirit-driven narratives (VES Narratives) collected from the participants to explore their experiences with

spirituality, sexuality, and informal learning.  The data collection methods included wisdom

whisper talks to elicit spirituality and sexuality timelines and glean information from the

participants' treasure chests, researcher journaling for documenting reflexivity, member checks,

and peer debriefing, which are explained in detail in Chapter 3.

## Frameworks

The frameworks that informed this study are womanism, narrative inquiry, and Black

Feminine Narrative Inquiry.  These frameworks are explained in detail in Chapter 2.  However,

here I briefly introduce the reader to womanism by way of Black feminism and Black Feminine

Narrative Inquiry.

### Black Feminism

Black feminism came about when the tenets of feminist thought were challenged by

radical Black women, women of color, and some white allies.  The main issue was that feminism

focused on gender inequalities without giving thought to the areas that influence the lives of

women of color, which include race, economics, and class structures (Collins, 1989; Davis,

2008).  As women of color and allies realized the continued disparities, they examined the basis

of the women's liberation movement and realized that the issues they were collectively fighting

for benefitted mostly white women with class privilege (hooks, 2000).  White liberal feminism

did not address the issues of race, class privilege, economic disparities, and educational

inequalities.  The works of Black women abolitionists initiated what is termed Black feminist

movement by challenging racist and sexist beliefs (Johnson, 2015).  Black feminism also arose to

resist the sexism that was present in the Civil Rights Movement.

The feminist agenda put forth by Black women, which included advocating for issues

affecting race, gender, sexual orientation, and social class, was more far-reaching than the

feminism white women proposed, which focused solely on gender. Black feminism affected a feminist consciousness and encouraged women to interrogate their position and share their stories of oppression and being woman (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003).

**Womanism**

Womanism was first introduced by Alice Walker (1983) and is often heralded as an extension of Black feminism because it is perceived to connect women of color who feel disconnected from feminism and Black feminism. One of the basic tenets of womanism is the commitment to the survival of all people—men and women—and an appreciation for people from various backgrounds (Walker, 1983). Walker's definition also posits that there is a connection to the divine as it is expressed through spirituality, love, dance, music, food, and the struggle. Womanism also unapologetically focuses on Black women's experiences while integrating relationships, spirituality, and experiences of oppression and survival. Layli Maparyan (formerly Layli Phillips) explains womanism being connected to spirituality, recognizing the divine and sacred nature of all living and non-human things (Phillips, 2006). Maparyan offers three domains of womanism that center on the survival of Black people, while specifically being focused on the experiences of Black women and women of color. Those domains include (a) human-to-human relationships to reduce conflict and increase peace; (b) environmentalism–the relationship between humans and nature; and (c) the relationship between the human being and the non-material, spiritual, or transcendental realm (Phillips, 2006). Many scholars have contributed to the advancement of the ideology of womanism (see Hudson-Weems, 1993, 1994; Ogunyemi, 1985; Phillips, 2006; Sheared, 1994; Williams, 1989) and for the purpose of this study, womanism and womanist inquiry refers, in a manner, to the collective body of literature consistent with Maparyan's definition.

**Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry**

To stay consistent with Black women's onto-epistemologies, it is imperative that we expand traditional narrative structures to a culturally situated and responsive narrative structure. Thus, this study was grounded in a newly constructed Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry in order to elicit the critical stories that depict the perceptions of Black women. To do this, I explored Black women's writing in novels, novellas, coreopoems, and short stories to elicit common themes that can be found in the stories of Black women. Those narrative themes include elements of humor, pain, sadness, family, advice, silence, secrets, and spirituality (God, religion, faith), which celebrate femininity, motherhood, community, and communal and maternal relationships.

<div align="center">

**Researcher Positionality**

</div>

> It strikes me as true that while our men seem thoroughly abreast of the times on almost every other subject, when they strike the woman question they drop back into 16th century logic. (Cooper, 1988, p. 75)

I am coming from a position that assumes reality is socially constructed and subject to interpretation. Therefore, in building a relationship with the participants and sharing knowledge to understand their experiences, I did not obtain objectivity nor eliminate bias; however, I discussed my subjectivities and how being a Black person, a woman, and a researcher influences the lens through which my work was performed. Furthermore, qualitative researchers (Clandinin, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Sheridan, Chamberlain, & Dupuis, 2011) agree that investigators are inherently biased by their experiences and cultures; therefore, objectivity is not something qualitative researchers look to obtain because observations are affected by how we view the world and research, which creates a variety of valuable points of view that we can use to work with and learn. One of the challenges was that in addition to retelling the participants'

stories, I had to reflect on my own intersecting life, which shaped my views and influenced the reiteration of the story.

I chose to conduct this study through qualitative inquiry, using womanism, narrative inquiry, and Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry, constructed from the narrative structures of Black women's novels. The rationale for using qualitative inquiry framed in this narrative inquiry was to gain an in-depth understanding of Black women's lived experiences in considering how spirituality and informal learning influenced their views on sexuality. Central to qualitative inquiry is expressing the researcher's positionality or offering a subjectivity statement. Subjectivity statements are shaped from the researcher's history, cultural worldview, and personal and professional experiences.

To some who are not familiar with qualitative research, the declaration of biases may cause one to be doubtful of the research, but non-disclosure may also cause one to not trust the intentions of the research and researcher or feel as if something is being hidden (Preissle, 2008). Having that understanding, I discussed my subjectivities of how being a Black, Christian, woman, sister, daughter, and researcher may influence, create bias, motivate, limit, or recolor the lens from which my work was performed.

I am the fourth child of five biologically created through my parents. I have two older brothers, an older sister and a younger twin brother. My mother was the oldest of 12, with eight brothers and three sisters—until it was later revealed that my grandfather fathered three other children, two before my grandparents were married and the other during the marriage. My maternal grandparents were married and stayed married for 45 years until the passing of my grandfather. In a pilot study, the participant Jan stated, "That's the way they were about sex and

relationships . . . secretive, and they were doing everything," as she described how the topic of sex and the outside relationship of her father was presented to her.

I grew up in a Christian home with a Baptist upbringing, so attending church on Sunday, Wednesday, and any other time of the week that the doors of the church were open was common practice; so too were the beliefs that women were subordinate, subservient, and unequal. Because of the (mis)interpretation of the Bible, it was assumed that men were the head of the household, they held a natural superior position over women and in society, and women were to be helpers instead of doers (Helgeson, 2002), which often resulted in and contributed to violence or abuse at the hands of husbands or fathers. Because of this belief system and upbringing, many women stay in unhealthy marriages and are often made to feel guilt or shame when considering alternative measures—my family was not an exception. My parents divorced when I was eight, encouraging my mother to seek relocation with her government job, and thus precipitating a move to another state and an integration into unfamiliar surroundings. While I acknowledge my birthplace of a Kansas farm and attending a predominantly Black elementary school until the second grade and being surrounded with people of color at every turn, I claim growing up in a middle-class, suburban area with two Black families on the block and attending predominantly white institutions of learning because of the significant impact those surroundings had on my development.

As I reflect on this time, I remember standing in the driveway of our house, my two older brothers leaning on our red 1990 Hyundai, and my mother standing in front of them with her arm around my shoulder as I leaned against her. I can't remember the topic of conversation, because it's not important, but I can remember how I felt as seconds passed and my brothers told my mother and me to go in the house. I hadn't yet seen what they were talking about, but eventually

it had come into view: a dark colored, pickup truck with a confederate flag waving and white boys, looked to be no older than 20, crept slowly by the house shouting, "Nigger!" My brothers hurriedly prepared to leave in the car and follow them, but my mother firmly said no, because something far worse could happen. That incident will forever be etched in my memory; as a child, that was my first encounter with racism slapping me blatantly in the face and daring me (us) to react. One thing was for sure, we weren't living on the farm in Kansas anymore.

Growing up, my biological father was not present, but I never felt the void. My oldest brother filled the position in my mind of a father figure and my other brothers (my twin included) acted like they were my father, imposing rules and making it difficult for any person of the opposite sex to express interest in me. My mother constantly reminded us that our "spiritual father" would take care of us when we had to do without and felt the pains of being a part of a single-parent household. I was not the only person my brothers tried to police. I remember a time when my mother expressed interest in dating and finding a potential mate. As I recall, this was around the year 2004; she was roughly 44 years old and had been single, uninvolved romantically, and had no companionship since she divorced my father, 14 years prior. Looking back, I am not sure if she was joking or serious, but I took it to be a serious inquiry; she told us (her children) very casually one day, as she was in the in kitchen and we were scurrying around attending to our own needs, that she was thinking of dating. I thought it was a great idea, but one of my brothers responded, "You don't need to date. If you want to go out, we will take you on a date." We laughed it off, as to say, that's the way it is and that's the way the men in my family acted, but something spurred and grew inside of me as I continued to develop and mature. That "something" was indignation toward the way my mother's feelings and desire for companionship were disregarded. As I continued to encourage my mother to keep an open mind about

relationships, companionship, and to fight for her rights as a single woman, I found the need to also fight for my own (Walker, 1983).

Hurston (2006) proclaims, "I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment" (p. 1). It was not until I went off to college that I began to see and understand that everything we accept as normal is not all that normal, nor acceptable. As a member of my community, I was so immersed in the principles and values that I wasn't able to appreciate nor critique my surroundings; I accepted them as truth because that was the truth conveyed to me. I realized how significant a role religion plays in how I view and experience the world, and sexuality specifically. I learned through my socialization, just as my mother communicated to me that she learned. As I grew older and began talking to my mother about the mores of life, she expressed that she was not introduced to sexual education in the home, so she learned on her own. She learned from her peers at camp, books, school, and her cousins. During her time of reflection, she recalls that her children (daughters particularly) taught her a lot about issues including sex and intimacy in her later years. She attributes much of this learning to watching her daughters grow up, go to college and learn to take care of themselves.

Much of my learning happened the same way because sex and sexuality weren't topics that were discussed openly in my home growing up. I now make it a point to have those open conversations with my nieces, nephews, sisters, and my mother still. For my mother, church, religion, and generational beliefs are significant factors that influence her onto-epistemologies. My mother is 67 years young and we frequently engage in conversations about dating and companionship. I always encourage her to do what makes her happy; if that is finding companionship then I support her, if not, I support that decision as well, as long as she is happy.

14

I end with an excerpt from Lorde (1984), which illustrates the need to push beyond limits and break down barriers, the very thing I am encouraging my mother to do. As I grow and develop my voice as a researcher, womanist/feminist, Black woman, sister, and daughter, I look to other scholars for guidance, direction, courage, and inspiration to not only speak my truth, but to also challenge what is termed truth.

> Next time, ask: What's the worst that will happen? Then push yourself a little further than you dare. Once you start to speak, people will yell at you. They will interrupt you, put you down and suggest it's personal. And the world won't end.
> And the speaking will get easier and easier. And you will find you have fallen in love with your own vision, which you may never have realized you had. And you will lose some friends and lovers and realize you don't miss them. And new ones will find you and cherish you. And you will still flirt and paint your nails, dress up and party, because, as I think Emma Goldman said, 'If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution.' And at last you'll know with surpassing certainty that only one thing is more frightening than speaking your truth. And that is not speaking. (Lorde, 1984, p. 40)

## Significance of the Study

The narratives of everyday Black women in this cohort discussing spirituality, sexuality, and informal learning explicitly combined are scarce. Black women experience racism, sexism, classism, and other intersected forms of oppression for which there has been little space for dialogue or intervention. Coupled with being an already underrepresented group, their worth in post-menopausal years is minimized; therefore, their needs and humanity are silenced and ignored. This study provides a space for those older Black women to tell their stories and make a significant contribution to creating a counternarrative to dispel sexist and racist stereotypes toward older Black women regarding the liberation of their sexuality and how their concepts regarding sexuality were constructed. Furthermore, older Black women historically have been raised with the sexist patriarchal idea that sex is for reproduction and not for women's pleasure, which means that if they choose sexuality for their own pleasure, in some way they violate the understanding of their own femininity and cross some taboo borders. This also poses risks for

15

mental and physical health issues, especially if these women did not have sex education and did not have anyone with whom they could discuss their sexuality.  A study like this then opens up a space to honor these experiences of oppression, survival, and navigation and disrupt the oppressive narratives that situate spirituality and sexuality opposite each other as if they are mutually exclusive.  Offering a counternarrative also contributes to the womanist movement to create space for Black women to speak against discrimination, sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression from Black women's perspectives, which is significant because the narratives differ from those who are privileged (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; hooks, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 1999).

Older Black women's narratives are a part of our human collective narrative and we need space to discuss the ways in which the women make sense of their spirituality and sexuality so we can not only understand and document these experiences but also be in a position to offer appropriate health care, educational, and community-based services.  Approaches of informal learning can reveal how social structures of oppression take form and sustain and maintain themselves.  Disrupting those structures would benefit more than those of the participants' population.  Implications for religious or spiritual leaders and communities include an awareness and a more open-minded approach to understanding that the communities and the people that occupy space are evolving; with that (r)evolution, the church leaders could be in a supportive role for their congregation and community.

Within adult education and education broadly, Black women's storytelling is scarce; it is necessary to create space for such storytelling and such structures of storytelling that integrate spirituality, interconnectivity, Blackness, and Black women's sexuality so it can be understood how informal learning structures play a critical role in shaping actions against and with

16

internalization of various social structures.  Therefore, this study contributes to the research on informal learning.  Moreover, this study on sexuality and aging of older Black women dispels some of the myths associated with ageism and sexism, especially in the context of culture and religion.  By gaining a better understanding of history, we appreciate what has been accomplished.

## Limitations

Since this study focuses on the narratives of Black women born between 1946 and 1964, I anticipated that a limitation of the study would include finding eligible participants who felt comfortable discussing segments of their most personal, intimate lives.  That was not the case; many Black women were interested in sharing their stories.  Additionally, because the study looks at Black women born between 1946 and 1964, there was the possibility that the age difference between the participants and the researcher may have created a barrier to building rapport in defining sex and intimacy; I may have been considered an outsider or too young to understand the interplay of such dynamics.  Again, this was not the case, as the participants did not consider me too young to share intimate details; they were excited that a young Black woman was asking them to share their wisdom and wanted to learn from their experiences, and they found it an honor to be a part of something that could have a global impact.  Additionally, I had to consider the moral and ethical issues, foreseen and unforeseen, that may have arisen with such sensitive topics.  It was possible the participants did not want to continue with the study, felt uncomfortable answering certain questions, or had memories that were too painful to share or work through.  In these instances, it was important for me to be sensitive to those moments and offer resources to the participant, if necessary, and remind the participants that they could terminate the study or the conversation at any point without penalty.  Lastly, these are deep, raw

and vulnerable stories told in the participants' voices that are very honest and narratively rich; for this reason, the narratives could be triggering to the reader.  Although a cautionary is necessary, this should not imply that research on difficult topics is out of bounds.  If Black women don't tell their own stories, who will?  Black women and Black feminists are willing to write their own stories, which means they write in vulnerable narratives.

## Operationalization of Terms

### African American vs Black

For this study, the terms "Black" and "African American" are used interchangeably. Using Agyepong's (2011) definition: "Black" is used in the cultural sense to include the diverse ethnicities that make up peoples of the African diaspora, and those who define themselves as such or prefer African-American.  There is also a "political usage of 'Black' to include the bond shared by all people who lived the colonial experience" (Agyepong, 2011, p. 176).  The use of these terms is contingent on the literature being cited and how the participant has referred to herself.  It may look inconsistent because there is no one way to be African American or Black.  The capitalization of Black, Brown, and not white is also intentional to denote racialized groups of people. Bhattacharya (2017b) posits that this intentionally "disrupts [the] linguistic dominance of white and decenter[s] whiteness driven onto-epistemologies to create centrality for groups that are continuously marginalized by white discourses and structures of oppression" (p. 1).

### Black Church

Refers to the "shorthand reference to the pluralism of Black Christian churches in the United States" (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p. 1).

**Informal Learning**

The unstructured, incidental, self-directed, tacit, or integrative acquisition of knowledge which "includes a focus on the person, ties learning to specific 'real-life' activities, and has no goal of generalizing the information learned" (Callanan, Cervantes, & Loomis, 2011, p. 646).

**Religion**

Defined as a specific doctrine, a set of basic beliefs, tenets, and rituals that a formal institution has in place that followers abide by based on theology (Hoyman, 1966; Lewis, 2007; Tisdell, 2008). There are internal and external factors associated with religion. The internal factors relate to acceptance of the practices, values, ethics, and beliefs of a particular religion. Externally, it means affiliation with the religion by attending church functions and observing the tenets in an institutionalized manner (Cascio, 1999).

**Sexuality**

Refers to one's sexual self-concept and sexual expression in an intimate, dating, romantic relationship, companionship, or courtship (Butler & Lewis, 1993; Johnson, 1996)

**Spirituality**

Encompasses moral decision-making and the search for meaning and purpose in life. It is often seen as more individualistic than religion and incorporates a fulfilling relationship with a higher power and others, finding one's purpose in life, transcendence, love, joy, peace (Canda, 1988; Chapman, 1987; Lewis, 2007; Mattis, 2000). Ultimately, the important aspect of spirituality is the recognition and embracing of what an individual perceives as giving meaning and purpose to life (Banks, 1988) and their personal experience with the sacred (Tisdell, 2008).

**Summary**

In this chapter, the background for the study was outlined and a rationale for Black women to provide counternarratives of their lives, specifically the most intimate, sacred, and taboo aspects of spirituality and sexuality was provided.  Using the womanist framework, Black women from the baby boomer generation become more visible and narrate their own stories, or at the least, interject and correct the false narratives that have been perpetuated.  The tenets of womanism, Black feminism, and narrative structures informed the study as frameworks and provided a basis for Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry as the appropriate means to construct vulnerable, empowered, and spirit-driven narratives (VES Narratives).  Finally, the limitations as well as the significance of the study were detailed in this chapter.  Going forward, Chapter 2 reviews the literature on the journey to womanism by way of feminism and Black feminism, intersectionality, spirituality, the Black church, sexuality, and informal learning.  In Chapter 3, the premises and procedures of Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry and how they are used to explore the older Black women's VES Narratives to include their experiences with sexuality, spirituality, and informal learning environments are explored.  Chapter 4 identifies and discusses the findings of the study as detailed in the narratives of the Black women.  Finally, Chapter 5 provides a conclusion and implications for further research.

# Chapter 2 - I Am A Witness

This literature review is offered as a way to understand the relationship among spirituality, sexuality, and informal learning. This section moves through the journey to womanism to include an overview of feminism, Black feminism, and then womanism. An overview of intersectionality and a summary of spirituality are incorporated, including various definitions of spirituality and religiosity and ways spirituality is represented in Black women's lives. Following is a discussion of Black women's sexuality and the influences of such and, finally, a review of informal learning. The discussion is intentionally limited to pertain to the relationship among spirituality, sexuality, and informal learning within the context of Black women's lives.

## The Journey to Womanism

> Den dey talks 'bout dis ting in de head; what dis dey call it? ("Intellect," whispered someone near). Dat's it, honey. What dat got to do wid womin's rights or nigger's rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yourn holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full? (Sojourner Truth as cited in Gates & Robbins, 2017, p. 8)

### Feminism

Since this study is grounded in a womanist framework, it is important to progress through the journey to womanism by way of feminism and Black feminism to understand and appreciate womanism. In positioning feminism, it is critical to note that feminism has morphed and evolved into many different forms of feminism, resulting in various forms of feminism. Some of those feminist movements include: Asian, Black, Chicana and Latina, liberal, Marxist, post-colonial, socialist, third-world, and transnational. Lander (2017) contends, "Feminism is a complex and multipronged field leading to various understandings of how oppression occurs across various axes of differences, including, but not limited to, sexual orientation,

socioeconomic status, and racial/ethnic identity" (p. 170). Historically, feminism was birthed

from the struggles of women of color who had been advocating for freedom as they worked

alongside white women in the woman's anti-slavery movement, the Abolitionist Movement, and

the Civil Rights Movement to fight against Black women and mothers being separated from their

families and sexually abused (Johnson, 2015; Taylor, 1998). While many Black women,

including Ann Moody, Victoria Gray, Septima Clark, Ella Baker, and Fannie Lou Hamer, were

defying racism and sexism as part of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in

North Carolina and separate Black feminist organizations, educated white women were

addressing sexism and their own perils (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003). Albeit piggybacking off of

the intellect of Black women and the constructs of Black liberation, white women called their

organized movement "women's liberation" (Giddings, 1984; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; hooks, 2000).

The women's liberation movement's main objective was to encourage women to challenge

sexism at every turn. From women's liberation grew a broader feminist base as various forces

joined to resist "sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression" (hooks, 2000, p. xi). The feminist

movement of the 1960s has been hailed as one of the most powerful efforts for social justice

(Friedan & Collins, 1997; hooks, 2000; Whitaker, 2017).

Betty Friedan is acclaimed to have reignited the feminist movement of the 1960s and

1970s. After graduating from Smith College with a degree in psychology in 1942, Friedan

moved to New York to become a journalist and a political activist. Shortly after, she married

and became pregnant; the pregnancy resulted in her being fired from her journalist job.

Thereafter, she began freelance writing and during a project, she sent out a questionnaire to her

former colleagues and found they were "suffering" from what Friedan thought was a situation

unique to her (Friedan & Collins, 1997). The responses she received prompted Friedan to write

*The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, which detailed the perils that US housewives were facing as wives, mothers, and homemakers. This work also challenged the notion that:

> Men and women were equal, but different – that men found their greatest fulfillment through work, while women were most fulfilled in the home – stood revealed as a fallacy, and the depression and even despair she and so many other women felt as a result was recast not as a failure to adapt to a role that was the truest expression of femininity, but as the natural product of undertaking repetitive, unfulfilling and unremunerated labor. (Whitaker, 2017, preface)

Friedan is credited for coining the phrase "the problem that has no name" (Friedan, 2000, p. 154) when addressing, as she put it:

> The problem that lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women . . . [the] strange, stirring, (…) dissatisfaction . . . each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question— "is this all?" (Friedan & Collins, 1997, p. 57)

Because these were mostly white, college-educated, housewives with time and money who wanted more from their lives, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was describing a career as the missing link. Many white women wanted equal pay for their work, alternative lifestyles, and social equality (Friedan & Collins, 1997). After seeing doctors and psychologists to treat what they called "a failure of femininity" (Whitaker, 2017, p. 11) and getting no relief, *The Feminine Mystique* encouraged discussion of the social, economic, legal, and reproductive status of women. Women's liberation set out to eradicate the problems discussed by this elite group of women (unequal wages for labor, social inequalities, sexism, and sexist oppression) (Friedan & Collins, 1997; Whitaker, 2017).

According to Ngwainmbi, (2004), there are three prevailing characteristics in feminist scholarship: (a) gender is the dominant theme, (b) it is woman-centered, and (c) the experiences of women are unique compared to men, but alike to all women. Thus, it was expected that

feminist scholarship would unite women in social and political action in a male, patriarchal society.  Feminist discourse advanced the notion that all women were oppressed and oppressed in similar ways.  Although oppression was not the same for everyone, many benefitted from the feminist movement, as hooks (2000) posits, "everyone has benefitted from the cultural revolutions put in place by contemporary feminist movement. It has changed how we see work, how we work, and how we love" (p. xiv).  Because it was seen and talked about by mostly the elite, the message of feminism was not inclusive enough to sustain the revolution and eradicate sexism, oppression, and patriarchy (Collins, 1996; Springer, 2005).  Nevertheless, feminism challenged and provoked some of the dominant mainstream views.

## Black Feminism

The tenets of feminist thought were challenged when radical women of color and some white counterparts challenged gender as the main factor they were fighting against.  In fact, most feminist intellectuals opposed the idea of incorporating positions on race, economics, and class to the already present perspective on gender (Collins, 1989; Davis, 2008).  The idea that race, class, and gender are not intersecting is "damaging to women of color, women in poverty, and women who identify as queer, trans, or lesbian because it does not consider how they are affected" (Lander, 2017, p. 34).  For women of color, particularly in the United States of America, the reality that confronts them includes more than gender.  The reality of their existence includes race, ethnicity, national origin, culture, sexual orientation, and social class (Collins, 2000; Ngwainmbi, 2004; Sheared, 1999; Taylor, 1998; Walker, 1983).

With the perspective that women of color's voices are silenced and their realities unnoticed, women of color and allies examined the women's liberation movement and its platform to uncover that the issues they were collectively fighting for benefited mostly white

women with class privilege (hooks, 2000).  Hooks (2000) posits that white women who were at the forefront of the feminist crusade did not take into account the poor white women and women of color that lived on the margins.  Furthermore, she concludes, "[white women] rarely question[ed] whether or not their perspectives on women's reality [was] true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group" (hooks, 2000, p. 1).  Women of color understood what it meant to be on the outside looking in and also on the inside looking out (Anzaldùa, 1987); therefore, who benefitted from feminism was interrogated.  Hooks (2000) puts it plainly by saying "feminism in the United States has never emerged from the women who are most victimized by sexist oppression; women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically, and spiritually—women who are powerless to change their condition in life" (p. 1).

Living as outsiders—outside the margins—provided a rich perspective and understanding of feminism that privileged white women would not understand.  White women were discussing problems from a lens filtered by race, class privilege, economics, education, and a different level of sexism, that was not from a marginalized perspective (hooks, 2000), while women of color simultaneously dealt with the realities of racism, sexism, and poverty (Taylor, 1998).  The works of Black women abolitionists initiated what is termed the Black feminist movement by challenging racist and sexist beliefs (Johnson, 2015).  Black feminism also arose to resist the sexism that was present in the Civil Rights Movement.  Black women, including Septima Clark, Ruby Hurley, Rosa Parks, Diane Nash, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ann Moody, had been organizing and serving the Civil Rights Movement to evoke change and reshape political behavior to the Civil Rights organizations that had been dominated by male religious leaders (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003).

Though white women fought alongside Black women, they did not share Black women's

agenda for racial equality and did not interrogate their position of privilege (Freedman, 2002;

Yellin, 1989).  The feminist agenda put forth by Black women, which included advocating for

issues affecting race, gender, sexual orientation, and social class, was more far-reaching than the

feminism white women proposed, which focused solely on gender.  Black feminism affected a

feminist consciousness and encouraged women to interrogate their position and share their

stories of oppression and being a woman (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003).  The Black feminist

agenda also sought to develop respect for the intellect, abilities, and bodies of Black women

(Taylor, 1998).  The bodies of Africans in (US) America, as Butler (2013) asserts, have been

historically condemned and "reduced to being as bodily people only, (…) seen less than human

and thought to be driven only by primitive desires.  Our degraded bodies have been exploited in

every way possible (for labor, sex, and science)" (p. 35).  Beal (1969), in a manifesto she penned

about the double jeopardy about being Black and woman, inserts a profound quote from

Sojourner Truth's speech at a 19th century Women's Rights Convention:

> Well, chilern, whar dar is so much racket dar must be something out o'kilter. I tink dat 'twixt de niggers of de Souf and de women at de norf all a talkin' 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all dis here talkin' 'bout? Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place every whar. Nobody ever help me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best places...and ar'nt I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm...I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me - and ar'nt I a woman? I could work as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well - and ar'nt I a woman? I have borne five chilern and I seen `em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard --and ar'nt I a woman? (Sojourner Truth as cited in Beal, 1969, para. 7)

This excerpt demonstrates the hierarchical position and explicitly describes how

collectively Black women are in a unique situation.  Black women were never afforded such

luxuries as to stay home and "[make] the beds, [shop] for groceries, [match] slipcover material,

[eat] peanut butter sandwiches with her children, [chauffeur] Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night" without worry and "ask even of herself the silent question—"is this all?" as Friedan and Collins (1997, p. 57) posit. Black women have remained at the bottom of the overall social status and greatly impacted by sexist, racist, and classist oppression. Hooks (2000) goes on to explain that Black women have not "been socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppressor" (p. 16) and that Black women have "no institutionalized other" (p. 16) to exploit or oppress unlike the white woman or the Black man. To explicate this relationship of the institutionalized other, hooks (2000) reveals that white women and Black men can act as oppressor or be oppressed because Black men can suffer from racism, but they can also oppress through sexism, and white women can suffer from sexism, but they can also serve as oppressors through racism.

**Womanism**

Leasure (2004), in her dissertation on perspectives of womanist and feminist theories, describes her experience encountering feminism. She expressed, as many other women of color have done (see Adekoya, 2014; Collins, 1989; Daniel-Anderson, 2009; Giddings, 1984; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; McNickles, 2009; Turner 2007), that feminism excluded the concerns of women of color, while painting a picture of an inclusive and diverse front. This exclusion created hesitation for Leasure (2004) to proclaim herself a feminist because of what she learned about feminism and its perception of being "patriarchy in a dress" (p. iv). In searching for her place, she found womanism. Womanism evolved from women of color not identifying with feminism or feeling disconnected from Black feminism. In fact, in her comparative dissertation, Vastine (2015) describes womanism as an offering to those who do not connect with feminism or are searching for an alternative to what has been called feminism and even Black feminism.

Womanism, a term coined by Walker (1983), is thought to rectify the division feminism implies, by signifying a commitment to the survival of all Black people. The definition of womanism has inspired women from various backgrounds to "re-explore and redefine feminism" (Turner, 2007, p. 10). Walker (1983) uses the following phrases to define womanism:

1. From *womanish.* (Opp. Of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another Black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious.*
2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle, *Loves* the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.*
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Walker, 1983, pp. xi-xii, italics in the original version)

In the first phase of the definition, there is a connotation of connection to the self. Walker uses the word *womanish,* an expression that has been used by Black folk to describe young girls who act like adult women (McNickles, 2009). In Walker's (1983) viewpoint, womanish is the "opposite of girlish, frivolous, irresponsible, not serious" (p. xi), but it is also full of strength and ambition as Walker states, "usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior" (p. xi).

The second phase of the definition expresses a connection to others. Walker (1983) expresses the need for and an appreciation of a connection to other women, men, and community

by professing a commitment "to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (p. xi). There is also the acceptance and appreciation for people from various cultural backgrounds, as she asserts in her answer to "Mama, why are we brown, pink, yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and Black?" Ans: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented" (Walker, 1983, p. xi).

The third phase of the definition represents a connection to the divine. The connection to the divine is expressed through spirituality, love, dance, music, food—but also expressed through the struggle. Historically, religion for Black folk has been used to buffer stress, promote healthy psychological functioning (Agyepong, 2011; Armstrong & Crowther, 2002; Davis-Carroll, 2011; Mattis, 2000). Maparyan (previously known as Layli Phillips) designates that different from feminism, womanism emphasizes the interconnection to spirituality, recognizing the divine and sacred nature of all living and non-human things (Phillips, 2006). Sheared (1994) posits that "womanist perspective shapes the both/and reality into a connected polyrhythmic whole. We no longer see ourselves as separate beings but as a communal spirit" (p. 30), and the relationship to the divine is expressed through love, dance, music, food, and struggles.

The last phrase, "womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender," denotes the relationship womanism has to feminism. Walker (1983) eloquently puts forth:

> It is not the difference in them [the difference between the literature written by Black and by white Americans] that interests me, but, rather, the way black writers and white writers seem to me to be writing one immense story-the same story, for the most part with different parts of this immense story coming from a multitude of different perspectives. (Walker, 1983, p. 5)

Womanism incorporates the complexities of the Black woman's life and "mirrors both the language and principles of the African American community" (Taylor, 1998, p. 56).

Many scholars contribute to the ideology of womanism and have advanced its contribution (see Hudson-Weems, 1993, 1994; Ogunyemi, 1985; Phillips, 2006; Sheared, 1994; Williams, 1989). As an extension to Walker's definition, Maparyan defines it as:

> A social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem-solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment or nature and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. (Phillips, 2006, p. xx)

With this definition, she points out that holistically, womanism concentrates on three domains at once. Those domains include (a) human-to-human relationships to reduce conflict and increase peace; (b) environmentalism–the relationship between humans and nature; and (c) the relationship between human beings and the non-material, spiritual, or transcendental realm (Phillips, 2006). Maparyan asserts that womanist methodology understands these elements are inseparable, meaning that each domain has to be attended to and then addressed as a whole to address the problems with women, social change, and oppression (Phillips, 2006). Foundationally, Black people value collectivism, spirituality, and community, and womanism creates that triadic relationship between the woman, others, and the sacred.

An additional extension, as presented by Hudson-Weems (2000), extends the womanist framework to Africana womanist and in addition to gender issues, family centeredness (including involving Black males in the struggle), and spirituality, she addresses several other key characteristics as important, which include: self-namer and self-definer, genuine sisterhood, strong, whole, authentic, flexible role player, respected, recognized, male compatible, respectful of elders, adaptable, ambitious, mothering, and nurturing. For Hudson-Weems (2000), these were ways to connect womanism that others did not. Douglas (1995) appoints womanism as the symbol of Black women's experience and states, "womanist signals an appreciation for the

richness, complexity, uniqueness, and struggle involved in being Black and female in a society that is hostile to both Blackness and womanhood" (p. 9).

In the field of adult education, Sheared (1994) introduced womanism in relationship to polyrhythmic realities as a way to "reinterpret the word – the ways in which we read, hear, and ultimately speak and listen to one another" (p. 29) and to "give voice to those whom traditional and unidimensional methods of instruction have silenced" (p. 28). In applying these interconnected concepts, Sheared (1994) cites Barkley-Brown (1988) to suggest the importance of recognizing that "people and actions do move in multiple directions at once. If we analyze these people and actions by linear models, we will create dichotomies, ambiguities, cognitive dissonance, disorientation, and confusion in places where none exist" (p. 28).

Based on a study, McNickles (2009) provides a collective overview of the terminology debate associated with womanism, as womanism has been fused with Black feminism, Afrocentric feminism, and Africana womanism. Scholars have gone back and forth trying to distinguish unique characteristics of each framework (Allen, 2002; Coleman, 2006; Collins, 1999; Hudson-Weems, 1993; Sheared, 1994), but Collins (1996) notes that:

> No term exists that adequately represents the substance of what diverse groups of Black women alternately call womanism and Black feminism. Perhaps the time has come to go beyond naming by applying main ideas contributed by both womanists and Black feminists to the overarching issue of analyzing the centrality of gender in shaping a range of relationships within African-American communities. (Collins, 1996, p. 15)

In this address, she spurs scholars to end the debate by proclaiming that:

> . . . whether this thought should be called Black feminism, womanism, Afrocentric feminism, Africana womanism, and the like- a more useful approach lies in revising the reasons why Black feminist thought exists at all. (Collins, 1996, p. 22)

In sum, womanism as a whole emphasizes the intersections of race, class, gender, spirituality, intellect, and sexuality; it emphasizes the importance of encouraging all members to exist

holistically.  For this study, womanism and womanist inquiry refer, in a manner, to the collective

body of literature consistent with Maparyan's definition.

## Intersectionality

> Called Matriarch, Emasculator, and Hot Momma. Sometimes Sister, Pretty Baby, Auntie, Mammy, and Girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient, and Inner-City Consumer. The Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother, and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself. (T. Harris, 1982, p. 4)

To understand how the issues of spirituality and informal learning impact Black women's

lives, an emphasis must be made on the various dimensions that make up a Black woman's life.

To understand these various dimensions, the perspectives of intersectionality are discussed.

Intersectionality was in effect in the 1960s and 1970s when women of color activists had to

navigate being Black, woman, and members of the workforce simultaneously—hence these

women had to situate the intersections of their lives to fruitfully navigate their lived experiences

(Collins & Bilge, 2016).  Collins and Blige (2016) provide an overview of the concept of

intersectionality, although it was not termed intersectionality at that time.  They posit that Black

women activists of the 1960s and 1970s challenged the anti-racists and social movements and

feminism and workers unions, as there were inequalities for Black women within each sector.

For example, there were issues of "race within the civil rights movement, gender within the

feminist movement, and issues of class within the union movement" (Collins & Blige, 2016, p.

3).  All of the issues were seen and treated as separate by those unaffected, although women of

color were simultaneously affected by all of these facets, spurring the creation of independent

movements and social groups that meshed the intersections of Black women's existence.

Crenshaw (1989) was the first to use the term intersectionality.  Crenshaw (1989)

grounded "intersectionality" in Black feminist thought and first used the term to describe the

disregard law and politics had for Black women.  According to Carbado and Gulati (2001),

Crenshaw's article used Black feminist theory to:

> . . . challenge (a) the male-centered nature of antiracist politics, which privileged the experiences of heterosexual Black men, (b) the white-centered nature of feminist theorizing, which privileged the experiences of heterosexual white women; and (c) the 'single-axis'/sex or race-centered nature of anti-discrimination regimes, which privileged the experiences of heterosexual white women and Black men. (Carbado & Gulati, 2001, p. 527)

After the initial article, Crenshaw (1991) presented intersectionality to extend the concept

and relate the idea to speak out about rape, violence, and social justice issues that surround

women, people of color, and gays and lesbians from a criminal justice perspective.  The

intersection of racism and sexism, as Crenshaw (1991) posits, are rarely acknowledged in

feminist and anti-racist work.  Therefore, the experiences of women of color are not represented,

leaving women of color disregarded on both spheres.  Crenshaw (1991) also acknowledged that

race and sex are not the only factors that shape the experience of women of color's lives; also

included are class and sexuality and the varied aspects of identity that should be measured when

"considering how the social world is constructed" (p. 1245).  To extend the definition of

intersectionality, Collins and Blige (2016) posit:

> Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a singles axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves. (p. 2)

Simply put, "intersectionality refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories

of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural

ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power" (Davis, 2008, p. 68).

Since its inception, intersectionality has spanned many disciplines (social sciences, humanities, education, law) and is included in theoretical discussions, as well as taken into consideration in political and educational arenas (Davis, 2008). It is heralded as the "most important contribution that women's studies have made so far" (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). Intersectionality as a framework has also grown to represent those with disabilities (Houtrow, 2015; Van Hook, Hugen, & Aguilar, 2001), men (Hearn, 2014; Johnson & Rivera, 2015), relationships (Chanmugam, 2014; Heath, 2014), and in health care and medicine (Bastos, Harnois, & Paradies, 2017). Rose (2013) demonstrates that intersectionality does not only encompass race, class, and gender, but embodies aspects of economic privilege, spatial containment, and systemic education inequality.

On the other hand, the vagueness of intersectionality has been a critique, and scholars question whether to apply it as a theory, a concept to only understand the experiences of individuals, or whether it should be expanded to be used as a complete framework and methodology (Davis, 2008; McCall, 2005). Nonetheless, Davis (2008) argues that the vagueness is what has made intersectionality a success because it encompasses the concerns of a broad base and is left open-ended for individual interpretation. Carbado and Gulati (2001) discussed the future of intersectionality and established that the future of intersectionality is hopeful because of the potential theories and work that have come from the groundwork of intersectionality. See Brown (2016), Smelt (2017), and Taylor (2017) for examples of research that have come from the work of intersectionality.

## Spirituality

Since the focus of this study is on spirituality, it is appropriate to offer various definitions and perspectives of spirituality and religion. Fall (2002), in her dissertation on spirituality and

the impact on the lives of Black women, discusses the importance of scholars defining spirituality, with an understanding that formulating a working definition of spirituality will either repudiate or accept other scholars' definitions. Scholars who have conducted research on and framed a definition of spirituality have influenced how spirituality is operationalized in this work and provide credibility (Fall, 2002; Lewis, 2007; Mattis, 1995; Mattis & Jagers, 2001; Pannell-Goodlett, 2016; Starks & Hughey, 2003). As many scholars have discussed in their work, I would also like to offer careful attention when addressing issues of defining spirituality in the interest of providing an inclusive overview. The following section describes how spirituality and religion are conceptualized with regard to the lives of older Black women.

**Definitions of Spirituality and Religion**

Spirituality is such an interdisciplinary, multifaceted term that when trying to define it, it becomes complicated (Bennet & Bennet, 2007; Canda & Furman, 1999; English & Tisdell, 2010; Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Some of the problems with discussing and defining spirituality include: (a) there are many ways to define spirituality, (b) the absence of a consistent definition, (c) the blurred lines in the classification of spirituality and religion, and (d) the controversy surrounding such sensitive and personal topics (Armstrong & Crowther, 2002; Mattis & Jagers, 2001; Washington, Moxley, Garriott, & Weinberger, 2009).

Some studies equate spirituality with transcendent experiences and being absent of formal doctrine, denominational characteristics, rituals and the organizational structure of religion (Abeles et al., 1999; Banerjee & Canda, 2009; Bhattacharya & Keating, 2017). Others have equated it to an active connection with a Higher Power, faith, spirits, symbols, or rituals (Mattis & Jagers, 2001; Tisdell, 2003). Generally, religion is institutionally focused; a part of an organized entity or church; and adheres to a set of beliefs, practices, or doctrine (Bhattacharya &

Keating, 2017; Kirylo & Boyd, 2017; Walsh, 2009). Whereas spirituality has distinct characteristics, taking more of an individualized role in a person's life and more personal rather than taking part in organized religious practices (Kirylo & Boyd, 2017). Basically, spirituality is free from an entity telling a person what they should think or do, but it is rather what a person is and what they have become as a result of their journey, with a greater concern to an inner connectedness, love, relationships, meaning, and purpose (Armstrong, 1996; Atchley, 2009; Kirylo & Boyd, 2017; Starks & Hughey, 2003).

Atchley (2008) posits that spirituality is often understood to be brought on by personal choices and life experiences and is thought to be a link to wholeness and the more genuine self. Tisdell (2008) purports that spirituality focuses on its role in an individual's creation of ultimate meaning, usually in relationship to a higher sense of self or what is referred to as "God," "Divine Spirit," "Life-force," or "Great Mystery" (p. 29). Armstrong (1996) adds that this transcendent force creates meaning. Attending to Anzaldùa's theory of autohistoria-teoria, Bhattacharya and Keating (2017) apply it to establish that broadly spirituality "offers knowledge creation and metaphysical alternatives to dichotomous body/spirit paradigms" (p. 2). Within this context, Bhattacharya and Keating (2017) posit that those who are marginalized recover "language, land, and spiritual practices" (p. 2). For some it is the inward reflection, meditation, prayer, spiritual journey and experiences that put one on the path for spiritual meaning (Atchley, 2008; Tisdell, 2008) and those "roots" connect us to our inner selves in which we find "our greatest strength" (Anzaldùa, 2015, p. 68). In this distinction, Vogel (2000) declares that "'spirituality' is often preferred because it does not contain particular doctrinal, historical or theological content" (p. 17).

In Western contemporary culture, there are attempts to replace religion with spirituality, with the assumption that spirituality connects better to contemporary norms. Consequently, this would erase much of the historical context and underpinnings of religion (Sheldrake, 2010). The term *spirituality* began to lead and substitute older terms in theology and became the preferred term in the 1970s to explain historical and theological studies (Sheldrake, 2010). The assumption was that the term spirituality encompassed the essences of a spiritual life that was more holistic and attuned to nature, and more personally focused (Sheldrake, 2010). Accepting this integrated perspective also incorporated various aspects of life experiences in relation to a higher power. In short, the term broadly integrated religious and human values and crossed denominational boundaries (Sheldrake, 2010).

The boundary between spirituality and religion are not always as distinct as presented. Sheldrake (2010), in his attempt to define spirituality, discusses the importance and concerns of separating spirituality from religion and not attending to the cultural, historical, social, and religious context when trying to define spirituality. In Kirylo and Boyd's (2017) study of Freire's faith, spirituality, and theology, they postulate that for Freire, faith, religion, and spirituality were intertwined. Essentially, it is being connected and committed to others for the betterment of the human condition (Kirylo & Boyd, 2017). Tisdell (2008) extends the claim that spirituality and religion are difficult to separate. She posits that for many, religion was a part of their upbringing, it was integrated into their socialization as a child; therefore, it is the foundation of their being. Additionally, the structure of religion has provided a guide on how to live spiritually, and the traditions of storytelling, rituals, music, and prayer allow one to connect to and honor the cultural traditions that have been passed down, making it difficult to distinctly sever the relationship between religion and spirituality (Tisdell, 2008). Sheldrake (2010) agrees

with Tisdell (2008) in stating that it is unlikely one can completely isolate spirituality since a person's worldview is formed from myriad factors including childhood experiences, personal life experiences, social and cultural values, and informal learning environments.  In other words, to formulate a working definition of spirituality would be difficult because it is dynamic and not static; thus, it would change as experiences influence our concepts of spirituality.

The following passage from Wade-Gayles (1995) describes spirituality for many Black people:

> They witness for the Spirit without defining it. I doubt that anyone can because the Spirit, or spirituality, defies definition—a fact that speaks to its power as much as it reflects its mystery. Like a wind, it cannot be seen, and yet, like a wind, it is surely there, and we bear witness to its presence, its power. We cannot hold it in our hands and put it on a scale, but we feel the weight, the force, of its influence in our lives. We cannot hear it, but we hear ourselves speaking and singing and testifying because it moves, inspires, and directs us to do so. (p. 2)

Because of this perspective, for Black people, the spiritual/religious world cannot be easily separated from the secular world (Butler, 2013).  The lines are blurred in constituting the different meanings between spirituality and religion and the fact that many definitions of religion overlap elements of spirituality.  Banerjee and Canda (2009) use the term spirituality to comprise "both specifically religious expressions (e.g., church attendance, Christian prayer, or bible reading) and spiritual matters that are not limited to religious expressions (e.g., transpersonal experiences such as insightful dreams or visions, the search for meaning, and pervasive worldviews)" (p. 241).  Generally, spirituality for Black people is rooted in African traditions, and this multifaceted inspiration considers God to be omnipresent and omniscient.  In other words, spirituality is in the heart and soul of Black people and embedded in the culture. Therefore, God and spirituality are everywhere and a part of everything and everyone (Bridges, 2001; Butler, 2013; Fall, 2002), which aligns with the proposed definition.

**The Black Church and Spirituality**

> Den dat little man in black dar, he say women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wan't woman! Whr did your Christ come from? Whar did you Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothin' to do wid Him!
> If de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all alone, dese women togedder (and she glanced her eye over the platform) ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now dey is asking to do it, de men better let 'em. (Sojourner Truth, 1851, para 1)

To gain an understanding of spirituality for Black women, it is important to view it through the lens or the context from which it is fostered (Wane, 2002). Researchers of African culture suggests some renditions of African culture have been preserved over time, carried throughout generations of displaced African people, and infused throughout Black communities (Armstrong & Crowther, 2002; Este & Bernard, 2006; Martin & Martin, 2002). Holloway (2005) describes African religious survivals and retentions as "those religious beliefs, activities, cults, deities, and rituals that can be directly traced back to Africa" (p. 10). Battle (2006) describes the "retention of African practices by the slave community" (p. 28) as Africanisms. Much of the African cultural and spiritual identity was preserved, such as "emotional expressiveness in religious worship and the development of distinct musical forms" (Armstrong & Crowther, 2002, p. 4), which are seen in spirituals or gospels. Holloway (2005) details that one of the strongest symbolisms is the use of water in West African religion and Christianity. Water is used for baptism as well as for purifying houses and sacred spaces to ward off evil spirits. The people of South Africa also attend to dance and dreams for spiritual insight (Armstrong & Crowther, 2002). Part of African traditions, as it is in many traditional Black Pentecostal and Church of God in Christ churches, is dancing and "possessing the spirit." Similarly, the people of West Africa believe that one's purpose is determined by God, and

everything needed to accomplish that purpose is provided by God, but the individuals must use the resources provided by God wisely (Ephirim-Donkor, 1997).

In spite of assimilation, many African rituals and traditions subsisted (Holloway, 2005). Hall (2005), in describing some of the Africanisms that became Americanisms, details the religious rituals, musical influences, funeral rites, naming practices, and magical beliefs that came to Florida by way of Africa. Furthering the discussion about religion, Hall (2005) details two concerns that often appear. The first is "the questions of the degree to which African culture survived in slave communities" and second, "whether slave religion was essentially docile or rebellious" (Hall, 2006, p. 224). This discussion leads to the "cultural interchange" that was described by Herskovits (1941, p. xxxv). Herskovits (1941) is recognized as a primary figure in identifying and documenting the significant influence African culture had on the conception of (US) American culture (Holloway, 2005). As Africans were assimilating to white customs, whites were assuming the African customs and integrating them into their lifestyle (Holloway, 2005). While conforming to white culture, Africans were not allowed to continue many of their traditions such as keeping elder circles intact, which kept certain traditions sacred such as religious and burial practices and community duties for the ill (Holloway, 2005; Paris, 1995). Some have expressed that African slaves were introduced to and taught Western Christianity (see Fall, 2002; Mattis & Jagers, 2001; Travick-Jackson, 2003), but Paris (1995) suggests that African slaves willfully incorporated principles of Western Christianity into their beliefs because they were consistent with their prior beliefs. Bridges (2001) contests that culture was built on an "African-based unified worldview" (p. 9) and suggests that the spirituality of Black people:

> (1) Was built from pieces of an African past (African retentions) that were reconstructed to address the issue of survival in a hostile and threatening new world.
> (2) Was formed from the experiences of the enslaved and included their strong sense of involuntary presence in America.

(3) Was constructed in part from Africanized elements of the European-Christian tradition. (Bridges, 2001, p. 3)

It seems from the previous statement that many Black people desired to keep their cultural traditions as they were forced to emulate and assimilate into Western Christianity, and some of the customs and traditions preserved can be seen in one form or another.

Although the Black church operates within the context of (US) American culture, its foundation is rooted in African principles (Battle, 2006). African Ubuntu is an influential principle describing having an essential respect and consideration for others in the community through spirituality and humanitarian kindness (Battle, 2006; Nafuko, 2006). The Black church was and is instrumental in preserving the community as it faced violence, racism, and hate. Battle (2006) terms "Ubuntu sensibility" to describe the significance of community in relation to self-identity. He quotes John Mbiti (1989) in stating, "I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (Battle, 2006, p. 1) to describe the Ubuntu sensibility that led to unifying the Black church and the Black community (Bridges, 2001).

In attending to many of the African principles, the Black church encouraged the community to accept and help other communities facing oppression (Battle, 2006). For many, the Black church has been heralded as the most influential part of the community in the United States (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Dyson, 2003; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990) and one of the few things that Black people could control (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003). According to Battle (2006), slavery and freedom are only a part of what has shaped the Black church and its spiritual beliefs, but it is the survival of the struggle, the communal worship, and the Civil Rights Movement that were significant integral parts of the existence of the Black church. The Black church empowered Black people to (re)create their identity and "protest the racism that sought to force upon them a false identity, and to create authentic community" (Bridges, 2001, p. 5) and all of

41

these were significant to Black people.  Spirituality and religion, often interchangeable in the Black community, are essentially the heart of the Black community, Black culture, and Black religion.  It is also the motivation in the fight for freedom (Bridges, 2001).  Scholars have recognized that spirituality and religion are essential components of Black culture and shape their beliefs and influence other areas of their lives (Hill, 1999; J. M. Jones, 1991; Wellner, 2001).  The Black church has been instrumental in contributing to the spiritual and religious formation of the Black community, the individual, and family life (Banerjee & Canda, 2009; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).  Despite the violence (bombings, arson, mass shootings) that has targeted and occurred in Black churches (see Bailey & Snedker, 2011; Banks, 2015), the Black church has been regarded as a safe place for worship, to learn values and gender roles, and resist racism and challenge the dominant society (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003).  hooks (1990) terms it the "homeplace" where members find community and fellowship.  Bridges (2001) quotes Cone (1972) in describing spirituality in the African-American community:

> African-American spirituality may be found (as theologian James Cone wrote) in the spirituals as well as the blues, the beauty shop and the barber shop as well as the prayer meeting, the bar and the street corner as well as the choir rehearsal, the hoodoo prophet's silver trailer and the spiritual adviser's parlor, as well as the preacher's pulpit, and the prison cell as well as the pew. (p. 3)

The preceding passage demonstrates that generally the Black church has been many things to the community: a place of worship, an open setting for expressing emotions, a refuge for the refugee, a sanctuary for counseling, a place to hold community meetings and educational endeavors, and oftentimes a place to get a hot meal and a good word.

On the other hand, the Black church has also been a place of hurt feelings and stagnant growth, perpetuating mores of traditional gender roles and upstanding patriarchy, as well as a place to hide abuse within the family, resulting for some in the decision to move beyond the

formalized settings to discover "liberating truths" (Edwards, 1987, p. 6) for the family, the individual and the community (Butler, 2013; Davis-Carroll, 2011; Edwards, 1987). For example, in her work, Cuffee (2006) argues for the empowerment of Black churchwomen in making moral decisions related to their sexuality. Cuffee (2006) aims at the Black church for eluding responsibility when it comes to contemporary issues of sex and sexuality for Black women in the church, especially when a large proportion of Black women are single or unmarried heads of the household. Cuffee (2006) discusses the all too familiar phrase single, Black churchwomen hear, "God will be your husband" as an answer to what sex and sexuality should mean for the adult, single Black woman. Womanist intellectuals would advocate for the education and empowerment of both adult, single men and women instead of the male-dominated, sexist explanation often received in the Black church.

Many parishioners have been left vulnerable in the church. Sociologists Shupe and Eliasson-Nannini (2012) uncover the dishonorable behavior of Black and white clergy leaders. One of the main premises is that the misguided Black identity and needing to find a place to belong has provided an opportunity for Black pastoral leaders to take advantage of the parishioners as these committed churchgoers equate belongingness, identity, and fulfillment to the church family and faithful participation. Moreover, in their work about child sexual abuse and molestation and the Black church, Moore, Robinson, Dailey, and Thompson (2015) discuss the risks for failing to protect children from sexual predators. In addition to discussing the important role Black churches have in protecting those within the church and the community, the authors provide suggestions for prevention and intervention strategies for church leaders and providers.

The various aspects of violence across Black women's lifespans in regard to the church has also been discussed by C. M. West (2013) through a Black feminist and therapeutic lens. This work studies violence in the community, in the workplace, and in intimate relationships. As this work is presented, race, class, and gender inequalities of Black women are acknowledged as well as the spaces Black women occupy. For example, the church, the home, and the community demonstrate how historically oppression has influenced the (mis)treatment of Black women within and outside of the Black community. Finally, the author notes that ideally, they would hope Black men would vehemently advocate for the equality of Black women, and Black women would be free to "occupy multiple spaces of their own choosing, with their own definitions of equality, liberations and sexuality (. . .) and walk out unscathed" (C. M. West, 2013, p. 175). This call to action is a cry for protection and appreciation of the Black woman.

Spirituality is such a complex concept resulting in various dimensions that affect countless areas of a person's life. These effects can be positive as well as negative. Brown-Spencer (2007) has described in defining "spiritual injury" as a "form of spiritual, mental, psychological and physical exhaustion that occurs as a result of battling racism and other forms of oppression where the spiritual identities of people are not integrated, acknowledged or valued" (p. 109), which is just as harmful as many other forms of oppression. Anzaldùa (as cited in Bhattacharya & Keating, 2017) advances that the negative "self-identity-related" issues that one adopts and suppresses, such as dispiriting experiences of the "emotional, geographic, economic, spiritual, philosophical, and familial" (p. 4) separates a person from their true self and spirit. However, examining the "self-identity-related issues" (Bhattacharya & Keating, 2017, p. 4) and acknowledging their damage, allows the space for healing and restoration. Spirituality and the journey to define the "who" and "what" of our being and beliefs are directly impacted by our

earliest traditional and religious experiences, for they are the foundation for the journey, whether it is accepted or not (Tisdell, 2008; Vogel, 2000). For Valerio (2015), it is seeing the medicine man cure a man of cancer and believing in the dreams, roots, and spirits of her cultural ancestors. It was seeing God for the first time at 16 when she attended the ceremonial sweat in the medicine lodge with her kin as they collectively wept feeling pain for all Native people (Valerio, 2015). Each occurrence contributes to spiritual development, which essentially makes the person the "subjects of their own lives and learning" (Vella, 2000, p. 8). In the religious context, which is often seen as the foundation for many older Black people, it is argued that religion enriches the spiritual experience of the person and encourages spiritual growth (Armstrong & Crowther, 2002). From a womanist perspective, attention is given to ending oppression for all people and attending to aspects of the human-to-human connection and the relationship between human beings and the spiritual realm to unite human life with the spiritual dimensions.

## Black Women's Spirituality

Many have placed Black women at the center of Black American history, the development of the Black community, and the Black church (Collier-Thomas, 2010; Du Bois, 1924; Gilkes, 2011). Spirituality for Black people, women in particular, was emphasized during slavery when Black women were sexually abused and used as bed maidens, and Black families were separated in an attempt to destroy the African culture (Musgrave, Allen, Allen, & Gregory, 2002). Researchers like Cole and Guy-Sheftall (2003) and Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) say the slave system also prohibited the teaching of slaves because the slave master and others feared an educated slave. Since many slaves did not read or write, they told stories and repeated information about history and genealogy, so the information could be passed on through the generations. They further declare that Black women were instrumental in keeping and passing

on the history (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Through spirituality, Black women and families connected to a community and God to endure the struggle (Musgrave et al., 2002).

Although the Black church has been the pillar of the Black community, Black women have suffered first-hand from the oppression in the church (Gilkes, 2011). Black women are the epitome of struggling for recognition and acknowledgment as a human being (Harris-Perry, 2011) and have "never ignored the inconsistency of liberation in the context of patriarchy" (Gilkes, 2011, p. 364), but have recognized the contradictions and forged ahead. The roles and resistance of Black women in leadership have been a part of the history of the Black church (Collier-Thomas, 2010; Gilkes, 2011). While Black men were fighting for their rights as men within a white society, Black women were fighting for leadership positions and headship roles in the Black church (Gilkes, 2011). Black women were not permitted to serve in leadership roles in the Black church, especially regarding preaching, because it was viewed as a man's work and women were to be submissive (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Because of the white racism they were facing and the sexist, patriarchal norms of the Black community, Black women were trying to survive as a person of color and at the same time trying to survive as women (Collier-Thomas, 2010).

Black women are at the center of the struggle for Black Americans, just as the Black church has been vital to the Black community (Y. J. Harris, 2013; Harris-Perry, 2011) because Black women "not only consume Black religion but craft it" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 232) and embody every aspect. To be represented in the Black church meant that Black churchwomen formed their own clubs and organizations within the church (Gilkes, 2011). These organizations signify the work that is done in the community to battle poverty and racism, and in homes to

teach about family life (Gilkes, 2011).  Because of Black women's support and work in the church and the community, the Black church survived (Baer, 1993; Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).  Black women have been pivotal in the survival of the Black church because of their varied multiple roles (church mother, secretaries and clerks, nurses, custodians, educators, missionaries, cooks, counselors) and their keeping and passing on the African history and culture through oral communication and memory (Baer, 1993; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

For Black women, spirituality, religion, and the church have served as a comforter, a place for therapy, worship, community, healing, and hope.  Washington et al. (2009) studied the significance of faith and spirituality in Black women transitioning out of homelessness and identified five themes that the women found important regarding how spirituality was demonstrated.  The five dimensions of faith and spirituality for Black women included (a) identity and beliefs, (b) affiliation and membership, (c) involvement, (d) practices, and (e) benefits.  Identity and beliefs relate to how Black women perceive themselves in relation to their religious, spiritual, or faith-based identities.  Affiliation and membership attend to the fact that some women are not associated with a specific congregation or church, but they have a desire to be connected to people and activities for support and resources.  For many women in the study, involvement was related to their quality of life and a deepening of their spirituality as they participated in activities.  Practices are the methods for expressing faith, such as prayer, meditation, contemplation, or reading biblical texts.  Lastly, building relationships, emotional well-being, learning coping strategies, accessing basic needs and opportunities, and serving the church and others were seen as benefits to being connected spiritually (Washington et al., 2009).

Along the same line of showing some of the effective properties of spirituality and religion for Black women, Dalmida, Holstad, Dilorio, and Laderman (2012) executed a

qualitative study to explore how Black women with HIV defined and used spirituality.  In the study, the findings included that the "majority of the women considered spirituality as 'very' or 'extremely' important" (Dalmida et al., 2012, p. 745).  The themes from the study included "spirituality is a process, journey, and connection to God/higher power" (Dalmida et al., 2012, p. 748), which expressed the belief that spirituality is a process or journey that takes time and is likely to result in differing experiences that bring a person closer to God and induce levels of spiritual growth.  The next theme that was present was "expressions of spirituality" (Dalmida et al., 2012, p. 750), which demonstrated the ways the women expressed their spirituality, including church attendance, prayer, meditation, reading spiritual material or text (i.e., Bible); helping and encouraging others; being thankful; and testifying about God.  The last theme revealed in the study was "benefits of spirituality/a relationship with God provides" (Dalmida et al., 2012, p. 753), in which the women described the benefits of being spiritual.  The main benefits the women in this study experienced were inner peace; improvement in health; or the experience of healing, strength, and the ability to "keep going."  Similar to what Washington et al. (2009) reported in his study, generally for Black women, spirituality is significant to their well-being, and the journey to spirituality is one of growth and being closer to a higher power.

Spirituality and health-related issues are further connected.  In her dissertation, Y. J. Harris (2013) studies how religion, spirituality, and the Black church shape the spiritual health of Black women.  She notes that spiritual health affects Black women's self-perceptions, their relationships with others, and overall being.  Furthermore, for Black women, spirituality was used in everyday life to keep the family strong and sustained, it helped them negotiate the mores and challenges of life, it provided restoration and protection from abusive relationships, and it preserved the connection to ancestral traditions (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; Y. J. Harris,

2013). Furthermore, Waite and Killian's (2008) study about mental health in Black women notes that Black women were more disposed to depression associated to the beliefs related to negative self-perceptions, discrimination, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural factors. As Waite and Killian (2008) discuss the health beliefs about depression among Black women, they note that a commonly held belief is that generally Black people accept affliction and hardship as a part of their life, which impacts the assistance they seek out and the consideration they receive.

To further understand how Black women navigate the pressures and compromises of complex and nuanced lives, C. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2004) created the African American Women's Voices Project, which is based in psychological research and journalism. Through their study, they defined the term *shifting* to define strategies Black women use to deal with the expectations of society, family, relationships, and other roles they play. Black women shift between identities in relationships, at work, and in spiritual lives. Shifting is what Black women have perfected and regularly do to survive in a race- and gender-oppressed world (C. Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004). It is what Black women do consciously and unconsciously, such as a shift in the tone of voice or intonation, or change in speech (speaking more or less "urban") depending on the contexts. The constant shifting creates an emotional and physical strain, which may result in losing sight of one's authentic self, damaging to the psyche and soul (C. Jones & Shorter-Gorden, 2004).

Spirituality can be further understood through interrelationships. In their study, Banks-Wallace and Parks (2004) examined Black mother-sister-daughter relationships to find out how women make meaning of spirituality and how spirituality affects their well-being and health behavior choices. They found that spirituality influenced every aspect of the women's lives, including health behavior. Most women in the study regarded God as having the plan for their

lives and in control of all things.  An essential factor for the women's spirituality was having a personal relationship with God.  They also reported that most of the women's stories related spirituality as a function to help them deal with health difficulties, building and forming strong families, and restoration from abusive relationships.

Biblical stories and historical events acclaim that God or the Divine sanctions justice for those who are oppressed (Abdullah, 1999; Cone, 1984; Wimberly, 1995).  For many Black women, spirituality empowers them to combat through daily trials and tribulations, while also providing the strength to impact social, cultural, and political change (Agyepong, 2011).  This empowerment drives Black women to object to the injustices of a racialized and male-dominated society.  It also permits them to come together and maintain a sense of community, build self-esteem, increase the quality of life, and encourage resilience because of shared experiences of marginalization and a history of oppression (Agyepong, 2011; Banerjee & Canda, 2009; Giddings, 1984).  Black women lean on their spirituality not only to supply them the fortitude to encounter the daily struggles of racism, classism, and gender discrimination (Agyepong, 2011), but also to help them cope with issues of poverty, privilege, work, welfare, and welfare reform (Banerjee & Canda, 2009).  This fortitude is what Bobb-Smith (2007) signifies as "the creation of soul culture" (p. 58); in this culture a "child of God" is created, which provides the authority to transform beyond the boundaries forced by the daily struggles of racism, classism, gender discrimination, and ethnic biases.

Self-reflection for many women is a part of their spirituality as Banks-Wallace and Parks (2004) have found.  Some of the women in their study reflected on God and the journey through life as they discussed experiences of sexual abuse at the hands of fathers, husbands, brothers-in-law, mothers, and sisters.  Banks-Wallace and Parks (2004) disclose how the Black women in the

study were conflicted as some of these women perceived the abuse and forgiveness as a source

of strength and some said that leaving the relationship would be similar to breaking the covenant

with God.  Nonetheless, as they developed relationships with older women in the church who

shared their wisdom, developed a deeper relationship with God, and began to grow spiritually,

they began to develop a different self-perception about domestic violence, which assisted in their

journey to healing.  The Black women in the study also associated healing from troublesome

childhoods and easing the worry about being a good parent to their spiritual growth.  Y. J. Harris

(2013) notes the significance of the Banks-Wallace and Parks (2004) study is that "it points to

the syncretic beliefs in African American culture and reveal, even if implicitly the same

complexities that exists in identity" (Y. J. Harris, 2013, p. 41).

Through womanism, Black women are given the framework to explore and express their

spirituality beyond the demarcation of slavery.  Womanism highlights freedom from oppression

for optimal health for the person and community (Musgrave et al., 2002).  For Black women to

gain control and restructure the narrative, they can establish wholesome relationships within the

church, the family, and the community.

## Black Women's Sexuality

My being is gendered; I am unapologetically woman.
My soul is raced, that reality I can't escape.
My body transforms…infant, youth, young adult,
*Sexual*
Woman. Aged. Old
*Asexual,*
Older. Seasoned.
*Forgotten.*
          McClish (2018)

To understand Black women's sexual pasts, one must understand the cultural context.

Culture is very influential to the impact and construction of perceptions and attitudes regarding

sex (Ahmed & Bhugra, 2007), and understanding factors that influence Black women's sexual

practice is vital (Brown, Webb-Bradley, Cobb, Spaw, & Aldridge, 2014). To define culture,

Ahmed and Bhugra (2007) suggest it is:

> . . . unique behavior, lifestyle, and attitudes which are formed as [a] result of customs, habits, beliefs and values that are common to a group and shape their emotions, behaviors and life patterns; it serves as a core behavior that regulates life. (p. 115)

Simply put, culture is essentially the general guidelines for how a group of people govern

their lives and interact with each other. To further explicate the definition of culture, Anzaldùa

(2015) beautifully describes "cultura" as the "fabric of life that the scissors of previous

generations cut, trimmed, embroidered, embellished, and attached to new quilt pieces, but it is a

cloth that the wash of time discolors, blends the dyes, and applies new tint" (p. 85). In

Anzaldúa's definition, culture is built upon and interwoven in the experiences and wisdom of

ancestors and elders. These definitions of culture, eloquently denote the interwoven aspects of

the influences of previous generations, behaviors, attitudes, and values and how they shape the

very fabric of society and every being. Acknowledging the historical, cultural, and structural

influences of Black people is paramount in understanding how attitudes regarding sex are

formed. Fundamentally, culture is "the story of group identity (. . .) and its ideas about what is

real, [. . . that] are rooted in patterns of the past, [. . . and] co-created by previous generations, it

is a social system that is difficult and slow to change" (Anzaldùa, 2015, p. 85), but necessary for

understanding one's existence. Culture shapes a person's being and influences their thoughts,

actions, and worldview. Importantly, cultural is influenced by all of the good and the bad, the

pain and joy, and the triumphs and breakdowns as generations evolve. As generations evolve,

the beliefs and attitudes also develop and advance, but the influences of the past will always be

present.

The sexual identities of Black people were in existence before slavery. Scholars such as Amadiume (1987), Arnfred (2005), Giddings (1984), Robertson (1996), and Wyatt (1997) posit that the sexual history of Black women has been characterized by others who are uninformed of the experiences of Black women. They continue that historical accounts often begin with slavery and women of color being disparaged from the beginning, but rarely are the accounts of Black ancestors as free people recounted. These scholars contributed to the reframing of history by beginning the story, especially Black women's sexuality, at a time when Black bodies and Black sexuality was sacred.

Generally, in African societies, sex was regarded as sacred and vital to their existence, and the chastity of girls was consequential (Wyatt, 1997). Arnfred (2005) and Wyatt (1997) note that although premarital sex was inhibited by many African societies, having a child out of wedlock was utterly forbidden and morally wrong. They continue to disclose that mothers were under great scrutiny while their young daughters were maturing into womanhood because if the young woman became pregnant out of wedlock (since there were no contraception devices), the mothers were often blamed for not warning and preparing the young woman for the consequences of sex. Because of this, the mother would tell stories of wild men roaming the streets trying to catch and rape young girls, or that simply seeing a penis would get the girls pregnant, to deter girls from engaging in sexual acts (Amadiume, 1987). Culturally, these stories were influential in the development of sexual identity; historically, the expectations of young girls were passed through these stories.

Because chastity was highly regarded, the consequences were severe. Amadiume (1987) records that for some African societies, the ramifications for engaging in sex before marriage resulted in a beating or putting hot peppers in the vagina. Moreover, the consequences of having

a child out of wedlock held the father of the child financially accountable, and it brought shame to the family and the girl (Amadiume, 1987). Therefore, girls were taught to respect their body or shame and punishment would ensue.

The expectations of womanhood were taught to young girls so when they reached the coming of age stage, they were prepared for the roles they would assume (Wyatt, 1997). As these girls prepared to become women, different practices varying by society were customary. For example, some girls were simply taught through oral histories, whereas others were fitted with waist beads and charms to show that they were off-limits until marriage, and still others endured female circumcision as a traditional ritual (Amadiume, 1987; Arnfred, 2005; Wyatt, 1997). Rituals were educational, as they introduced young women to matters of sex, marriage, procreation, and family life. Although information regarding sex was often the truth, myths and tales were also passed down from peers (Mbiti, 1989). While some customs are deemed heinous and cruel, the point being is that African women from a young age were taught and understood the expectations and their roles as women; as a result of the teachings they knew they were valued and revered (Wyatt, 1997).

The community is also essential to the union, in rearing children, and uplifting families. The African proverb, "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" illustrates how important community is to individual identity (Mbiti, 1989). Scholars such as Mbiti (1989) and Wyatt (1997) describe how important marriage is for African people. They describe marriage as the reason for existence and that marriage and procreation go hand in hand. Without procreating, the marriage is incomplete. Understanding the high regard marriage and family have in African cultures sheds light on some customs such as giving the bride presents, polygamy, inheriting the wives of the deceased brother, and arranged marriages (Mbiti, 1989). Marriage for a woman

enhances her identity as she connects to a man that is in turn connected to a family, whereas the family is respected by the tribe. Being connected to a tribe has benefits such as elder women passing on the wisdom of keeping house, preparing and planning for children, and extended familial support in raising and teaching children (Wyatt, 1997). The village and the members of the tribe are essential to the success of the families and the children's development overall.

Boundaries were generally ordinary for African people regarding sexual contact. In some tribes, only after the husband was gone for a long time or deemed infertile would his brother, or a family friend, be permitted to perform sexually with his wife, but only for procreation. There were boundaries between the father-child and mother-child relationships as well, and incest, rape, bestiality, and homosexuality were forbidden. The family was a sacred product of marriage, and sex was obligatory for procreation. Also, modesty and privacy were continually revered. For example, the rear ends and genitals were covered and private, but breasts were regarded as a symbol of life and for nursing babies, not as sexual objects. As a result, the breasts were not covered the same way as other body parts.

The introduction of slavery took sex out of its cultural and natural context for African people. Since the general sexual practices of Africans were not understood and based on the white standard, they were deemed as corrupt (Wyatt, 1997). This provided additional validation to institutionalize Black individuals because they were demarcated as savages (C. West, 2001). Black individuals and families have been unfairly and carelessly judged and depicted as deviant and unfit because they were refereed against a "normalized" standard of middle-class whites (Agyepong, 2011; Allen & Helm, 2013; Dyson, 2003). Researchers D'Emilio and Freedman (2013) describe this as the "American family-centered reproductive system" (p. 88) because sex was for procreation and advancing the ideal "American family" where the "American family"

adheres to traditional white customs and cultural norms. From this notion, white people and

white families were romanticized and perceived as greater, superior, and normal, while Black

people and Black families were considered lesser and only fit to serve those that were superior

(Hine & Thompson, 1998). This matters in part because the cultural influences that extend

generations and are passed down have evolved from this deficit narrative. Furthermore, when

pitted against the other, the stereotypes and appraisals continually find Black people, especially

women, wanting because the cultural context for valuation is unfitting.

The evolution of the way families and relationships were viewed did more than elevate

how sexuality was perceived; it propelled the social hierarchies of race, class, and gender that

were already in place and justified slavery (Giddings, 1984; Marable, 2001; Wyatt, 1997). As a

slave, there were no personal rights, including the rights of the body, privacy, and modesty.

Therefore, Black women were devalued and degraded, and stereotypes, which suggested that

Black women were negligible, immoral, loose, (Giddings, 1984; Hine & Thompson, 1998;

Wyatt, 1997) and "depletable commod[ities]" (Crenshaw, 2014, p. 255) progressed. In their

depiction, D'Emilio and Freedman (2013) describe how this behavior has translated through the

generations by stating:

> White, middle-class women have been encouraged to bear children; African American,
> Native America, and Mexican American women, and the poor generally have faced
> greater social stigma for bearing children outside of marriage and greater risk of
> sterilization without informed consent. (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2013, p. 90)

This statement depicts the shame that was placed on women of color, regardless of their

circumstances and it also demonstrates the limited rights women of color especially had

concerning their bodies and sexual reproduction. C. West (2001) advocates that Black women

are affected differently due to the patriarchal nature of the American society. While Black

women are seen as sexually desirable because of the myths associated with their sexuality

(exotic, promiscuous, and licentious), they are still pitted against what is considered classic beauty—white women—and unlike Black men, Black women are not regarded as sexually desirable—white women are because of the standard rule of beauty. That standard of beauty being equated to lighter skin and softer features, none of which are equated to Black women, creates more layers of racism and sexism for Black women than that of Black men and white counterparts. All of this results in mental, emotional, social, and spiritual exhaustion from battling negative images, while carrying the burden of being a mother, sister, friend, lover, supporter, and more in the Black community, all unnoticed by many Black men and most of (US) America (C. West, 2001). Judgments such as these helped propel the social hierarchies that were already in place and further limited private behavior and procreation; it also forced women to negotiate their sexual selves. The infamous Moynihan (1965) report is an example of unjustifiably depicting Black families as unstable and pathological, without attending to cultural, social institutions and structures that influence the formation and maintenance of Black relationships (Allen & Helm, 2013).

Negative images and stereotypes have greatly impacted the Black woman. Images that perpetuate these deviant stereotypes, such as welfare mother, gold digger, hussy, and the like, continue to sexually exploit and damage the self-concept of Black women and the value they place on their sexuality (Collins, 2000). C. West (2001) explains that the events of the Civil Rights era and those leading up to it provided easier contact and access to Black bodies, but it did not rectify or demystify the myths associated with Black sexuality, not only for whites but also for Black people. These myths and messages which are used to detest the Black body— including the messages about voluptuous lips, hips, and curves; the wide noses; and the big, fluffy, kinky-coily textured hair—perpetuate Black self-denigration and within group loathing.

57

Scholars such as Collins (2000) and Eugene (1994) posit that these negative concepts and pervasive images allowed confusion to creep in the minds of Black women. On the one hand, they are taught chastity, but on the other alleged as promiscuous, immoral, and disposable, thereby creating an internal conflict of whether to deny being a sexual being and denounce sexual pleasure or live up to the social constructions of being promiscuous and disparaged (Collins, 2000; Eugene, 1994). This "double jeopardy" (Beale, 1995, p. 386), to be Black and female, greatly obstructed Black women's sexual expression and continued to make the sexuality of Black women a taboo subject, silenced their power and continued to give power to men and to whites, and perpetuated the dominant myths in our society (C. West, 2001).

These negative images and stereotypes also affect the research regarding Black women and sexuality. In Blair's (2014) study of Black women's sex work, she exposes many of the challenges researchers and writers face when dissecting the intersecting lives of Black women by peering in to view the politics and the interpretation of Black sex in (US) American culture and history. Several significant topics are highlighted in the study regarding Black sexuality to include: criminalization and regulation of Black women's reproduction (Sollinger, 1992, 2002); the use of sexual violence on Black women (Feimster, 2011; Rosen, 2008), forced sterilization of Black women (Roberts, 1998), Black urban sexuality viewed as pathological and criminal (Heap, 2009; Hicks, 2010), the use of lynching as a weapon of racial terror against Black communities (Markovitz, 2004), and images of hypersexualized Black men as rapists (Hodes, 1999; Sommerville, 2004). By using this foundational research, Blair (2014) examines her work as a researcher of Black women's sexuality and challenges other researchers to recognize and explore the range of experiences that Black women have encountered. Doing this helps uncover the

limits of the researchers' understanding so they can hear the inaudible stories and read between the lines to understand Black women's sexual pasts (Blair, 2014).

### The Black Church and Sexuality

In general, for most Black churches, abstinence until marriage was expected not only because it was encouraged biblically, but because Black folks, especially the working class and poor, wanted to survive in (US) America, be held in high esteem, and be respected by whites; the opposition of the Black body and Black sexuality was thought to do that (T. W. Harris, 2015; Higginbotham, 1993; C. West, 2001). Therefore, discussions of sex and sexuality were kept to messages of abstinence. Douglas (2003) and Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) extend the reasons to reveal that because of the (mis)representation of Black people as hypersexual, ignorant, and lesser than during slavery, the Black church tried to change the narrative; and in doing so held a definite position about contraception, premarital sex, abortion, homosexuality, affairs, prostitution, and children born out of wedlock. C. West (2001) maintains that Black institutions fought against white supremacist views and empowered families (women, men, and children of color) to love one another and keep fighting for each other, but Black institutions such as churches, schools, and families, did not address the fundamental issues of Black sexuality and disavowed the places where Black sexuality was prevalent and accepted, such as nightclubs and in the streets. C. West (1993) confers the reluctance of some Black establishments to discuss sex and sexuality:

> But these grand yet flawed black institutions refused to engage one fundamental issue: black sexuality . . . Why was this so? Primarily because these black institutions put a premium on black survival in America. And black survival required accommodation with and acceptance from white America. Accommodation avoids any sustained association with the subversive and transgressive-be it communism or miscegenation . . . And acceptance meant that only "good" negroes would thrive- especially those who left black sexuality at the door when they "entered" and "arrived". In short, struggling black institutions made a Faustian pact with white America: avoid any substantive engagement

with black sexuality and your survival on the margins of American society is, at least, possible. (p. 86)

Henceforth, those who fit the deviant stereotypes would be questioned or rejected by the Black community, especially the Black church (Cohen, 1999). A. Harris (2015) notes that this posture of dogmatism is how Cohen (1999) describes those who are previewed as sexually deviant (prostitutes and homosexuals) being shunned by Black communities and Black churches.

The Black church has served in many capacities for the Black community. Many Black churches are the spiritual foundation; a community center; a place for social and emotional support, counseling; and a place for the sick (Banerjee & Canda, 2009; A. Harris, 2015; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). It has become the charge of the church to fulfill all of these roles and importantly care for the community in a time of need and illness, but as A. Harris (2015) notes, the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Black communities challenged the Black churches to deal with conflicting morals of supporting those most in need and adhering to conventional beliefs that were highly regarded in the church. Cuffee (2006) posits that there is a responsibility of the church to recognize the moral urgency of the times and to engage in conversation, thereby empowering the Black community to practice sound moral judgment and not to evade the cries of the Black people. McBride (2005) takes issue with the term "Black community" and argues that commentary on the "Black community" assumes a generality for Black people and their concerns, but the "Black community" does not encompass all that are Black, meaning that within the Black community, there are many versions depending on the subject and the qualifier, and oftentimes, it is gays and lesbians that are not included in what it is meant by the "Black community." Cohen (1999) contends that ostensibly AIDS was brought to the Black communities by "black gay men, black men who have sex with men, black injection drug users and their sexual partners-groups we are accustomed to ignoring" (p. xi) and the Black church has

been absent or very slow to respond to the AIDS crises in the Black community. When the

Black church did respond, the response was generally negative because of the belief that

homosexuality and drug use were immoral and sins, and the only way to be accepted into the

Black church and the Black community was to repent of the sins (Cohen, 1999). Douglas (1999)

cites Reverend Kwabena Rainey Cheeks, an HIV positive pastor, for the reason why the Black

church has been slow to acknowledge AIDS in the community. Cheeks declared, "When you

deal with AIDS you have to deal with all of the issues, all the isms of [the Black] community . . .

You can't touch AIDS and not deal with homophobia" (Douglas, 1999, p. 3). Nevertheless,

AIDS is rampant in the Black community, and the Black church has been slow to provide

education and outreach (Douglas, 1999). The Black church is perceived as a pillar of the Black

community. The Black church serves as many things to many people, it brings people together,

serves as a refuge for the displaced and a comforter for those downtrodden. The importance of

the Black church in the Black community cannot be overstated, but as it has been documented, it

has not fulfilled its mission in serving all of the Black community, leaving many to fend from

themselves and feel rejected by their own.

Because sex and sexuality are generally not topics often discussed in the Black church or

community (Newman, 2002), Black women generally have less sex education than their white

counterparts and are often told to not have sex, instead of being able to learn about healthy

sexual concepts and the options related to having sex and engaging in healthy relationships

(Campbell, 1989). Single, Black churchwomen often hear the familiar phrase, "God will be your

husband" as an answer to what sex and sexuality should mean for the adult, single, Black woman

without acknowledging the components of basic human nature and the desire for companionship.

Furthermore, this approach also disregards the need for education on engaging in healthy sexual

relationships.  The topic of same-sex relationships has spurred conversations about sex and

sexuality.  Cuffee (2006) reveals three ways Black churchwomen have found the topic of same-

sex relationships to help them reflect on their sexual morals, which include:

> (a) [helps] to liberate their sexual agency from the frustrating conservatism of evangelical
> and biblical traditions,
> (b) [allows them] to make different moral choices about their bodies, sexual pleasure and
> sexual partners, and
> (c) [authorizes them] to still embrace their spiritual identity. (Cuffee, 2006, p. 47)

This approach has empowered Black churchwomen to know they have options and can make the

moral decisions related to their sexuality.

Sexuality and spirituality are oftentimes regarded as separate and unconnected, but

Anzaldùa (2015) describes an interconnectedness as a "plurality of souls" (p. 50), which

heightens the awareness of differing points of view and allows one to find meaning all around.

The interconnectedness of spirituality and sexuality exemplifies the womanist framework as it

posits a human-to-human connection for the survival of all people and a connection to the divine

or spiritual realm.  The symbolic nature of recognizing the interconnectedness of one's

spirituality and sexuality can lead to a transformation in perception and self and help expose

alternative facts, thereby leaning toward a more holistic lifestyle (Davis-Carroll, 2011).  As one

learns and grows, their identity evolves, and there is a constant reinvention of self.  There is a

transformation in thinking and being.  Anzaldùa (2015) speaks about this transformation taking

place through art, being able to "reread, reinterpret, re-envision, and reconstruct her culture's

present, as well as its past" (p. 60), but the same sentiment could be applied to a person seeing

themselves as the art(ist) and reconstructing the past and the present representation of their

culture.  Essentially, this is reclaiming the cultural and historical stories (Anzaldùa, 2015) to tell

a different story and provide a narrative based on strengths rather than accepting the dominant

narrative.

## Informal Learning

Learning happens in various ways and many different contexts.  This section briefly

describes the differences between formal education, non-formal education, and informal

learning.  The general definition of formal education also termed formal learning (see English,

2005b) refers to education or learning that is officially recognized and takes place in an

institution with a set curriculum (English, 2005b; Livingstone, 2001; Schugurensky, 2000).

Schugurensky (2000) describes formal education as prescribed education usually from preschool

to graduate studies to comprise the following features:

> 1) it is highly institutionalized;
> 2) it includes a period called 'basic education' (which varies from country to country, and usually ranges from 6 to 12 years) which is compulsory, implements a prescribed curriculum—approved by the state—with explicit goals and evaluation mechanisms, hires certified teachers, and institutional activities are highly regulated by the state;
> 3) it is propaedeutic in nature (in the sense that each level prepares learners for the next one, and that to enter into a certain level, it is a prerequisite to satisfactorily complete the previous level);
> 4) it is a hierarchical system, usually with ministries of education at the top and students at the bottom;
> 5) at the end of each level and grade, graduates are granted a diploma or certificate that allows them to be accepted into the next grade or level, or into the formal labor market. (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 1)

As described above, formal learning is a component of formalized education in the sense that

within a structured hierarchical system or the environment, a teacher, trainer, or instructor

disseminates information, including an evaluative method or component.

Non-formal education lies on the continuum between formal and informal learning.  Non-

formal education is defined as semi-structured learning and educational activities that happen

outside of the formal school system (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974; La Bell, 1982; Merriam &

Bierema, 2014).  These activities may include painting classes, driving lessons, music lessons,

training programs, and workshops.  Other features of non-formal education include programs

that may be flexible, typically do not require prior experience, and are short-term and voluntary

(English, 2005b; Schugurensky, 2000).

A universal consensus has not been reached regarding the definition of informal learning,

as there are numerous variations of the term (Coombs, 1985; Merriam & Bierema, 2014), but the

consensus is that learning happens on a spectrum, with most of the learning occurring

imperceptibly (English, 2005b).  Some of the various definitions of informal learning include the

"acquisition of new knowledge, understanding, skills or attitudes, which people do on their own

and which has not been planned or organized in formal settings such as schools, colleges, and

universities" (English, 2005b, p. 310).  Boeren (2011) describes informal learning as incidental

and unorganized.  It is the learning that does not take place in an organized setting.  Callanan et

al. (2011) identify that informal learning "includes a focus on the person, ties learning to specific

'real-life' activities, and has no goal of generalizing the information learned" (p. 646).

Additional tenets of informal learning distinguish it from formal learning and encompass the

following features:

> 1) the extent to which learning is the result of didactic teaching,
> 2) the extent to which learning is socially collaborative,
> 3) its embeddedness in meaningful activity,
> 4) whether it is initiated by learner's interest or choice, and
> 5) the relative presence or absence of external assessment with important consequences.
> (Callanan et al., 2011, p. 646)

These elements of informal learning were generally found in the literature reviewed and

demonstrate the spectrum that learning occurs.

Informal learning subsequently is reported to encompass the other dimensions that formal

and non-formal education disregard, which broaden the spectrum of informal learning.  Because

informal learning is broad, Schugurensky (2000) proposes separating informal learning into "two main categories—intentionality and consciousness" with "three types—self-directed learning, incidental learning, and socialization" (p. 2). Figure 1 demonstrates how Schugurensky (2000, p. 3) classified the three types of informal learning related to intentionality and awareness at the time of learning.

| Form | Intentionality | Awareness (at the time of learning experience) |
|---|---|---|
| Self-directed | yes | yes |
| Incidental | no | yes |
| Socialization | no | no |

*Figure 1.* Schugurensky's three types of informal learning.

Under this classification, "self-directed learning refers to 'learning projects' undertaken by individuals (alone or as part of a group), without the assistance of a 'resources person' who does not regard herself or himself as an educator" (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 3), thus making learning intentional and conscious. Incidental learning therein "refers to learning experiences that occur when the learner did not have any previous intention of learning something out of that experience, but after the experience, she or he becomes aware that some learning has taken place" (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 3), thus making learning unintentional, but conscious. Lastly, socialization, which is also referred to as tacit knowledge, "refers to the internalization of values, attitudes, behaviors, skills, etc. that occur during everyday life" (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 3), making this type of learning unconscious and unintentional. As a concluding thought, Schugurensky (2000) acknowledges that a fourth type of learning could be added to the other three, one that characterizes an intentional, but unconscious learning, but could not be conceptualized.

The fourth type of learning Schugurensky (2000) mentions but does not intellectualize manifests in Bennett's (2012) model.  Bennett (2012) extends Schugurensky's (2000) model of informal adult learning to include another domain termed "integrative learning," which reconceptualizes informal adult learning.  In this model, integrative learning is presented to attend to the nonconscious but intentional aspect of learning.  It is defined as "a learning process that combines intentional nonconscious processing of tacit knowledge with conscious access to learning products and mental images" (Bennett, 2012, p. 28).  In other words, the use of the senses and instinct encourages learning.  Bennett offers that this integrative learning lends to understanding, creativity, and moments of clarity and often happens when a person turns away from a problem, and when the mind is preoccupied with other tasks or thoughts.  For example, when there is a mental block, K. Bhattacharya (personal communication, September 6, 2016) suggests graduate students take a walk, draw a bath, or read something fun to give the mind a break and a chance to fill the gap in learning.  Bennett (2012) also suggests taking naps or during new experiences, one trust intuition to activate the integrative learning.  There are two sub-processes to integrative learning: phase shifting and sublimation (Bennett, 2015).  Phase shifting is when one can express how learning occurred, there is a conscious understanding of the words, images, and ideas, which were used to analyze the problem and come to a solution.  Moreover, sublimation is when one becomes aware of understanding or learning without realizing the steps it took to come to that realization (Bennett, 2015).

In reviewing Schugurensky's (2000) model, Bennett (2012) agrees with the self-directed and incidental learning components of Schugurensky's model of informal adult learning, but contends that the tacit and nonconscious component needs clarification.  Figure 2 is a visual of the model Bennet produced.
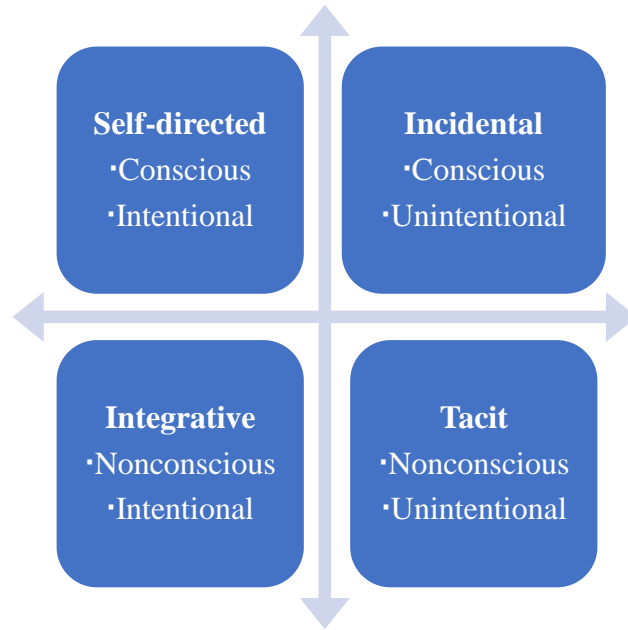
*Figure 2.* Bennett's Model of Informal Learning.

Bennett's (2012) model of informal learning illustrates how the tacit, nonconscious components are extended. In the reconceptualization above, Bennett modifies "socialization" to impart "tacit" learning "to capture the nonconscious and unintentional learning that occurs when an adult learns on his or her own, as well as that which is learned socially" (Bennett, 2012, p. 27). It is the learning that is understood or implied without being stated. Also included is the integrative learning component, the fourth part that Schugurensky (2000) acknowledges, but did not construct.

Informal learning has been situated in the literature from various perspectives. It has been seen in the workplace, labor, and job market settings (see Cameron & Harrison, 2012; Nancherla, 2009); in technology, digital literacy, and social media (see Heo & Lee, 2013; Mills, Knezek, & Khaddage, 2014); within ethnic identity and social justice (see Chevalier, 1995; Sandu, 2013; Scribner & Cole, 1973; Shin, 2011); with young children and adolescents (see Overwien, 2000; White, Hailemariam, & Ogbay, 2013); within the family setting (see Riedinger,

2012; Snežana, 2010); in human resource development and professional settings (see Bednall, Sanders, & Runhaar, 2014; Plachuta, 2016); and related to spirituality (see Cook, 2013; Dillard, 2012; English, 2000, 2005a). Other relevant examples of informal learning in the literature include work by Callanan et al. (2011) in which they provide a brief literature review on informal learning reviewing the domains of learning a first language, learning about the mind and emotions within families and communities, and learning about science in family conversations and museum settings. In their study, they present examples of informal learning in each of the contexts and offer that informal learning is highly social and cultural and seen in various forms of conversation, interaction, and activity.

Communication as informal learning has been studied from various perspectives. Baumgartner (2014) studied Black women with HIV/AIDS and noted that generally, these women knew the risks for contracting the disease; however, they engaged in risky practices, as they did not believe negative consequences would occur because they believed in fatalism—that a higher power would protect them. Baumgartner (2014) found that, in general, this type of optimism was a mechanism low-income Black woman used. The Black women in Baumgardner's study reported that they learned about HIV/AIDS through conversations with others (doctors, peers, caseworkers), peer learning and hearing others' stories, magazines, the internet, and other forms of informal and self-directed learning (Baumgartner, 2014). Steptoe (2011), in her dissertation, uses an informal learning lens to view Black women's communication on Kinks.com, an online community for women of color to discuss and learn various aspects related to natural hair.

Literature also reveals that indigenous knowledge or practices have elements of informal learning incorporated. To demonstrate, Boucouvalas and Lawrence (2010) present indigenous

knowledge to "refer to knowledge that is local, organic, rooted in a particular culture, and passed on to future generations through an oral tradition" (p. 42). This indigenous knowledge has elements of informal learning, as it generally incorporates indigenous practices that integrate learning from nature, animals, and others (Anzaldùa, 2015). For example, these indigenous practices generate indigenous knowledge in Alaskan Native people, the Yup'iks, who offer thanks to nature for the resources and continued supplements through praise and gifts (Boucouvalas & Lawrence, 2010). Furthermore, Avoseh (2011) reviews indigenous African education and presents elements of informal and lifelong learning as seen in the community of learners. He posits that generally, African education is different from the educational practices of many Western cultures for the reason that there is a holistic view of the world from the African perspective where "everything flows into everything else just as everyone exists because of everyone else in the family and community" (Avoseh, 2011, p. 36). This holistic perspective unites the community and admonishes the responsibility to each other. He expresses that in African culture, everyone has an obligation toward the community and while learning and teachable moments are often informal, they do not happen randomly; they happen within the home, community, and institutions. What's more, Boucouvalas and Lawrence (2010) and Avoseh (2011) note that many indigenous cultures have several commonalities that exist in traditions such as "valuing collectivism, community, interdependence, harmony with nature, balance, and the wisdom of elders" (Avoseh, 2011, p. 42) that are essential principles. Similar to the African cultures, many Black Americans incorporate and value family, community, and ancestral knowledge as a form of learning. For example, many Black families celebrate and base educational methods from the seven principles of Kwanzaa, which is rooted in traditions of indigenous African people. Additionally, much of the learning that occurs in indigenous cultures

is through "storytelling, myths, dreams and visions, art, rituals, and ceremony" (Avoseh, 2011, p. 42), which are incorporated into many of the beliefs and traditions.  For Valerio (2015), it was the awareness that she did not realize she was Indian when her relatives told her that she was, because Indians were bad guys on T.V.  She did not realize she was Indian until much later, as she asserts:

> It's in my blood, my face, my mother's voice. It's in my voice, my speech rhythms, my dreams, and memories. It's the shape of my legs, and though I am light skinned, it is features—my eyes and face shape. (p. 37)

It's all of these things that helped her realize and appreciate her heritage.

As a final point, learning is connected to womanism.  Etienne (2016) displays narratives of older African Caribbean women who landed in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s searching for a more fulfilling life.  In a search to understand their motivation for learning and continuing on the journey to lifelong learning, Etienne explores their social interactions and informal learning practices through interviews to demonstrate how these women's lives have been enriched. What's more, instead of presenting the narratives from a deficit in which health, poverty, and isolation are at the forefront, she offers their stories through active citizenship and lifelong learning, while revealing the socio-cultural characteristics of the older, African Caribbean, women.  In sum, womanism would posit that Black women's learning would encompass elements of friendship, love, justice, laughter, and purpose.  The stories that reveal the informal ways of learning might include public and private shame, experiences of loss and humiliation, but also a challenge to build a better family, a better community, and better people; in that fashion, an example of many of these elements have been presented.

**Summary**

Feminism, Black feminism, and womanism set the stage to understand the importance of Black women's narratives and the relationship among spirituality, sexuality, and informal learning for many Black women.  Many Black women's narratives about their sexuality and how they have come to understand themselves as sexual beings are deeply influenced by religion, spirituality, and the Black church; therefore, a review of the intersections of the Black church, Black women's spirituality, and Black women's sexuality are outlined.  These interwoven aspects validate the use of womanism and Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry.  The next chapter discusses the research methodology that informed this study.

# Chapter 3 - We'll Understand it Better By and By

In this chapter, I present the premises and procedures of Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry used to explore older Black women's experiences with sexuality, spirituality, and informal learning environments.  I begin this chapter with a brief overview of qualitative inquiry and narrative analysis, incorporating examples of narrative research by Black women scholars.  Second, I describe the key tenets of womanism and the way they informed the study as a framework.  Next, I offer a framework informed by the structures seen in Black women's novels for understanding how Black women's lives are storied.  Finally, I describe the research design to include how I conducted the study, i.e., collected, analyzed, and represent data.  I also discuss issues about academic rigor and trustworthiness of this study.

Recall the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of how two Black women born between 1946 and 1964 discuss their sexuality in relation to their understanding of spirituality and informal learning.  The following research questions informed this study:

1. What are the ways in which the participants describe their sexuality?

2. What are the ways in which the participants describe their spirituality?

3. In what ways, if any, do the participants relate their sexuality with their spirituality?

4. In what ways, if any, do the participants attribute informal learning experiences to their sexuality as informed by their spirituality?

## Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative research is a post-positivist view of the world and science.  Simply put, unlike quantitative researchers, which revere quantifying constructs in measurable units and the ability to predict and control relationships between the researchers and participants, as well as their

subjectivities (Tolman & Miller, 2001), qualitative researchers believe there is no infallible truth and that there is a reality outside of numbers and facts.  Qualitative researchers look to study events that are relevant to daily life (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Qualitative research is a method of inquiry in which the researcher seeks to gather an in-depth understanding of human behavior such as one's beliefs, experiences, and perceptions. Thus, one's reality is subjective and dependent on the person reading or interpreting the work (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004).  Qualitative inquiry is used when one wants to understand a phenomenon, event, situation, or lived experience in the context in which it exists, essentially constructing narratives that emerge out of in-depth understanding of the participants' storied lives.

Because qualitative inquiry can have a creative approach, the study can lead to experiences expected and unexpected, pleasant and unpleasant.  There is a constant process of negotiating the research and growing perspectives of the data wherein a researcher has to constantly reassess and revisit the data collected and analyzed and their subjectivities (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004).  Qualitative inquiry lends itself to the researcher and participant developing a less formal relationship and affords the participants to share their experiences and make meaning of their interactions with other people, situations, environments and their lived realities (Saldaña, 2016).

This study is grounded in qualitative inquiry because this approach allowed the researcher to explore and understand beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions to better understand a phenomenon (Pathak, Jena, & Kalra, 2013) as well as to attempt to systematically inquire about an in-depth nature of the human experience within the context in which the experience occurs (Bhattacharya, 2017a).  While this is the traditional goal of

qualitative research, please note that in actuality, the study was messy, non-linear, and perhaps less systematic than desired. However, I documented to the best of my ability the ways in which the study was designed and executed. The value of qualitative research for this study was the in-depth exploration of the ways in which Black women have understood spirituality and their informal learning experiences to influence their sexuality.

## Frameworks Influencing Methodology

The frameworks that informed this study methodologically were womanism, narrative inquiry, and Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry, constructed from the narrative structures of Black women's novels. In this section, I explain each of these frameworks in detail.

### Womanism

When the process of legitimizing knowledge is dominated by a certain group, the knowledge of the marginalized group(s) is devalued and diminished (Collins, 2000). For example, white researchers have dominated and (mis)appropriated research about Black women, resulting in Black women's narratives being undermined and oppressed (Collins, 2000; McNickles, 2009). Therefore, the womanist framework provides a legitimate space for Black women scholars to discuss the intersecting lives of Black women from social, cultural, and historical perspectives (Cannon, 1995; Harvey, Johnson, & Heath, 2013).

In Chapter 2, the Journey to Womanism described the establishment of womanism by way of feminism and Black feminism. The womanist framework was developed by Black women for Black women to assert the feminine Black worldview. Within the Black feminist worldview, Collins (2000) classifies two crucial relationships for Black women: (a) relationships with one another and (b) relationships with formal and public spaces, such as Black churches or Black women's organizations. In this inference, Collins suggests relationships between Black

women create energy and power by "passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women" (Collins, 2000, p. 102). Womanism also unapologetically focuses on Black women's experiences while integrating relationships, spirituality, and experiences of oppression and survival. Layli Maparyan (formerly Layli Phillips) explains womanism being connected to spirituality, recognizing the divine and sacred nature of all living and non-human things (Phillips, 2006). In her definition of womanism, Maparyan states:

> A social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of colors everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem-solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment or nature and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. (Phillips, 2006, p. xx)

With this definition, Maparyan offers three domains of womanism that center on the survival of Black people, while specifically being focused on the experiences of Black women and women of color. Those domains include (a) human-to-human relationships to reduce conflict and increase peace; (b) environmentalism–the relationship between humans and nature; and (c) the relationship between the human being and the non-material, spiritual, or transcendental realm (Phillips, 2006). Maparyan asserts that the womanist framework places these elements as inseparable, meaning that each domain has to be attended to and then addressed as a whole in order to address the challenges faced by women due to social structures of oppression and associated social change (Phillips, 2006). For this study, these domains are relevant because the human-to-human relationship was explored as the older Black women reflected on the integral relationships that shaped their sexual and spiritual perceptions. Additionally, the informal learning experiences may be attributed to learning in relationship with others. For this study, with regard to the environmentalism, I expanded the understanding of environment to include informal learning environments and environments within which the participants' lived

experiences occurred.  The relationships between human beings and the non-material or spiritual realm is the core topic of inquiry.  Through the research questions, the older Black women described their spirituality, related their sexuality to their spirituality, and described how their informal learning experiences attributed to their sexuality.  Thus, the inquiry into the participants' experiences within these domains is interconnected and inseparable, too.  Sheared (1994) describes the interconnection of the domains of womanism as a triangle where race, class, and gender are interwoven, demonstrating the reality that "although [the woman's] experiences are grounded in this experience, her reality is shaped by others" (p. 30).  In other words, a participant might have an understanding about relationships because of her upbringing and lessons in the church, but she is also shaped by other influences such as peers, siblings, and other environmental aspects, which has taught her what is appropriate or inappropriate.  For this study, womanism and womanist inquiry referred, in a manner, to the collective body of literature consistent with Maparyan's definition.  Thus, the design and the execution of the study were influenced by the need to explore women's relationships and environments in which women learned about sexuality and spirituality and the ways in which they navigated various oppressive terrain to inform their sexual and spiritual relationships as older Black women.

### Narrative Inquiry

> We are the hyphenated people of the Diaspora whose self-defined identities are no longer shameful secrets in the countries of our origins, but rather declarations of strength and solidarity. We are an increasingly united front from which the world has not yet heard. (Lorde, 1984, p. 4)

This study was grounded in a newly constructed Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry in order to elicit the critical stories that depict the perceptions of Black women.  However, before discussing the newly constructed framework, it is important to situate the discourses of traditional narrative inquiry, which makes way for a culturally responsive methodological

framework. While traditional narrative inquiry has been helpful in various types of qualitative research, it does not offer the nuance and cultural responsiveness to highlight stories of Black women's experiences. For that, a stronger cultural framing of narrative inquiry is needed, which is provided in a later section. In this section, I discuss the foundational concepts and definitions of narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry or storytelling is not new; however, it has gained popularity among researchers in the last few decades within traditional interpretive and critical qualitative research (Plummer, 1995; Riessman, 2008). Traditionally, it has been understood that Bruner (1991), a cognitive psychologist, positions narrative understanding and sought to understand how narrative processing worked. He attributes his views on narrative thought to "those working in the vineyards of narratology" and "to the debates that have been going on among literary theorists" in the past decades (Bruner, 1991, p. 5). He argues that the mind creates its reality through "cultural products, like language and other symbolic systems" (Bruner, 1991, p. 3). Specifically, the cultural product would be narratives and "not how narrative as text is constructed, but rather how it operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality" (Bruner, 1991, p. 6). Additionally, Polkinghorne (1988) questions traditional research methods when working with fellow human beings. Polkinghorne (1988) expresses his distrust and the limitation in the scientific models for research involving humans by stating:

> I do not believe that the solutions to human problems will come from developing even more sophisticated and creative applications of the natural science model, but rather by developing additional, complementary approaches that are especially sensitive to the unique characteristics of human existence. (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. x)

Coupled with this notion, Polkinghorne (1988) examined the way psychotherapists, counselors, and organizational consultants developed ways to understand their clients and found that these practitioners work with narrative knowledge. Understanding this confirmed his initial

assumptions of employing approaches that are complementary and sensitive to the human

existence.  The approach that is complementary and sensitive to existence is narrative inquiry.

Narratives are used to explain why people behave the way they do (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Additionally, narrative inquiry is described by Kim (2016) as "a storytelling methodology

that inquiries into narratives and stories of people's life experiences" (p. 304).  Essentially,

narrative inquiry is used to examine people's histories and tell their stories.  Chase (2018)

submits that narratives are a way to understand one's own or other's actions, meaningful objects,

or events while allowing for one to reflect on feelings, thoughts, and experiences from the past,

present, future, or hypothetically, without limiting the narratives to a specific time.  Because

narratives can be obtained from triangulating sources such as interviews, journals, diaries,

artifact elicitations, music, and other documents, this method is versatile in that whatever the

narrator is comfortable sharing they have the means to do that.

The applicability of narrative inquiry is diverse.  It carves out space for those who are not

a part of the dominant position—those in power, institutions, organizations, and the like—to

evaluate and offer an alternative analysis.  In many instances, social structures of oppression

have been narrativized through experiences of traditionally under-represented individuals

(Cuffee, 2006; Seawood, 2015).  For example, in Black cultures, passing on information or

telling one's story orally is not a new method.  Informally, Black cultures have a long history of

using narratives or storytelling to pass down stories of struggle, oppression, and wisdom

(Amoah, 2013; Collins, 2015).  However, it feels intellectually, philosophically, and spirituality

incongruent to provide a lens of sense-making of Black women's experiences using traditional

narrative inquiry structures since most of those structures were not developed while centering

Black women's storied lives.  Thus, in the next section, I present a culturally situated narrative framework generated from the narrative structures of Black women's novels.

**Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry**

To stay consistent with a Black women's ways of knowing and being, it is imperative that we expand traditional narrative structure to a culturally situated and responsive narrative structure that can be a framework for this study.  Thus, in this section I have explored Black women's writing in novels, novellas, and short stories.  The narrative themes commonly found in the stories of Black women include elements of humor, pain, sadness, family, advice, silence, secrets, and spirituality (God, religion, faith).  I envisioned that much like the characters in Black women's novels, the participants in my study might have shared stories informed by similar emotions and experiences.  Additionally, there are certain empowered and centered Black women archetypes celebrated in Black women's novels.  These archetypes celebrate femininity, motherhood, community, and communal relationships positioning Black women at the center of it.  Therefore, in this study, I could see conversations that take place that highlight maternal relationships such as "mother," "other mother," and/or "village mother."  In the Black community, it is not uncommon to have women play the roles of "mother," "other mother," and "village mother" in the lives of people within the community.  For example, the "mother" being the traditional definition of mother—the one who birthed or raised the person, the "other mother" may be a best friend's mother or an aunt that is as close as a mother, and the "village mother" is the mother to the entire community.  Conversations with maternal figures are sacred and often take place within the kitchen informally as people enter the kitchen from within and outside the house, associated with cooking and sharing food.  Within Black women's writing, these conversations have specific structures and patterns as unpacked below.

Maya Angelou (2008) writes in *Letter to My Daughter:*

I have made many mistakes, and no doubt will make more before I die. When I have seen pain, when I have found that my ineptness has caused displeasure, I have learned to accept my responsibility and to forgive myself first, then to apologize to anyone injured by my misreckoning. Since I cannot unlive history, and repentance is all I can offer God, I have hopes that my sincere apologies were accepted.

You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them. Try to be a rainbow in someone's cloud. Do not complain. Make every effort to change things you do not like. If you cannot make a change, change the way you have been thinking. You may find a new solution. Be certain that you do not die without having done something wonderful for humanity.

. . . I gave birth to one child, a son, but I have thousands of daughters. You are Black and White, Jewish and Muslim, Asian, Spanish-speaking Native American and Aleut. You are fat and thin and pretty and plain, gay and straight, educated and unlettered, and I am speaking to you all. (p. xii)

In the examples, pain and family-based community are demonstrated throughout. In the first paragraph, Angelou discusses failure in relationship with other humans. Also demonstrated is the reflection of relationship and building a spiritual relationship with God with respect to the experiences with other people. The second paragraph demonstrates interaction with one's environment and the various ways of learning that can transpire through difficult experiences. Also detailed in the paragraph is how one might move forward after traversing through hardship and what one might put forward to humanity as a whole. The final paragraph of the passage expresses the elements of "mother," "other mother," and "village mother." Angelou embraces the many daughters she has accepted and is speaking to through her writing; she provides maternal advice and relatability to people through maternal affection, guidance, and advice because she is not the biological mother of all of them.

Another example of relating to Black women's narratives comes from Shange (2010), in which she produced a choreopoem, a play/poetry collection, detailing the interconnected journeys of seven women of color. Each of six women represents the various colors of the rainbow (red, blue, green, etc.) and the seventh woman (lady in brown) symbolizes a Black

woman. The women are referenced as such in the play (lady in red, lady in brown, and so on) to depict the varied experiences of women of color in the US. The journeys of the women encompass elements of adventure, identity, kindness, humor, pain, love and loss, cruelty, spiritual awakening, sexuality, and the strength to endure in spite of and because of the relationships with others. The following are poems that can be found in the play and a brief analysis of how they demonstrate the human-to-human, human-to-spirit, and human-to-environment tenets.

The poem "no assistance" (Shange, 2010) narrates the sacrifices, physically and emotionally, one makes for love. The lady in red addresses "you" as the one she has loved for "eight months, two weeks and a day" with any assistance from "you" (Shange, 2010, p. 28). The lady in red talks about all that she has done from answering calls in the early morning hours to meet "you" and giving gifts. She has finally decided to end the affair and no longer stand in a shadow. This decision results in her figuratively and literally leaving a plant with a note attached that implies she has watered and nurtured it every day since she knew "you" and from now on "you" can water it "yr damn self" (p. 28). The ending of the relationship signifies empowerment, independence, and strength. It also demonstrates the selflessness women often exhibit in relationships and the selfishness needed to recognize the importance of self-love and self-care.

In the finale, "a layin on of hands" (Shange, 2010), after the women have reflected on their relationships with men and their worldly lives and experiences, they admit there is a void in their being. The lady in red states, "i found god in myself/and i loved her/i loved her fiercely" (p. 87 ). The women realize they have been missing "a layin on of hands" (Shange, 2010, p. 85). The "layin on of hands" symbolizes many things to the women. It can be presumed to be a

spiritual reference, whereas in many Black churches the laying on of hands is a part of faith healing and the use of intercessory prayer (Martin & Martin, 2002). Laying on of the hands also signifies something being passed on (knowledge, strength, creativity), to satisfy an emptiness, or recreate a person's being. The "layin on of hands" in the final work connects the women to the human-to-human, human-to-spirit, and human-to-environment through their relationships, friendships, and self-awareness. In addition, it exemplifies the transformation the women experienced throughout the text, which included experiences of love and loss, rape, abortion, finding their identity in a racist and sexist world, bouts of domestic violence and encounters with AIDS/HIV, spiritual awakening, and learning about relationships with others—men and women. In all of this, the lady in red learns who she is and begins to love herself for who she is, flaws and all. She begins to appreciate her beauty, inside and out, and feel at peace, empowered, and in solidarity with others and herself. This demonstrates the overall power the women found in themselves through learning in relationship to others, through a divine realm, and in their environment.

Although this coreopoem (Shange, 2010) has been made into a film and highly regarded, it also spurred a reaction in Black men, similar to that of white people's reaction to Black power, because their delusions of power and position of authority were challenged. This work has been criticized because of the inequitable view of Black men in relation to the Black women's stories, but the poems depicted in this work represent the perception and truth held by many Black women, which does not necessitate a balance, but an authentic view of Black women's experiences on surviving and thriving as a woman, a Black person, a Black woman.

For many women of color, formulating novels, poems, or stories serves as a way to express petty, happy, melancholy, evil, or obscene thoughts, as well as secrets, heartaches, fears,

and dreams safely in the face of tribulations (Bell-Scott, 1994). These works detail the multifaceted identities of women of color and encompass the elements of pain, humor, kitchen-based community, family-based community, mother, other mother, and village mother. These identities can be found in various stories from well-known women of color novelists, including Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, Toni Morrison, Lorraine Hansberry, Toni Cade Bambara, and other inspiring writers. In addition to those elements, here I suggest three characteristics that are included in Black woman's narratives: (a) life's lessons on surviving and thriving as a woman, a Black person, a Black woman; (b) spirituality as a protective barrier and a source of strength; and (c) lives, dreams, and hopes deferred to stand in the shadow of our men and families.

**Life's lessons on surviving and thriving as a woman, a Black person, a Black woman.** The embodiment of the complex, varied intersections and experiences of Black women's lives provides a unique position in life, despite the unpleasantness of being minoritized daily. This unpleasantness generated from being at the receiving end of various intersected structures of oppression forces Black women and Black families to create strategies for survival, in the most literal sense daily. These strategies of survival often are grounded in knowing how to navigate being Black (in the US) within a cultural context where the daily discourse is to enslave Blackness.

For women of color, particularly in the US, the reality that confronts them includes being a woman (gendered), Black (raced), and a Black woman (intersections of gender and race), which impacts their lives on a different dimension than white men, white women, and Black men. For example, White women can suffer from sexism, and Black men can act as oppressors or be oppressed because Black men can suffer from racism, but they can also oppress women through sexism, but Black women can do neither (hooks, 2000). Additionally, within the reality

83

of Black women's existence also includes their ethnicity, national origin, culture, sexual orientation, and social class (Collins, 2000; Ngwainmbi, 2004; Sheared, 1994; Taylor, 1998; Walker, 1983). While it can be argued that any group can have their unique and overlapping intersectional characteristics with other groups, in this study, the focus was to center on older Black women's narratives and sensibilities because of the various forms of intersected marginalization this group experiences.

With the perspective that women of color's voices are silenced and their realities unnoticed, Black women's experiences and survival stories have resonant cultural elements that are often missed in the dominant discourse. Especially if these Black women are post-menopausal, then intersected structures of racism, sexism, and patriarchy render their lives to have less value, given that they have passed their reproductive years. Although Black women share commonalities, such as gender and sometimes skin tone, no two stories of Black women can be assumed to be identical—the experiences, the background, and the family structures are unique and cannot be oversimplified, nor overgeneralized. The complexity of Black women's narratives cannot be reduced or oversimplified, even while presenting these three narrative tenets. Each of the tenets, while thematic in nature from Black women's novels, are also complex and resist easy reduction of differences into sameness. Perhaps, Bambara's (2005) description of a Black woman could be instructive here. Bambara says that a Black woman could be:

> . . . a college graduate. A *drop-out.* A student. *A wife.* A divorcee. *A mother.* A lover. *A child of the ghetto.* A product of the bourgeoisie. *A professional writer.* A person who never dreamed of publication. *A solitary individual.* A member of the Movement. *A gentle humanist.* A violent revolutionary. *She is angry and tender and loving and hating. She is all these things—and more. And she is represented in a collection that for the first time truly lets her bare her soul and speak her mind.* She is also a must-read text to be delivered into the hands of all of us who work to achieve the wonderful light of

84

knowledge, love, and beauty. She is an everlasting *yes*. (Bambara, 2005, p. 1, italics in original)

Bambara's description of Black woman presents multiple identity categories that might even be at odds with each other and yet could create resonant understanding for cultural insiders. These ways of seeing a Black woman are resistant to the dehumanizing ways in which Black people broadly, and Black women specifically, are seen in sociocultural discourses, often reduced to degrading stereotypes. These stereotypes are dangerous because they create perceptions for cultural outsiders about Black women, and if they have access to power (police officer, teacher, judge, policy maker), then they use these stereotypes to cause direct harm to Black women and their wellness. Thus, Black women's identities in relationship to other identities are based largely on their social constructions (Allen & Helm, 2013; Anzaldùa, 2015; hooks, 1983). The chronicles that detail Black women's existence are representative of society's perceptions and not based entirely on verifiable information (Franklin, 2000; T. W. Harris, 2015) nor is much consideration given to family dynamics, religion, race, color, sexuality, or education and economic contexts (Rose, 2003).

Imagine how confusing it must be for a Black woman to repeatedly witness discourses about their lives reduced to archaic, unflattering, and dehumanizing stereotypes, when their own embodied experiences and communal and ancestral knowledge are far more complex than their depiction in dominant discourses. However, if such dominant narratives are pervasive, then they oppress Black women and their understanding of self in relation to the dominant group. Many Black women encounter a time of confusion, miseducation (Thomas & Jackson, 2007), and double-consciousness of oppression from race and gender perspectives (Beal, 2008; Dubois, 1903).

Often the informal lessons about life in general taught to Black women are negative and depict harmful images of Black women (Collins, 2000). These images are used to control and construct Black women's narratives of how to be a Black woman; narratives include being angry, irresponsible, unattractive, promiscuous, bossy, too independent, and disloyal stemming from the characters that have portrayed Black women by the dominant culture to which they were introduced during slavery and carried forward in the media and dominant literature (Bobo, 1991; Chaney & Brown, 2015; Collins, 1989; T. W. Harris, 2015). For example, many stereotypes stem from the character "Sapphire" from the television show Amos and Andy, which depicted an angry, mannish, and bossy Black woman (T. Harris, 1982). Also, the infamous character "Mammy" put a negative spin on the concepts of a Black matriarch. Mammy was large, dark-skin, nurturing, and asexual. She took her place as the head of the Black family, but failed to be submissive, overstepping her role as a mother and wife, and is often blamed for the decline of the Black family and community (Chaney & Brown, 2015; T. Harris, 1982; T. W. Harris, 2015). Lastly, Jezebel, a stereotype positioning Black women as promiscuous, seductive, and sexually deviant (Collins, 2000; Harris, 2015) contributes to the variations of what society portrays as roles available for the Black woman. These portrayals are often accompanied by the comparison of Black women to those that are lighter skinned, slender, and docile (T. W. Harris, 2015; Morrison, 2015), which challenge the Black woman's self-concept, self-confidence, and self-esteem and overshadow the positive narratives of Black women (Allen & Helm, 2013; Morrison, 2015).

Dominant discourses and material actions teach Black women that empowered Black embodiment is a threat (Bobo, 1991; Butler, 2013; Paris, 1995) and any variation from established stereotype will not render Black women immune from oppression. Living with such

daily oppression also teaches Black women about Black anger, suffering, and illusions. The illusions are the deception of self-hate, Black hate, and community hate, which are detrimental and rooted in the narratives and stereotypes endorsed by society (T. C. West, 1999). The illusion happens usually when Black women internalize a dominant narrative as part of their identity and become agents of their own oppression. The stereotypes of Black women—being loud, oversexualized, having bad attitudes, and having many children while relying on government support—while prominent in non-Black communities, are also strongly forced on Black communities (Bobo, 1991). Unfortunately, the daily and pervasive onslaught of such narratives, when internalized within the Black community, are used to shame other Black people, often directed at a specific type of person-—Black, woman, and usually poor (Whatley, 2015). Sometimes such internalized narratives lead to Black women being content with occupying spaces where they are at best just tolerated and not celebrated for the work they produce and their contributions (Counts, 2012).

In addition to social miseducation about Black women's identities and worth, there are challenges within the Black community to educate their own people about key topics such as sexual relations, sex education, and sexuality. This is because many important conversations are avoided while Black women are young because a "child is to stay in child's place," and children do not engage in "grown folk talk." However, failing to engage in these educational coming-of-age talks about sex, sexuality, puberty, the responsibilities of womanhood, and the like, leave many to fend for themselves and learn on their own (Dungy, 1994; Riley, 1994; Rose, 2003) while navigating a hostile dominant cultural landscape.

Despite the negative narratives and experiences that Black women endure, they are forced to learn how to be tough, resilient, and "make it work." Typically, it is through a cycle of

hardship, faith, deep reflection, and truth-telling that Black women develop their identities and begin to have a shift in their thinking that interrupts the negative space that robs them of joy, pride, and the worthiness of love (see Angelou, 2013; Bell-Scott & Johnson-Bailey, 1998; hooks, 1983; Rose, 2003; T. C. West, 1999). As Black women center themselves and realize their truths, they begin to heal (hooks, 1983) and traverse the world, professionally, academically, and romantically. They are comfortable building up other Black women who are dealing with similar situations and help them on their journey to wholeness. Surviving and thriving then is not just about being able to navigate oppressive situations. Surviving and thriving as a Black woman in a society that is continuously oppressive requires an honest awareness of one's trauma so one can begin the journey of healing from the fragmentations caused by the trauma. Therefore, one can begin to create a relationship between surviving and thriving instead of surviving and suffering. For example, in Maya Angelou's poem, *Still I Rise,* she highlights how there are expectations of how an enslaved or once slaved Black woman might behave in front of their oppressor, and how her defying such expectations creates discomfort amongst the oppressors. In that poem, Angelou focuses on creating an identity that is celebratory in Black femininity, sexuality, and spirituality without the need to accommodate the dominant group's version of Black womanhood. Therefore, in doing so, Angelou demonstrates that survival as a Black woman is not just about suffering but healing from such suffering and creating empowered versions of selfhood.

**Spirituality as a protective barrier and a source of strength.** Spirituality for many Black women is related to the spiritual connection to a higher power (Bridges, 2001; Butler, 2013). The faith associated with spirituality allows them to endure pain, sickness, hurt, poverty, and the struggles specific to Black women—it is one thing that no other person can take away.

Black women draw strength from their spirituality, which then provides them with fortitude, resilience, patience, compassion, and the willingness to forgive others and themselves, while not forgetting the lessons in the heartache (Leasure, 2004; Morrison, 2015; Walker, 1983).

Often, Black women offer themselves and their proficiencies in service for the betterment of their community as a whole (Bambara, 2005; Beal, 2008). There is an unspoken burden on Black women to shoulder the weight of the family and deal with difficult issues within and outside their communities. Outside of a Black woman's community, she has to deal with multiple social structures of oppression. And yet being in one's community does not immune one from social structures of oppression, as community members could be patriarchal, misogynist, sexist, ageist, homophobic, etc. Thus, for a Black woman, harm can come from those who oppress her and also from the ways in which she might have internalized the oppressor's narratives unconsciously, thereby being complicit with her own oppression. Additionally, Black women's portrayal as tough and resilient positions them in such a way that prevents them from expressing themselves in a genuine manner when they are indeed in pain and suffering. Instead, they are expected to maintain a tough, resilient Black woman façade because that is what is commonly expected regardless of how things are challenging for her (Baker, Buchanan, Mingo, Roker, & Brown, 2015; Nelson, Cardemil, & Adeoye, 2016). In such instances, many Black women might find comfort and solace in spiritual communities (Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2004; hooks, 1983; Mbiti, 1989) while enduring the struggles associated with racism, classism, and sexism (Musgrave et al., 2002).

An argument can be made that spirituality informs the social construction of Black womanhood (Banks, 2015). Black womanhood, constructed through the dominant narrative, often erases the daily trauma with which a Black woman navigates her life, by imposing a

resilient, tough, characterization on Black women.  Within certain cultural contexts, Black

people, especially Black women, are supposed to endure long-suffering and hardship with the

spiritual promise of a better life in the future.  Through this belief, many Black folk tolerate and

accept that to be spiritual is to suffer in hopes of gaining eternal rewards (Rutledge, 1990).

Attending to this theory becomes destructive for financial, spiritual, and relational advancement.

Spirituality for many Black women consists of love, love of self, family, and the

community, even when the love is not reciprocal (see Angelou, 2013; Bambara, 1992; Bell-Scott

& Johnson-Bailey, 1998; Boylorn, 2012).  Spirituality dwells within the mind, body, and soul

and connects to the universe.  Spirituality allows one to connect with others, develop personal

values, and gives meaning to life.  Spirituality as a strength provides hope, inner peace, and

challenges a person to be better versions of themselves if they believe the burdens one bears will

make them stronger (Bambara, 1992; hooks, 1983).  On the other hand, although often misstated,

many believe that [God] will never put more on them than they can bear, which causes many to

tolerate and accept unwarranted burdens (i.e., to endure long suffering, to love others in spite of

abuse, neglect, and mistreatment, etc.) and to reassure one's self in difficult times.  This can

cause a person to have unrealistic expectations of themselves and spirituality.  To detail this,

Coleman (2008) re-counts an experience had by Lisa, her friend, as Lisa came to her and other

women in her church group after she was beaten by her boyfriend.  This had not been the first

time and it was not likely to be the last, but in the midst of Lisa's trouble, the women joined

together to comfort and console Lisa.  One way the women uplifted Lisa was to braid her hair,

despite the bald spots from the hair that had been ripped from her scalp, because as Black women

they understood that for Lisa to feel strong, feel as if she could go on another day, she could not

have her hair looking crazy.  The women also empathetically confirmed Lisa's pain because

many of them also knew firsthand what she was experiencing.  In the midst of Lisa and the other

Black women sharing a nonjudgmental and sympathetic space, Lisa asked questions such as

"What did I do to deserve this?  Why is God letting this happen to me? and What am I supposed

to do now?" (Coleman, 2008, p. 2).  Although the answers to these questions are difficult and

nearly impossible to answer, they are frequently asked in difficult and trying times.  The answers

that many Black women create come from a place of familiarity and comfort.  The comfort could

be the familiarity and solace of sitting under the big tree on the farm in the spring watching the

children run and play or hearing something that feels like sitting in church on a Sunday morning

listening to the choir belt out spirituals that touch the core, to hear about how God will make a

way out of no way such as Greene's (2015) lyric.

> Made a way/don't know how but you did it/standing here not knowing how we'll get
> through this test/But holding unto faith you know that/Nothing can catch You by
> surprise/You got this figured out and You're watching us/But when it looks as if we can't
> win/You wrap us in Your arm and step in/And everything we need You supply/You got
> this in control/And now we know that. (track 5)

To hear such lyrics is to not get stuck in believing the narratives of deficit and defeat.  Songs,

lyrics, and hymns like the above offer a glimmer of hope to regroup and make a plan of recovery.

Moreover, a cathartic response is invoked to purge emotions that have been pent up, to let the

tears roll down the cheek as a way of cleansing, or as a declaration that one is ready to continue

the fight.  Spirituality provides consolation to know that one is not alone and to know that when

life seems out of control and in disarray there is a way out of no way.

For Black women in particular, spirituality is influential to their existence and worldview.

Within the dominant discourse, Black women are not openly credited for nor referenced as

central to the human existence; consequently, their experiences have not been rendered as

valuable or noteworthy.  Knowing and understanding the experiences and perceptions of Black

women on their sexuality and spirituality may reframe the previously held-onto epistemologies. Womanism as presented in this study is found in the Black community as one joins together to protect those in the community and in the larger society. Womanism also characterizes and analyzes the multiple oppressions and experiences of Black women to create counternarratives for present and future members of society, men and women.

**Lives, dreams, and hopes deferred to stand in the shadow of our men and families.** I wrote this section with utmost humility to my family, community, and creator. I did not write this section to further denigrate any group of people, especially those already experiencing some amount of social oppression. Yet, I was aware that by writing this section, I invited the gaze of those who would want to use this information for further co-optation and strengthening of their reductive stereotypical understanding. Perhaps these folks would continue with their reductive, stereotypical understanding with or without my work being a catalyst. However, my commitment is to provide intellectual integrity to my work, which compels me to not gloss over how patriarchy plays out in Black communities and how such dynamics are expressed in various Black women's novels. In the current culture of the #MeToo movement, where discussion about oppression often has the face of a white woman, it is critical to highlight how race and patriarchy intersect in oppressing Black women.

The phrase "cult of true womanhood" depicts the attitude that "true womanhood" is representative of having a home and family (Franklin, 2000; Holmes, 1999; Perkins, 1983), thereby rendering women's usefulness to reproductive behaviors and archaic gender roles. Yet, for Black women, the patriarchal expectations go beyond family and home (Rose, 2003). Historically, Black women have cared for, sacrificed, and put others first, including the man and family (hooks, 1983), sometimes freely and sometimes enforced. For example, as portrayed in

*The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982)*,* the story about the life of Black women in the southern United States in the 1930s, the main character, Celie, is a teenage girl who has been repeatedly beaten and raped by her father. After bearing two children, which are snatched from her by her father and later adopted, an arranged marriage is made between her father and Mister, a widower who needs someone to care for his children and household. After being married off and mistreated by Mister and his children, Celie eventually gets the house in order and learns of Mister's mistress, Shug Avery, a glamourous jazz singer. Shug falls ill and moves in with Mister and Celie, resulting in Celie putting her life, dreams, and hopes on hold to care for Mister, his children, and his mistress, an experience that left her mistreated, broken, angry, and standing in the shadows until everyone was cared for. This example also extends to Black women remaining silent and compliant for various reasons including: concealing the truth to keep secrets within the Black community (T. C. West, 1999), remaining silent in the home and in public to protect the Black man's ego and decrease the target society has already placed on his back, to protect their self-image and remain to appear brave and strong (Bell-Scott & Johnson-Bailey, 1998), to not shame themselves or the family (hooks, 1983), and because this was expected and accepted by Black men and women (Walker, 1982).

Conversely, Black women also collectively lift their voices when Black men, children, and the community need them to uplift them, to build their esteem, and to stand in the gap when things begin for fall apart. Sometimes Black women sacrifice themselves consciously or unconsciously, while not receiving reciprocated protection from others, Black men in particular, which commonly results in Black women learning to be their own heroines, which is admirable but also a burden (Rose, 2003). Ultimately, Black women are willing to give of themselves to protect and secure the family, the community, and the church, sometimes at the cost of losing

much of themselves in the process. They find the potential in challenging situations after experiencing loss and pain to remain faithful, loyal, and find their strength in God (Rose, 2003). As demonstrated by Celie (Walker, 1982), although she faced much adversity and her faith waned, she found strength in God and through creating friendships with other women, which relates to the human-to-spirit and human-to-human relationships present in the womanist framework.

As womanism is rooted in the everyday experiences of women of color, the nature of their everyday spaces and environment as understood through cultural contexts is where the narratives are situated. Narratives come from stories that overlap and intersect in the human-to-human relationships, human-to-environment relationships, and human-to-spirit relationships as put forth by Maparyan (Phillips, 2006) (see Figure 3). While Maparyan has said environmentalism is humans to nature, I am reframing environmentalism for this study as the relationship with human beings and their environment, which can be nature, cultural context, or social context. While this is Maparyan's definition of environmentalism, I also want to bring this aspect of environmentalism to connect with the informal learning spaces Black women encounter.
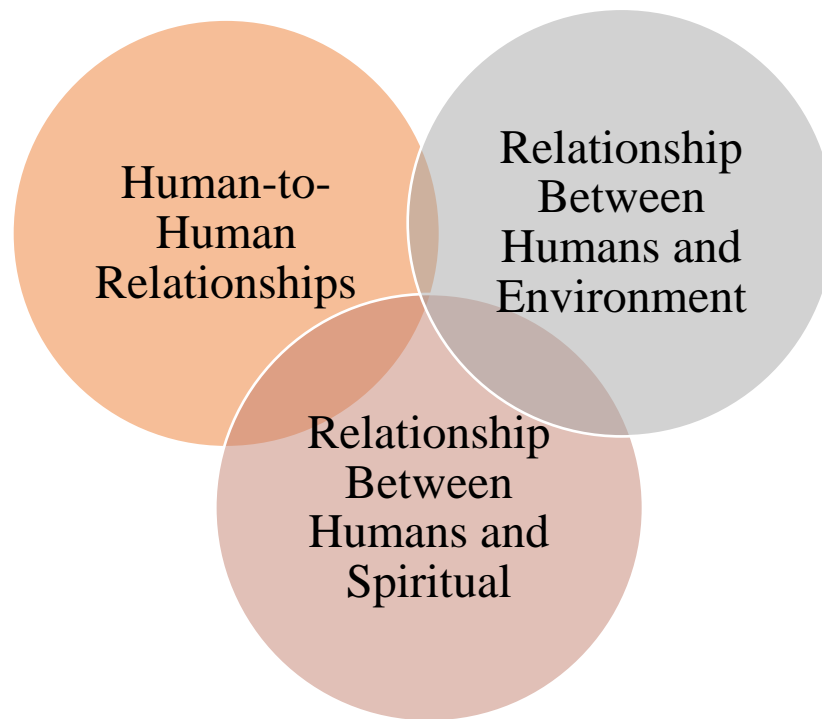
*Figure 3*. Eliciting narratives.

The intersection of these realities demonstrates how Black women negotiate and navigate their sexuality through spirituality and informal learning. Coupling womanism and the narratives of Black women also characterizes the perceptions of the participants while restructuring the stories of the dominant group that have been used to justify the power differential among whites, Blacks and Browns, men and women (Collins, 1998; Riessman, 2001). To explicate this relationship, Walker (2003) offers a fictional narrative of Hannah Kemhuff, a poor young Black mother, who accepts donated clothes from wealthier families from time to time, and who is continually humiliated by her husband's constant cheating. One day, as Hannah and her family are in line to receive government assistance for food, she notices her husband catching the eye of another woman who is also in line to receive assistance, but Hannah keeps quiet. As Hannah's turn approaches to receive assistance, she is denied by a white woman, Sarah Marie Sadler Holley, because Hannah looks too wealthy in the clothes she is

wearing. As Hannah is denied assistance, her husband and the woman tease and berate her and leave Hannah without assistance and alone with the children. Soon after, Hannah's children die from malnourishment. Sarah Marie Sadler Holley receives word that Hannah has put a spell on her in revenge for turning her away and for her children dying, but in order for the spell to work, Hannah needs Sarah Marie Sadler Holley's hair and feces. Sarah claims to not believe in the spell but locks herself in her home and literally scares herself to death. The human-to-human element is depicted in the interaction with Hannah and her husband, the other woman her husband ran off with, and Sarah Marie Sadler Holley. In Hannah's attempt to have dignity and restructure how she was viewed by wearing nice clothes, although she was in need of assistance, the white woman exercised her power over Hannah to remind Hannah that she was poor and Black.

## Research Design

The research design is basically a plan for carrying out the study, essentially it is a "*logical plan for getting here to there*, where *here* may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered, and *there* is some set of conclusions (answers) about these questions" (Yin, 2009, p. 26, italics in original). The design was informed by narrative inquiry, Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry, and womanism. In the research design, the logical plan describes the connection the empirical data has to the research questions and then its conclusion (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; McNickles, 2009; Yin, 2009), essentially how I collected, analyzed, and organized the data. The data collection methods used in the study were wisdom whisper talks, influenced by items in the older Black women's treasure chest and timeline, informed by the need to be culturally congruent.

**Gaining Access and Participant Selection**

The participants were recruited using my personal and professional network because of the sensitive and personal nature of the topic, while maintaining confidentiality. I asked Black women in my immediate circles (friends, colleagues, churches, sorority, educational institutions, and informal learning settings) and the mothers of friends and family members to consider participating. I did not reveal to anyone in my network those who agreed to participate so I could maintain confidentiality. If a member of my community referred a participant to me, I did not reveal to the member that I had selected the participant for the study. Also, my reason for using my personal and professional network of people is because of the already built-in rapport and trust people had with me, which is critical for discussing the potentially sensitive topics in this study. After I contacted the individuals who expressed interest, I discussed the study in detail, reviewed the consent form, and answered any questions. It was imperative for the participants to feel they were central to the research process and they had the authority to speak for themselves and share their experiences (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003).

The issue of sample size is something with which qualitative researchers grapple constantly (Kim, 2016). Kim (2016) suggests that when the focus is on life stories, the sample may be small because of the time invested in lengthy interviews. In qualitative data, the number of participants is not key; it is the quality and appropriateness of the data in order to form a comprehensive picture to answer the research questions (Kim, 2016; Kvale, 1996). With this in mind, I selected two participants for the study, as I am also aware of the time and resources available. Purposeful, criteria-based sampling was used to select the two participants who met the specific requirements. Purposeful sampling "is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which

the most can be learned" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). Essentially, the researcher

purposefully selects individuals and sites to conduct the research that complement the research

design and provide an optimal experience for answering the research questions. Simply put,

purposeful sampling is selecting participants "based on time, money, location, availability of

sites or respondents, and so on" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 98). Purposeful and criteria-driven

sampling were appropriate for this study because they specified the selection of participants

based on certain criteria and the constraints of available resources. Essential criteria for

participation in this study include:

- Being a biologically, self-identified Black woman

- Being a Black woman born between 1946 and 1964

- An interest in the topic being studied

- A willingness to fully participate in the study without coercion or monetary
  compensation

- A willingness to fully discuss topics related to sexuality, spirituality, and informal
  learning environments

- Understanding that such sensitive topics could provoke cathartic emotions and
  feelings

- A commitment to participate in the data collection methods and any follow-up
  meetings

- A preparedness to have the interview recorded using audio or visual equipment

- A commitment to have the information and narratives published.

Participants knew they could quit the study at any time without any penalty and that what they

shared with me would always be confidential. Additionally, they could also request a return of

their data without any additional penalty.  Meetings with the participants occurred at a mutually agreeable location.

## Membership Role

Because of the personal aspect I unearthed, I was attuned to the issues of power and representation (Few et al., 2003).  Black women have been judged as sexually experienced, risky, immoral, and sexually deviant in prior literature (Collins, 2000; Heath, 2014; Seawood, 2015), but that literature fails to distinguish Black women's experiences and sexual scripting development from their white counterparts, which impacts gender, racial, and sexual interactions (Collins, 1999; Few et al., 2003; hooks, 2000).  Few and colleagues (2003) and Johnson-Bailey (1999) discuss the complexities of researching within one's own culture, particularly Black women.  It is important to note that the dynamics of qualitative research are not static but constantly changing.  Interview dynamics can change because of disposition, character traits, and imbalances in the research structure.  These imbalances are not mitigated simply because "women interview women, Black [people] interview Black [people], or when Black women interview Black women" (Johnson-Bailey, 1999, p. 668).  However, some of the margins that Black women constantly find themselves negotiating can be mitigated by having a person on the other side of the interview that can identify with some of the experiences and pains and lead to building trust.

Because this study was grounded in a womanist framework, Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry, and a Black narrative lens, membership role for me included a kinship role with the participants.  In that kinship role, I saw the older Black women as my cultural elders, which means I did not call them by their first names.  I called them "Ms.," "Mrs.," "Aunt," or "Mother" depending on the relationship.  I had a cultural kinship role with them, and I assumed that they

would be inclined to talk to me in ways that cultural elders do wherein they advise and share their experiences through storytelling.

My membership role in this study was also that of an outsider and a peripheral member. Although I am a member of the culture being studied, I do not fully understand the subculture, that of being born in the baby boomer era of 1946-1964, so aside from forming a researcher-interview relationship with the participants, I was not involved in the activities of the group. Being a member of the cultural group, however, did provide advantages. Few and colleagues (2003) discuss the need for "within-group investigations [because the studies related to sensitive topics with Black people are] often based on non-representative groups of Black [people] drawn from clinical, high-risk, and convenience samples" (p. 205). It could not be assumed that I would be accepted as an insider just because I share the same cultural background and gender as the participants. Underlying "issues of color, class, linguistics, nationality, sexuality and physical attractiveness" (Few et al., 2003, p. 207) had the potential to affect the relationship with the participants. There was a chance that these constructs would be intellectualized differently by the participants (Johnson-Bailey, 1999) and "must be negotiated with informants throughout the research process" (Few et al., 2003, p. 207). These were challenges that could affect conducting interviews on sensitive topics, regardless of the insider status or relationship building.

## Data Collection Methods

The data collection methods included collecting data via wisdom whisper talks. The wisdom whisper conversations were elicited through the participants sharing items from a treasure chest and detailing significant events (timeline) that had a significant impact on their sexuality and spirituality. Table 1 depicts a data collection outline to detail the specific data collection methods and the amount of data produced.

Table 1

*Data Inventory and Potential Raw Data Pages*

| Data Source | Number of Pages | Total Pages |
|---|---|---|
| 1 initial meeting per participant<br>1 hour each meeting | 2 x 1 =2 hours<br>10 pages per 1 hour | 2 x 10= 20 pages |
| 1 initial wisdom whisper talk per participant | 2 x 20 pages per one hour of transcription | 20 x 2= 40 pages |
| 2 follow-up wisdom whisper talks per participant to construct timeline<br>1 hour each talk | 2 x 2= 4 h<br>10 pages per 1 hour ours | 10 x 4= 40 pages |
| 3 wisdom whisper talks centered around items in treasure chest<br>2 hours each talk | 2 x 3= 6 hours<br>20 pages per 1 hour | 20 x 6= 120 pages |
| 3 peer debriefings | 3 peer debriefings<br>5 pages of analysis per consultation | 3 x 5 = 15 pages |
| 1 researcher journal throughout the study | 15 pages | 15 pages |
| 3 member checks with each participant | 2 x 3= 6 member checks<br>6 pages per member check | 6 x 6= 36 pages |
| | Total pages | 283 pages |

## Wisdom Whisper Talks

There are many ways a conversation can take place to understand an experience. These ways can be formal; semi-structured; informal; or open, natural conversations. The unstructured sharing of information between Black women has been called many things, including sister circles, sisterhood, girl talk, and sister to sister talk (L. Banks, 2017; Harley, The Black Women and Work Collective, & McKay, 2002; Harvison, 2017; C. Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004). "Sister" has been a term of endearment for women of color, even outside of blood kin. "Sister"

is often a term one hears, especially in the Black church when church folks refer to a woman to replace the formal designation of "Ms." with a more affectionate and intimate term. Harley and colleagues (2002) describe Angelou's recorded experience in her autobiographical work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. They retell the time Angelou heard her grandmother Mrs. Henderson address her friend Mrs. Flowers as Sister Flowers and, after some time had passed, realized they were in fact like sisters because they were joined by experiences and tribulations they faced as Black women.

Sister circles are reminiscent of the academic circles of the 1970s and 1980s when Black women joined together as a cohort in a typically predominantly white college or university setting to alleviate the feelings of isolation and alienation and support each other on their academic journeys (Harley et al., 2002). Sister circles are also part of feminist spirituality groups (Brock, 1988), where people of same-race women contemporaries come together to create alternative support systems in higher education and graduate programs (Brock, 1988; Patton & Harper, 2003), and as an intervention strategy for mental and physical health of Black women (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011).

Certainly there are other ways in which women, and especially Black women come together to build community with each other. Currie (1999) discusses how "Girl talk" can refer to a common cross-cultural understanding of adolescent girls' relationships that can involve conversations among friends, which includes gossip (McDonald, Putallaz, Grimes, Kupersmidt, & Coie, 2007). However, the term "Girl" or talking to one's "Girl" within the Black community exceeds adolescent girls' relationships. Girl talk can happen between girls and women of any age.

Another form of conversation amongst Black women is kitchen-table dialogue, although such dialoguing is not just limited to Black women. Scholars (Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, Colin, Peterson, & Brookfield, 2010) have employed the term *kitchen table* to refer to the process of engaging in an intimate dialogue with others wherein one participates in self-reflection, perspective taking, and analyzing other multiple constructs that may be different than one's own. In this particular example, Sheared et al. (2010) discuss and reflect on race and racism and how their lived experiences have influenced their interactions and actions in hopes of bringing the kitchen table dialogue to their classrooms and other shared spaces, formally and informally, to become open to exploring and engaging in conversation with others with an open mind.

Additionally, qualitative scholars use *sister-to-sister* talks to engage in conversation with other scholars on how to navigate researcher-informant relationships and how these talks can contribute to research. For example, Few et al. (2003) engage in the "congenial conversation or positive relating in which life lessons might be shared between Black women" (p. 205) to converse about the ways to manage qualitative research involving sensitive topics and Black women. Their study, which reflects the organic conversations among Black women researchers and scholars in each other's homes and coffee shops, centers around the women sharing their experiences and knowledge about employing qualitative research by, for, and with other Black women. They situate the study in grounded theory with a Black feminist lens to remain culturally congruent with how Black women might relate to each other.

In an anthology of writings by radical women of color, twin sisters Beverly Smith and Barbara Smith (2015) record their dialogue regarding their experiences as Black feminists in the Women's Movement. They entitled the dialogue, *Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue* in which the warm conversation discusses the effects of racism and classism within the

movement. "Across the table" and "sister-to-sister" in this case are both literal and figurative. Literal in the sense that this intimate conversation happened across the table and they are biological sisters. Figurative or symbolic in the sense that across the table, as established previously, refers to engaging in a close, intimate dialogue with others where one participates in self-reflection, perspective taking, and analyzing other multiple constructs that may be different than one's own.

There is no doubt that the narratives of Black women can be a source of empowerment and a learning tool, particularly for people of color and other women. As women of color recall and reflect on their life experiences and share cultural stories of triumph, they construct meaning for themselves through these stories (Johnson-Bailey, 2010), often facilitated through the relational terms used in informal conversational contexts. Many of the above terms of endearment are often used with peers, or girlfriends of similar generational cohorts, sisters that share similar experiences. While numerous terms exist in Black feminist literature about engaging Black women in conversations that are relational and culturally congruent, there is a lack of discussion of methods of inqury about the engagement of Black women in intergenerational conversations, which is how I engaged with the participants in this study.

Could these same terms be used when there are generational differences between the participants and the researcher or would we need a different set of understanding and relational terms? What would the informal conversations between myself, a young emerging scholar, and the participants, who were born in the baby boom era look like? On one hand, there are the traditional interviews in which a qualitative researcher engages when conducting inquiry. On the other hand, there are informal conversations between sisters or kitchen table talks. But I am not a contemporary of my participants, so I was unsure of whether our conversation would be in the

realm of sister-to-sister talks or even girl talks.  Therefore, with this knowledge and my experiences with older Black women, I imagined that my engagement with the participants in this study would fall somewhere between traditional interviews and kitchen table talk with sisters.

I imagine somewhere in this continuum lies what I coin *Wisdom Whisper* as my method of engagement and inquiry with the older Black women participants in this study.  Wisdom whisper acknowledges the value placed on the wisdom shared across generations and the respect given to one's cultural elder.  They are the conversations we have with our mothers or grandmothers while they share their recipes in the kitchen; if one listens closely, they are also sharing nuggets of wisdom along the way.  These nuggets of wisdom can include topics ranging from child rearing, to dating, to dealing with a racist colleague, to maintaining an orderly house, to dealing with other women.

For example, we could be in the kitchen making banana pudding, where my mother would be sharing her recipe orally, as "a pinch of this and pinch of that" because she cooks intuitively instead of prescriptively, while the other women in my family would engage my mom with, "Nan, did you hear about X?"  Then while learning how to cook, we end up talking about many things simultaneously.  It is never about the banana pudding.  It is as if the banana pudding is an excuse to connect with each other and have a conversation.

In addition to direct conversations, wisdom whisper can also include indirect conversation through informal learning environments and our engagement within those environments.  For example, young Black women could overhear their aunts talking on the phone with their girlfriends about their lives, romances, dramas, and other issues.  Paying close

attention to conversations grown Black women have is a legitimate way younger Black women learn how to navigate their worlds.

Using the womanist and the Black Feminist Narrative tenets, this type of wisdom sharing emerging from direct and indirect wisdom whisper conversations between older and younger Black women reflects the ways in which we learn to relate to the world and to each other and navigate our environments. These real-life, down-to-earth conversations with a matriarch or conversations heard through ear hustling (a culturally congruent term synonymous with eavesdropping), involving schooling on relationships, life, sex, money, faith, love, and balance, reflect on how we might survive and thrive as Black women; how we connect to our spirituality and navigate our lives; and how we understand our roles within the culture of patriarchy, racism, and other social structures of oppression. These wisdom whispers are not the same as standardized interviews or in-depth semi-structured interviews, because as a researcher, I was aware of the power difference. I attempted to the best of my ability to disrupt that difference by situating myself in a relational way with the participants, by conceding power to their elderly wisdom. Certainly power sharing within qualitative research is common in critical and feminist work, as demonstrated by Few and colleagues (2003) and others (Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2012). However, in this scenario, I extended this power sharing by adding humility to the researcher positioning, by posturing as someone who was willing to learn from her elders who are not just participants but also life guides. Thus, as a researcher, my need was not to extract information from the participants but to cultivate conditions where I can learn from their wisdom.

These wisdom whispers are different from the conversations I have with my girlfriends or my sisters, as we would not have the benefit of a cultural elder who would have much more

106

years of experience than us, and therefore more wisdom to share. For example, my grandmother

gardened and there was dirt under her fingernails from gardening, from physical labor, for

meeting life's demands. The wisdom she would whisper to me from those experiences

influences my thinking about the potential of wisdom whispers as a method of inquiry into Black

women's lives. Wisdom whispers with cultural elders are conversations about surviving despite

patriarchal and domestic violence, tales about scars on the cheek, tears licked from lips that once

upon a time wore ruby red. Wisdom whispers are about sharing those stories that help us find

strength to survive and thrive as Black women with a connection to our spirits.

Wisdom whispers are by invitation only—meaning one needs to know a member to get in

because the things that are spoken are sacred. Wisdom whisper occurs in a safe place for women

to say what is needed; share the stories that may be uncomfortable or brave; and or share

intimate, failed relationships or unconventional sexual preferences. It is the elder who counsels

with the best intentions, determining when to share and how much of herself she will share. My

role then became that of a catalyst or of a facilitator who elicited these wisdom whispers. In the

next section, I discuss certain strategies for eliciting wisdom whisper conversations.

 **Wisdom Whisper Elicitation**

While I was aware of letting go of control in eliciting wisdom whispers, to the extent that

I could learn from the cultural elder participants, what would be most relevant for this study fell

into certain domains of knowledge. However, I remained open that there could be other domains

of knowledge that I had yet to consider and might discover in the process of wisdom whisper

conversations. The domains of inquiry included biographical information, family information,

coming-of-age narratives, and current experiences with sexuality. I was interested in knowing

about their developmental experiences and instances when they realized they were spiritual and

sexual beings.  I was also interested in knowing how they learned about relating to a partner

sexually and what it perhaps looked like in their lives currently.

Yet, I was aware how awkward these conversations could be and how difficult it could be

to even get started.  Therefore, the first step to these conversations was one of rapport building

with the participant, perhaps around the kitchen table, or while getting instructions of how to

cook something, or whatever way in which the participant wanted to relate to me in our first

conversation.  I imagined conversations to be full of laughter, insights, and questions the

participant might have for what is coming up ahead in the research process.  In those

conversations, I reminded the participant that she was fully in charge of what she would like to

share and how much, and that I was there to learn from her.  Next, I shared with her that in the

upcoming conversations, I appreciated it if she would put together a Treasure Box.  Although

these conversations were something I engaged in while seeking informed consent, I respected the

participant's agency to consider and reconsider my requests throughout the research process and

continuously and enthusiastically consent to my requests.

I explained the Treasure Box would be a box in which the participant would place all that

she "treasures" about her experiences as a Black woman, specifically related to her

understanding of sexuality and spirituality.  However, knowing that these are really broad topics

and perhaps could be overwhelming, I offered specific prompts for the participant to consider

each time she prepared a treasure box.  The prompts were only gestures from me as a researcher

to ask for something while remaining open to whatever the participant would be willing to share.

The first prompt was: As you know, my study is about understanding how you think

about yourself as a spiritual person and how you think of yourself as a sexual being.  For our

next meeting, in this treasure box, would you put some items, which can be anything of your

choice, about how you learned about spirituality?  Are there key moments or events that stand out to you?  You could put anything in there like books, journals, music or writings, pictures, whatever you like that reminds you of your spiritual journey.  After discussion about the items she placed in the treasure chest, the follow-up question was: if you were to teach me about the most important lessons about spirituality you learned as a Black woman, what would be some things you would tell me?

The second prompt was: As you recall, my study is about understanding how you think about yourself as a spiritual person and how you think of yourself as a sexual being.  For our next meeting, in this treasure box, would you put some items, which can be anything of your choice, about how you learned about sexuality from puberty till now?  Are there key moments that stand out to you?  You could put anything in there like lingerie, pictures, rings, diaries, poems, movies, whatever you like that reminds you of your journey as a Black woman and her sexuality.  After discussion about the items she placed in the treasure chest, the follow-up question was: if you were to teach me about the most important lessons about sexuality you learned as a Black woman, what would be some things that you would tell me?

The third prompt was: To recall, my study is about understanding how you think about yourself as a spiritual person and how you think of yourself as a sexual being.  For our next meeting, in this treasure box, would you put items of your choosing that demonstrate or symbolize at this point in your life, how sexuality and spirituality might be related, and if they are not related topics for you, what keeps them separate?  After discussion about the items she placed in the treasure chest, the follow-up questions were: as a Black woman, how have the domains of sexuality and spirituality, either together or separately, enhanced or hindered your midlife development?  What piece of advice would you offer to other Black women on learning

about their spirituality and sexuality?  What would be the first lesson from your experiences that you can share and what would be some critical lessons from your life to current day that you can share?

The prompts explained above are informed by the tenets of Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry and womanism.  In the prompts, it can be seen that the researcher's disposition is humble and relational, with a cultural understanding of how to engage elders without creating an environment that treats the cultural elders as simply bodies of information on which one rides for her academic progress.  However, the specific methodological act of using elicitations for participant-driven inquiries, where photo, object, documents, artifacts, or timeline are used, exists in qualitative research literature already.  Below I offer some descriptions from existing qualitative research literature about elicitations.

The intention is that the participant-centered data collection methods (Lander, 2017), as detailed in this section, would guide the wisdom whisper talks.  While elicitations via objects or seeking timeline-based experiences are prevalent in qualitative methods, in this study, I expanded those methods by positioning myself as a learner and asking the participant to select salient aspects of their experiences that could teach me, thereby eliciting wisdom the participants can share.  However, for the purpose of demonstrating the use and scope of various types of elicitations, a discussion is subsequently offered.

**Participant-Centered Data Collection Methods (Spirituality and Sexuality Timeline and Treasure Chest)**

Lander (2017) described participant-centered data collection methods as methods that are participant motivated, unlike interviews in which the researcher asks questions and the participant responds.  In following Bell-Scott's (1994) suggestion to use sources that may not be

traditional or mainstream to understand the experiences of Black women and allow for self-expression, wisdom whisper talks were used in the study using prompts to construct timelines and discuss items in the participants' treasure boxes.

**Spirituality and sexuality timeline.** In qualitative research, interviews are the conventional method of collecting data (Bagnoli, 2009), but there are multiple ways to view and express oneself. Bagnoli (2009) and Johnson and Weller (2001) argue for qualitative researchers to go beyond conventional interviewing and to consider the use of graphic elicitation and arts-based methods in qualitative research to give participants another way to communicate things that may be difficult or painful to put into words. In their study, Kolar, Ahmad, Chan, and Erickson (2015) used timelines to explore resilience among marginalized groups, specifically South Asian immigrant women who experienced domestic violence and street youth who had been violently victimized. They used the timelines to situate and supplement semi-structured interviews and also to lessen the anxiety that may be aroused when interviewing marginalized groups about sensitive or traumatic events (Kolar et al., 2015).

Another example includes a qualitative study Jackson (2012) employed using visual timelines "to examine the racial identity development of ten multiracial individuals" (p. 416). This timelining tool helped her uncover "hidden complexities of multiracial identity development, including the fluidity and shifting of identity, and the impact of interpersonal relationships and environmental context on one's sense of self" (Jackson, 2012, p. 427). Sheridan, Chamberlain, and Dupuis (2011) used timelining as a narrative-based tool to research fatness and weight loss so the participants could focus their stories using information from photographs, diaries, and medical records. They convey that with this tool, the participants gain

a deeper understanding of their past experiences as well as develop richer narratives than with the use of interviews alone.

This method fits the womanist framework, as the research is contextualized by inserting the person into the environment and evaluating from their lens, which allows the study and the researcher to be more culturally sensitive to individuals; having the participants discuss their timeline is important for the process of collecting and analyzing the data. Timelines "provide an opportunity for linking the story with the wider social, political, and environmental context during the interview" (Adriansen, 2012, p. 40) and is another method that allows the researcher to understand life from the participant's point of view. In a way, it provides a womanist connection between the story the participant conveys verbally and the perception of life the participant has lived. Adriansen (2012) conveys that "the timeline should not lead the interviewer or the interviewee to assume linearity and coherence" (p. 40), but that the perceptions of the life events from that participant's perspective are interwoven to provide context for the life story. In this study, I elicited the timelines through the wisdom whisper talks. The timelines denoted pivotal events related to spirituality and informal learning, which influenced her views on sexuality throughout her lifetime.

**Treasure chests.** Treasure chests were used as an inquiry method to record the narratives attached to items that have contributed to the participant's development. Lander (2017), in her study, used artifacts to elicit meaningful narratives from the participants that may have otherwise been difficult to reveal. Bhattacharya (2013) used memorabilia boxes in her study with international students. She supplied the participants with boxes and requested they accumulate items that represented their stay in the United States. During the conversation phase, without any prompts, the participants shared their items and discussed their experiences

112

(Bhattacharya, 2013). This method was befitting because the narratives were developed from the intersections with the human-to-human relationships, human-to-environment relationships, and human-to-spirit relationships as put forth by Maparyan's (2006) version of womanism. Specifically, in relation to the participant and her environment, participant-centered data directly connects the methods to the theoretical framework as is conveyed below by Kim (2016). Kim (2016) uses an adapted version of Weber's work to make a case for using images in research. The following are her reasons:

1. Images can be used to capture the ineffable, the hard-to-put-into-words.
2. Images can make us pay attention to things in new ways.
3. Images are likely to be memorable.
4. Images can be used to communicate more holistically, incorporating multiple layers, and evoking stories or questions.
5. Images can enhance empathic understanding and generalizability.
6. Through metaphor and symbol, artistic images can carry theory elegantly and eloquently.
7. Images encourage embodied knowledge.
8. Images can be more accessible than most forms of academic discourse.
9. Images can facilitate reflexivity in research design.
10. Images can provoke action for social justice. (Kim, 2016, p. 150)

The treasure chest was intended to draw richer details and deeper descriptions out of the participant using meaningful items or collectibles as prompts (Douglas, Jordan, Lande, & Bumbaco, 2015).

Treasures can include many things such as souvenirs, pieces of a garment, mementos, relational maps, photographs, drawings and arts, writings, scrapbooks, videos, diaries, and many other things (Douglas et al., 2015; Kim, 2016). In this method, the participants selected and shared items of importance to tell their story further, provide a deeper understanding, and provide context to the experience. These objects can "create a comfortable space for discussion and open opportunities (. . . ) not limit responses" (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2006, p. 8). As well, they stimulated deep feelings, emotions, and memories to emerge that may

have been suppressed or forgotten, resulting in a more comprehensive account of events, values, ideas, and beliefs that connected the participant to their experiences that have shaped their worldview. Treasures can be placed in a variety of vessels. Those vessels or containers can include anything from shadow boxes, shoe boxes, pillow cases, bags, decorative containers, or any other kind of container. The vessel has a biblical connotation as well. In the King James version, the vessel is mentioned numerous times to mean literal containers, but also metaphorically to indicate that (wo)man is seen as a vessel, for this reason. The items the participant included in their treasure chests as vessels were meaningful or valuable to the participant and attested to their spiritual journey. Collecting such items allowed me to compare the information the participants disclosed in conversations and in their timelines and have a visual of some of the events and places described. These documents also allowed the participants to share a piece of their world with me. Providing this space also allowed the participant to recollect old memories and go into a space that was reserved for those moments in time and share those experiences with an outsider, trusting that her thoughts, if whispered, would be safe. Although Epsetin et al. (2006) are referencing specifically photos when they reveal that the participant's memories are heightened, and participant interviews become longer and more comprehensive, I believe this speaks to documents and objects in general; they sharpen the participant's memories and cause for longer, more comprehensive and in-depth interviews.

**Researcher Journaling and Peer Debriefing**

In addition to collecting data, it is important for the researcher to understand and process the data through her own subjectivities and onto-epistemologies. For the process of understanding, processing, and analyzing the data, I used journaling for notes to myself much like memos and for exploring my thoughts, beliefs, hunches, tensions in the data. I also used

114

peer debriefing for verification of my analytic procedures, findings, and logical progression of ideas. Saldaña (2016) explains that analytic memos and researcher journals are "places to 'dump your brain' about the participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation" (p. 44). They are similar to a reflective journal or diary where the researcher writes uninhibitedly about the relationship with the data. Saldaña (2016) suggests writing reflections about a number of things including what triggered the development of a code, personal thoughts and assumptions, the meanings behind actions and decisions, and how the research is developing in one's researcher journal.

Peer debriefing is imperative in qualitative research because a researcher needs to reflect on her thoughts and conclusions not in isolation but with someone else who is not close to the data, but is familiar with the substance and the methodology of the inquiry. Within this context, the peer debriefer becomes a mirror, a sounding board, and an interrogator of the researcher's findings, analysis, conclusions, assertion, etc. (Bhattacharya, 2017).

**Truth and Ethics**

For this study, two women were chosen, Viola and Pamela. I had met each woman at prior engagements and they had prior knowledge of my study and expressed significant interest in being a participant. Over a 3-month period, I met with each participant separately to hear their stories. With a desire to disrupt traditional interview structures, I employed wisdom whisper talks and let Viola and Pamela know these would be conversations and not necessarily interviews and that I was there to learn from them as my cultural elders. I did not ask specific questions about their sexual experiences. I relied on the prompts to guide the discussions and the participants to define spirituality and sexuality. Since these were older women, some of the information and events were hard for them to recall; for that reason, the member checks were

115

important, so they could clear up any misunderstandings and add information they may have thought about after the conversations concluded.

At the first meeting with Pamela, we discussed the nature of the research and the first prompt relating to spirituality. After discussing the first prompt, she thought it would be helpful to have the prompts in writing, so she could read and reflect on them. For our next meeting, I provided the prompts for her and found that it did help her focus her thoughts, stimulate the memory of past events, and prepare her to share relevant information. Incited by Pamela's request, I also shared the prompts in advance with Viola.

By discussing the information in a nonjudgmental and open environment, the participants were open to share their stories and many of the secrets they had been carrying. Befittingly, at times, the participants whispered their experiences, understanding that there were unspoken accounts behind the stories they shared. I initially planned for the wisdom whisper talks to last one hour, but on average they lasted two to three hours, and each time Viola and Pamela felt more comfortable and enthusiastic discussing such personal experiences with me.

Although Viola and Pamela had never discussed their personal experiences about sexuality or sexual abuse to this length, they were agentic and knew what they were willing and unwilling to share. Viola and Pamela were autonomous and self-determined despite whatever challenges they had up to the point of our conversation. Each of them had engaged in counseling and had other coping mechanisms before our conversation for various reasons, but I was prepared to offer counseling resources should they need them. Since each of them had been in therapy, they recognized their own patterns and the areas where they had more healing to do. They also had support systems that are culturally congruent to them, and spirituality was one of

their tools.  They were very forthcoming with their stories without any obvious or subtle indication of trauma, and neither one of them perceived these topics as high-risk topics.

I understood that Viola and Pamela might have unfinished spiritual or mental health issues they had been carrying for a while and after those issues were unpacked, it may not be easy to neatly pack all that was disclosed.  Viola and Pamela are self-determined women who wanted to share their stories, and part of sharing brought healing and closure to some areas of their lives.  They consented to talk about the topic and understood they could quit the study at any time, if they chose to.  They also understood they could share whatever they felt was safe to share; that was not traumatic to them.  Telling their story was something they wanted to do unrestrictedly, so it is important to see them as agentic, self-determined people, as opposed to fragile women.  Viola and Pamela have gone through so much, that just talking to me is not as high risk, as they can assert for themselves.  Because this study is in part driven by Black Feminist Theory, self-determination is imperative, and as such, I could not determine for Viola or Pamela what was risky or not risky for them.  They are my cultural elders and they determined what they wanted to share; the information in the narratives is what they determined was appropriate.

One of the assumptions I made was that whatever way I sought verification of where they were with their emotions and comfort level, I trusted the answer they gave me was honest and the indication of that honesty.  Because this is not a conversation that happens in all spaces, I had to trust that what was said to me was not said in any sort of duress or trauma being triggered.  These women thought about these experiences for a long time and had help in sorting some of these experiences out before I entered the picture.

Viola and Pamela discussed their orientations to sexuality, spirituality, and their informal learning spaces without much probing from me. The narratives were recreated experiences through time, based on their personal experiences from the past to the present, which conveyed lessons they learned. For Viola and Pamela, this experience provided them a safe space to tell their story to a person they trusted, and these women spoke their truths without apology. The stories had been told in pieces to different people, but never told from the beginning to present to one person. Ultimately, these narratives were constructed through sisterhood and porch and park conversations. These co-constructed narratives are not truths in the way that gravity is true, or in the way that physical reality is true, but they are truths in the way the participants understand their onto-epistemology. Whether each piece of information shared is absolutely the correct information we do not know, but this is the information the participants hold in their mind, body, and spirit when they make sense of their life. How much of that is completely accurate and verifiable we do not know, nor do I claim to know, nor am I putting it forward as such. I am putting it forward as this is how the participants understand their lives; therefore, this is self-determination.

Traditional discourse in social sciences has marginalized this way of truth making and knowledge building. In a cultural empiricism, this way of understanding people's lives and narratives is marginalized, so people who are experiencing suffering are not always heard. Hence, I conducted the study with that ethicality in mind and created a new direction and way of understanding, so the Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry is a response to that. We have Black Feminist Thought and narrative inquiry, and now we have Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry.

By using this framework, they were open with me, but at points in time they also wondered if I was uncomfortable listening to them as they detailed intimate moments in their

118

lives.  Sometimes we sat in silence after a heavy story was shared, until they were ready to talk again.  I would ask occasionally if we needed to stop for the day, but they wanted to carry on; most of the time they just needed a little time for the words to settle.

When attending to qualitative research, there are times when the researcher cannot predict how a participant will respond, and sometimes the participant cannot predict how they will respond.  Therefore, with this study, after discussing the informed consent, there was an assumption made by the participants and the researcher that the participants were willing and able to share those stories.  To me, this was more than eliciting stories or gaining knowledge.  I have a genuine interest in wisdom sharing, mentorship, and intergenerational cultural communication.  When dealing with humanity in general, and in dealing with cultural elders, culturally situated ethics come in to play.  There is no way researchers will know what will happen, as we are not robots, and cannot explicitly declare what we are going to do as a pre-programmed agenda.  Thus, entering the research space meant respecting the space we were holding and leaning on the bonds of kinship that formed with mutual respect between the researcher and the participant.  For example, I shared the final timeline I created with Pamela at our member check and she did not respond favorably to seeing her life in black and white on paper.  She reacted with: "Are you going to put all of this in there?  What does my momma and all of these people have to do with my story?  Why would you include them?  Are you going to tell people these details?  Who is going to read this?"  I calmly answered all of Pamela's questions and reassured her that the information in the timeline was to make sure the material I use for the narrative was accurate and in chronological order.  I also reassured her that I would use pseudonyms for all names.  She was reluctant to accept my answer, so I promised that I would keep all communication open regarding her narrative, and if she wanted to stop the

conversations she could.  She refused to review her timeline, but wanted to read her narrative, so the narratives are co-constructed as part of the due diligence of this study.  She was concerned that I would tell secrets about her family that they had not consented to.  Also, seeing her life in black and white created some embarrassment.  I consulted with my advisor after the conversation with Pamela, but there was no way I could have prepared for that.  What do you say in advance that is ethical, but also leaves room for being compassionate, ethical, and real with the person?  My advisor advised me to journal and remain aware and vigilant.  She reminded me that these women were people who had experienced a great deal during their lifetime, so if they were consenting to telling me their stories, they had boundaries regarding what they were willing to tell and what they would hold back.  And as a researcher informed by Black Feminist Thought and Womanism, I felt compelled to respect the elders' agency instead of second guessing them.  They also had coping mechanisms because they are not fragile women without the skills of navigating difficult life experiences.  She suggested that I find the balance with participants by allowing them space to tell their story at their own pace choosing what they wanted to share, but also being vigilant of my positionality and actions in the process.

I became aware during the peer debriefing and journaling that I was reserved in my writing and thoughts.  Because I understand that traditionally Black women have been marginalized and their stories distorted to fit the stereotypes of the dominant or hegemonic group, I wanted to present the narratives in a genuine way, careful not to perpetuate stereotypes or create an analysis that suggested that one participant's lifestyle, spiritual practices, or sexuality preferences were better than those of the other.  I took this charge seriously and I knew I was handling intensely sensitive parts of people's lives.  I wanted to make sure I was careful in how I told these narratives and what truths I was sharing with the world about these cultural

elders. I am not casting judgment on their understanding or lived experience, but I am simply sharing and being conscious of the influence these stories have on the participants and perhaps others who read them.

<div align="center">**Data Management and Analysis**</div>

Data management is the process of organizing the volumes of pages of data that I collected into manageable chunks. Essentially, it is the organizational strategy of all the data collected in preparation for data analysis. Similar to the data collection process, the data analysis is extensive. The process included data management, reading/memoing, describing, classifying, interpreting, theorizing, and representing/visualizing information. I managed the data by maintaining a digital folder with each dataset collected. The hard copies of the participant writings were kept in a locked safe as well as the wisdom whisper elicitations and artifacts/archived documents. I organized the volume of data by organizing it in chronological order. Also, when working with the data digitally, I protected the data via passwords.

Data analysis is an iterative and emergent process. Data analysis for narratives was a slight challenge because the process of collecting and analyzing data progresses as the study developed; therefore, there was no formula or prescription to guide narrative analysis (Kim, 2016), in this case, a Womanist and Black Feminine Narrative Analysis. To my knowledge, no studies have incorporated these analytical frameworks; therefore, while I treaded in unfamiliar territory for the data analysis process, I was open to emergent issues and ideas while I engaged in this process. For this reason, what follows is how data analysis was approached based on the framework of Black women's narratives as previously established (see Figure 3).

The process of data analysis involved close reading of the transcripts generated from wisdom whisper conversations. In the wisdom whisper conversations, participants shared their

wisdom with me in terms of what I might learn from their experiences of sexuality, spirituality, and the intersection of the two in their lives as Black women. Using womanism and the tenets of Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry, I was predisposed to ideas that resonated with relationship with self, spirit, and other environments in which learning occurs; ways in which one struggles, survives, and thrives; and ways in which one negotiates their role as a Black woman within and outside their communities. This was the first layer of analysis, and in it, the narrative elements of Black women's conversation that could include pain, humor, kitchen-based community, family-based community, mother, other mother, and village mother. These elements are found in various stories from Black novelists, including Alice Walker, Angela Davis, Lorraine Hansberry, Ann Petry as well as many others. In addition, throughout the entire data analysis process, I asked myself the question, "What else is going on?" to make sure that I remained open to ideas that are present in the moment in addition to the ideas I had already identified from womanism and Black Feminine Narrative structures (see Figure 4).
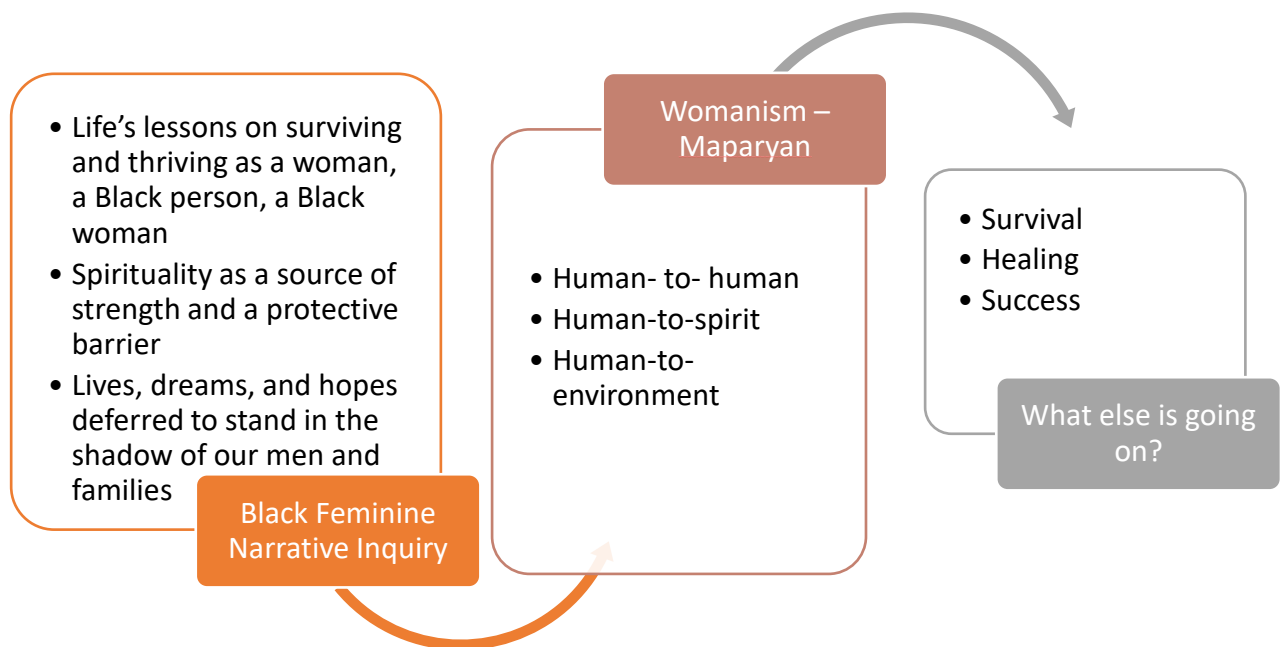


*Figure 4*. Data analysis.

As I continued the analysis, in subsequent rounds, I began to look for instances of vulnerability, spirituality, and empowerment in the Black women's narratives of experiences of sexuality. These elements helped in creating what I am coining as Vulnerable, Empowered, and Spirit-Driven Narratives (VES Narratives). These narratives would then be part of how the findings of the data would be represented in accessible, yet complex, layered, and multidimensional form (see Figure 5).

**Collect Data**
- **Wisdom Whisper Talks**
  - Treasure chest of sexuality
  - Treasure chest of spirituality
  - Treasure chest of spirituality and sexuality

**Analyze Data**
- **Explore Narrative Storylines Through A Womanist and Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry Lens + What Else is Going On**
  - Self, Human-to-Human, Human-to-Spirit, Human-to-Environment
  - Black women's survival, struggle, healing, and success
  - Black women's spirituality as a source of strength
  - Black women's relationship with patriarchy
  - What else is going on?

**Present Data**
- **VES Narratives**
  - Vulnerable, Empowered, and Spirit-Driven Narratives

*Figure 5.* Data analysis process to data representation.

## Data Representation

The data represent a storytelling of how the Black women engage in and negotiate sexuality and spirituality in their various environments throughout their lives. I created VES narratives in congruence with the structure of Black women novelists' storytelling, where the storied lives of Black women are often stories of struggle, vulnerability, empowerment, and

spirituality.  The unfolding of these stories shared elements of strong empowerment and carried elements of coming-of-age narratives that could be understood as a Bildungsroman.

Kim (2016) tells us that Bildungsroman's origination is German and Bildung means "formation or education" and roman is "story" (p. 127).  Thus, Bildungsroman is a story of the protagonist, or main character's education or development, psychologically, socially, and morally from youth to adulthood—also known as coming-of-age narratives (Boes, 2006).  Kim (2016) details how Frye, a Canadian literary critic and theorist, used Bildungsroman to trace women's self-development.  The elements of Bildungsroman that were incorporated in this study include:

> The idea of an inner or spiritual journey of personal growth;
> The tension between the ideal and the reality;
> The importance of the context in which the protagonist's personal journey takes place;
> The role of enhancing the *Bildung* of the researcher and the reader;
> The importance of questioning, dialogue, and doubt in the personal journey; and
> The elements of striving, uncertainty, complexity, and transformation. (Kim, 2016, p. 129, italics in original)

As seen in the features of Bildungsroman, the character embarks on a personal journey to achieve transformation.  Although the stories about Black women could be termed as Bildung, they do not always share similar characteristics with those of their white counterparts.  O'Neale (1982), a Black novelist and literary theorist, argues that Black women's coming of age represented in the novels follow a completely different development pattern than their white counterparts, and even than their Black male counterpart.  O'Neale (1982) discusses that the traditional Western coming-of-age narratives include, "first physical awakenings, dramatic adolescent conflicts, and later reconciliation with family, religion, educational system and national community" (p. 25).  Conversely, Black women do not have the same sense of personal freedom to explore these issues, especially within a dominant culture targeted to create

oppression and suffering for them. Therefore, O'Neale (1982) argues that there is no specific

pattern for Black women's Bildung, and it varies because of the multiple social structures of

oppression they have to negotiate; often these coming-of-age experiences can occur much later,

after Black women learn how to navigate the world as racial, gendered, sexual beings, and

understand their own trauma and create paths of healing. Using Toni Morison's novels *The*

*Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, O'Neale states:

> Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Sula, inconsistent with cultural values established
> within the canon. However, most novels by Black women, including those represented in
> Schultz's survey, do not support her thesis about "healthy interaction" with the Black
> community, even the protagonist's family. Similarly, to Buckley's conclusions about
> British Bildungsroman, the Black heroines are often "orphaned or at least fatherless by
> death or alienation." Where fathers are present, strained relationships with mothers exist.
> These alienations extend into adult sexual relationships where heroines are repelled by or
> are at least indifferent to sex not only because of familial conflicts but also because fears
> of producing children who will be likewise rejected because of race, skin color or gender.
> (p. 27)

Therefore, it can be argued that a coming-of-age experience for a Black woman can occur much

later in life, especially even after their reproductive years, which is the age group of the

participants. Within that age, there might be possibilities to deal with the trauma and rejection

from various forces of oppression, and find pathways to heal, much like how Maya Angelou

carried herself in the later part of her life, despite the cruel and brutally violating incidents in the

earlier part of her life. In those later parts of her life, she became the wisdom whisperer to her

community and to anyone who would value in her advice.

> The stories from Black women novelists generally represent internal struggles racial
> identity, gender definitions (in contexts of Black and not white experience), and the
> awakening of sexual being- in short, to discover, direct, and recreate the self in the midst
> of hostile racial, sexual and other societal repression- to produce a literature not confined
> to usual Bildung development as set chronological ages. (O'Neal, 1982, p. 25)

> For example, Feng (2000) studies the work of African American novelist Toni

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Asian American novelist Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman*

*Warrior and China Men* to discuss the construction of female Bildungsroman and the intersectionality of the multiple, complex layers of race, culture, systemic oppression, and gender associated with their stories. Leseur (1995) details the works of Black and Caribbean authors and discusses how these authors have modified the traditional European Bildung model to fit their oppressed, raced, classed, and gendered lives. Angelou's (1969) work features her personal story as she and her brother are moved from Arkansas to California to live with her grandmother after their parents are divorced. In the book, Angelou shares her struggles with racism, the experiences of childhood rape, and her journey to womanhood. Cisneros (1991) details the coming of age story of a Latina girl growing up in Chicago. In this novel, Cisneros uses poems and short stories to detail her trials, tribulations, and joys. Hurston (2006) tells the coming-of-age story of a character Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In this novel, Janie journeys through failed marriages, poverty, and trials in search of her purpose. Walker's (2003) *The Color Purple* encompasses stories of love, loss, finding faith, friendship among women, family secrets, and defining sexuality as the stories of the characters are interwoven. In all of these examples, the coming of age of a Black woman, or a Black woman's Bildung does not follow a set pattern but varies widely. Whereas in Anglo or westernernized Bildung, the narrative structures include first sexual experiences, adolescent and family conflicts, and later reconciliation in search of one's personal freedom in a cultural space where they are not alienated as Other but supported in their quest for freedom, the above examples provide the complicated terrain of Black women's journey with different narrative elements in their Bildung, such as friendship, sisterhood, spirituality, sexuality, and family secrets, etc. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, VES narratives contain narratives of vulnerability, empowerment, and spirit-driven coming-of-age experiences.

**Reciprocity and Ethics**

Although some are hard to predict, ethical considerations should be addressed in all research, and limiting the harm to the participant and researcher, whether social, emotional, or physical, should supersede any researcher's agenda (Lander, 2017). When engaging in centering Black women in a study, I was especially conscientious of choices and actions (Allen, 2002) I made with the data and the relationship. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) discuss two types of ethical elements qualitative researchers should consider: procedural ethics and ethics of practice. Procedural ethics involves seeking approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) or similar committee in order to conduct research. Ethics in practice refers to the commonplace issues that come from doing research and the obligations the researcher has. Collins (1989) suggests that ethics relate to personal accountability, whereas a person is responsible for not only developing their knowledge but owning and presenting that knowledge that is genuine to their identity, character, values, and ethics. Presenting ethically sound research, respecting the identity, character, morals, and values of the women is equally important.

Researching sensitive issues such as sexuality and spirituality involves risk. There was a potential for the participants to disclose information that may lead to cathartic moments or reliving experiences they would rather keep hidden; in those instances, how I responded as the researcher was paramount to how the interviewing process would proceed, and more importantly, the well-being of the participant and how they recovered. I handled a situation of this magnitude in a number of ways: (a) I was a sounding board and provided a listening ear. With the understanding that I am not a credentialed therapist, I created boundaries and attended to reflexive research, which is the act of constantly questioning our assumptions and how conclusions are drawn while being aware of our roles and actions as related to the research

process as a whole (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).  In these important and delicate moments, what is said and how it said is critical (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).  It is important to keep in mind that the women in the study were born and grew up during the baby boomer era, a more traditional time than now, which demanded an understanding of morality, modesty, and culture of that time. Moreover, it should be noted that the behaviors, perceptions or beliefs of one group of Black women does not represent all Black women (Allen, 2002); (b) I was prepared to offer referrals (counseling, spiritual) to women who may want to speak to someone about their mental health; and (c) I considered peer debriefing with a peer that was clinically trained "for evidence of psychological distress" (Few et al., 2003, p. 211).  I consulted with my co-chairs of my dissertation committee for guidance and reminded the participants that they could terminate the study or the conversation at any point without penalty.

Ethical implications may arise from conducting life history research and using timeline interviews as a method (Adriansen, 2012).  If the timeline is not protected and is published, the participant's anonymity has the potential to be lost since the datum pinpoints specific times and places.  Therefore I did not publish the timeline, but treated the information as notes (Adriansen, 2012).

It is important to tell Black women's stories and disseminate information about their "lives, thoughts, inventions, discoveries, and other general successes" (Etter-Lewis, 1996, p. 117) because their stories have been set against white, middle-class (US) American women's stories, and their experiences and are deemed trivial and "ghettotized" (Etter-Lewis, 1996, p. 116).  Including these groups into the research and inserting their narratives creates a complex and intricate interweaving of multiple individual and group narratives that are dissimilar from the narratives that have been largely communicated (Collins, 2015).  Given the sensitive and

intimate nature of the study to explore ways in which Black women use spirituality and informal learning to inform their understanding of sexuality, issues of cultural norms, and class stratification of the narrator are of importance (Bailey, 1999; Riessman, 1987). It cannot be assumed that an immediate bond or connection will occur or insider status will be granted between the interviewer and the participant if they share the same racial or ethnic background (Few et al., 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 1999). The same should not be assumed with the narrators in this study and myself because we share the same racial or ethnic background and gender classification. If the cultural norms of the narrators are not attended to, there is an opportunity for a misunderstanding to arise with the narrator's story, meaning-making, relationship, or trust building.

Although Black women scholars work with Black women participants and share gender and race, there are considerations to be made. From the conversations with other Black researchers and scholars, Few et al. (2003) become aware of the issues that may influence interactions with Black women studying Black women, such as color, class, gender, linguistics, nationality, sexuality, and physical attractiveness, which must be continuously negotiated and not assumed. For example, body language, the way one speaks, and the educational background could affect the researcher-participant relationship. As Few et al. (2003) encourage other Black women scholars and researchers to engage "in pursuit of truth and knowledge about, by, and for Black women" (p. 205), they make recommendations for conducting qualitative research with Black women that should be considered above what is established in the traditional qualitative literature about interviews to find culturally congruent methods of inquiry. The following are the recommendations: (a) contextualizing research accurately and appropriately gaining knowledge about the history and culture of the participant, to alleviate misrepresenting, misinterpreting, or

contributing to stereotypes and marginalization of the diverse Black women's experiences.

Attention was given to these principles as I understood and employed the philosophies of

intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and multiple jeopardy (King, 1988), which attend to the

multiple diverse dimensions of Black women.  I also included the participants in the planning of

the research and empowered them to narrate their own stories; (b) contextualizing self in the

research process involves recognizing subjectivities throughout the process including the data

collection, data analysis, and the data representation phases of the research process.  This was

done as I reflected on the dynamics of the researcher-participant relationship through journaling,

peer debriefing, member checks, and being accountable and responsible for the sensitive,

personal information I was privileged to have access to and that the participants were willing to

share.  I was responsible with the Black women's narratives so the information did not

perpetuate stereotypes, multiple oppressions or present negative images of Black women; (c)

monitoring our symbolic power in the representation process means I needed to be attentive to

the language I used throughout the process, because just like some of the other features (body

language, class, color, etc.), the use of language has the ability to identify a person's social status

and suggests educational or social/class privilege.  Additionally, since my participants were

older, the use of slang may have been misinterpreted.  For example, my mother (a baby boomer)

made a reference to my cousin's (a millennial) "cute thongs" one summer day in a conversation

and my cousin, embarrassed, asked my mother not to tell her dad because he doesn't like her

wearing them.  My mom, with a puzzled look, said I'm talking about your shoes!  In my cousin's

mind, thong was a reference to her underwear and not her shoes.  She told my mother they call

her shoes flip-flops, not thongs.  This is an example of how language can be misinterpreted.

Instances such as this could potentially harm the rapport with the participant if she has a frame of

reference to something that may be offensive or uncouth.  Thus, I was reflective of the language

I used, understanding that there may be regional or generational differences.  I also refrained

from interrupting and inserting my personal affects in the research when it was not appropriate;

(d) triangulating multiple sources involves using more than one method to uncover unspoken or

implied meanings.  Few et al. (2003) approaches questions in multiple ways so the participant

has a chance to reflect on their answer from different angles when it comes to sensitive topics

such as sexuality.  Furthermore, triangulation provides the participant with the freedom to

control their narrative and express themselves in ways that words may not.  Since Black

women's stories have been set against white, middle-class (US) American women's stories, and

their experiences are deemed trivial, attesting to the political connotation sexuality for Black

women holds is also important.  I used nontraditional sources of data, so the Black women were

able to "show" and tell about their experiences; and (e) caring for our informants in the research

process attended to the wounds or scars that were uncovered because of the sensitive nature of

the research.  Following Few et al.'s (2003) suggestion, I explained the boundaries of the

relationship and provided referrals when appropriate, I also considered peer debriefing with a

peer that is clinically trained "for evidence of psychological distress" (p. 211) and consulted with

my co-chairs of my dissertation committee for guidance.  I also encouraged self-reflection for the

participants and involved them in member checks.  When ending the study with the participants,

I was respectful, understanding some of them may not want the relationship to end and will have

a genuine interest in my work.

A great deal of gratitude is due to the women around which this study centers.  Because

of their willingness to participate in research, share their stories, and make the most intimate

parts of their lives public, others may benefit from hearing their stories and identify with their

journey.  To express my gratitude, I will continue to create and build a kinship with the women because they expressed interest in continuing the relationship.  If the relationship would have ended when the study did, then ethically it would be wrong because these participants see me like a daughter, sister, friend, since we were deeply engaged in kitchen-based community and I gained knowledge on the backs of these women.  Depending on the woman, after the research is complete, the relationship may involve monthly chats, lunch or coffee, or me volunteering to do something.  I would also like to provide the women a copy of their stories after it has been nicely bound.  I think the women would appreciate the gesture in knowing that I have delicately cared for their words, wisdom, and message and I did not take the responsibility lightly.  It also reinforced to the women that their storied lives are important and their stories will be shared with future generations.

## Trustworthiness, Rigor, and Member Checks

Being consistent and transparent throughout the research process is important for establishing trustworthiness and rigor; because of this, consideration is given to provide clarity and alleviate obscurity in various ways.  Strategies for establishing trustworthiness and rigor include an ongoing and extensive review of the data via member checks so the participants can verify the accuracy of the transcription, preliminary analysis of data, and the final results at the end of the study.  Peer debriefing, journaling, and re-listening for both verification and clarification, and triangulation are also important (Lander, 2017).

Tracy (2010) provides eight criteria for excellent qualitative research.  The following is a list of Tracy's (2010) tenets and how I addressed each of them.

Self-reflexivity and transparency in qualitative research is described as the act of constantly questioning our assumptions; being honest and authentic about our strengths,

shortcomings, and the nature of the research; understanding how conclusions are drawn; and being aware of our roles and actions as related to the research process as a whole (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Tracy, 2010).

1. Worthy Topic

2. Rich Rigor

3. Sincerity

4. Credibility

5. Resonance

6. Significant Contribution

7. Ethical

8. Meaningful Coherence

Choosing a worthy topic was important because I was able to apply my personal interest to a larger societal issue. Rich rigor is provided when a variety of suitable data sources and theoretical frameworks join together to study the detailed topic (Tracy, 2010). To ensure the richness of the rigor, Tracy poses questions to test the rigor of a study:

> (a) Are there enough data to support significant claims? (b) Did the researcher spend enough time to gather interesting and significant data? (c) Is the context or sample appropriate given the goals of the study? and (d) did the researcher use appropriate procedures in terms of field note style, interviewing practices, and analysis procedures? (Tracy, 2010, p. 841)

To ensure richness in rigor, I selected frameworks to support my study: Womanism, Black Feminism, and Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry. I was sincere throughout my research by stating my positionality early and ensuring consistency with the use of research methods. I used member checking, peer debriefing, exercising reflexibility through journaling as a way of remaining credible in this study, and I used multiple data sources. Using thick, rich, detailed

descriptions created credibility, especially when those descriptions depicted information in multiple data sources across the participants' varied narratives. Additionally, the depth, richness, sincerity, honesty, and vulnerability of the narratives produced resonance amongst readers for various reasons. At the start of this study, I included a rationale for significant contribution by providing a personal, social, and practical/theoretical justification for the study. I was reflexive about how I approached the participants and how I would support them through the study as well as provide opportunities for them to stop participating if they felt uncomfortable. I ensured the participants understood my interests in this topic and my background as a Black woman.

Through member checks, I checked with the participants throughout the process for accuracy, to corroborate what was found, and to mitigate any misunderstandings that may have been communicated. Additionally, understanding that the participant's ways of making meaning are shared with the researcher, member checking kept the researcher grounded in the data and the subjectivities at bay. Member checking also provided opportunities to discuss the researcher's thought process, illuminate ideas that emerged, or gain new insights about the data (Saldaña, 2016); this was especially true during the analysis and coding phase of the research. Furthermore, member checks empowered the participant to invest in the research and authenticate their contributions (Few et al., 2003).

### Summary

Qualitative inquiry provides the wherewithall for the researcher to explore beliefs, experiences, and attitudes of the participants in their context. Methodologically, for this study, womanism, narrative inquiry, and Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry constructed from the narrative structures of Black women's novels were used to frame the study. Wisdom whisper was used as a data collection method and as a way to honor the wisdom that was shared through

intergenerational conversations.  To stay consistent with Black women's onto-epistemologies,

Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry was presented as a way to explore and analyze older Black

women's experiences with sexuality, spirituality, and informal learning environments.  To

represent the data, the vulnerable, empowered, and spirit-driven narratives of the participants

were presented.  Additionally, throughout the study, the procedural ethics and the ethics of

practices were considered as I was personally accountable for protecting, developing, and

analyzing the information that was shared as well as presenting the findings that were true to the

study.

# Chapter 4- You Don't Know My Story

I selected the two participants because they shared similarities but also significant

differences in their experiences that brought them to their understanding of sexuality through

spirituality and informal learning settings. To capture the essence of the Black women's stories

as Vulnerable, Empowered and Spirit-driven (VES), I created narratives using womanism and

the tenets of Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry. VES narratives present a resolution to O'Neale's

(1982) critique of Bildung as a method for analyzing Black women's lives. Bildung is a German

term meaning educating oneself, wherein a person matures personally in a cultural context. This

developmental process is achieved through transformation of one's accepted beliefs mostly

through philosophy and education. This coming-of-age story focuses on the psychological and

moral growth from youth to adulthood. O'Neale (1982) posits that traditionally, a coming-of-

age story comprises a person having a conflict with themselves, society, family, etc. and

eventually reconciling their conflict, finding value in themselves and their situation, and being

accepted into society after assimilating to society's values. However, the problem lies in that

this is not the case for Black people, undeniably not for Black women, because of the many ways

they are marginalized and never fully accepted in society, whether assimilation has occurred or

not. O'Neale (1982) submits that society is not willing to create the welcomed space to honor

growth; instead more barriers are encountered. Therefore, coming of age can sometimes come at

the end of one's life because that person is continually sorting out pain and trauma. Henceforth,

for the coming of age to happen, one needs to be vulnerable and empowered simultaneously. For

this study, I oriented a spiritual dimension in addition to vulnerability and empowerment. VES

narratives exemplify how narratives can be presented in a vulnerable and empowered way with a

component of spirituality, which attends to the concerns O'Neale suggests when analyzing Black women's lives.

VES narratives also highlight the need for having culturally responsive ways to writing narratives. The participants' narratives captured the relationships with self, others, spirit, and environments in which learning occurred. The narratives also encompass elements of struggle, surviving and thriving, and the ways in which the women negotiated their roles as Black women within and outside of their communities. I honor each participant's self-authoring of their VES narratives by presenting the VES narratives in first-person juxtaposing information they shared with me during the conversations to Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry as detailed in Chapter 3. I created these VES narratives by using information shared with me during the wisdom whisper conversations and for aesthetic purposes, I smoothed out certain parts of the narrative to improve the flow and understanding. To that end, I would like to offer a cautionary. The narratives include colorful language that some may find offensive, and topics or events that could be emotionally or psychologically triggering for the reader.

## Still Standing: VES Narratives of Participants

### Great is Thy Faithfulness: The Chronicle of Viola

At first glance, Viola resembles a stylish, hip grandmother, the kind you would go on vacation or shopping with. She is an accomplished designer and educator in her late 60s. Knowledgeable and soft spoken, she is firm in her stance and beliefs. Viola is very busy and still quite active managing her own design business, so pinning her down for conversations was sometimes like catching a butterfly. Viola was first introduced to me through a mutual friend, Kim. I had expressed my research interests to Kim and she thought Viola would be someone with whom I should connect since Viola had completed her doctoral degree and could provide

insight on navigating the process. Viola and I had spoken many times and determined that we had some similar interests so when it was time to complete my dissertation, Viola expressed interest in being a participant. We met at Viola's home for our meetings. At our first meeting, I was greeted at the door by her fur-babies and then her as she did a little hop like a school girl. We greeted with a hug and she invited me into her home. After a quick tour of the home, during which she pointed out some of the renovations she and her husband Brent recently finished, we talked about her recent and upcoming travels, sorority life, and current projects she was working on and her latest art projects, the conversation soon switched to research and the study at hand.

Since Viola holds a Ph.D., the conversation led to a general discussion about qualitative research, black women as participants, and our respective institutions. She was excited about the topic and shared that some of her friends were interested in being participants as well in the future because they wanted to share their experiences. Throughout the interview, we moved comfortably to different locations throughout her home, beginning in her colorful pink and green sitting room on her daybed, then on to the living room for subsequent conversations, as well as to the covered porch. As Viola shared her testimony, it was truly a conversation that bonded two women born of different generations. The wisdom whisper talks were an exclusive uninterrupted time for the participant to share her wisdom. Viola passed the wisdom down as the two of us sat side by side in various rooms of her home. Together, we experienced moments of laughter as well as moments of contemplative silence, during which I appreciated her vulnerability and was reminded of the necessity for the study. The stories are told like a flashback, a glimpse in time being remembered and embraced. Following is the co-constructed VES narrative of Viola's experiences in first-person voice as analyzed and synthesized from the wisdom whisper talks. The VES narratives are co-constructed, meaning I constructed the narratives and shared them

with Viola, who made suggestions, omissions, and additions to her story (Lander, 2017).  Please note that this is a rendition of the wisdom whispered from the participant.  Additionally, my intention was to keep as much of the essence of the story and the participant's disposition because I wanted to represent them in their authentic form.

**Part I: Church – The foundation for the family.**  I'm sure I was going to church even when I was in the womb.  You know, Southern Baptists go to church.  My mom was a missionary and my dad was a Baptist minister, so there was no getting out of going to church, even if you were sick.  If any of us had a tummy ache, my daddy would order, "Give 'em Pepto-Bismol cause they're going to church!  It's one day with God, you can spend that day in the church and feel better."

We went to Sunday school, Bible study, and Wednesday prayer; it felt like we were in church every day. Although my dad was a minister, we attended another church twice a month because he believed, "You're my children, you're at home with me; you go to church with me, and I can teach you, but you need to learn from others, too."

I learned more about church from others around me because I also went to a private Baptist school attached to the local university.  When my older siblings started talking about going to the nightclub at 18, my daddy wouldn't hear of that in his house.  But when my brothers started going to things like that, they were 19 and out of my daddy's house; if not out of the house, we were going to church.  Everything about my childhood was centered around church: playing with church kids, going to church picnics, and at school the main things they talked about was how to be a Christian and church!  With church having been a part of all my life, I vowed to myself, although I dare not say it to my parents, that when I was out of their house, I wasn't going to church no more.  It wasn't that I didn't believe in God; I just felt churched out.

One of my most special memories was being baptized when I was 10. The whole congregation walked from the church to the river to participate in the baptism. Those who were getting baptized had on white gowns, and we walked in a line as everyone sang:

Take me to the water/ take me to the water/take me to the water/ to be baptized/ none but the righteous/ none but the righteous shall be saved/ so take me to the water/ take me to the water/ take me to the water/ to be, to be baptized/ I'm going back home/ going back home/gonna stay here no longer/ I'm going back home/ going back home/ to be baptized. (Simone, 1967)

My friend Gina was baptized before me and when she got out of the water, she was crying. I thought maybe she had been dunked too deep, but she was actually having an emotional moment. As a 10-year-old, I didn't connect that. I was frightened. It wasn't because I couldn't swim since we had a swimming pool in our backyard, but that water was dark. I was also nervous it would get in my nose. I asked the preacher if I could hold my nose and he reassured, "I will hold your nose." I was still nervous when he took the back of my head in the palm of his hand, clasped my nose, said a prayer, and dunked my head under the water, but it only lasted a few seconds. When I came up people were clapping, and I thought that was cool; I liked the attention. Then my mom grabbed me and put a towel around me to dry me off. After everyone was baptized, we went back to the church and had a big dinner. Everyone from church and our families came to the dinner. It was a big celebration and I felt happy to be around people that loved me.

Later that evening, my mom gifted me a necklace with cross on it. When she put the cross around my neck and told me I was one of God's children, I felt a warm relief and felt special, but at 10, I didn't fully understand the significance of religion and spirituality. As I look

back at it now, that's when I first connected to my spirituality; it was like feeling a connection to something bigger than me that I was thankful for.  I cherished that moment and that necklace.  It was the first piece of Christian jewelry my mom had ever given me, and I cherished it for two reasons: first, I felt I was closer to God and second, I knew how hard my mom and dad had to work to get that necklace and still provide for six children.

My parents worked hard, always leaving before we did for school.  Mom left at 8:00 to go to the hospital where she was a nurse and she was also a missionary.  Dad, a carpenter and a minister, left our home around 5:00 in the morning.  A family friend, Ms. Carolyn, would come down the street and wait with us until we got on the bus; she also met us when we got home from school to make sure we got in the house.  She would make us snacks so we could eat and do our homework.  Most of the time we told her we were doing it, but were not doing it.  My parents' expectations for school were high for us because they valued education and hard work.  One day, William reported that he didn't do so well in Math and was going to give up trying to learn it.  My dad responded, "You can't do it if you don't try."  There was no such thing as not trying, not for my dad.

My dad worked and taught us how to work, even making us work for our Christmas gifts.  If we didn't follow the house rules or do our chores during the year, all of that was counted against us at Christmas time.  For instance, it was expected that my brother Robert would only get one gift because he was always in trouble.  Eric, on the other hand, was always "good" because he was the oldest and he kind of kept us in line; but my sister Karen wouldn't get too many gifts sometimes and my dad really kept his eyes on her.  Dad kept a record somehow and the gift level was dependent on how we acted the whole year.

In our house of six kids we all knew the rules and followed them except Karen and Robert occasionally. Every Saturday without fail, unless it rained really hard, we all had to do chores. The girls did inside chores, like laundry and cleaning the kitchen, and the boys did outside chores like yard work. Also, if we came to the table and said we didn't do or learn anything that day, my dad would say, "You gonna learn something. You can't just go the whole day and not learn anything." So, we ended up sharing what we had learned that day.

Dad's discipline was tight. If one person was being punished and the rest of us were around, Dad would punish all of us because we knew about it and didn't say anything. If one person couldn't go out of the house, nobody could go out of the house and we would be mad at that one person. I think Robert would do it deliberately, so he would have somebody in the house with him, but with six kids you had to discipline. On occasion, we would get spankings. My dad wouldn't spank Karen or me because he was a man and my mom wouldn't allow it, but she would spank us if we did something or if she had to ask us more than twice to do something.

**Part II: Hold your head up high.** Karen loved to chase boys and my dad chastised her a lot and put her on punishment. She really wasn't afraid of spankings or being on punishment; she weighed the consequences and decided if the risk was worth it. It usually was to her, especially if she had already made plans with her friends. If she went out, my parents waited for her and she got a spanking or got put on punishment again when she returned home. She didn't care because she went out and had a good time. If it was me and I was on punishment, I stayed right where I was supposed to. Karen used to call me a goody two-shoes, but I liked being home and working on art projects. Karen wasn't like that, she wanted to be with her friends and boys.

On many occasions, Karen had plans to go out with friends, and one time, she dressed in a miniskirt to go to a birthday party. My parents would never buy us miniskirts, so she made her

own by cutting one of her skirts shorter and half hemming it.  My daddy threatened, "If you go out this house you will get pregnant.  You aren't hiding anything, and a man shouldn't see everything until you're ready for him to see it."  So he made her go change.  But to listen to them, the way you dressed was an invitation to men, and that was the lesson I learned.

I felt good about who I was; I didn't have a problem with who I was, but I wished I was prettier, like Karen who was 13 months older and so outgoing.  I struggled at times with accepting my looks and outer appearance because I thought I was the ugly one.  I've always thought that I had a long nose, a long chin, and I have this thing with my smile, it's kind of twisted.  When my daddy told me I was pretty, I would refute, "That's because I'm your daughter; you're supposed to say I'm pretty."  There was no denying that Karen was pretty and that I was jealous of her beauty; she had the friends and the boys to prove it.

My mom used to say, "God don't make people that are ugly.  If people only judge you by your outer looks then they don't need you and you don't need to be around them."  It was easy for my mom to say, but that didn't mean I believed it or she believed I was pretty.  I believed God made us in His image and that we were all God's creations; he just made us individuals and some prettier than the others.  I believed early that people should look at people from the inside.  I also understood that we're all human and the first thing we see, especially boys, is the aesthetics until we learn more about that person.

When I was 15 a bully, Martha, had been picking on me because she was jealous, and she knew I wouldn't fight her.  It started with her pulling my hair and it escalated from there.  One day, I was walking through the lunchroom and Martha grabbed my satchel and threw it to the ground, then she punched me in the face and bloodied my nose.  I hadn't done anything to Martha to warrant this kind of abuse, but she wailed on me as the other kids laughed.  I wouldn't

fight her, as I didn't know how to fight. So the whole week long, Martha and her crew picked on me. Church was my only reprieve. When I got to church after that week, the congregation was singing:

> I once was lost in sin/ Jesus took me in/And a little light from heaven filled my soul/ He filled my heart with love, wrote my name above/Just a talk with Jesus makes it all right/ Have a little talk with Jesus/Tell God about your troubles/He'll hear the faintest cry/And answer bye and bye/Feel the prayer wheel turning/Know that the fire's burning Just a little talk with Jesus makes it all right. (Norwood, 1978)

I felt so close to the song and it gave me hope because it was about being prayerful and that things would be alright. In that moment, I cried; I knew if I had God in my life nothing would be bad. I think that was my very first spiritual moment, when I really knew what spirituality was.

Since my siblings were in higher grades, they didn't know I got beat up. When I told Karen about it on the way to the bus, she ordered one of my brothers to go looking for Martha, but Martha was nowhere to be found. Martha also didn't come to school the next day, but that was a turning point for me as far as spirituality was concerned. I realized that if I had the spirit of God in me, I shouldn't be afraid of people. After that, I really wasn't afraid. I just said a prayer when I walked by myself, since kids picked on me all the time.

Living in the South, we had a good life, but we still had to be mindful of racism, bigotry, and lynchings, so we never went anywhere alone. Growing up, I wasn't afraid like a lot of other kids because I figured my dad would fix it, whatever it was.

Growing up in the 50s, I learned quickly about racism. Although my parents tried to protect us from many things, they couldn't shield us from racism and ignorance. The first time I

realized I was Black was when some friends and I tried to go into the theater on the side of town we lived on, but we couldn't go in.  I didn't know at 14 that we couldn't go into a white movie.  I knew from my friends who rode the city bus that Black folks had to sit at the back of the bus, but my siblings and I never rode the city bus.  My parents dropped me and my friends off at the local mall and after walking around a while, we decided that we were going to the movie because that's what teenagers did.  When we walked up to the ticket booth, the lady wouldn't sell us a ticket.  She sneered, "Y'all need to get on out of here now; we don't serve coloreds in here.  You can't buy a ticket."  I was confused and scared and my friends were scared, too.  I think it was their first experience as well, so we stood outside the mall and waited on my parents to pick us up.

When my dad arrived, he asked, "What did y'all do?"

They didn't tell us we couldn't go to the movies, but they didn't tell us we should go either, so I reluctantly said, "We tried to go to the movies."

My dad yelled, "You know you're not supposed to go down there!  If you want to go to the movies, you go to the Black movie."  That was a real eye-opener and I'll never forget that lady's voice, "Y'all go on now, we don't serve coloreds in here."

The next time I experienced racism, I knew it.  I was 16 and on the Fashion Board for a fabric store.  To be on the Fashion Board, I had to be really good at fashion and compete against other girls.  We were given a pattern and we had to make something wearable.  If it was good, you were chosen to be on the Fashion Board; I was chosen.  One of the first activities was to make an item of clothing and model it down a runway.  I thought the challenge would be walking the runway in front of so many people, but what came next, I don't think anyone could prepare for.  We had to pose like mannequins on the runway while two little old white ladies

145

judged our creations.  The judges were allowed to touch our clothes, but they weren't allowed to touch our skin.

As they were walking down the runway and critiquing our creations, one of the white women said nastily, "I don't know why they put that monkey mannequin up there."  I had instant tears well up in my eyes.  There were two white girls standing on either side of me and no other Black teens.  The girls could visibly see my dismay and held my hand really tight until our 5 minutes of spotlight were over.  The girls were angry but didn't say anything until we went to the back.  They hugged me and told Ms. Millie, the director, what happened.  Ms. Millie asked if I was okay and I cried, "Yeah," although I was visibly shaken and still crying.  When the fashion show was over my mom and dad came to the back to see us, and when they saw me, they could tell something was wrong.

They asked us what was wrong and Jillian, my white friend, narrated what happened on the runway, "Well, this lady called her a monkey."  I wasn't going to tell my daddy what happened, but he bent down and took my face in his hand and said, "Look at me.  Do you think you're a monkey?"

And I breathed, "No" in between sobs.

He said, "Then you hold your head up high and do not cry. If you have to look that woman in the face and tell her you are not a monkey, then you do it.  Don't you look down."  That's when I realized what racism really felt like.

**Part III: A time of growth and learning.**  My mom and dad had six children: Eric, William, Robert, Karen, Daniel, and me.  Robert is 4 years older than me, but he was always the one telling me and Karen stuff that mattered.  He was the one who told us how babies were

made: "a man and the woman, they get together and they sleep in the bed and they hold each other, and kiss, and they make a baby."

So that's what we knew about babies. If our questions about stuff were more than Robert could handle, he would divert, "When it's time for you to know, mom and dad will tell you." That pacified my curiosity for a little while.

When I asked my Mom about it, she elaborated, "Well, the boy has a penis and the girl has a vagina and a lot of people call it the private areas, and they make babies with these."

Now could you imagine what I was thinking, how are these two things going to make a baby? I questioned, "Well Mama, you had Daniel and you went to the hospital and brought him and back." She confirmed, "Yeah, we did," and that was the extent of our conversation for a long time. Although my mother was a nurse, she shied away from providing the details about anatomy or sex with us.

I was in the 7th grade when I had my first boy crush. His name was James, but I didn't think he liked me because when I smiled at him, he didn't smile back. I told Robert about it and he told me, "Well most boys just want sex and that's all they think about at this age."

I questioned, "Well what's sex?"

"Well kissing and hugging and the boy put his thing with the girl's thing," he replied.

To my reaction of disgust, Robert laughed, "Yeah right, you think it's gross now. But if you believe in God you shouldn't have sex until you know what's right for you, you understand it, and you know that God has chosen that person for you."

Of course, I didn't know what that meant, so I went home and wrote in my journal about liking James and whether I still loved God if I had these feelings. I was confused by it all. Robert said I shouldn't have sex until God has chosen a person for me and my parents said

people have sex when they are married.  I always thought sex had a lot to do with spirituality because people I was around talked about sex, sexuality and God together.

School was another place I learned about sex.  I went to a private school, so we wore uniforms but some of those girls hiked their skirts up, rolled the sleeves, and buttoned it down to look sexier.  I learned about the act of sex in Ms. Lewis's PE class in 7th grade.  I heard the girls talking about being with their boyfriends.  One girl in particular was Bianca, who was always an open person and never ashamed of who she was; that's what I liked about her.  She also loved sex and talked about it.  Everyone knew Bianca as being wild and having sex.  One day in PE, I was sitting with Bianca and a group of other girls and Bianca was instructing us on how men and women did it; we were all in awe.  She said we probably wouldn't like it at first, but she told us all the details as we sat in the corner of the gym floor in our uniforms.  Bianca didn't go to school with us the following year because she moved to live with her aunt for a year and then came back.  There were rumors that she got pregnant and had to live with her aunt, but when she came back she didn't have a baby; but I could tell something was different.  There's no doubt in my mind that her grandmother had a time with her, but I learned about sex from Bianca; what she taught me kind of intimidated me.

I was 16 when I called myself having a boyfriend, Kevin.  Kevin was the only boyfriend I had growing up.  I could never go anywhere with him; my dad just didn't allow me to go to the movies or anything with him.  He often came over to my house and watched TV with my family; by 9 pm he was gone.  We also talked on the phone occasionally, but we didn't have long conversations or anything like that.  One night, when he left my house he said he would call when he got home but never did.  It wasn't until 10 years later I found out he didn't call that night because he went to see another girl whom he eventually married.  So, I figured I didn't

really have a boyfriend.  I was the girl he would visit up until 8:30 pm.  I didn't know the other girl because she went to a different school, but people used to tell me he was trying to date me so he could get in my pants.

I started college young at 16 and was naïve to so many things in life.  It wasn't until I started college that I experienced what Karen described as eating ice cream.  I hadn't ever had a sexual feeling toward another person until college.  I saw this boy in passing and my body got hot.  I didn't even know this boy; he just walked by on campus.  It was like a flash of warmth that came over my body.  I think I had an orgasm and didn't even know it, it happened so fast.  I never saw him again after that, but I kept thinking, "Oh my God," as I giggled to myself.

In college, I made new friends from all walks of life.  One friend, Eva, played basketball and was a tomboy.  We were good friends in college and as well as after we graduated.  Eva and I had a mutual friend, Cheryl who called me one day and said she found out Eva was with a woman.

I was confused, "Like Eva is gay? But she spent the night with us all the time and we took showers…"

Cheryl unapologetically responded, "I don't understand that.  I'm not going to call her anymore."

It took me a second to process what was happening and how to respond because I came from a house where my dad preached against homosexuality.  He never denied us our friends who were homosexual or of another race, but he believed homosexuality was a sin.  It wasn't public knowledge, but with college being a mere 20 minutes from my parents' house, on many occasions my college friends came home with me.  They were from all walks of life and my mama treated them like they were her kids.

My dad often joked, "They over here again, they ain't got no people?" He accepted my friends, but told us, "I'll be praying for y'all."

I think the fact that my parents were accepting of my friends prompted my response to Cheryl, "Eva's lifestyle is nothing for you to understand. It's not your choice." I'm glad I didn't turn my back on Eva. We had been friends for a long time and if she needed something I'd try my best to help her; but I'm not going to deny her happiness, nobody is denying mine.

Before I turned 18, I didn't learn much about self-image because my mom didn't talk about that kind of stuff. All my dad said was if you kissed a boy, you'd get pregnant. I remember them both saying, "You look really pretty or handsome dressed up today" when we were little, but when we got older they stopped saying those things. They focused more on feeding, housing, and teaching us, not saying words like "I love you, you look so beautiful today." My mom and dad didn't do that, that's why I vowed to do that with my own kids.

All the lessons started to come in college, and they came by way of Doris. Doris taught the ballet and jazz dance group I was involved with. Doris answered the questions my mother wouldn't and when I came to class, she would compliment me. That's how I learned about self-image. I always thought I was the ugly duckling and if I kissed a boy I would get pregnant, so I stayed away from people and got into the artsy world and danced. I learned so much from the ballet and jazz dance group. From them, I learned how to dress and about what looked pretty. I went to the mall with some of my dance friends to try on clothes. They taught me about self-image, which boosted my confidence. I no longer came to school looking homely and wearing jeans under my dresses. I just wore jeans and t-shirts. I also stopped stuffing my bra with socks and toilet paper. I felt better about who I was, and I felt free. In college, I majored in home economics and began attending fashion shows to showcase my skills and newfound confidence.

For one of the fashion shows, I made a one-piece swimsuit with cutouts in the front; the design was way before my time and I made a cover up to go with it. When it was time to showcase our designs on the runway, I was so nervous that when I went out to walk the runway, I didn't take the cover off; I was too nervous. The home economics teacher, Ms. Stubbs, made me walk the runway again without the cover up. She announced that I was so excited about the design that I forgot to take the cover up off, and the audience went crazy. That moment I realized that my body didn't look so bad.

My mama was in the audience and was so tickled when I took the swimsuit coverup off, she said, "it wasn't because you took the swimsuit coverup off, it was because you discovered you had a body."

After that, guys paid me attention and talked to me, but I didn't get many dates. That was all right because that was my coming out stage. Even though I didn't have a positive self-image, in hindsight I am glad I had a mentor and a group of young women from whom I could learn in a positive and safe environment. It was a long time to wait to respect yourself or to have this image that you're not so bad. It doesn't matter what other people think, if you think it, people are going to see it, because it's something that comes out of you.

**Part IV: Train a child in the way she should go.** I wasn't much of a partier and I had only a few friends in college, but I did have a boyfriend, Steve who I thought was pretty cool. I had never been with a boy and didn't have much experience dating, so I thought he was the bomb. He paid me attention, he called, and when he went to the ROTC, he would send pictures. I was so excited to have a boyfriend that I went back home and showed my mom pictures of Steve. Her response was, "You know boys only want one thing."

I thought, "Can't you just be happy for me?"

Steve and I dated for two and a half years and then on my graduation day, he asked me to marry him.  He had asked my parents for permission beforehand.  My dad liked Steve, but my mom had her reservations.  She didn't say no, though, she told him if I wanted to get married I could.  I was just so happy that I didn't care, so we married in December, right after I graduated.

Steve was my first real boyfriend and we didn't have sex until our wedding night.  As Steve and I were changing into our clothes for the reception, there was a slight tap on the door.  It was my favorite aunt, Mary, to whom I was really close.  She wanted to have a quick word with me to tell me about sex!  She knew I was still a virgin and that it was something she thought that I really needed to know, but it tickled me because my mom and dad never said anything.  She took the liberty to have this private, important conversation with her newlywed niece on her wedding night.

She said, "I know you're a virgin, so you tell him to be gentle, and if not, I will tell him."

Steve was really sweet and considerate on our wedding night.  The evening was not as traumatic as I was expecting; it was actually pretty uneventful, and I didn't enjoy it because it was done and gone.  In Steve's defense, he had been waiting over two years and guys get excited, so it didn't take but a minute, but I was thinking, "That's it?  Why was everybody acting all crazy about that?"

When I saw Aunt Mary the next morning for breakfast, I told her, "It was nothing like you described it."

She told me, "It will get better."  We both laughed.

I was grateful I had someone to talk to about it and it calmed me down.  I also told my mom what happened, and she said, "You still want to be married?"

"I'm going to give it another try," I teased.  We shared a laughed.

This was different because I didn't have those types of conversations with my parents. Although the conversations about sex and married life were few and far between, and usually in passing, I was ok with what I got.

Steve was smart and a hard worker. He worked his way up the corporate ladder and eventually had a position as the District Manager for a major corporation. Because status was important to him, Steve gave me anything I wanted. He cared how we looked, carried ourselves, and spoke around the people he worked with because he thought it was a direct reflection on him. At first, I liked that Steve was a take-charge kind of man and wanted to be in complete charge. I thought it was cute that I didn't have to get groceries or anything like that. I ignored Karen when she protested that I needed to learn to do things on my own; I wasn't interested.

As I mentioned before, I swore that once I left my parents' house, I would not go back to church, so I had taken a break from church when I started college. Although I lived a mere 20 minutes from my parents' house in the dorms, I was out of their house following my own rules; but I never told them I wasn't going to church.

At this point in my relationship with Steve, I still hadn't returned to church. Since my husband wasn't interested in going to church, I justified not going. Instead of getting up to go to church we slept in. About five years into our marriage, I started noticing friends having babies and I wanted a baby. The fleeting thought that followed was, "I can't bring a baby into my house if I don't go to church." Although I swore I would never go back, there came a time when I said, "I need to go to church." That had been embedded in my spirit as child and in the back of my mind I could hear my daddy, "If you have a family, raise them in the church."

I just thought I needed to go to church, but Steve made it clear that he wasn't interested and asserted that he wasn't going to church. With that, I told him, "You know what, I can't speak to God for you, but I can speak for me and my children."

I went back to church after a 10-year hiatus. I knew I had to be in church and prepare to raise my future children with the sense that I had, whether Steve joined me or not. I had been attending church regularly for about six months when one Sunday, Steve got up, got dressed, and went with me. S even months later, I was pregnant with our first child, Aubrey.

I called home to tell my mother I was pregnant and she asked, "Are you sure?"

"The doctor said I'm pregnant," I confirmed.

She added, "Y'all really had sex?"

We laughed so hard and I could hear her drop the phone to tell my dad, "Viola had sex!"

My daddy got on the phone and gushed, "It's about time y'all gave me a grandbaby!" A few years after that I got pregnant with our second child, Nicholas. Our children were christened in the church, and although we were centered in the church, I didn't make Aubrey and Nicholas go to things they didn't want to, like I had to as a child. I didn't go to Bible study or Wednesday prayer meeting, but we went to church every Sunday. I did, however, continue the tradition and when my daughter was baptized I gifted her the cross necklace I had received when I was baptized.

I didn't want my children to learn about the world from the world, I wanted to be one of the first people to educate them. To that end, I educated my kids about their bodies and sex at a young age in a developmentally appropriate manner. I cleaned out the bathroom cabinet while 4-year old Nicholas was taking a bath and he said, "Mommy, look."

I looked around and his little penis was floating in the air. "My penis feels funny." Aubrey and Nicholas knew the anatomical names of their body parts because we talked about things like that. I figured if they ever got into an accident, they would need to know if their penis or vagina was hurt, not their "John" or "schmekle," "putang" or "tutu."

So he remarked, "My penis is sticking up and it's hard."

His comment caught me off guard that I laughed but I tried to be serious. I think what happened was he was playing with the duck and he kept hitting it with the duck.

I tried to explain what was happening to his body, "Oh you're having an erection."

He repeated, "I'm having a 'nection."

When I took him out of the tub it was still like that. So I told him, "This happens with the man's body; it is nothing to be ashamed of and there's nothing to laugh about, it's just a part of you, it's your physical make."

He simply said, "Oh."

No sooner had I gotten him out of the tub and put his pajamas on, he ran and told Aubrey that his penis had a "nection." I heard her yell, "Moooommm!"

All I could do was giggle to myself. We always had conversations about how their bodies were responding to puberty because my parents hadn't talked openly about it, even though my mom was a nurse. I wanted to have those conversations with my kids. Steve didn't think he needed to talk to the kids about those topics, so I made sure they were informed and not shamed. I refused to let them go out, especially in this world today, and not know. I'd rather they knew exactly what was happening than learn from the streets and be misinformed. In retrospect, when I was growing up, I felt my parents should have talked to us more and been open about sex instead of trying to make us fear it because it's really nothing to fear. I was

adamant about our talks so Aubrey and Nicholas knew about protected sex. As they got older, I explained, "If you want to know how to protect yourself, you have the key right there. You know that if you're going to have sex, unprotected sex, nine times out of 10, you're going to get pregnant or you're going to get a venereal disease. It's about choices. You can protect yourself or you can go unprotected. I'm going to preach to you about having sex because it's a natural thing for the body to want, and who am I to argue with the inner you. Who am I to tell you that you can't act on that? I will take you to get condoms, but it's up to you to use them, because there is one thing I will not tolerate. I will not tolerate you coming into this house telling me you have AIDS or that you are pregnant because I'm teaching you how to protect yourself. So if you can't be mindful, then it's on you."

It was on more than one occasion that I had that talk with Aubrey and Nicholas. They knew where I stood on premarital sex, but they also understood I was a realistic parent and I would rather educate them so they could make informed decisions, rather than allow them to be uninformed or misinformed like I was. Until the day my mom died, she never talked candidly about sex. Now she talked about Christianity over and over again, but she never joined that with the sexual part in the same conversation and she never really talked to me about sex, so I learned from others.

When the kids and I watched TV together, I would also talk to them about the things we were watching. One time we watched a movie with a scene of a man raping a woman. At that point, I knew we needed to have a conversation about that.

Aubrey criticized, "Well she shouldn't have that skirt on."

I countered, "It was not about what she had on, it's about power that the man thinks he wants and so he feels like he can get it by forcefully raping her."

Nicholas swore, "I would never rape anyone."

I thought that was good to know.  He continued, "If a woman don't want to marry me, I just won't marry her. I'm not going to make her marry me."

So, he associated sex with marriage, which I thought was cute.

I realized I had done a good thing with my kids by talking with them all the time.  I remember one time my son came home from middle school and said he had a headache.  I asked, "When did you get this headache?"

He thought about it, "I've had it for two days now and it just got worse when I was in class."

He was almost 13, so I figured he could be going through some hormonal changes and maybe he needed to release himself.  But that was the one conversation I didn't know how to approach, so I asked my husband if he could talk to him.

He debated, "You want me to talk to him? He don't need to know all that."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.  So that night I had taken a Tylenol into his bedroom and I took the liberty to broach the subject, "Nick, I think that what's going on with you is that you need to release yourself."

He looked at me puzzled, "What are you talking about, release what?

Then I said, "Well, sometimes our hormones get so excited that you need to help your penis release yourself a little bit.

He asked, "How do I help my penis release?"

I looked around the room and in confidence I encouraged, "You need to hold it and just pump it a little bit."

He shrieked, "Mom, you so nasty! You are so nasty, get out of my room!" It must have helped because he woke up the next morning without a headache. He just needed to know that he had permission.

This was not uncommon for a couple of my white girlfriends. They took their sons to hookers and let them have sex for the first time. I used to think that was the craziest thing in the world to take your child to a hooker. As I got older, I realized that in a safe, clean environment, it's probably the best thing for a 16-year-old boy who's never had sex before to understand what a woman likes or what a woman enjoys, and she can help him understand his body and what he likes.

After 23 years, the cuteness of Steve's dogmatic personality had worn off. I hadn't noticed so much until I asked Nicholas, who was 12, to help set the table.

His response without skipping a beat was, "You're the woman, you supposed to be doing that."

I was shocked into silence for a moment and then I looked at him with a puzzling look, "Excuse me?"

He started back peddling because he knew I could get real crazy. He responded, "Well Daddy said women do all of that stuff."

I couldn't fault him for thinking or believing that because as I reflected, that was in fact what he was being taught. I couldn't help but go to bed thinking about that and thinking hard. I deliberated to myself, my kids are learning the wrong things about life and how to treat people. The next day I called Aubrey at college and asked her, "Aubrey, what do you think the position of a man and a woman is?"

She spoke, "Mom, I'm so glad you asked me that. What's going on?"

I responded, "Well Nicholas said something the other day and I've been thinking about some things lately."

She said, "Are you getting ready to tell me you're going to divorce dad?"

I replied, "Why would you say that?"

She said, "I thought you should have divorced him a long time ago.  Yes, he's teaching Nicholas the wrong things and I don't know how you put up with it.  I wouldn't have a man trying to tell me how I have to dress.  I was waiting for you to tell me one day."

Our conversation opened my eyes and the next day I woke up and said to myself, "I'm leaving this marriage."  I did.

With my daughter at college, I took Nicholas to my mom's house to spend a few days.  I called the movers and asked them how soon they could get to the house and move my things. They told me they could have someone come and pack everything the next day and unpack me by 5 pm.  The next day they packed everything and moved it into our new townhouse.  When Steve got home, I was sitting in the house and I told him, "I am divorcing you. I split up the furniture and left you half."

 He had a fit and when I was leaving the house, he said, "You will be back."

I never looked back and I never went back.  I hadn't told anyone that I was divorcing Steve and moving, not even my mother, for eight months until my divorce was final because I knew she would intervene and try to talk me out of it.

I could hear her plea, "You don't need to divorce him, he's a good man.  He's never hit you and he takes care of y'all."

But she didn't live in the house.  It was true that he never hit me and never cursed me, but he was in complete charge.  So, eight months later, I entered my mama's house and told her, "This is my new address."

She said, "Oh are you and Steve moving?"

I replied, "Mom, I got a divorce. This is my new address."

She called my sister and my brothers to see if they knew, but they didn't know either.

**Part V: God works in different ways.**  When I divorced Steve, I stopped going to church again.  It wasn't because of the kids or the divorce, but it was because I got into grad school.  During grad school I was working on a master's in art and interested in joining one of the Black Greek Letter Organizations in the South.  I decided one year after I graduated college that I wanted to pursue a master's in fine arts.  I've always loved learning and always wanted to get a masters and a PhD.  I held off on going back to school in order to please Steve and take care of the kids because he thought after I finished my bachelor's degree I didn't need any more education.  I always thought it was the woman's place to support her husband and try not to grow beyond him and that's what he thought I would be doing if I went back to school, and he was right.

The month after I divorced him, I applied to graduate school.  I started the following summer and finished my master's degree in a year. I felt like I had been cheated all this time because it only took me a year.  Here I was, 40-something years old and I was angry.  I placed my anger on the wrong person, though; I was angry at Steve when I should have been angry at myself.  My dad never taught us to be submissive; he taught us to value education and if we wanted to go higher in this world, we had to step out.  I think I misunderstood him because he said step out but respect your husband and I was thinking if I stepped out Steve would be upset.

160

I learned later on after I got the divorce that it was all me; I was the one holding myself back and I would never do it again for anybody.

I started teaching after I graduated. One time, as I was travelling to an art conference, I saw an old friend at the airport. Tanya was also travelling to attend the conference. As we chatted about our careers, she mentioned I should consider getting my PhD from the university she was at, Hillman University. So, we scheduled a time to discuss the venture further and I visited the campus. Tanya hosted my visit to the campus and also introduced me to many of her friends and family. Months after that visit, I decided to attend Hillman University for the doctorate degree in Art Education.

Tanya and I became close friends because she was the only person I knew at Hillman for a while. We often hung out outside of the office and would get lunch together so there were many times we would shared information about our lives with each other. After I had been at Hillman for a few semesters, she said, "Oh I got somebody that I want you to meet so bad! His wife died six years ago, and he's been alone, I just think that y'all would be good together."

I had no intention of entertaining the thought of a relationship and I definitely wasn't looking for a husband. I turned down the idea, "Tanya, I didn't come up here to meet anyone or to marry. I came here to go to school and to teach, then when I finish school I'm heading back South."

She countered, "You could at least have dinner with him."

I said, "Okay, have him call me."

Brent called the next day, "Hi this is Brent Jacobs."

I really wasn't looking forward to the call, "Who?"

"Brent Jacobs," He confirmed.

"Oh, okay," I remembered.

He mustered up the courage to suggest meeting for lunch or dinner and I accepted lunch by telling him I would meet him downtown.  I didn't know much about Brent except that he lived out west, was a widower, and Asian.  Tanya hadn't disclosed any other details.  When I arrived, Brent was already at the restaurant and we verbally greeted each other.  I could tell Brent was nervous.  I wasn't nervous because I had made up my mind that this was the first and last time I would go out with him.  I was not interested in dating because I was clear with my priorities.  I was going to complete my doctoral degree and go back South; anything else was a distraction for me.  We ate a quick lunch and I thanked him for the meal.  He countered with a request to go out again the next week.  I politely declined with the untruthful excuse that I had an exam to prepare for.

I'm sure he reported back to Tanya because at the office the next day she questioned, "Why'd you put my brother off?"

I refuted, "Why didn't you tell me it was your brother?"

"I just wanted you to find out about each other on your own.  I didn't tell him much about you either.  I still think you should meet him for dinner."

Once again, I politely declined.

Two weeks later, Brent called me and indicated, "I'm thinking about coming back to the university to see a game, maybe I'll see you around."

I responded, "Ok, well when you get here have a nice time."

Brent was not getting the polite dismissals.  When he returned to campus, he called again for dinner; once again, I politely declined.  He went back to the west and two weeks later, he came back and asked me to go to lunch once again.  This time I accepted.  When he picked me

up for lunch, I could tell he was nervous.  He didn't know where to put his hands and was kind of fumbling.

I asked him, "Have you ever dated a Black woman?"

He sheepishly responded, "No," but I knew that.

I reassured him, "Well, you can relax," and he started laughing.

After that, we laughed and talked about everything.  We weren't ready to end the conversation, so we went to Starbucks and sat there and talked longer.  He dropped me off at my apartment and called me later that night to say he had a nice time and I told him that I did, too.  He left to go back west, but he called all month long until he returned north.  When he called, we would laugh and talk about something silly.  He started coming to visit more often but I really didn't want to date because I already had my mind set that I didn't want to date anyone.  He was a happy distraction and I liked him.  I felt good about our friendship, and he was becoming more relaxed.

Tanya was promoted to another position within Hillman, leaving me to finish my degree without her company.  I didn't realize how different it would be without Tanya, but soon discovered that the department and work environment was toxic.  It was so stressful, I had to go to a psychologist just so I could redefine who I was.  I second-guessed everything . . . my purpose, if I was doing the right thing and if I was strong enough, or smart enough to get a PhD.  Don't get me wrong, I made a 4.0, got exceptional marks on my papers.  When it came to my proposal defense, though, they were not going to pass me, and that was evident when I proposed the second time.  That played a number on me and had it not been for my willingness to get on my knees and pray and ask God to give me the strength to do his will and to let the Holy Ghost

in me, I would have been gone.  I would seriously have been gone because I contemplated suicide; it wasn't but for a minute, but it was still there.

   Had it not been for Dr. Laurie and Dr. Pearson, I would not have stayed at Hillman University.  They recruited me to their department and promised they would see me through the graduation process.  I think Dr. Pearson was my angel.  When preparing my study, I realized I wanted to do something out of my comfort zone and research something that was not widely studied.  My new subject on same-sex relationships changed my life.  I learned that people can be very merciless and ruthless.  From my participants, I heard stories of people claiming to love one another, but when faced with adversity such as a descendant declaring their sexual preference, the community splits and a lot of it's based on religious beliefs.  Many people believe that God thinks or said that no man should sleep with another man.  Now there are a lot of things in the Bible that I do question, but my problem with that part is: God said to love one another. He also said we shouldn't put a label on ourselves and love has no sight.  If love has no sight, why is it that people are saying that two women can't be together and allowed to fall in love with another or two men can't fall in love because they're the same sex?  I think that people in general have their opinions about sexual preferences and a lot of it comes from the environment in which they grew up.  I think if a person comes to me and says, "Look, I'm gay, I just don't have an affection for men, I'm a lesbian," who am I to judge her?  I can't judge because if she fell in love with a woman, that's who she loves.  If the woman fell in love with her, who am I to say that they can't love each other?  I can't turn my back on her because that's her insight to who she is.  If that's who you are, that's who you are.  If you're going to be my friend now, you're going to be my friend later, and if you're my child now, you will be my child later.  This perspective was partly based on how I grew up and also my experiences in college.

Brent and I continued dating and he helped me through that rough period at Hillman University. After a year-and-a-half of dating, Brent said, "My mom wants to meet you."

I was hesitant, "Oh, well, I don't know if I want to do all that quite yet."

He rebutted, "Well it's just a casual meeting, you know it's not going to be a big deal, just my sisters and my mom at the park."

I'm thinking, "Okay, his mom and his sisters, that may be ok." When we arrived at the park, the entire Jacobs family was there. We pulled up and I saw all the cars and all of those Asian people and I was like "my God."

He tried to smooth it over, "Don't get nervous."

I get out of the car and I see this little older Asian lady with salt and pepper streaked hair shuffle from the picnic area to the car. When she reached the car, she greeted me with a hug and a smile. I was comfortable after that. I went over to everybody else and they just kind of introduced themselves down the line and everybody was friendly; no one was out of place and that was a relief. Except his sister Gabby. I wasn't sure Gabby liked me after our initial meeting, but I didn't know why. Eventually it would come out. Gabby had reservations about me at first because when we first met, I was a vegetarian and she hadn't been told. Apparently, you can't go to a place known for beef and declare that you are a vegetarian; it doesn't work like that. During the picnic, I ate all of the non-meat food items and she got offended. She thought I was picking at the food although I really wasn't. I thought Brent would let them know that I didn't eat meat, so in order to make amends and be included in the family, I started eating meat again.

Brent and I continued to date long distance, and he would visit frequently. On this one particular occasion, Brent had gone to Chicago with his mother to visit Gabby. When he

returned, we went to dinner and there was a long strand of blonde hair on the car seat and a tube of lip gloss in the console.  I know the woman had left the items to inform me she had been with him; she was Gabby's friend Sam.  I'm sure Gabby hooked them up as a way to try to get me out of the picture and get back at me for the picnic incident.  It pissed me off and when I inquired about the hair and the lip gloss, he denied knowing anything about it.  As I continued to probe, I could tell he was scared and getting upset, but before I let it go, I affirmed, "If you didn't want to be fixed up, you should have told Gabby because she fixed you up and you went with it.  So, until you really know who you want to be with, I don't know if you should call me or not, we're done."  In my heart I don't think that anything happened between Brent and Sam except dinner.

The next day I called Tanya so she could hear it first-hand that I wasn't going to see her brother anymore because he wasn't sure who he wanted to be with.  She got mad at Gabby and said, "Gabby should stay out of Brent's business."  To that point, I let her know that Brent also had the chance to tell Gabby that but didn't.  It was easier for me to go back to my own quiet life and let go now.  I didn't have any interest in dating in the first place.  So, I buried myself in my school work.  Even when Brent called, I didn't talk to him.  He called all month long, but I didn't return the calls, I didn't have much more to say at that point.  I was in my late 50s, and I refused to play childish games.

Two weeks later, his mom called and started the conversation with small talk, "How are you doing?"

This wasn't uncommon because we had become friendly and her calls were frequent.

"I'm fine.  How are you?"

"I'm fine.  Well I want you to know that Tanya told me what happened."

To that point I assured her, "Brent and I were still friends and…"

She cut me off in mid-sentence, "I had a talk with Gabby; I think things will be ok."

Days later Brent showed up at my door with a big smile on his face and a dozen roses. Once again he was nervous. "Will you please talk to me?" he pleaded.

I moved to the side of the door to allow enough space for him to walk in. "Well, I'm, listening."

He confessed, "Gabby set me up with Sam and I didn't want to go with her, but I didn't want to be rude."

I said, "You could have told her you had a girlfriend; she would have understood that. If not, you could have just said I'm not going on a date. You didn't have the balls enough to say that."

He admitted, "I didn't know what to do."

"You could have called me, and I would have told you what to do," I snarked.

I told him how upset I was, and he apologized. After that, there was no more dating anybody else and Gabby didn't intervene. He was so sure of us that he asked me to marry him. He wanted to move back up North, buy a house, and he wanted me to stay with him. I accepted his proposal for marriage, but even though I was 60 something, I was not going to live with him without being married first and I wasn't going to marry him without him meeting and getting the approval from my family. I didn't grow up like that and it would have been uncomfortable for me to live with Brent before we were married.

I'm a Christian, so it's hard for me to look at having sex and being a Christian and not married as something favorable to God. You know they do it now and it's fine. I tell both of my kids that's fine if that's what they want to do but understand that you're not married, and that person can walk away anytime and you have no obligations, but it's left up to you.

The following week Brent showed up with a ring and officially proposed. I wouldn't marry him until he met my family because if they had any problems with it then I would have had to rethink a lot of stuff, and if they objected, they would have had to have a really good reason for me to leave Brent.

Brent had already met my brother Daniel when he came to stay with me a week. I introduced him to Brent when we went to dinner and he reported back and told my other brothers about him. Doris, my mentor, had come and stayed a few times, too. Although I was having some doubts, they accepted him. So, I called my mom and told her I was bringing my fiancé, but I didn't tell her he was Asian. "Oh, this is the Brent guy? Well are y'all going to get married down here?" she questioned.

I told her we didn't know where the wedding would be; we were just engaged. Of course, she told everybody so when we drove up, Karen and my mom were waiting. My mom's eyes were wide in shock because neither of them knew that Brent was Asian. I caught my mother and Karen off-guard. When we hugged, Karen just laughed and poked me jokingly.

My mom said, "But Viola didn't tell us..."

I said, "That he's Asian, Mom?"

But my mama didn't flinch. After we chatted for a while, I told her Brent had a room at the hotel and she refused, "This is going to be your husband and one day this may be his house, so he can sleep in the guest room."

I slept in the room across from my mom and Brent slept down the hall, but I snuck in to see him, "HI, Honey."

"Oh, you came to see me," he was pleased.

"Yeah, just for a little while, but I gotta sneak back to my room before Mom wakes up."

So I snuck back to my room after sitting and talking to Brent for a while. The next day, my mom started inviting her friends over, so they could meet her future son-in-law and she just loved him. I wish my dad could've known Brent; he would have liked him, but Dad passed in 1993 of lung cancer. He was 13 years older than my mom, so he died when he was 73. It was a blessing that he lived as long as he did. After the diagnosis, he lived seven years longer than expected and smoked until the year before he died.

Before we left, I talked to Karen about my insecurity about Brent maybe wanting to be with other women. She reassured me, "A woman knows when her husband is cheating; it doesn't matter the ethnicity or the color of skin of another woman, they just know."

I hadn't felt or seen anything, so I pushed my insecurities aside and continued to enjoy my life with Brent. I had no doubt that he loved me because I didn't have to ask for anything. I could be looking at something curiously and the next thing I know, he had gotten it for me. I had to stop him from doing that because I don't ever want to take him for granted. I told him, "You know, it's good to love a person and it's good to want to give them what they want, but sometimes you have to let people want stuff, you have to let them get it on their own."

We didn't waste any time getting married. I married Brent while I was in the Ph.D. program and he was so different than Steve. He would push me to do it, whereas Steve would discourage me from completing my degree.

As I reflected on this, I remembered telling Steve that I really wanted to get a master's degree and Ph,D, and he questioned, "What for?"

"Do I have to have a reason?  I mean, really, I don't have to have a reason.  I don't have to do shit with it, but if I want it and I'm capable, then I should be able to do."  But that was definitely not the way he saw it.

Years after the divorce, Aubrey confessed, "Dad is so jealous of you.  He called, and we were talking and that's all he talked about.  He asked, 'Well, what is she doing now?' and I told him that you were getting your Ph.D. He mocked, 'That's a waste of money.'"

Steve hadn't changed; he married a woman that worked as a salesperson at the grocery store, while he continued to climb the corporate ladder.  He wanted a submissive partner, and although I wanted to care for my husband and children, I wanted more for myself.  He got exactly what he wanted, as did I.  So, I said good luck to him.

Brent bought a house on the 11$^{th}$, we were married on the 22$^{nd}$, and we moved in on the 26$^{th}$ as husband and wife.  I went back on campus as Mrs. and word spread that I got married, resulting in being approached by a few nosey people, "Who did you marry?"

I responded proudly, "Brent Jacobs."

"Isn't that Tanya's brother?"

"Yeah."

"Do you even know this man?"

"I wouldn't have married him if I didn't know him."

Almost a year after visiting my mama, she was diagnosed with cancer.  When she first got sick, Brent and I went down to see her in the hospital and then at a rehabilitation facility.  She was beaming with pride as she introduced him to the patients and staff at the rehab facility, "That's my son-in-law.  He's a doctor and my daughter is getting her PhD."  I was still working on my PhD at Hillman University, so I prepared to leave school for one semester and the summer

but continued to teach online.  We refused to put her in a nursing home or hospice, so we kept

her at home.  Brent had to go back home, but we decided I would stay with Mama.  So, he gave

her a big kiss on her forehead and told her he loved her and would see her soon.

As my mother began transitioning, she napped during the day but stayed up all night

watching TV.  One night, I got up and went into her room and she was in there with the TV

going and I said, "What are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm just praying."

"Well, let me pray with you."

I'll never forget the moment we touched hands because my mom loved Bonanza and she

wouldn't let me turn the TV down.  She was having her moment, but she was listening to

Bonanza at the same time.  The way she touched my hand, I felt a connection with her and I felt

like our souls were intertwined at that moment.  The bond between a mother and daughter

couldn't get any purer than that.  I broke the somber silence and told her that.

She replied like I expected her to, "God works in so many different ways."

My mom was really spiritual.  She continued, "Either you grow into it or you just have it.

You know Viola, a lot of people out there don't know God, if only I could have touched them."

I comforted her, "Mom, you touched so many and I know you're going to heaven."

"Oh, I'm not worried, I know I'm going to heaven, but I'm going to pray for you!" she

joked.

We laughed because I didn't like going to church and to her, going to church was a part of

it.  You couldn't be a Christian and not go to church because in order to feel the spiritual part of

it, you had to be in church.  That's where my mom and I disagreed.  I don't think you have to be

in the house of the Lord to be spiritual, I don't believe that at all, but my mom did.

Growing up as Southern Baptists, we were taught about spirituality and about religion. From what I gather, spirituality is how you understand the spirit behind religion. It's the warm fuzzy feeling that you can get anytime, not only when you go to church. It's what makes my heart feel good. Religion on the other hand, is all about the practice to me. We have all of these different practices and all of these different organizations, like Methodist, Southern Baptists, and AME to list a few and we all come from a different practice; that's religion.

After I graduated with my Ph.D., I moved back home, literally, and of course Brent came with me. I was adamant about moving back to the South, but I never intended to move back to my childhood home. Being in this home has its good moments and not-so-good moments. We had a lot of great family memories, but I also remember the funerals and deaths. Even though we've done some major renovation to the house, I feel like I've moved backwards. I know I have developed into a successful, well-adjusted African American woman, and I feel good about that, but sometimes when I come home and I'm tired, I don't have good feelings about it. I tell Brent that I can't wait until October when we move, and he reassures me that there's nothing wrong with the house, it's just smaller. Maybe that's what it is. When I got married the first time, I had a big house. When I got married the second time, I had a big house, and when I was on my own I had a big house, so I'm used to big homes. I try to convince myself that the reason I feel like this is because I'm used to having a big house and this house cannot accommodate everything I have. We still have a storage unit and I feel bad about that because I can't put all of my stuff in the house. But the reality is sometimes I feel like I'm taking steps backwards. I try to explain it to Karen who would not live in this house for nothing because she said she didn't want to live in the house she grew up in. But when I drive up and I realize I'm going into my childhood home and I'm actually sleeping in it, I feel like I've taken a step back. Sometimes

when I drive down the street and look at the houses my dad built, and the way the home owners keep the homes, it saddens me because they were so nice, and I know how hard my daddy worked.

### Grace and Mercy: The Chronicle of Pamela

At first glance, Pamela looks like someone's favorite aunt. She is an educator and an advocate for women and children in her mid-50s. Her cocoa skin is rich with lines that hold stories of love and loss, pain, and strength. Pamela's story is uniquely different than Viola's and demonstrates how choices, informal learning spaces, and family development directly affect the people we become. Upon meeting Pamela, you would not know of her struggle to survive and thrive as a woman . . . a Black woman. She is a funny, honest in a matter-of-fact way, strong, resilient, and a gentle force to be reckoned with. Pamela was in transition and did not have a place to call "home" at the time so we met in the early evening at the park, at her friend's house, or sat in the car in a parking lot to talk. Our conversations were for Pamela cathartic, and she was grateful to have a safe space where she could sort out her trauma and make sense of what happened in the past and what was going on in the present. It was as if I were her journal as she dictated her lived experiences. As Pamela shared and whispered her wisdom, we had moments when we didn't make eye contact or utter a single word, letting the wisdom that had already been spoken permeate the car or fly by in the summer breeze; whether settling or unsettling, the wisdom would find its place. As the words settled, she sometimes met my gaze with an unsettling, nervous smile, as to gauge my reaction to the secret she whispered and mask some embarrassment, but to also display her strength in the recollection of adversity. At times, I was stunned in silence or felt an ache in her as she detailed the trauma she endured. Her story was told as a flashback, a glimpse in time to the salient moments that aided in her development.

She stood with confidence and excitement as we hugged for a colloquial greeting to begin our first conversation. She was the first to break the silence as I gathered my materials, and asked, "Where do we start first because I am so excited about this research."

After we attended to the business of research, I shared my motivation for research and my connection to the research of spirituality and sexuality to build rapport. Pamela found an opening in the conversation and began talking about her orientation to spiritualty and what that meant for her. Following is our co-constructed Vulnerable, Empowered, and Spirit-driven narrative of Pamela's experiences in first-person voice as analyzed and synthesized from the wisdom whisper talks. The VES narratives are co-constructed, meaning I constructed the narratives and shared them with Pamela, who made suggestions, omissions, and additions to her story (Lander, 2017). Please note that this is a rendition of the wisdom whispered from the participant. Additionally, my intention was to keep as much of the essence of the story and the participants' disposition because I wanted to represent them in their authentic form.

**Part I: I think I had a happy life, but it was dysfunctional.** I've always been a loner, the person standing on the outside looking in and in the 50+ years of existence, that feeling hasn't changed. I guess it started when I was about six years old. At six, the world as I knew it changed. The person who loved me, clothed me, and fed me began clutching her chest and shaking as she sat in the chair. Watching her gasp and struggle for air had me confused, I had no idea what was going on and it was just the two of us at home. I had no one to call to for help. I had no one else to look in the eyes and share my concern and fear. My Gramma Rose had a stroke. The events that led up to the sirens and the ambulance are a blur, but they come back as I see them cutting open her throat. "Is that a straw they are putting in there?" My traumatized six-year-old mind had no idea what was going on.

Because I had lived with Gramma Rose, I didn't know my siblings. I knew who they were because they would visit with my mother, but I didn't know them, and they didn't know me. So, after the doctors found the tumor in my grandmother's brain, it just got worse . . . everything just got worse and worse. One moment, I was with Gramma and the next, I was at the hospital. After that, my mom picked me up and I stayed with her. Who were all of these crazy people in this house and what was all of the commotion?

I suddenly heard, "Well, put the oatmeal back on the stove!" That was from the tall, slender, dark chocolate girl with braids they called Sissy. The chaos of running around and hollering at each other seemed like a normal occurrence, and I didn't understand any of this. I couldn't make sense of the feelings of confusion, abandonment, and displacement.

My siblings wouldn't know I was missing if I left; to them I was one in the same to the piece of furniture I was sitting on. I was an imperceptible object. Because they weren't used to having me around, my older sisters Sissy and Shelly did a lot of things in front of me. When my mom left for work at 9:00 am, at 9:05, more people were in our small 3-bedroom apartment. That was when the party started. On more than one occasion, there would be parties—drinking, cussing, having sex, and throwing up. I sat in the chair with my knees pulled to my chest rocking while I looked on at the commotion and thought, "What is happening" until I fell asleep.

It wasn't until I was 13 that my mom got a steady 9-5 job; before then she had worked in the morning and through the late evenings caring for others. One late evening, my sister Sissy and her boyfriend thought I was asleep and they started having sex in the same bed I was laying in. I was so scared to move that I just laid in the bed and pretended I was asleep. That happened a lot, as if I wasn't there.

My sister Sissy was the more rebellious of the bunch growing up. She was no stranger to boys and frequently skipped school, resulting in suspension from school and fights; and although she was the middle sister, she was the first to have a baby. She was not ashamed to disregard authority and do her own thing.

I admired Sissy's tenacity and gumption. When she wanted something, she was likely to get it and when she didn't want me to tell, she would offer a quarter for my silence. I was happy for the quarters my siblings paid for my silence, because in the 60s, a quarter went a long way. I would go to the corner store and buy a Jim Dandy candy, a nickel bag of chips, a bottle of soda pop, and penny candy. So, quarters were my friend. If my mom wanted information, she would offer me a quarter as well. I was in a position of power and had no idea.

Ms. Katy, the lady across the street, watched me during the day while my mama was at work before I started school. I was one of three or four of the neighborhood kids that didn't go to school because we were too young, but Ms. Katy's own kids were older and went to school. Ms. Katy kept an immaculate house and her kids were always clean, but she was a prostitute. I guess my mom trusted her because I went over to her house every morning after breakfast and stayed with her all day. Because of her profession, of entertaining men, there would be someone new every day and they would ask me funny questions, like "What color panties Ms. Katy got on?" And she would prep me by saying, "Don't you tell 'em" after bribing me with a bag of candy.

So, that was a game we played. Ms. Katy would purposefully leave me out front to greet the men and she would be in the back getting pretty and putting on her good smelling perfume. Each time I was asked the panty question and I didn't answer, the men would pay me a dollar. On Ms. Katy's good days, I would make $6-$7 a day, but Ms. Katy would take half of the money

and give me the other half.  One day we got creative with our game and Ms. Katy said, "Tell 'em my panties are blue.  They will give you $1 if you tell them."  So, she told me what color to say and at the end of the day before my momma came, she split whatever dollars we had.  We played that game like every day.  I had so much fun with Ms. Katy; she was just a real nice woman.

By this time, Sissy had just become a teenager and had her first child.  My other sister Shelly was pregnant with her baby.  Back then, Black folks weren't allowed a lot of places and we couldn't just drop our kids off at the daycare like you can now.  One day after I finally started half-day kindergarten school, my sister didn't come home in time for mama to leave for work her 3–11 pm shift, so my mama insisted, "Come here, I'mma show you how to take care of this little baby because I got to go to work."  So, she took me to the kitchen and instructed, "This is how you heat up the milk.  Put the pot on the stove, turn the fire on the stove, go get the bottle turn the fire off, pour the milk in there, and set it on the cabinet with the hot pad."  So that was simple enough, cause I could cook eggs.  I could work the stove.  So, she did that and then coached me on diaper changing, "Let me show you how to change the diaper."  We had cloth diapers, so she said, "Fold it like this and tuck it under and pin it.  Put your hand here and stick the pin in and when you feel the pin stick that finger, then pull up."  She did it.  I got the baby and she was screaming.  Mama changed her, she had the rubber pants on and she gave me the bottle.  She said sternly, "Don't do the milk like your sister do it (as she mimics how my sister tests the temperature of the milk on the wrist).  Put it in your mouth and take a suck off of the nipple to make sure it is not too hot."  So that's what I did.  She continued, "When she gets through burp her."  So that's what I did, and she was screaming.  She gave me a crash course like 10 minutes and then was out the door.  So, I was sitting and rocking her and burping her and soon she went

to sleep.  And I was sitting in my chair rocking once again, but this time I was crying because

nobody was home.  I was all by myself.

It seemed like an eternity until I was able to see Gramma Rose again, but after she left the

hospital, she came to live with us.  She looked different.  Was this the same lady that introduced

me to church?  Was this the lady that planted the garden in the empty adjacent lot where the

house burned down and was there when I witnessed my first miracle as a little girl to see the

fruits of our labor as the fruits and vegetables sprouted out of the ground?  She looked different.

The head of straight gray hair that was once flowing down her back was no longer there.  What

replaced it was white gauze bandages.  My heart was broken; this wasn't my Gramma Rose but a

shell of her.  Although she had always been a woman of few words, now she only uttered

five . . . "I want to go home."  And like her, I also wanted to go back to the home we knew.

Moving had been traumatic for both of us.  She wouldn't talk; she would just cry, and I would

cry.  I took care of her as best as a seven-year-old could.  I didn't want her to feel neglected as I

had.

After staying with us, Gramma Rose eventually moved back to her house and I started

getting used to living without her, even though I missed her a lot.  Because my siblings would

buy me stuff and they weren't mean to me, and my mom would let me sit in her lap when she

wasn't too tired, I felt loved, but I felt empty also.  I didn't have many friends in the

neighborhood, and because my siblings were much older than I was, I would play alone or

entertain myself.  I was often left alone or sent to stay with other people, like the Wilsons. -Even

when Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, my Godparents from up the street, bought me frilly dresses and took

me to church with them, I felt empty.  The Wilsons attended the local Baptist church and back in

those days, the Black church was everything.  I grew up in the church house.  When I lived with

Gramma Rose before she had the stroke, we had gone to church. When I moved in with my mama and siblings, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson took me to church. My mama and siblings didn't go to church. My mom worked all of the time and my siblings would come and go as they pleased, but I was in church when I was little, seven days a week, but it really wasn't church. It was where everybody went to socialize and on Sundays we went early and always took a dish. It was at church that Black people learned we weren't allowed to go past the railroad tracks. They would literally take everybody from Sunday school and walk up to the tracks and say, "Do not never go across these tracks because people with skin like ours are not supposed to be on that side." So that's what we did.

On one of them Sundays, when I was 10, I got Baptized, but this time it was different. This time it was my choice. You know, Black folks get baptized when they young cause it's what your mama or grandma wants you to do, but this time I wanted to be baptized. After going to church with Gramma Rose and the Wilsons, I felt like I needed to be baptized.

I think I had a happy life because I didn't understand that it was dysfunctional. From the time I could remember until I was 14, my stepdad was around. I never knew he had another family because he was at our house so much that he would just come and go, but in actuality, he was a man with a wife and six kids, and my mama was his mistress. When I asked why he wasn't over on Sundays, she would say, "Because he works a lot." I had no choice but to accept that answer. Every year, he took us to the Ice Capades, the Harlem Globetrotters, and the state fair and we had a good time as a family. So, for these reasons, I had a happy childhood. I wasn't physically abused. I sat on my mom's lap and got hugs and kisses and always had clean clothes. Although we didn't have a lot of money or materialistic things, we watched TV together as a family; we played board games and jacks. My siblings babied me, and I usually got what I

179

wanted.  I started at the top with my mama and if she said no, I'd keep going asking each sibling until I got a yes.  I always got a yes.  And my mama didn't allow us to fight one another, so while there were arguments, there were never physical exchanges.  Now that I'm older, I understand that every household has its level of dysfunction.  I didn't know dysfunction, though. I didn't know that's what that really was, instead I thought they were all just crazy.

**Part II: Living in the gray.**  I was 12 the last time I saw Gramma Rose.  Her dog Jack-Jack got hit by a car and died and Gramma Rose died two months later.  The days of playing hopscotch and dolls and making mud pies were over.  What I knew as normal was altered.  If I thought my world was chaotic and dysfunctional before, I hadn't seen nothing yet.

Three months after my Gramma Rose died was the first time it happened.  I didn't know exactly what was happening, but I knew it wasn't right.  I had known Lou most of my life; he was my sister's boyfriend and was always around the family.  The first time we were alone, I was 12 and he was 18.  It started when he asked me to try marijuana as he blew the smoke in my face and I did.  I had seen other people try marijuana, so I thought that trying it once couldn't hurt me.  That was the beginning of the downward spiral.  My body became grown, but my mind was stuck at 12.

He never penetrated me.  He would just get on top of me naked and ejaculate and sometimes he would perform oral sex on me.  But my 12-year-old mind could not comprehend the adult behaviors that were happening to my body.  I cried to God, "Why are you allowing this to happen to me?"  Why would God take my Gramma Rose and then have this man do nasty things to me?  This couldn't be right.  This is what I had seen my mama and Sissy do, but I didn't like it, not with him.  I was confused.  I had just lost my Gramma Rose and now this was happening.  But I never told, not until I knew he couldn't hurt my family.  He assured me that if I

ever told, my family would be sad and die. Every time I wanted to say something to somebody, anybody, I could hear his deep raspy voice whispering in my ear, "If you tell, your family will die. I will kill you and your family. Your sister will die and be put in a box and in the ground. Do you want that to happen?" I couldn't have that happen. I couldn't have more people die, although I felt like dying every single time. I thought that if I wasn't around then he couldn't hurt my family and couldn't hurt me. Things would be better . . . if I died. If I wasn't around. I wasn't sure what was right or wrong, what was truth or fiction. I began living my life in the gray. I didn't know who I was or how to find her.

When I did start dating and having fun as a teenager, I thought any boy or any man that touched me I was supposed to, you know . . . so I just let it happen, and I just shut that part out cause I didn't know any different.

Tommy was a new boy that I was going with, he was 19 and more experienced than I was. He asked me, "You ever had sex before?"

I couldn't answer because I didn't know. What was sex? Do I say yes because of what Lou had been doing to me? I couldn't let anyone know that. So, I didn't answer.

He said, "Yeah you have, you just don't want to tell me."

Nobody was having the important conversations with me about sex and men. I was scared to ask my sisters, so I was just kinda learning on my own. Because of my miseducation, I got pregnant by Tommy at 14. I was six months along when my mama found out and decided I was gonna get an abortion. That was her decision. I spent the night at the hospital because it was a late-term abortion. Tommy came by the hospital and sat by my bed and my mama just rolled her eyes at him.

181

We didn't talk much about the abortion except for her to state, "Now you know your two sisters had babies before they were 15 and you see how that turned out for them. I don't want that for you, you still have a lot of fun to have."

So, I accepted that. It was her choice, but the abortion happened to my body. She added, "This is like a cup of spilled milk. We knocked it over by accident; we are going to clean it up and we are going to forget about it." And I accepted that.

My mother was always a pleasant, loving person. She never had a lot of words, but she was pleasant, inviting, supportive, and very engaging. She just didn't have a lot of the words. She never refused a hug or a request to sit in her lap or to sleep in the same bed. She never refused any of that. She was just a good mother. But the love my mother showed could not stop the thoughts of suicide that ran rampant through my mind since I started being sexually molested. My body was totally different than my brain. It was like my body was craving it. I always felt nasty and dirty in my brain, but my body felt something different. I would sneak to look at my stepdad's Playboy books and read them. I didn't really care for the pictures cause it was the stuff that I had, but the articles were stimulating and it gave me a rush to sneak them and get away with it.

My sister was by no means a housekeeper because she worked night and day to make sure her family had all they needed. She had five kids, and all of them were Lou's except the second one 'cause he went to jail for a while and she had a baby by somebody else. But when she worked nights, my mama made me go babysit her kids on the weekends, even after my many protests against going. My mama would hear none of that, "We're family and we help each other."

So, I went.  My sister went to work, and Lou went out and came back at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and the horror would begin.  On one particular night, Lou returned home, and the kids were asleep.  I tried to avoid his advances by running and hiding under the bed with all the dirt and cobwebs, but he grabbed me by my foot and snatched me from under the bed.  I could smell the tobacco and liquor on his hot breath as he pressed his mouth to the side of my face.  I did all that I could to separate my mind from my body and retreat to a place that had to be better than this until he was satisfied.

Early that morning, I was relieved when my sister came in from her graveyard shift, because surely he wouldn't touch me while she was here, but she was so tired that she dropped right in the bed and went to sleep; I got next to her, but it didn't stop.  He just got on the other side of the bed.

At 17, I got pregnant again and had an abortion.  This time I was old enough to get that one on my own, but I didn't know whose baby that was.  One of the guys I had sex with was like 30 years older than me and he knew my mama and was so scared that if my mama found out that she would kill us both.  So, he made sure all of that went really smooth, so my mom wouldn't find out, and he paid for it.

My senior year of high school, life got to be too much.  The thoughts of suicide were always in my head and Lou had upped the ante on our "relationship."  I was now trading myself to him for marijuana, and his oldest son, my oldest nephew, would catch him on top of me a lot, but neither of us ever said anything.  Life had become harder to bear.

I started skipping school a lot.  My mama found out on a fluke 'cause the school was concerned about me graduating since I had so many absent days.  I ended up going to night school to finish, but that didn't absolve me from the talk about my absences with mama.

She sat me down, "Look, your sisters told all the lies and played all the games.  If your ass lie to me . . . I don't know what's going on with you 'cause you won't talk to me, but you need to talk to somebody."

And I believed her because I seen my mom give out some beatings.  She was right; I needed to talk to someone. So, I went down to Mental Health Clinic at 18 and they gave me this Black woman and she interrogated me, "Why are you here?"  I answered with vague details and the first thing she said to me was, "Well, maybe it's what you wanted."  I got up and walked out of there and said I'd never get any more help ever again.

In the midst of my teenage years, my mama thought my sisters were giving me the 411, and my sisters thought my mama was giving me the 411, but nobody was giving me the 411.

The last time I skipped school, my sister caught me and threatened, "If you don't tell mama, I'mma tell her."  I skipped because I went to get birth control pills.  I decided I wanted to have sex with boys and not Lou, but I couldn't tell my mama that.  So, after I went to the birth control class at the women's clinic, I came home and threw the bag of condoms and pills on the table and I told her why I skipped school, excluding the part about Lou.

She was like, "I don't want you having sex right now, but I understand."

But she didn't tell me why she didn't want me having sex.  There was no more conversation.  I didn't get those, I got the general lessons . . . "Do what I tell you, don't do what I do," you know I got that stuff.  But I had watched them do it, sex, and it didn't make sense.  I was stuck on the side of not doing it, so I was still confused about it because I didn't understand why you would do it.  I don't understand why I wasn't supposed to, but you're doing it in front of me. It's so much that had been deposited in me till I didn't know who I was, so that's why I spent all those years living in the gray.  Living in a space where I wanted to end my life.

Although Lou's threats on my family's life were ever present, there were times I felt I had to say something or I would explode, so I brought up topics around the abuse at family gatherings while everybody was around, and my mama would shut me down.

She would scold, "We don't wanna talk about that. Let's not do that today, we tryna have fun."

So although I hadn't told her directly about the demons that haunted me, she was aware that something was going on whether she acknowledged it or not.

I didn't know how to feel about anything because my whole life, I did whatever my family told me to do. I mean it literally. I was sheltered, but also exposed to a lot as a child and young adult. I was a good girl and I did everything they said.

When I graduated from high school I came off the stage and my mom said, "You're on your own now."

I didn't really realize what that meant until I got through partying with my friends later that night. I woke up the next day and I was like, "What do I do now"? In that moment, I realized I did not know how to think for myself, they had not taught me how to think for myself. Everything I knew came from the conversations, the experiences, and the environment they raised me in.

**Part III: Sexuality–A constant needle stick to my soul.** I didn't know I could say no to men. I was never really attracted to young or old; it's just that older men were so much better to me than younger boys. Younger boys would boast, "She's a hoe man, you can get that." Where older men took me shopping and picked me up. I had a few sugar daddies that I had never had sex with; they just thought I was gorgeous and wanted me on their arm. They paid me to go hang out with them and I did. This was before I had children, so I was having fun.

185

By the time I birthed my first child, I was 19, but his daddy Melvin ran out on us. The next time around, I married in hopes to do it right but that was only wishful thinking. I didn't know to wait on anything. Nobody said you should wait to get to know people. I've also still got so much pain and so much guilt that I'm hiding from the molestation. I'm hiding the fact that five years into being molested I'm so hooked on weed because of Lou. He sold weed and he gave it to me, and sometimes he would make me buy it. When I didn't have money to buy it, I had to trade myself to him, so I'm hiding all this guilt and shame. I was always trying to do stuff to be respectful . . . better. And it just never happened.

I had known Bradley only a month before we got married, but no one objected. Nobody ever said, "Don't do it. Don't marry him." All I knew was what I felt, and we know that our feelings can get us in a lot of trouble. I didn't know that then, but I know it now. I made my step-brother give me away at this wedding, but he showed up 45 minutes late and I think it was his way of protesting. I sat at his house dressed and ready to go for 45 minutes and he never came out and said to me, "You should not marry this man," although he knew that I shouldn't marry him. So, the wedding went on as planned.

Two weeks after we were married was the first time Bradley hit me, and four months later I got pregnant. Two months into my pregnancy, I went to my neighbor's door upstairs to ask for help because I knew she was going through the same thing. I could hear the fights and the yelling from my apartment below. I told her my husband was beating me up, too, and we started holding each other up; we were there for each other.

I don't know if she had anywhere else to go, but my mother decided, "Look, if you're going to come here, you can, but I'm not going to put up with that. He can't come here, and you not going to be traipsing in and out of my house, so either you leave him, or you stay with him."

That's when I made up my mind to leave him.  I was six months pregnant.  I left.  I packed my clothes, my baby, and I walked out.  I left and stayed gone, for a while at least, until he came to my mama's house and kicked in the door and hit me in the eye for leaving him.  That time, the police caught him, but it forced me to hide in the local battered women's shelter because I didn't want to press charges.  I was scared, and I didn't want to go to court.  I didn't want to lose my spot in the shelter and I didn't want to leave because I felt safe and felt like it took the pressure off of my family to be dealing with all of my mess, so I was good.  I had my child and my baby in my belly and I was okay.

Months had passed, and I was back at my mama's house and I started letting Bradley come over to visit.  My family made it clear that they didn't want anything to do with the situation and that grown folks handled their own business.  My mama also let me know the men in my family weren't going to do anything to Bradley until I was done with him "because they wasn't going to jail behind that stupid nigga."  I understood that, I did.  With that understanding, my mama said Bradley could visit but she didn't want that nonsense in her house.  Bradley started to come over and took ownership of the unborn baby in my belly.  I thought we were off to a good start and we began going to his mom's house and staying.  My in-laws were wonderful, and I think that's why I clung to 'em, why I stayed.  I couldn't see how one person could be bad and all these other people are good.  I didn't know to look inward; all I cared about was what was on the outside.

One day, Bradley's mother, Rochelle, sat me down after he had assaulted me, and she confessed, "I'm sorry, I should have told you my son is crazy."  Rochelle married Bradley's dad when she was 14 and he beat her for breakfast, lunch, and dinner the entire time they were married.  They had five babies and he killed one when she was six months pregnant by kicking

her in the stomach.  She had to sneak her kids to the lady up the street to go get her GED, so she could get a job.  When she got her GED and a job, she filed for divorce.  She was just as terrified of her son as she was her ex-husband.  Bradley was there for the birth of my second baby, even though he and my sister cussed each other out like mad rabid dogs the whole time they were in the room.  My sister hated him and with good reason.  Six months after the baby was born, Bradley hit me so hard, he broke my jaw.  Broke the bones on the side of my face.  I had surgery and had my jaw wired together.

One day, I was on the bus getting away from him but as I got off the bus, there he was waiting.  I ran into a convenience store, and the store clerk shouted, "I'm not going to have that in here.  You get out (pointing to Bradley) and you get in here and use this phone and call whoever you need to call cause ya'll can't do that in here!"

She let me call and my sister came and got me.  It was just horrible.  You never think somebody's life has so much . . . hatred and anger, just so much all the time.  But it didn't stop there, Bradley would follow me to work.  He would leave my baby in the house by himself and follow me to work.  He was sure every man I stood in line behind to cash my check I was having sex with; he was like a paranoid schizophrenic.

So, I called the shelter and they gave me a lawyer's name, Mr. Bradshaw.  I went to see Mr. Bradshaw with my mouth wired shut and he asked, "Why are you here?"

I murmured, "because my husband broke my face and I need help before he kills me."

He stared at me for what seemed like a while with a concerned look before saying, "Okay, you know what, I'm going to do this for free."

He got me full custody of my child and a clean start at 23 years old and I never looked back after that, although it took a while for me to actually shake Bradley.  At first, I didn't know

he was stalking me, but then he came to my job where I was an apartment manager.  He would wait until all the maintenance men were gone, he never got it off until the last time.  The last time, he jumped over the table so fast, grabbed the scissors, and had me pinned down before I knew what was happening.  I was sure he was going to stab me with those scissors, but the maintenance man walked in and he dropped the scissors and ran out.

"That nigga's crazy, is that your husband?" Ken, the maintenance man asked.

This was happening as I was healing emotionally and physically.  I was beginning to heal, and I was emotionally tied to God, 'cause I had thought if I really got the divorce and left him, I was going against God.  I believed from growing up in church and growing up with what people told me was right or wrong that you had to stay in a situation because God had a plan for you.  I was confused and settling back in the gray space.  At Gramma's and the Wilson's I wasn't exposed to people beating people up.  I didn't understand that.

Ken coming through the door was a blessing.  Bradley would have stabbed me with those scissors if he hadn't come in and caught Bradley.  Even more promising was his promise of protection.  Ken told me, "I'll protect you from that crazy nigga."

"You will?" I beamed.

"Yeah," he said with confidence.

"What about your wife?" I asked.

"I have plenty of girlfriends anyway, but I'll take care of you," he reassured.

"Okay."  I settled, and that's where the last two babies came from; he protected me.  The first thing he did was go out and get me a car.  The second thing was he moved me where Bradley couldn't find me and all I had to do was pack my stuff.

189

"Pack everything you want to take," Ken ordered and handed me a stack of sticky notes. The next day he brought me the boxes and said, "Put the notes on everything you want to go in the trash and at 2:00 be ready."

When 2:00 came, four men in a truck showed up.  He wasn't one of them.  They got all the boxes and moved me, and me and my two kids was good.  I didn't ask many questions, all I knew was he did what he said he was going to do.  I was 23 and impressionable and my life was horrible.  My mama couldn't help me, my siblings couldn't help me, my daddy ain't nowhere to be found and he never helped me.  I had nobody to help me and Ken helped me in a way that he brought solutions to my issues, so I gave him two babies.

Me and Ken had been having an affair for a long time before his wife Sherita found out and came to my job to confront me.  I had walked to the window to make a hot cup of tea, so my back was to the door when I heard it bust open.  I turned around startled, and this big Black woman was busting in, angry as a grizzly bear ready for a fight.

I warned, "If you take one more step, I'm going to throw this in your face.  I will burn you.  I'm not scared of you."

I knew who she was before she even announced herself.  She broke down in tears, sat down in the chair, and cried, "I'm sorry, I don't mean to act like this, but my husband is an asshole.  I don't work, and I don't have any way to take care of me and my kids.  I have to stay with him.  It's not your fault he's having sex with my best friend, my neighbors, and everybody else.  He's always had women.  You just a victim; you just young and gullible.  I don't really blame you.  You just one of the rest of his girls."

I was looking at this big woman who was every bit of 6'3" and 400 pounds in tears.  She could have snatched me up, but she broke down like a flower.

"I'm sorry.  I didn't know," I tried to convince, although I knew Ken's situation.  I didn't care; I was trying to get out of my abusive situation with Bradley, and Ken came through A to Z. He came correct with everything.  I was also trying to keep from getting my ass whooped.  When she really broke down I continued, "I am so sorry.  I will leave him alone."

"I know you didn't.  It doesn't matter, just don't ever call my house and I'll never call your house.  I don't care what you do cause it's not going to change him.  Just don't call my house.  I really didn't want to harm you.  I didn't come here to harm you, but I'm just so angry at myself, cause I can't do anything," Sherita confided.  And just got like that, she walked out the office and I never saw her again.

When I had Ken's first baby, he was at the hospital with his two oldest girls.  I'm sure Sherita sent them cause she wanted to know if the baby was really his.  There was no doubt this baby was Ken's and the girls reported that back.  I had known Ken's kids from when they called and visited the office even before we began the affair.  I didn't care about his wife or kids at that point; I knew he would protect me from Bradley and provide for me and the kids.  I had my daughter, Destiny, and three months later, I told my sister about the molestation.

I was 23 and the manager of an apartment complex.  I lived at the bottom of the hill, my mom lived at the top of the hill, and my sister lived by the entrance to the complex.  One day, during a visit with my mama, she said, "Baby, why are you still walking with your head down?"

"I don't know?" I lied, because I hadn't really told anyone about the demons haunting me, and I wasn't ready to tell my mom.

"Well, you better tell somebody what is going on with you," she suggested.

So I walked over to Sissy's apartment and said, "I gotta tell you something,"

She breathed, "Ok."

I had respect for my sister because she was the sister who raised me. My mom had to work and go to school and she was the oldest, so she was at home most of the time. She bathed us and fed us, and she made sure our clothes was clean. She was that motherly sister, and she took really good care of me.

"I got something to tell you. It's not good, but mama said I need to talk to somebody," I started.

"Ok." She was always mild mannered.

My heart was pounding through my chest. "Lou has been having sex with me since I was 12 and I'm just messed up about it." I stumbled over my words they came out so fast.

Unfazed, she reasoned, "Well, don't you worry about that no more, you let me take care of that and don't you worry about it anymore."

I didn't feel anything after I told her. I thought I would feel relief, but for me it was a band-aid, so to speak. I didn't feel anything by what she said. I trusted what she said, but I didn't feel anything because I'm already all messed up. I didn't know how to feel about anything.

After I had Destiny, things between me and Ken began to change. He was 20 years older than me and he began to pry into my life, the part that I wouldn't expose.

"You just too sweet something got to be wrong with you. I never met a woman as nice and as sweet as you," he probed.

"What do you want me to do? I don't know how to cut men's tires and bust out windows and cuss out girls. Why would I go cuss out a woman when you cheating on both of us? I don't know what you want me to do. I don't know what kind of bad girl you want me to be," I snapped.

He didn't have a verbal answer, but his actions spoke. Once I got on my feet, the shelter offered me a job because they needed somebody who could relate to getting beat up and none of the staff had ever been through that, so the manager called me and offered me a job. I took it. When I left the apartment complex manager job, Ken started cheating on me with the new girl who took the job. But when Destiny was three months old, it was too late; I was already pregnant again by Ken, with my son Jaceyon. I did not plan that pregnancy. I had my diaphragm as birth control and I could never take birth control pills because I nursed all of my children, so that was not an option. I did have an IUD after the first one, but Bradley asked me to take it out cause he wanted a baby. By the time I did that, they were unsafe, so I didn't get another one, I just nursed, and I used the rhythm method with the calendar. I tried taking birth control pills when I was younger, but I got pregnant with my first child on birth control pills and they made me sick, so I did what I thought would work. After Jaceyon was born I got my tubes tied.

By this time, I have my four babies, the youngest was six months old and I had been through a marriage when I met Maurice; Maurice lived next door to my sister. I met a lot of people like that, but I was only in this particular neighborhood because of my mama. She was such a punk. When it was time to reapply for Section 8, my mama was scared to tell the people that me and my kids were living with her. If they would have known that, they would have given me my own Section 8 voucher, then I could have moved two doors down from her and stayed in the complex, but she would not tell them. I ended up calling a hookup who called somebody, and they hooked me up with a place way out East. I took the first place I could get, but it was way away from my mama. I was vulnerable out there and that's how I met Maurice.

Maurice's opening line was, "I've been watching you."

"That's not a good thing," I replied.

"Yes, it is, cause I see you going to work, you got these babies, you struggling, but you're holding your own," he complimented.

Two weeks later, he was staying with me. Two weeks after that, he asked me to marry him and bought me a car, so I could get back and forth without being on the bus with the kids. He moved in with us, and we planned to get married and be a family.

He was the one that gave it to me and I tell you how I know that. In 1985, Rock Hudson came out and the whole AIDS thing blew apart. In 1987, Maurice was such an asshole, so two years into our relationship, I cheated on him and found out I was pregnant after I went to the doctor for a routine check-up. I didn't think there was any way that I could get pregnant since my tubes were tied, but I was and I had to terminate that pregnancy. I got infected after I had Jaceyon, my last baby. I just didn't know it because I didn't get tested until my baby was two years old in '89 and the test came back positive. I felt devasted, like I couldn't take another ounce of bad news. I was furious.

After I found out, I went home to tell Maurice to which he responded, "I love you anyway." But he was hiding that he was infected this whole time cause he used to go to the doctor all the time; I just didn't know why.

"Did you give me this?" I demanded angrily.

"How could I give you this and I go and donate blood every week?" He reasoned.

Then two weeks later he told me he had cancer, but he didn't have cancer and I'll tell you how I know. Maurice was a repeat offender and on probation. Since he was on probation he had to go see his probation officer. He was also an IV drug user. The probation officer got a hold of

his medical information and because they were his guardians, he called me into the office and told me he had AIDS.

I was in such denial that I told the probation officer, "Our relationship ain't like that anyway, so I'm good."

She was confused. "Well, y'all are engaged and y'all live together.  He said you're his fiancé," She questioned.

 "We are, but it's never been a sexual relationship.  He's doing me a favor and I'm doing him a favor," I denied.

"Okay I get it," She assured.

"So, I'm good."  I was so furious at him because I asked him, and he'd lied.  He knew when he came to this city that he had it.

Then he kept saying, "I'mma marry you so you can have all my stuff."

And I believed him.  I sent out wedding invitations and people were laughing at me cause he had a wife in Atlanta.  When she called me, I answered the phone and she snapped, "So you're going to marry my husband?"

"Who is this?" I said with an attitude.

"I am Maurice's wife," she growled.

I retreated, "Okay, my mistake.  I didn't know."

She threatened, "Well, I'm telling you.  I'm going to come up there and I'm going to kick your ass."

"Well, you better bring some help cause I'm not no bitch ass punk.  Me and my sisters will fuck you up," I yelled and slammed the phone.  I never heard from her again and I was

telling the truth, I was ready for a fight.  I really don't think she knew he was sick, cause they weren't together when he was down there, but I don't know because one lie led to other lies.

My second husband, John, was a serial cheater.  He got a venereal disease and went to the clinic and gave my name anonymously without coming home and telling me, so they contacted me.  Now I already knew that the HIV diagnosis was there, and he also knew, so I go down and get the test to see whatever it is he got, and HIV shows up with the other venereal disease.  Do you know the caseworker came to my job!  I was working for the school district, and she came to my job to give me some shit.

Although I already knew I had HIV I went off on her because that was unprofessional. "How the hell you gonna tell somebody they HIV positive in the middle of the day at they job! Are you crazy?  Bitch get out of here and don't you ever call me again, you stupid bitch!"

She looked at me terrified and corrected, "You absolutely right, I'm so sorry."

I cussed her out.  I used to be a professional at cussing because I was angry!  I was so angry!

Look up asshole in dictionary and you'll find my third husband Stan's picture there.  I was horrible at picking men.  Stan was my next-door neighbor's brother, and he had a lot of shit to hide.  I think he thought being with me would help him do that.  He had good jobs, but he couldn't read or write.  He was married when we started talking but they were on the verge of separating.

I saw her cussing him out and talking to him so bad one day that I told his sister, "Tell your brother when he get sick of that shit, he can come over here and be my man."

Go figure!  I knew his wife because we stayed in the same city but we didn't hang out. She heard everything cause she was standing in the door.  So, I said, "Yeah, I said when he's sick

of her to call me." And he did, but it was all a bad dream. We were together close to 10 years. It took his sister's man to put a bug in my ear to even think about leaving his ass alone.

"I don't even know why you follow behind somebody that can't even read and write anyway. He don't even know what the hell he's doing," he remarked.

I stopped in my tracks, and I thought, "He is so right." And about a year after hearing that I put his ass out. When we split up, he said, "I just wanted to see how it felt to use somebody cause people had used me my whole life."

"You coulda picked a bitch without four kids," I retaliated.

As a result of getting the HIV diagnosis at 26, I felt like if anyone wanted to be around me that, you know . . . because I would tell them, and if they accepted me then I should be with them. I was always chasing after being this respectful married woman because that's what I heard as a little girl growing up in the church and I chased it. In a way, I'm still chasing after that, but in a much better way. I feel like it could possibly not happen, but that it still could. Honestly, I'm still chasing it, hence the four marriages. I wanted to be respectful. I wanted to take away the dirtiness of being a fornicator. I wanted to take that away and marriage did that. It wasn't the solution, but it took it away, it made me feel respectful for a while because I never felt that. I always felt robbed and it still seems that way because of the diagnosis. It's like, damn, I get to this point and then it's . . . gone.

**Part IV: I didn't know I had a spirit that was suffering.** My kids were five years old and younger when I got my diagnosis. I was suicidal every single solitary day and I didn't know how to get better. At my doctor's appointment, the nurse asked me how I was, and I all I could say was, "I don't know." Because I didn't know.

She continued with the examination and interrogated, "Well are you sleeping? Eating?"

"I don't know," I replied.

"I noticed you chewed out the insides of both of your jaws," she continued.

 "Well, ok," I responded.

She countered, "I want you to see somebody."  So, she sent me to psychiatric behavior down at the local hospital and that's when I really started healing.  I was in denial for 10 years, but only because I had to raise my kids.  During the 10 years of denial, I was in therapy trying to heal myself, which was difficult because I didn't know I had a spirit that was suffering.  I only knew that my body was sick.  I also spent that much time in therapy because I refused the HIV medication since I thought it was poisoning people with all of the side effects.  I was a single mother with little kids; there was no way I could deal with the side effects of nausea, diarrhea, dizziness, blindness, and so many others.  So for the next few years I was trying to get well both mentally and physically.  I began relationships with my caseworkers and doctors and was in constant negotiation of the number of pills I needed to take.

The first doctor, Dr. Renea, gave me my results and told me I had to take all of this medicine.  I looked at her and said, "I don't have to do anything but go home and raise my kids and I cannot raise my kids if I'm going to be dealing with all that."

So, Dr. Renea told me to think about it.  I ended up going to the clinic and met Dr. Sampson, a wonderful doctor, who ended up leaving the area to take care of his brother who was also diagnosed with HIV.  Dr. Sampson would say to me, "Ms. Pamela, your T-cells are at 16,000, which is pretty good right now, but I need you to take this medicine because if you get sick and you're not taking this medicine then we're going to have to nurse you back to health and then get you better."

I told him, "But I'm fine right now."

"Yeah but if you take a dip. . ., he argued.

 "What kind of medicine?" I sassed.

He started, "Well it's 30 pills . . ."

I interjected, "I'm not stopping to take 30 pills a day!  It's not happening."

So, I kept going to my appointments with Dr. Sampson and he referred me to some resources.  I looked up the places he referred and found one that I could catch the bus right to, so I called them.

Ms. Donna, the director at the time, insisted, "You know what, I'm not even supposed to take your case.  I'm supposed to give you to a case worker, but I like you so I'm going to take your case and we'll see."

We talked, and she kept me abreast on new medicine that came out.  She would tell me about it and all this stuff and kept me in the loop about the things that were happening.  We would just talk.

So, Dr. Sampson called me back and bargained, "Pamela, 16 pills."

I countered, "16 pills, are you kidding me!  What do you want from me?"

"Okay, Okay," he sighed.

"I'll see you on my next appointment," I teased.

I'm not a pill taker and never have been.  If my head hurt, I drink a hot cup of tea and lay down and I'm done.  I just didn't do pills.  Pills is like drugs to me and the only drug I ever took was marijuana and I loved it; the time I had to quit it, I hated it.

So, I sat in Ms. Donna's sessions and I confided, "You are a part of my healing."

Eventually after going back and forth for 10 years, Dr. Sampson called me back and offered, "Pamela, 7 pills."

I agreed, "Now you're talkin'."

"You take two in the morning and five at night," he instructed. And the only reason I had to take five at night was that one pill was in 200 mg and they wanted me to take 600, so that was three of them and the other two pills were the same two pills that I took in the morning. So that's when I started taking the medication. I didn't have any complications and I have been asymptomatic from day one.

The day I got my diagnosis I went home and called my family. It just so happened that I was watching TV, and I never really looked at the 700 Club, only because it had so much going on and my shows were coming on. But that particular day, I watched the 700 Club and a lady called in and she had four babies at home and her husband was the only man she's ever known. She had just given birth to her little baby, and he was a traveling salesman. She went to get her check-up and found out she had AIDS and didn't know what to do. Her husband was denying it, but they prayed for healing for her right there, and I just sat in on it and I soaked it all up.

My prayer was to stay completely healthy until I got my kids grown, cause they were very little. I never thought that I would see life beyond all of that. At first, I didn't tell my kids, but I would put them through these regiments of cleaning, sorting clothes, and doing their laundry. My oldest boy, Tyree, he's very perceptive, but of course he was my go-to and my confidant. I made sure he was prepared to take care of his siblings. I started writing goodbye letters to them and making tapes, and I did that for 10 years; the second 10, I was on meds. Twenty years in and I started wasting away. I started getting thin boned. The doctors would change my cocktail, but they still wouldn't give me disability.

When friends found out about the diagnosis, it was likely because of something we were talking about in casual conversation. Like this one time, me and Priscilla were talking, and she

mentioned they had to go to another state and get these kids cause they mother died of AIDS.  I told her I tested HIV positive.  Priscilla couldn't wait to get on the phone and call everybody.  I didn't know she was one of those people that secretly hated me.  With me, the HIV had never been a secret.  Even now, I see people that knew me way back and they look at me and ask if I'm alright and I say, "Do I look all right?  I know you know, but I'm good."  And it aggravated people because of the fact that I had three husbands.  They would say mean things, "Who would marry her?" and "She must really suck a mean dick to get her husbands in her condition."  But that wasn't the case, it was honesty.  I was honest with the men that I encountered and when you teach people how to treat you, you don't have to demean yourself to get desired.  I didn't have to, and I didn't.

As soon as a man rolled up on me talking about, "You sure is cute."

I rolled it out and told them, "Look, what you see ain't what you get, and I don't know about you touching me."

It was something that I was not going to lie about because lies destroy.  You think you're building a foundation and what you're building is sinking sand.  That's the worst 'cause I had a marriage like that.  And although I quit cussing, sometimes stuff make you so mad and it's all you can do to really keep from hurting somebody.

I started being a drill sergeant to my kids, just in case they had to go live with somebody else; I didn't want them to be treated like crap.  I don't care if you go to family, blood, or whatever they have a tendency to get on other people's nerves because they're in their space and they're not really prepared for that, so I wanted them to be of use.

I made a will and a DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) and everything.  I didn't want my kids to deal with that.  I'm like my mama, when it's my time let me go; don't be hooking me up to no

machines, looking at my unresponsive butt.  And when I die, cremate me.  I don't care if you put me in a mayonnaise jar or drop me in the backyard, I won't know cause I'll be dead.  Take that money and pay the bills.  Y'all have a party and put some pictures up and talk about how crazy I was and how much you enjoyed me being on this Earth.

I fought to get disability for years, but they wouldn't give it to me.  Now, I'm glad that I didn't, because I didn't want to be stuck in a rut waiting and depending on the checks to come and not working.  I got welfare in between jobs to make ends meet.  At first, I felt cheated but then I had to understand something.  I had to understand my source.  I had to have faith in what I was believing.  It took a long time for me discover my source because I didn't know that it was there.  I didn't know that spirit thing was there because I was looking for love every place and I didn't know it was with me all along.  When I discovered it was right there, that's when I came to grips with my delivery.

I took the medication and then I got off of them.  My mama saw me, and worried, "Girl, I saw you and I thought you was about to die."

"Nope, I'm still here," I boasted.

"Girl look, all you got to do is give it to God and keep on pushing," she advised.  My mama did that a lot because she raised six kids by herself and she went through a lot; she just didn't tell us or didn't let us see.  And I did that with my kids; I didn't tell them about the HIV diagnosis and all of the pills.  They were the only ones that didn't know.

So, 20 years on the meds and I got off; I just quit taking them.  The new mix they gave me made me sick.  I woke up one morning and decided I didn't want to take them.  I didn't even tell the doctors, I just quit going.  I just kind of dropped off and I didn't take them.  A few months off of the medication and I got an infection in my toe and my toe swelled.  I don't know if I

bumped it or if I stepped on something, but I had to go to the doctor, a different doctor. Instead of being concerned about my toe, she was concerned about my blood pressure. I never had no issues with high blood pressure, but because I was homeless, unstable, moving from place to place and living like I was living, eating ramen noodles, and stuff that I've never eaten before, stuff with sugar and processed stuff, stuff from food pantries, my blood pressure had elevated. I told her, "Forget about my blood pressure, what about my toe!"

"Take some ibuprofen and soak it in some hot water. But you need to get that high blood pressure taken care of," she advised.

Since this was not a free clinic, it was a sliding scale clinic, I was gonna incur bills that I could not afford, so I figured I had to go back to see that doctor and I had to go back and take the medicine. When I went back my t cells were 100, that's full-blown AIDS. I had full-blown AIDS, but I was asymptomatic. They say when your t cells get below 200, it's full-blown AIDS, mine were like 115.

My case manager Angela asked, "Would you like me to help you get disability?"

I declined, "I'm sick of they asses and I don't have time to be writing and having them send me the same piece of paper six and seven damn times. I'm not doing that." I decided I was going to enroll in the local community college and get me a piece of paper and get a job.

**Part V: I Thought you had to die to meet God.** Deception is the ultimate trick. Satan ain't got but one, and its deception. This was very real for me because the trapper always sets the snares and I didn't know when I was running into them. All of the traps that I was snared in were covered up; they were disguised like they weren't really there, and I was trapping myself trying to help people. Every time I would help somebody, it put me in another snare. My neighbor Lanette, who drove a newer light blue Chevy, would occasionally come over and ask

me to watch her kids or help pay her light bill.  I would help as much as I could.  But when I needed her to return the favor and run me to the store so I wouldn't have to carry all of the kids on the bus, she was always too busy.  This happened many times; the people I helped were never around to help me.  Pretty soon, I was in the dark and didn't know where to step.  Every place I stepped was a snare, so even when I made the anonymous phone call to report the drug activity in my neighborhood, that was a snare, that was a trap.  The call was not really anonymous.

Two or three years later, I joined Forest Hills Baptist Church.  The minister wasn't a prophet, but he would call for people with illnesses to come to the front for prayer during the deliverance service and he would pray for certain things.  One day, he asked if he could pray for anybody that has an illness, so I went up and told him about my illness and he prayed.

After service, the minister took me to the office with his mom and said, "Mom, God has some special work he has here that he wants us to help with."

The three of us fasted from food for 7 days, only having water.  I don't know how I did that, but I did it.  After we did the fast, the very second it ended, it was like something started at my toes and started tingling all the way up and went through my body.

It was time to have the talk with my mama.  I'm sure she was aware of the sexual abuse whether she acknowledged it or not.  It took all this time for me to get up the nerve to talk to her. She didn't have much to say and didn't want to talk about it much, as she revealed that she had been sexually molested.

She merely reasoned, "I really can't talk about it because I'm so past it and I survived it. I'm done with it and you need to do the same."

In her day, women were seen and not heard, so she chose not to talk about it.  I accepted her response and I felt good about telling her.

I said to myself, "Ok, maybe that's what I need to do, because my mama wouldn't tell me anything wrong."

Through my whole life I thought you had to die to meet God, but because I went through the treatment with Ms. Donna, I was able to go back. I sat in a room for six months and I told Dr. Rickman all of those horrible molestation stories. I told her all of my horrible date rape stories. I told her all the horrible stuff that had me bound.

Dr. Rickman tried to give me pills and I looked at them and insisted, "I'm not crazy."

She informed, "That's why people don't get help, because they think they're crazy pills. They're not crazy pills. What has happened to you is you've been through so much trauma and so much toxin that it's messed up the chemical balance in your brain. These pills are going to take those toxins out and help your brain get chemically balanced again."

"Give them to me!" I exclaimed. It was the best thing I ever did. I continued to go to the counseling session and took the medicine and I got better.

I was getting better but I was still getting high on marijuana and had a sugar daddy Trey. I was straddling the fence with my spirituality and my worldly life. At this time, I was the preacher's wife's assistant, so I attended church pretty regularly. One evening I was sitting in the front of the church while Reverend Walker was preaching about Job, and my head kept jerking back. It worried me so I thought I was having a heart attack or something 'cause I kept ticking. I finally turned around and I saw myself sitting in the back of the church with horns. It was just this nasty thing and I was like, 'Oh my God.' That wasn't the first or last time I would have a spiritual encounter like that. After I saw that thing, I went home and got rid of Trey.

When I left my Trey, the day I went to break up with him, he said, "I got to go to the store, I'll be right back."

When Trey left, I was sitting at the kitchen table in his 2-bedroom apartment and my kids were playing outside. I was sitting at the kitchen table telling God, "I'm going to leave this man," and I heard this "clink, clink, bam" and I'm still sitting there. Then I hear the "clink, clink, bam" again and then the words, "You're free." I broke up with that man and walked right out of there. Then transferring buses, I met the devil, my fourth husband Rick.

I married the devil 'cause he came in such a good package. I didn't know I was hanging out with the fool this whole time! I didn't understand or realize that the seed of fornication was planted in me through molestation and kept growing and growing . . . I didn't know! I took him home and married him. Shortly after we were married, I caught Rick with his hands on my daughter, so I'm back in it again. I should have kept the sugar daddy; at least he was good to me and gave me a car to drive. I met this fool on the bus stop. He was the one that ended up molesting my daughter.

I had four bad marriages and in my fourth marriage, Rick molested my little girl when she was six. I thought I was going to die. He never penetrated her, but I caught him, and I called everybody I was supposed to call. He went through the court system and my little girl watched me put his ass in jail. I did all that I knew to help her healing.

She went to counseling until the doctor said, " I think she's going to be okay, she's really young and there was no penetration."

My church family also stood behind me and the day I caught him, we went to church. I told the pastor and he immediately started praying for her. They pulled that seed out. See, nobody plucked my seed; mine grew into this huge oak inside of me and almost killed me literally. I would have special talks with God because I didn't trust anyone else. It felt like a safe space when I talked to him. The total opposite when I was with a man. Sexuality is a

hurting thing that has physically felt very good to my body at times but has always been a hurting thing to my brain, my mind, my way of thinking. The only good that has come out of my sexuality is my four children. Sex or sexuality has always been something someone has taken against my will, wanted from me with no intention of keeping me, and something that has always hurt me physically, mentally, and spiritually. Sexuality to me is something that always feels like I am being robbed, used, and only for tending to someone else's needs and wants. Sexuality has always been a constant needle stick to my soul that appears that I can only shake off when my literal death comes. Sex and sexuality are something that I always want to be over with. Sex and sexuality are one in the same to me and has overshadowed the intimacy that I long for even now at 55 years old. I have yet to experience a full and true experience of what I believe to be sexuality mixed with sincere intimacy, foreplay, and thoughtfulness mixed with positive touching, no anal, and no oral contact. I am at a loss about sexuality. I am not confused about gender, the sex act itself, preference, reproduction, ejaculation, or orgasm. Honestly, when I realized that living was not a fantasy, all of my perceptions about sexuality stopped. It is something that men wanted from me and nothing more. I have been forced into sex so many times I lost count. I have grown numb to my sexuality and to sex; now it is a series of quickies that meets a basic human need. Sexuality is not a sore subject for me, but it is a subject that I have possessed very poor judgement and insight about. Sexuality has always been distorted and twisted; it is guilt-ridden, dirty, nasty, shameful, disgusting, and controlling. It kept me locked up mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, especially from the ages of 12 to 42 until I went to therapy and now I can deal with sexuality in an adult manner.

I hated how sex made me feel, it felt good to my body, but it totally ripped out my soul. The only thing good that has come from sex is my four children and I wouldn't trade that for the

world.  Sex has been a constant needle stick to my soul and it has almost killed me.  At 55 years old, I long for pure intimacy and wish I had the chance to do it right.  I wish I was taught how to love the right way, and to wait on a man that loved me.  When I realized that life was not a fantasy, all of my perceptions about sexuality stopped, the reality is that it is something that men want from me. Because of the molestation, my views of sex and myself are skewed.  From 12 to 42, I was locked up mentally, spiritually, and emotionally.

It's never easy to leave a bad relationship and my relationship with the carnal world was no different.  I was still a really heavy weed smoker and I had fallen asleep after I smoked and woke up in hell.  I went to bed one night and I didn't wake up.  I didn't get out of the bed, but in my sleep, I woke up and I was in hell.  I call it hell because I was on this bed, this big, old pretty bed; it was beautiful.  I was hanging onto the headboard on my knees and there was a ring of fire burning around me and Satan and all of his demons were standing around with guns, knives, and everything.  He was going to kill me, and I cried out for Jesus and he showed up.  It wasn't a person; it was the spirit.  It just came right down.  It was like this beam, not a light, but a presence.

He proclaimed, "I know she's guilty, but you can't kill her cause she's mine."

Then He walked through the fire and picked me up like a baby.  As he was bringing me up, he showed me all the errors of my ways from the age of knowing better.  He showed me everything.  Everything that I had been through.  He showed me my enemies and even though they didn't have faces, I knew who they were.

He carried me up all the way and when we got to the top, he said, "The choice is yours." And that's when I let it all go.  I began to read my Bible.  For three years, I only left the house when I had to.

**Part VI: I Failed at being a Christian, now I am a child of God.** I was introduced to spirituality way before sex. Everything I've been through is because of sex. I thought my beauty was a curse for so many years. Because of all that I have been through it's hard for me to feel good about putting my spirituality and sexuality in the same space but it's also so hard for me to say they are not intertwined. Coming from a Black church, religion is what I grew up on. But having a spirit and knowing for myself as an individual is important because I thought you had to die to meet God.

Before, I never knew I had a spirit and a soul; I thought they were the same thing. When He brought me to the top and said, "The choice is yours," I surrendered what I thought I knew, because what I thought I knew never worked. I quit smoking marijuana. I got saved. The next night, I tried to smoke weed and the devil and the demons started talking to me. I mean, I was sitting in my room and I don't believe in that ghost stuff like on TV where they be opening up cabinets and seance and stuff. I don't believe that; but I know what I heard, and I know what I experienced. When I heard the voice, it wasn't anything that I audibly heard. This was in me, and I was like oh shit because I just got rescued and I was like oh shit.

I feel like after God came for me, I'm renewed. I thought I had been saved my whole life. I was saved with my Gramma, but I after going to church and studying the Bible I learned that I had to be set free, delivered, and filled with the Holy Ghost. I didn't know you had all them other steps. I've failed at the Christian thing, now I'm just a child of God. When I was a Christian, I was dating a married preacher, smoking weed, having affairs, and doing what I wanted to do, what felt good to my flesh. I was a Christian the whole time I was doing all of that. Everything that I've done and everything that's happened to me has been while I've been a Christian. Anybody walking this Earth has a secret and a skeleton they would rather leave in

their closet. They don't want it to fall out. They have something they're ashamed of. They have something they regret; they're just like me. So, we have different addresses, but every one of us is stuck here in this Valley of the Shadow of Death. So, whether they're more important to me or than me, or they have authority that I don't, I don't really care because it doesn't bother me anymore.

I was so concerned with the doctrine of religiosity that I got baptized every time I went to a different church. I thought that is what you were supposed to do to be clean, to be accepted. I had never read the Bible for myself, so I was never getting the full scope of the whole thing. I was just going through the motions because that was what I was supposed to do. That's what the preaching said, "You must be born again you must be baptized," "you got to go through the water;" you know all of that. So that's what it meant for me to be a Christian, and I failed.

As I read, I started getting more insight into what it means about having a spirit, a soul, and a body—all the stuff that was used to try to kill me and make me this horrible disgusting person. But my Creator is the one that created me, and when he created me I was pure. When I came out of my mother's womb I was born out of iniquity, but I was still pure. Everything I had been exposed to up until this point left a stain, a mark, and left a cut. It left damage, pain, anguish, and everything that you could think about in a negative fashion, but it was still something in there crying out "this cannot be it."

All religion has a doctrine, but the doctrine of man makes the word of God void. I didn't know that until I started reading and studying. I lived the religious doctrine, which in my opinion says you can do whatever you want to do as long as you ask for forgiveness, repent, and come to church every Sunday and act like you got some sense at church. It says that you can be religious and cuss somebody totally out and you can be okay with that. It says that you can be

religious and when somebody new shows up to church you can be unaccepting. You can be religious and when you coming to your church and somebody you never seen before sitting in your seat, a religious person can say, "You in my seat." It has taught me that a room full of people will give 10% of their money to somebody that's asking for it and you're in debt at home. Religion says to me that you're going to go to the church and help them paint and help them fix the church up, but your stuff is falling down. If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceived his own heart, this man's religion is vain (James 1:26) and literally I get it. That's where the Christianity and religion and church thing hems me up. I don't think they are bad for what they're doing, it's just that I'm not that person anymore. They be like say amen, but I don't say amen for everything. I don't like to take communion, because I'm not free and clear in my mind, and that's a personal decision and that's a personal relationship. Now I'm clear about what I do, there's no more gray; that's the difference in my spirituality. Before I didn't have any boundaries, any lines. The only boundaries and lines were the ones my family put in place for me, and when I graduated from high school, they took them away, so I didn't have any. I didn't know how to set any, and I had no clue, but now I have to set them.

I've had these spiritual encounters and I began tying it together. I believe I am having a Job experience. Satan threw everything at Job to test his faith and that's how I felt, but I never once became disheartened with God; matter of fact, I trusted him because I knew that it was him and only him that rescued me, and I tell him every day, "Thank you for coming for me."

The Christian thing is hard, and because I have failed at it, I consider myself a child of God. I love Christians. I love everybody; I always have, but I can't be mistreated no more and I've learned that I can't do God's job. People are in trouble because of whatever steps they are taking, like me. I was in trouble because of my steps. I just didn't know where I was going; I

was taking the wrong steps.  It was like the devil turned on all these lights and said, "Come in let's play," and when I did, he turned off all the lights and it went black.  I would spend all of my time trying to get my behind out the dark going down the wrong road.  I'm in the dark on the wrong road and nobody but God could get me out and I knew that much, so now I'm trusting him.  So now that's where my spirituality comes from, because he gave it to me himself.  He revealed himself to me in a way that I don't care who you are, or what you say; I don't care, I met him for myself.  It's very personal; that's why I figured, if that's what you said you went through, I believe you, because I know my journey . . . I know it.  I went through it, I did it, he brought me out and he talked me through it.  It wasn't an audible voice, it was a presence.  That's my spirituality.  Spirituality to me is a presence; it's a space that you operate in.  You don't always know what it's going to be like or look like, but you walk in it because you trust in it, and it gets you through every single solitary day.

My kids were 16, 14, 12, and 11 when they learned of the HIV diagnosis. I sat them down and told all of them except Jaceyon because I didn't think he could handle it.  Tyree told me he knew it was something I wasn't telling them, 'cause everything changed.  But I talked to them for like three years and we cried all the time.  I mean we was messed up.  We cried every day, but then one day the tears just stopped.  I began to educate my kids because I hate when I hear ignorant people talking crazy about what they don't know.  The stigma was still heavy.  Sometimes I find myself sitting on the bus stop ready to talk about my story and often I am given the chance.

One summer day I was sitting at the bus stop on the covered bench and a young woman was sitting a few seats away crying.  I slid over to approach her, "Baby you gon be alright?"

"Naw," she cried.

I was concerned, "You got somebody to help you?  If you don't mind me asking, what's wrong?  You want to talk about it?  I'm a stranger; I don't ever have to see you again.  You ain't gotta worry about it coming back, you know."

"I'm so sick of this nigga, we got three kids and he still burning me," she confessed.

I questioned, "Burning you?  Giving you VD?"

 "Yes," she confirmed.

I consoled, "See, I ain't gonna tell you to leave your man, but I will tell you that you need to tell that nigga he ain't touching you without a condom and I'll tell you why."

When I shared my story, she was shocked, "For real, you don't even look like that."

"'Cause it's not something you look at," I explained.

She was like, "Thank you so much."

I'm a survivor and it is a blessing for me to share my story.  I couldn't use it as a crutch and I wasn't gonna let it keep me from raising my kids.  I had tunnel vision with that.  I think every cloud has a silver lining but that was something that was always given to me by my mom and I never knew how to use it.  Now I do.  I share my story to help others.  If I can help a young Black girl not learn the lessons I've learned the hard way, I consider that a blessing and my way to pay it forward.

## Discussion

The study was influenced by the need to explore Black women's relationships and environments in which they learned about sexuality and spirituality.  The narratives uncovered the ways in which they navigated various terrain to inform their sexual and spiritual relationships as older Black women.  Although the participants have distinct journeys, they also share some similarities, as demonstrated through the VES narratives.  In the following sections, I analyze

each participant's narrative individually and then provide a cross-narrative comparison to highlight the similarities and differences in the participants' experiences as informed by the tenets of Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry and womanism.

The purpose was to explore narrative storylines through a womanist and Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry lens and decipher what else is going on. Because the relationships among people, their environment, and their spiritual development are delicate, intricate, and interwoven components that affect the interactions one has with others and themselves and in turn influences their spiritual and psychosocial development, there is overlap in the analysis of each domain. For this reason, the most salient aspects of the human, environment, and spiritual relationships are highlighted.

Through the VES narratives, Viola and Pamela synthesized their own experiences and made sense of how they defined spirituality and sexuality. This way of conceptualizing spirituality and sexuality may differ from that of others who can point to specific events that allowed them clarity, but this way was justifiable for Viola and Pamela, as it provided them the space to synthesize their experiences and come to terms with their defining moments. VES narratives and Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry allow this adapted process of coming of age for Viola and Pamela. The tenets of Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry highlight the elements of survival, struggle, healing, and success; spirituality as a source of strength and a protective barrier; and the relationships within the family and patriarchy.

**Human-to-Human**

The analysis of the human-to-human exchanges reveals the interactional influences that have affected the intersecting realities Black women face when negotiating and navigating their sexuality through spirituality and informal learning. Those relationships consist of relations with

214

the self and others, have shaped their perceptions of sexuality and spirituality, and have been significant to their development.

For Viola, the main human-to-human relationships are with her siblings, parents, husbands, mentors and teachers, and peers. Because of the closeness of her family, she was able to solicit information about spirituality from all members, but only from her siblings about sexuality. Those conversations shaped and continue to shape Viola's perspectives of spirituality and sexuality, specifically what she learned directly and indirectly from her brother Robert and sister Karen. Viola mentioned she and her sister would approach her brother Robert to solicit answers to questions about sex because although their mother was a nurse, there were no candid conversations about sex or the anatomy with her. In addition to her siblings, Ms. Lewis, her teacher, and her peers were also the main sources of information regarding sex, sexuality, and spirituality.

Significant relationships were also built with other girls from the Fashion Board and her mentor Doris and propelled Viola's development. The relationship with Doris began when Viola was in college at 16 and has continued to this day. Doris has influenced Viola to become a member of a Black Greek Letter Organization; to find the value in building and maintaining relationships with other strong, educated, successful, Black women; and to know and understand her worth. The young women with whom she also associated helped her in developing her self-esteem and a positive self-perception.

The relationships with men in her life also influenced her path. Because she was inexperienced in dating, she did not know what to look for in a husband, but she had some general expectations of how a man should behave because of the observations she made of the men in her family. Her father was a provider, a protector, and the head of the household; he also

215

loved and respected his family. Her brothers communicated with her about the details of relationships with boys and were kind to her in their daily interactions. The relationships with her husbands also provided an alternative insight. Although her mother did not boldly disagree with her decision to marry Steve, she had her reservations but did not voice them to some point because Viola was an adult. The relationship with her first husband Steve and her current husband Brent helped Viola learn about herself and create healthy boundaries.

Pamela's influential human-to-human relationships include those with her grandmother, siblings, her mother, various men including her stepdad, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, Ms. Katy, and her health providers. Pamela's first meaningful encounters happened when her mother left her with her grandmother as a young child. She held her Gramma Rose in high esteem and cherished the relationship they had. She stayed with her grandma until she was six years old and then went to live with her siblings and mother after her grandma became ill. She attributed protection, love, stability, and security to Gramma Rose. She also considered Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, her godparents in the neighborhood, influential because they showed her positive attention, spent time with her, and took her to church with them when she was no longer staying with Gramma Rose. She explained that although she felt loved and had these people around her, she felt empty and abandoned.

The relationships with her siblings provide a different story. Because her siblings were so much older than she was, and Pamela did not grow up with them, they had not formed a solid bond and were not accustomed to having her around, which resulted in them often disregarding her presence. Pamela admired her sister Sissy, and although she was the more rebellious of the bunch, she was not ashamed to be her own person, to get what she wanted, and break the rules if they did not fit her. Sissy was also the first of her sisters to have a baby at a young age. She

regarded Sissy as a matriarch since she was the oldest and her mother often worked long shifts, resulting in Sissy often taking the role of primary caregiver.

Pamela detailed the relationship with her mother as good, but not close. Her mother was a pleasant and loving person and although she did not talk much, she never refused a hug or a request to sit in her lap or to sleep in the same bed. She also worked hard and provided for the family. Even though they did not have a lot of money, they would occasionally spend time together as a family watching television, playing games, and celebrating birthdays and holidays with few gifts but a lot of love. Her mother valued family and helping family through hard times. She and her siblings were not allowed to fight each other physically. Even when her mother would discipline them, she attributed the discipline to love and in Pamela's view these attributes made her a good mother. The discipline did not make up for the lack of conversations or the lessons that needed to be talked through. It also did not absolve her mother from protecting Pamela from the dangers within and outside of the home. Although she liked her siblings and her mother, she was afraid to ask them about sex and men. From her siblings and her mother, Pamela observed sexual activity, and while she did not fully understand what she was being exposed to, she learned about relationships and general expectations in relationships.

Ms. Katy was also influential in Pamela's development. It is assumed Ms. Katy is not a malicious person, since Pamela was entrusted to Ms. Katy when her mother had to work and Pamela was not able to go to daycare. She detailed her relationship with Ms. Katy as a good one, one in which she had fun, but that relationship as well as the relationships with her sisters and mother exposed her to develop a perception of men and how those relationships should be managed. Because of these suggestive relationships, we can attribute that knowledge base to Pamela's actions of having multiple sugar daddies and engaging in relationships with older men.

These relationships demonstrated to her that she could get money for her body, entertaining men was fun, and that relationships may not last long.

The relationship with her stepdad also influenced her development. The man who she reveres as her stepdad was in fact never married to her mother; her mother was his long-time mistress. The relationship they shared demonstrated to Pamela that it is permissible to engage in extramarital affairs as long as both parties consent. When he left his wife and married another person, it was Pamela who felt the pain of the breakup. This blow to her idea of family and what a "dad" embodied surely affected her on multiple fronts, also indicating that she did not have positive relationships with males or positive male role models. This was another example of men behaving badly and her bearing the brunt. The other example, and arguably one of the most significant, is her connection to Lou, the man who introduced her to marijuana, molested her, and dated and later married her sister. Lou's exploitation spurred Pamela to be dependent on marijuana and for her body to mature and develop prematurely; it also created emotional, psychological, and physical trauma. She alluded to the fact that she would separate her mind and body, retreating to a safe space when the abuse was taking place, but like her addiction to marijuana, she craved sex. The introduction stifled her spiritual, emotional, social, and mental development and changed her perception of herself, sexuality, and relationships. Lou also threatened her and her family's safety if she were to ever tell. She was no longer afforded the luxury of being a naïve child, her sanity, welfare, and health were threatened. To that point, the medical personnel assisted Pamela in her healing, even that of the counselor who suggested she invited the sexual abuse. Although Pamela felt defeated in that instance, she knew what to look for in a professional who could aid in her healing and later found that in Ms. Donna and her other HIV specialists.

Viola's and Pamela's families shared a variation of wisdom whisper. Viola was given direct and indirect training on how a woman should conduct herself, but Pamela was not afforded that training. Pamela also suffered generational trauma of sexual abuse, since her mother was sexually abused and then Pamela's daughter was. She said that her mother thought her sisters were "giving her the 4-1-1" and her sisters thought her mama was "giving her the 4-1-1," but no one was telling her anything. Both Viola and Pamela were married multiple times, although Viola did not get married the second time until she was in her 60s. Both women showed great strength and courage as they navigated their relationships. Viola had the courage to leave the toxic relationship with Steve, and Pamela did all she knew to do when her daughter was molested by her late husband. Contrasting, Viola's parents were not very affectionate and after she became an adolescent and young adult, they did not express their affection or love to her, whereas Pamela recalled her mother never rejecting a hug or a request to sit on her lap and she was very kind.

Although the participants experiences are markedly different, they both admired girls who were confident and did not care what people thought of them; for Viola it was Bianca and her sister Karen and for Pamela it was her sister Sissy. Viola and Pamela also shared in identifying as loners or outsiders, and both Viola's and Pamela's mothers did not continue to offer guidance to their daughters after they reached a certain age. Viola's mother did not object to her first marriage, although she had reservations, and Pamela's mom did not supervise or offer advice after she graduated high school. These main characters also connect and influence the participants' environment.

**Human-to-Environment**

Within the participants' life exchanges there is also a human-to-environment connection that reveals the relationship the participants have with their environment, such as nature, cultural contexts, or social contexts. It is in such contexts that learning occurs, thus noting the connection with the informal learning spaces the participants encounter.

For Viola, it was evident that her existence began with the church and that it would likely influence her throughout her narrative. Viola mentioned how her upbringing in the church created expectations in the household both spoken and unspoken; it was expected she would go to church, even if she was sick, to revere the one day designated for God. As she got older, she attended a private religion-based school, which further impacted what she learned and shaped her perception of spirituality and sexuality. Her environment regularly consisted of church, Sunday school, Wednesday prayer, religious school, and living in a religious home environment.

The home environment prompted Viola and her siblings to gain an appreciation for learning. Her father was a proponent of learning and education, as he and Viola's mother were college educated. He encouraged his children to reflect on their day and share as they sat around the dinner table together. He also advocated for the children to diversify their learning and to learn from a variety of people and sources to gain different perspectives. This desire for learning continued into her later years as she sought higher education and explored alternative avenues for self-discovery, such as the Fashion Board and having a diverse group of friends in college. Viola's home life also influenced her dating and marital patterns. The one boy she considered her first boyfriend was invited to spend time with her and her family as they watched television together; there was not an instance in which she was alone with young men until she was in college. It was not until Viola began attending school that she learned about anatomy and sex.

She detailed specifically one instance when the PE teacher Ms. Lewis brought the Bible to discuss sex as the basis for procreation. Because her life was centered on church and religion, she felt "churched out." She declared that once she was out of her parents' house, she was not going to church anymore. Once she left the home to attend college and then again when she married, she in fact dismissed church, not because she did not believe in God, but because she was asserting her right as an adult, and she was in the environment to do so without any direct consequence.

The Fashion Board she joined in college was also a space that fostered learning. This experience is significant because it is where she developed her self-esteem and self-perception and realized she was pretty and a sexual being. This was an alternative option for validating who she was. She stopped wearing jeans under her dresses and she believed she had her first orgasm after a boy walked by her in the hall, but really did not know what it was. Because of her environment and upbringing, she was obstinate in her morals and beliefs about dating and her expectations. She was adamant that she would not engage in premarital sex and she would not cohabitate with a man before marriage; she stood firm on her word. It is no doubt that Viola's environment significantly impacted her development and encouraged her spirituality and sexuality early in life.

Like Viola, Pamela's relationship with her environment played a significant part in her development. In contrast to Viola, Pamela was raised by her grandparents for the first six years of her life and in that environment, she was first exposed to church and what an affectionate home environment was like. When she went to live with her mother and siblings after Gramma Rose fell ill, she thought they were crazy because the house was full of commotion and chaos. The environment Pamela was exposed to provided a social context for which Pamela would learn

about sex.  In this context Pamela was vulnerable to the aspects outside of her control and was not guarded against malicious acts such as sexual and emotional abuse.  Although Pamela says she was exposed to spirituality before sex, it was in this environment that Pamela learned about sex, marijuana, and how to silence her voice and spirit.  It was in her home environment that Pamela saw and heard her sisters and mother having sexual relations while she was in the same room, and sometimes the same bed.  She also experienced her sister's wild parties and did not have adult supervision, sometimes leaving her to babysit at a young age.  The environment around Ms. Katy was also influential in Pamela's development.  Ms. Katy, a sex worker, supervised Pamela sometimes because Pamela's mother had to work.  She did not live in an environment in which kids went to daycare, so Ms. Katy's care contributed to how she understood sexuality.  All of the environments taught Pamela that she had to be clever and use her body a certain way when it came to men.

There were not many conversations between the people in Pamela's environment and herself about spirituality and sexuality.  She recalled her mother telling her to merely "give her HIV diagnosis over to God" after she was diagnosed with HIV.  With regard to sex and Pamela's first pregnancy and abortion, her mother explained to her:

> Now you know your two sisters had babies before they were 15 and you see how that turned out for them.  I don't want that for you, you still have a lot of fun to have.  This is like a cup of spilled milk.  We knocked it over by accident; we are going to clean it up and we are going to forget about it.

Pamela accepted her mother's philosophy because she did what she was told to do and was not taught how to think on her own.  That was the extent of those significant foundational conversations.

Pamela began to peer through a different lens after the age of 12 because of the sexual abuse.  It is difficult to differentiate if it was the environment that made her vulnerable to sexual

abuse or the characters in the environment. Whereas Viola had an open and trusting relationship with her siblings and had the opportunity to ask about sex, dating, and development, Pamela did not feel comfortable asking about those topics, leaving her to learn on her own and by watching her sisters and mother. By contrast, Viola mentioned her classmate Bianca going away, due to her rumored pregnancy, to her aunts. In the environment in which Pamela grew up, her sisters bore children at a young age and when Pamela became pregnant the first time, her mother took her to have an abortion, which eased the ordeal of getting an abortion the second time she became pregnant. Although Pamela's mother conveyed to her that she did not want her having sex or babies at a young age like her sisters, it was too late. Because of the sexual abuse and becoming pregnant at a young age, her body was overdeveloped and desired carnal pleasures, which was vastly different from Viola who did not realize she had a womanly body until she was in college and was repeatedly told that boys only wanted sex and that sex was for procreation. Pamela also skipped school to get information about contraception and learn about sex, sexuality, and safer sex practices.

In comparison, Pamela grew up in a single-parent urban environment where the expectations for her were not clear. She also did not have a clear understanding of right and wrong, she "lived in a gray area." Viola on the other hand, grew up in a suburban dual-parent home. Both of her parents were college educated and there was a clear understanding of right and wrong, how she should be treated, and the roles of a man and a woman. Both Viola and Pamela encountered childhood trauma, but to varying degrees and instances. Pamela encountered sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse at the hands of a family member, whereas Viola experienced distress that was racially motivated. Both of the participants expressed healing sessions in and out of the church although at different times in their lives. For

223

both of the participants, education aided in their development in one way or another. Viola had a P.E. class that discussed anatomy and conservative, pro-life agendas, and Pamela skipped school to gather the information she thought she needed. The comparison is a point of reference to signify the differences in the participants' environments. It is in no way an admission that one environment is better than the other, or an admonition about suburban or urban vicinities.

**Human-to-Spirit**

Within their life spaces, the participants also engaged in human-to-spirit relationships, focusing on Black women's connection to spirituality, providing recognition to the divine and sacred nature of all living and non-human things. The compendium of experiences integrates relationships, upbringing, spirituality, and systems of oppression and survival. The introduction to spirituality and sexuality made a drastic significance in how the participants developed and saw the world. The relationships and key actors set the foundation for how the participants would interact with the environment, associate spiritually, and how they would negotiate their role as Black women.

For Viola, spirituality was engrained in who she was and what she did. At an early age, she received spiritual guidance from family and had a spiritual understanding. The events surrounding baptism were also explained to her and she was gifted a symbolic item (the necklace with the cross) to commemorate the event, even though she did not understand the magnitude of it. Viola's environment and relationships encouraged her spiritual development. She attended a private religion-based school, which further prompted the importance of having a spiritual relationship. The early implantation of faith helped her during a time of great crisis, completing her PhD. While dealing with the trauma of rejection, she contemplated suicide and although it

was a fleeting thought, it was still present. Because of her faith, she realized that she needed to go to God in prayer, just as she had done with the bully in grade school.

Viola's spirituality directly influenced her sexuality. It was clear in her household, and there was no confusion as far as the role of a man and woman and the role sexuality played in one's life. For example, she asked her brother about sex and he vaguely described sex but followed up with letting her know that it was a special act to be shared with a special person that God provides for you. Therefore, her understanding of sexuality was connected with spirituality from a young age, and that notion has not changed.

Pamela was baptized as a young child but did not understand the meaning or symbolism of baptism and was not given much spiritual guidance. That thought process followed her to adulthood, as she thought that she should be baptized frequently. Unlike with Viola, no one explained baptism and spirituality to her in her formative years.

Another person who had an influence on Pamela's development was Ms. Katy, a prostitute who watched Pamela until she could start school. The men she entertained would pay Pamela money to answer "the panty question" and she would share her earnings with Ms. Katy. Ms. Katy would purposefully leave her out front to greet the men while in the back preparing for her rendezvous, which shaped Pamela's orientation about spirituality. Because her mother had to work, and her environment taught her she had to be clever and use her body a certain way, her spiritual orientation was affected by her relationship to men. On one hand, it was hindered, but on the other hand she used some form of spirituality (although she may not have known what to call it) to sustain her. She did not realize she had a spirit and a soul until she was well into her 40s. Although Pamela's mother worked copious amounts and church may not have been a

priority, she demonstrated spirituality when she told Pamela to pray about her HIV diagnosis and give it to God; he would take care of it.

Although both participants had disjointed conversations with parents about sex, their initial sexual experiences were different. Viola had her aunt to inform her on what to expect, whereas Pamela was not sure if she was a virgin or not. Sexuality has been a sore spot for Pamela because it has directly influenced her ontoepistemology. Had she had someone to talk to and mentor her as a young lady, would her life course trajectory be any different? Had she been in a safe space to grow and develop appropriately, would she have different expectations for her life? It is evident that the expectations, environment, and spiritual journeys of each participant were markedly different, but they came to the same conclusion. In the narratives, Pamela and Viola both attested that their lives are where they are because of life choices. As aforementioned, the human, environmental, and spiritual relationships are so intertwined and interconnected that there is not a manner to distinguish which affects the other and vis-a-versa.

### Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry

As discussed in Chapter 3, Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry is used to analyze the critical stories that depict the perceptions of Black women. Suggested are three characteristics included in Black woman's narratives: (a) life's lessons on surviving and thriving as a woman, a Black person, and a Black woman; (b) spirituality as a protective barrier and a source of strength; (c) lives, dreams, and hopes deferred to stand in the shadow of our men and families.

#### Surviving and Thriving as a Woman, a Black Person, and a Black Woman

For women of color, particularly in the US, the reality that confronts them includes being a woman (gendered), Black (raced), and a Black woman (intersections of gender and race) (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Surviving the trauma that comes with these intersections and mustering

the wherewithal to thrive in a world that was not created for Black women (hooks, 1981), but on the backs of Black women, is a daily feat. Black women cannot erase the memories of the past because they contribute to their ontology, and the past has created lessons along the way. They have survived the struggle and pursued healing for their minds, bodies, and spirits. They have restructured their perceptions and began to narrate their own stories, filling in the gaps and correcting deceptive "truths" to resist the ideals of the dominant group, which have been used to justify the power differential between men, women, and people of different races and ethnicities (hooks, 1983). In the following examples, the participants' narratives demonstrate their negotiations of being a woman, a Black person, and a Black woman and gaining a sense of self-worth and love.

Pamela's body was prematurely developed partly due to being molested, but she was not a woman; she was still a child unfairly forced to act and think womanly. Pamela realized she was a woman when she gave birth to her first child. Prior to that, the abortions did not mean anything to her because she did not understand how she got pregnant. It was as if she was not her body and managed to create a detached relationship with her body, as a coping mechanism. She knew the basics about physical details, that a man and woman make a baby, but she did not know the details of how the baby was made, so she was disconnected from the process. She just knew she was pregnant and would get an abortion. When she gave birth to her first child and fed him from her breasts, it was her first memory of feeling like a woman. She was amazed at the life she created and wanted to protect that life at all costs. On the other hand, Viola understood she was a woman on her wedding day and thereafter used information from the ambiguous conversations her mother would have with her about marriage and attending to wifely duties.

Although Viola lived in the Southern United States in the 1950s, she lived a class-based privileged life. She attended a private Baptist school, she had never ridden the city bus or had encounters with having to sit in the back of the bus (but heard stories from her friends of doing so), she and her family lived in a well-to-do neighborhood with a swimming pool in the backyard, and her parents were college-educated professionals. Despite living a privileged life and being protected from many of life's perils, there was nothing that could protect her from realities of the intersections of her identity. She understood she was Black early in life and would be judged as such when she was 14 and wanted to visit a white movie theatre. The ticket lady would not sell her and her friends a ticket and scorned, "Y'all need to get on out of here now; we don't serve coloreds in here, you can't buy a ticket." To this day, Viola can hear the woman's voice . . . "We don't serve coloreds." But it is the encounters with racism that really opened her eyes to understanding the intersections of her life. Another incident happened when she was 16 and a member of the Fashion Board (an organization for young women designers). As the young ladies were modeling their creations, the judges (two older white women), exchanged conversation and one jeeringly said, "I don't know why they put that monkey mannequin up there." This episode jolted her to tears and resulted in her dad affirming her strength, telling her "Hold your head up high and you do not cry. If you have to look her in the face and tell her that you are not a monkey they you do it and you don't look down." It did not matter where Viola lived or what school she attended, she would always be Black and that fact she could not change.

Both of the participants discussed how they understood themselves to be Black or African-American. During our conversations about being a Black woman, Viola reframed Black to African American. When I brought this to her attention and probed if there was a distinction

for her between the two terms, she had not been aware she had done that.  She did mention that in her upbringing, her parents did not use the term Black; they regarded themselves as African American because her maternal grandmother was of mixed race (Black and white), and her maternal grandfather was Native American.  On the other side, her paternal grandparents were Cajun from Louisiana and spoke French.  She could not recall a time when her mother used the term Black, but her dad would, and in their household, they would say African American.  Being raised in the 1950s in the Southern United States using the term African American was uncommon.  As she reflected, she confirmed that it was unusual for her family to use the term African American in those times, but she never questioned her parents and never gave it any thought until our conversations.  Her family was progressive and openminded for the era they lived in, but she attributed that to her dad travelling around the world in the military, being a skilled carpenter and minister, and both of her parents being college educated.  She did recall people in the neighborhood using the terms Colored, Negro, and Black.

Pamela stated decidedly, "All I remember is being Black.  I don't have no thoughts about being African American."  She continued to express her belief that as a human race we are all oppressed.  She interrogated:

> I'm still struggling with who said if you're not white then you're a minority.  Where did that come from?  What about if you're not Black you're a minority?  Racism is alive and well, it is a living breathing, genetically modified organism, and it is croaking.

Questioning this belief is a part of Pamela's growth and resistance to the hegemonic narrative.

It took the participants time to comprehend when they realized the duality of being Black and a woman.  More often than not, the participants discussed being either Black (raced) or a woman (gendered), but the realization of the convergence of the two (intersections of race and gender) did not happen for them until they were mid-20s or older.  For Pamela, it was in her 20s

229

when she was trying to find housing and assistance and had to encounter a White male landlord. For Viola, it was much later when she began to run her own business and received push back from her male workers on how the business should be run. Viola also mentioned a pivotal time for her realization also came when she pursued her doctoral degree. It became clear to her that she would fight a battle because she was Black and a woman. Viola and Pamela found out that each level of their lives demanded a different version of them and required them to reach back and build on the wisdom from the previous lessons learned.

Historically, Black women's wellbeing had not taken precedence (King, 2016); and that standpoint was ingested at a generational level such that many Black women believed the distortions themselves. For many Black women, life was about survival and caring for others, not about attending to one's well-being (hooks, 1981); therefore, many Black women have felt their well-being is not important and consequentially neither was their self-care or self-love. This was evident for Viola and Pamela as they sacrificed to attend to the needs of others. Pamela still struggles with this, but as she began to take ownership for her own life, she understood that she is solely responsible for her life. All the pain of the past shaped who she was and all the characters in her story contributed to who she was, but she was solely responsible for her, the life she chose to live, and the energy she chose to put back into the world. In growing up, the participants did not change who they were at their core; they matured and learned what was best for them. In doing that, they lost people—friends and family—and they were ok with that. They learned it is acceptable to reevaluate relationships, especially if one has given to the point where reciprocity in a relationship is questioned, and choose to move on if it is not healthy for them, providing them the power to change their narrative.

The stereotypes of black women are not only perpetuated by outsiders, but also within group (Harris-Perry, 2011; Scott, 2017). When a Black woman changes her narrative, she is often ridiculed from both sides: those that are supposed to be allies and those known to be enemies. Creating a space for multiple truths to exist can be a reality for the plethora of identities "Black womanhood" represents. The lived experiences collectively draw strength and resilience for the strong Black women often misrepresented as uneducated, angry, and troubled (Scott, 2017; Settles, 2006). Collectively changing the narrative to reflect that Black women are diverse, complex, determined, worthy, and loveable provides the power to make her own decisions and sets the stage to unapologetically speak her truths. This liberation necessitates collective organization among Black women and developing allies for successful collective resistance.

**Spirituality as a Source of Strength and a Protective Barrier**

Black women draw strength from their spirituality, which then provides them with fortitude, resilience, patience, compassion, (Mattis, 2002) and the willingness to forgive others and themselves, while not forgetting the lessons learned along the way. They find the potential in challenging situations after experiencing loss and pain to remain faithful, loyal, and find their strength. Spirituality can also act as a barrier, as one can spiritulize their problems (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 2005). In other words, people can ascertain that the hardships they encounter are a part of God's will and if they pray and have faith, their problems will dissipate. In this way, religion, the Bible, and the colorful narratives told from the pulpit all function as a source of source of strength, but also a barrier. For Viola and Pamela, spirituality was unquestionably a protective barrier and a source of strength.

Spirituality played a significant part in Viola's life during graduate school at Hillman College. The psychological distress of navigating the politics of academia took a toll on Viola's mental health. She knew she was not well received in her department, and the emotional toil caused her to question her purpose and her acumen. The agonizing experience and the thoughts of suicide prompted her to once again go to God in prayer. Spirituality was a main source of strength for her and both of her parents, as her mother and father both passed of cancer. Her father lived seven years longer than expected. However, it was the special mother-daughter bond that Viola and her mother shared that made caring for her mother during the transition all the more special. She sat up at night with mother as she was praying and talked about spirituality. It was in those special moments that Viola felt as if her soul was intertwined with her mother's and she felt the connection to God. Even though Viola would have rather lived in a different house, aside from her childhood home, it was the connection that brought her back, and it was the spiritual and emotional connection that is hard for her to sever, but also hard for her to contain. She mentioned that she could not wait to move to her new home and used the size of her childhood home as an excuse, but the reality was that she was struggling with asserting the adult version of Viola into the younger version of Viola's space. There were also trauma-related issues and a haunting of unresolved issues Viola had to face while she lived in her childhood home. Although she evolved into a beautiful, successful, Black woman, she could not escape the good and bad memories of her childhood and the spirits of her parents that inhabit every space of the house.

Although Pamela did not tap into her spirituality until her late 40s, spirituality was always present in her life that exceeded organized religion. She did not fully understand what spirituality was, but she tapped into what she called her safe space as a protective barrier, as she

traversed the horrors of molestation and sexual experiences with other men. As Pamela grew older, she learned there were many levels to maturity and spiritual maturity. She began to reflect on her lifestyle and relationships and realized she needed to make some changes, including stopping the smoking of marijuana, ending the relationships with her financial benefactors (sugar daddies), and focusing on her spiritual growth. Here, spiritual growth for Pamela was creating boundaries, holding herself accountable for her actions, and trying to rectify her misunderstandings.

Spirituality has served as a protective barrier and a source of strength for Pamela, as it helped her remain resilient and resolute in becoming a better person, mother, and spiritual being. Spirituality helped her survive suicidal thoughts, molestation, abortions, an HIV diagnosis, abuse and exploitation, homelessness, and gambling and marijuana addictions. Her spirituality has given her strength to fight the medical system for proper care, have the power to provide for and protect herself and her children, learn her purpose in becoming an advocate for children and young mothers, and to use her testimony to help and influence young Black women. Viola and Pamela were not afraid to grow and become better people for themselves. They loved themselves by getting rid of toxic people, ending relationships, and evaluating the habits that did not serve them well, and they took the initiative to be better, live better, and love more.

**Lives, Dreams, and Hopes Deferred**

Historically, Black women have cared for, sacrificed, and put others first, including men and family (Chaney & Brown, 2015; Jones, 2010). Black women are often willing to give of themselves to protect and secure the family, the community, and the church, sometimes at the cost of losing much of themselves in the process. Oftentimes, making an investment in a choice that falls short, which tempts the woman to invest more to rectify the situation and try to mend

what was lost, sometimes results in losing more. This section titled "Lives, Dreams, and Hopes Deferred" focuses on the relationships within the family and patriarchy. It is within these relationships that Black women often put others before themselves making sure others are taken care of before she takes care of herself.

For Viola, the events related to her salient understanding of patriarchy involve her relationships with Steve (first husband) and Brent (second husband). Steve was an authoritarian figure in their household. According to Viola, it was important to him to be the head of the household and portray an assertive reputable figure head, where status, class, and the role of a wife were important to him. Viola initially did not mind being a kept woman, but she realized she needed to learn how to do things for herself. In a way, Steve did things for her as a way to control her, what she learned, and how much she learned. When she expressed interest in furthering her education and pursuing her graduate degrees, he impeded her progress and thought a bachelor's degree was sufficient. He did not want her to grow beyond him, unlike her father who encouraged higher education and learning. Steve encouraged her to care for their household and their children while he worked his way up the corporate ladder. Being raised in a traditional patriarchal household, Viola thought it was the woman's place to support her husband and care for the children.

Viola did not fully realize she was perpetuating the patriarchal standpoint until she asked her son to perform a household chore and he rebutted that it was the woman's job to do that. She knew then that she was contributing to what her children were learning about gender roles. After having this experience and coming to the realization that she was putting her life on hold to make others happy, she was upset with Steve, but said she should have been angry with herself for allowing it. This notion of placing and accepting the blame is an another example of a Black

woman altering her standpoint for another. In Viola's viewpoint, her father taught his children to become their own person and pursue education; she did not understand that one could do both, take care of her family and become the woman she desired. From there, she promised she would put herself first. She has become unapologetically self-regarding, which shows up in her second marriage to Brent. She firmly believes she can do whatever she desires as long as she is not hurting anyone or herself. It also means she has the liberty to refuse to do anything she does not want to, which shows up by way of refusing to dutifully cater to Brent. She occassionally attends to domestic duties, such as cooking, preparing his lunch for the next day, and occassionally fixing his plate, but she has made it clear that Brent is capable of doing all of these things and more; thus, she does not consider that her responsibility or duty, but something she does sometimes as an act of love, not out of obligation. Viola has demonstrated that loving, caring for, and defending men does not mean they are not held accountable for their actions and words, it means just the opposite, that they are held accountable.

Pamela was regularly a single mother and witnessed her mother as a single mother, so men's work and women's work were never an issue as it had been for Viola and her family; she did all of the work. Being a single mother, she sacrificed for her children to pick up the slack when the relationships with their fathers did not work out. Similar to the role she played growing up, she cared for her nieces and nephews and younger sibling when her mother and sisters were not around to care for them. At a young age, she cooked, cleaned, fed babies, changed diapers, and was seen as an extra pair of hands around the house.

She had many relationships with men as she was learning who she was. Many of these relationships had an abusive component, whether emotional, physical, psychological, or sexual. One of the most prominent relationships in which Pamela put her life on hold centers on the

molestation.  She kept the secret of the molestation for a long time because Lou threatened to kill her family if she told.  When she tried to confide in her mother, her mother discounted her feelings and admissions, making claims that no one wanted to hear such stories.  Pamela later understood her mother's standpoint, as she had also been a victim of sexual abuse when she was younger; for her, it was something that happened and that should be dealt with in private.  This was similar advice that her sister would give her when she disclosed the secret of molestation that had been haunting her for years.  Her sister claimed that she would take care of it and that was the end of the discussion.  For Pamela, that was a part of being in a family—caring for each other, keeping family secrets, and dealing with the plight of life the best way one knew how.

Black women have been misrepresented as a despised and marginalized group (Harris-Perry, 2011), and when the narrative shifts, there is an uproar because they were not given the permission to be efficacious, authentic, or individual.  The hegemonic group encourages black women to remain in expected roles, to isolate and withdraw, and to succumb to the societal and patriarchal standards (Collins, 2004; hooks, 1983).  Black women are relegated to being something between a superwoman and a fighter.  If they step out of those roles, then they are guilt ridden for not staying with or protecting the family (Nelson et al., 2016).  Black women are often trained on how to behave or not behave according to the dictates of patriarchy.  If a black woman behaves in a way that challenges the male patriarchy, she is viewed as difficult, sassy, having an attitude, a harlot, hoe, easy, and wanting sexual advances.

Both of the participants held traditional mainstream views of patriarchy and the expectations of a woman but were adamant in teaching their daughters to be strong and encouraging them to follow their dreams and their passions.  Both participants discussed the divergences of their upbringing to how they reared their children.  They were equipped to

execute the crucial conversations they knew they must have with their own children to more fully prepare them to navigate the world or protect them from some of the things they had encountered. They educated their children (daughters and sons) about sex and safe sex prophylactics, which required some self-directed education on their part in order to be informed. They also allowed for open dialogue, which provided a sense of comfort for their children to confide in them. The education they have given their children has also provided them the ambition to control their own bodies and minds to deal with matters such as abortion, rape, and self-perception and say what is appropriate for them.

The value of Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry is seen through the VES narratives of Viola and Pamela. The tenets of Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry manifest in the vulnerable, empowered, and spirit-driven narratives of the participants as they established through the narratives that spirituality was a protector and a barrier; the ways in which they survived as women, Black people, and Black women; and how on many occasions they put others first to sustain family and community.

## Chapter Summary

The narratives of the participants provide context and understanding to their lives as older Black women. Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry and VES narratives provide a basis for the contextual details of the participants' narratives as they were told in first-person voice. Womanism and Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry themes—(a) Life's lessons on surviving and thriving as a woman, a Black person, and a Black woman; (b) Spirituality as a protective barrier and source of strength; and (c) Lives, dreams, and hopes deferred to stand in the shadow of our men and our families—were used to interpret and compare the narratives for thematic congruency. The final chapter offers the conclusion and implications for this study.

# Chapter 5–I Could Not Tell It All

The purpose of the study and research questions is stated below. These reminders serve as an anchor for the information presented in this chapter. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how two Black women, born 1946-1964, discuss their sexuality in relation to their understanding of spirituality and informal learning. The specific research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are the ways in which the participants describe their sexuality?

2. What are the ways in which the participants describe their spirituality?

3. In what ways, if any, do the participants relate their sexuality with their spirituality?

4. In what ways, if any, do the participants attribute informal learning experiences to their sexuality as informed by their spirituality?

The experiences of older Black women have been explored to some degree (Cuffee, 2006; Guthridge, 2004; Y. J. Harris, 2013), but there are few studies that examine the ways in which older Black women have attributed their sexuality to their spirituality and informal learning contexts. For this study, I used womanism and Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry to inform the study. In this chapter, I answer the research questions and discuss the contributions of this study to interdisciplinary literature. I also conclude the chapter with suggestions that could further this work.

## Responses to Research Questions

As addressed in Chapter 2, to explore the orientation of sexuality through spirituality and informal learning, I chose to use Black feminism, Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry, and womanism as frameworks. Black feminism posits that sexism, class oppression, gender identity, and racism are intersecting concepts for Black women (hooks, 1981). In this study, Black

feminism was used to situate the intersecting identities of Black women's lives. The intersecting

concepts should be considered both separately and collectively, while acknowledging the

bidirectional relationships that reinforce the exchanges. To fully understand Black women's

experiences, these intersecting concepts cannot be disregarded. For example, the participants

had various intersecting identities that contributed to their ontoepistemology and how they

navigated through life. Included in their narratives were elements of these intersecting concepts,

which verified that these women had some semblance in understanding the complexity of their

lives. Although there were still areas that Viola and Pamela were working through, they were

able to articulate intersecting concepts, such as being a woman, a Black person, and then the

intersections of being a Black woman.

In addition to Black feminism, I chose to use womanism as a conceptual framework.

Womanism is often heralded as an extension of Black feminism, as it is perceived to connect

women of color who feel disconnected from feminism and Black feminism (Collins, 1996;

Hudson-Weems, 1993). Womanism also unapologetically focuses on Black women's

experiences while integrating spirituality, relationships, and experiences of oppression and

survival. Womanism, as proposed by Layli Maparyan (formerly Layli Phillips), encompasses

three domains: (a) human-to-human (b) human-to-environment, and (c) human-to-spirit. In this

study, womanism provided the lens that acknowledged the human-to-human relationships, or the

connection one has with others, the community, and oneself to promote a commitment to the

survival of all people (Walker, 1983). Thus, the participants detailed the various relationships

that influenced their development. Additionally, womanism also allowed the integration of

informal learning into the study. For this study, human-to-environment revealed the relationship

participants had with their environment, such as nature, cultural contexts, or social contexts

wherein learning occurs, as well as the connection with the informal learning spaces the participants encounter. For the participants, those spaces included their homes, communities, churches, school settings, and job sites. All of these places contributed to the informal learning occurrences the participants experienced. As defined by womanism, the divine is not solely religion or religious beliefs but the divine can be found in one's struggle, living (people, animals, trees, etc.) and non-living things (light, air, water, books, etc.). Spirituality was a main component for the study, and the participants articulated their viewpoints on spirituality and how aspects of spirituality contributed to their development.

In staying consistent with Black women's ontoepistemologies, Black feminism and womanism were also used to develop and inform Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry, a methodology that expands the traditional narrative structures and way of analyzing Black women's narratives to a more culturally situated and responsive narrative structure. Grounded in Black feminism and womanism, Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry suggests three tropes for analyzing Black women's narratives: (a) life's lessons on surviving and thriving as a woman, a Black person, and a Black woman; (b) spirituality as a protective barrier and a source of strength; and (c) lives, dreams, and hopes deferred to stand in the shadow of our men and families. O'Neale (1982) also suggests that for the coming of age to happen, one needs to be vulnerable and empowered at the same time. Thus, during the analysis, I looked for vulnerable, empowered, and spirit-driven (VES) elements in the narratives. Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry, womanism, and VES narrative combined allows the participants to synthesize her own experiences. Throughout this process, the participants detailed their coming of age and defined spirituality and sexuality for themselves because the methodology permitted them the space and safety to do that. Coming of age in this manner may be different for some people who can point

to specific experiences that influenced their development, but this was valid for the study and the participants. Using wisdom whisper and Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry to create the VES narratives provided a reflective opportunity for integrative and incidental learning to occur. In other words, the distractions of life hindered the participants from realizing and acknowledging milestones in the coming-of-age process until they were allowed by others and allowed themselves the vulnerable and empowered space. This study illustrates a methodology in that the compiling of life events are not always linear or straight forward with cause and effect. These frameworks were integrated throughout the research and contributed to how I was thinking about the study. The theoretical framings were used to inform the responses to the research questions. While these frameworks are presented separately for descriptive purposes, within the study there is considerable overlap, intersection, and entanglement of the tenets from each.

The responses to the research questions are integrated because the participants see sexuality, spirituality, and their experiences in informal learning environments as entangled and interconnected. Responding comprehensively to all the research questions simultaneously avoids redundancy, as response to one question often has overlapping elements demonstrating a response to another question. In the following sections, I respond to the research questions by integrating elements of Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry and womanism as I answer how the participants orient their sexuality through spirituality and informal learning.

For Viola and Pamela, their main informal learning contexts included family (parents, siblings, and extended members) and their peers at work and school. Their families were their first point of contact and some of the most influential people in their lives as they were first introduced to the world. During Viola's upbringing in a Southern Baptist household, she was

taught about spirituality and religion. Religion to her was about the practice of theology, and spirituality stemmed from religion—it is the spirit behind religion. She attributed spirituality to a warm, fuzzy feeling that makes her heart feel good. Many times, she has these feelings in church or when she is meditating. Spirituality to Pamela, on the other hand, is a presence. It is a space one operates in where one's ethics and values are not compromised. Instead, spirituality is setting personal limits to avoid operating in a gray space full of insecurity and uncertainty. Spirituality is also rooted in the faith of trusting something that may be outside of one's rational understanding. The variation in their understanding of spirituality is directly attributed to their experiences. For Viola, spirituality was introduced as source of protection and a guide at a young age. She had some semblance at a young age of what it meant to be spiritual because of her background. On the other hand, Pamela was introduced to church through her grandmother at a young age and then with the Wilsons, her godparents, when she went to live with her mother. Pamela's grandmother raised her like she was her own child and sheltered her from many of life's evils—she was Pamela's protective barrier. Pamela learned early what religion was but did not have a full grasp or understanding of spirituality until after she was 40 years old.

Spirituality was indeed a barrier and a strength for both women in terms of navigating their lives as they resisted dogmatic norms and carved their own space within their religious or spiritual communities. Viola's introduction to spirituality at an early age was through understanding how spirituality can begin to create barriers between oneself and others through the form of adherence and deviation from moral codes. Although spirituality was presented as a protective measure, it imposed strict limits and expectations on Viola, so much so that she vowed to stop attending church when she left her parent's house. For Pamela, spirituality was a barrier as she dealt with sexual abuse and mistreatment at the hands of different men. She had not fully

understood that she had a spirit or what spirituality was, so the (spiritual) protection of Gramma

Rose disappeared when she went to live with her mother and siblings at the age of seven. The

change in the environment exposed her to adult situations. While she questioned the chaos in her

mother's house and why God would allow sexual molestation to happen to her, during the sexual

abuse, she retreated to a "safe place" in her mind, the space that was reserved for herself and

God, which she guised as a protector; but it was a barrier to her personhood. Pamela also

experienced frustration with spirituality and religion as she tried to be a Christian, but claimed

she failed at that; so she concedes to calling herself a child of God. How the participants defined

spirituality was directly influenced by their experiences. Though they had different foundational

experiences, different introductions to spirituality, and their orientation to spirituality varied,

their values are consistent with elements of womanism and Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry,

including taking responsibility for one's actions, promoting the survival and well-being of others,

love, forgiveness, and finding a sense of purpose. Figure 6 illustrates how the participants

described their spirituality.



**Viola**
- Childhood
- Household taught about religion and spirituality
- Spirit behind religion
- Makes her heart feel good
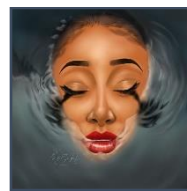
**Pamela**
- Late 40s
- A presence
- A space where ethics and values are not compromised
- Avoid the gray
- Trusting something that is outside of rational understanding

*Figure 6*. Participant descriptions of their spirituality.

The participants' upbringing and the human-to-human connections also transferred to how they learned about sex and sexuality and what they were exposed to. Viola learned much about sexuality, specifically teachings against homosexuality, but not so much about sex because her environment was centered around the Black church, and sex was not often discussed in the Black church. This delineation was unexpected but suitable based on her upbringing in the church and her father's role in the church. Pamela's introduction to sexuality and sex was markedly different since living with her mother and siblings. Pamela witnessed her mother and sisters engaging in sexual relations as she lay in close proximity as they thought she was asleep, resulting in her feeling scared and uncomfortable in her surroundings. Although the sexual abuse by her sister's boyfriend began at 12, she was told not to have sex by her mother but did not have the conversations about the consequences and reasons not to. Moreover, she saw her sisters and mother engaging in sexual behaviors so the "do as I say and not as I do" rule was dominant in her household. She also recalled vivid memories with Ms. Katy, the woman who worked as a prostitute that watched her during the day while her mom was working. She witnessed men traipsing in and out of the house to "visit" with Ms. Katy. They would interact with Pamela as they played "the panty game" and gave her money and candy. Pamela experienced her sisters getting pregnant and having their first babies at 13 and 15 years old. Pamela's mother also had a child when Pamela was 14. These examples of tacit knowledge led Pamela to be confused about values, attitudes, and sexual behaviors. Pamela could not comprehend the behaviors being modeled at a young age. At a young age, Pamela was also parentified and played the role of caregiver to many children for different reasons, which contributed to Pamela's self-directed and tacit learning experiences. For example, she had to learn on the fly how to care for her niece when her sister did not return home in time for her

244

mother to leave for work, so Pamela had to watch the baby until someone arrived. She stated that there were many occasions when she had to care for her nieces, nephews, and younger sibling. The experiences are direct examples of Pamela putting her family before herself and how the perception of the responsibilities of family members is tied to the collective welfare of the family. In such instances, Pamela was developmentally unprepared to assume the responsibility, resulting in role confusion and identity chaos as she tried to deal with the interesting identities at a young age. However, it was an unnegotiable and expected role.

Viola learned indirectly through her sister's experiences as well. As Viola grew and developed into a young lady, she recalled her sister trying to wear a miniskirt out of the house that she was sure her parents had not purchased. She heard her dad tell her sister, "If you go out this house you will get pregnant. You aren't hiding anything, and a man shouldn't see everything until you're ready for him to see it." That message for Viola conveyed to her that the way a girl dressed was an invitation to men and she was invested in that way of framing women's sexuality. Pamela had similar thoughts, as she tried to understand why she was getting negative attention from men (because in her estimation she did not dress provocatively), further perpetuating the dominant patriarchal discourse on the acceptable way for a woman to behave or what she should wear. While Viola's sister directly resisted the dominant patriarchal disposition by wearing miniskirts and breaking her curfew, Viola did not show resistance until she was much older, and she did it in subtler ways. This exchange between her father and sister left an imprint and forced her to decide for herself if that was the correct framing. Her beliefs have shifted slightly where she thinks that it is not the woman's fault if she gets raped or assaulted, but her clothing choice can tempt a man to violate her.

Viola's father preached on sexuality and asserted that homosexuality was wrong in the eyes of God, but she could not recall the Bible or her church discussing the act of sex specifically, aside from discussing sexual immortality, which again shaped her perception of sexuality. Viola's dad preached against homosexuality and sexual immortality, but her parents never denied access to her friends who were homosexual or of different racial backgrounds. Her dad whole heartedly believed that sexual immortality was a sin, but he would not turn his back on his church members or children. I believe this notion may have unknowingly influenced Viola's interest and dissertation topic about same sex relationships and her acceptance of Eva, her friend who was a lesbian in college. On the one hand, this is an example of how spirituality was used as a protective barrier; since Viola's father's teachings were rooted in Baptist theology, he used Biblical buffers as a way to protect Viola from heartache, unplanned pregnancy, and unwarranted attention. He told Viola she was pretty, so she would not have to look for validation in a compromising way and find herself in perilous situations. Viola's informal learning experiences provided a protected space for her to learn about herself. But, spirituality was also a barrier to her development, which constrained the conversations about development, sex, dating, and self-esteem. Early on, she learned that spirituality becomes a barrier for protecting her from engaging in homosexual activities or any sexual activities, for that matter. Spirituality was also used as a barrier to suggestively prescribe acceptable ways of carrying oneself. Some of these expectations were patriarchal; however, they were strong enough imprints on Viola to have influenced her adult orientation to sexuality and spirituality. In this way, the trope in Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry where spirituality can act as a barrier and a source of strength was enacted.

246

Pamela did not have the same instruction on sex and sexuality as Viola, even though Viola's instruction was brief. The man Pamela referred to as her stepdad had a wife and other children, and her mom was his mistress, but she remembered positive memories with him. He taught her how to pick the ingrown hair out of his face, they spent time watching television together, but when he eventually divorced his wife, he remarried another woman (not her mother) and that devastated her. What shattered her even more was the sexual abuse she experienced at the hands of her sister's boyfriend, and her sister and mother's reactions to the abuse. The messages of "don't worry" and "put it in the past" pacified her at the time because she did not believe her mother and sister would tell her anything misleading. In retrospect, those types of messages were the foundation of the messages Pamela received when she became pregnant as an adolescent. The first time she became pregnant, her mother decided for her that she should have an abortion. Pamela remembered her mother equating the experience to "spilled milk that they had to clean up and forget." There were no pre- or post-operative conversations about sex, safe sex, or her developing body. The responses to these events served as a model for how Pamela would respond to future events.

Although she was a child chronologically, emotionally, and mentally, she was a woman biologically and had to learn how to survive in that terrain. The second time she had an abortion, one of the men she was involved with took her and paid for the services. Soon after the second abortion, she skipped school to go to the clinic to get birth control because she wanted to have sex with boys. After Pamela completed the requisites to receive birth control, she started dating and having fun as a teenager. She thought she was supposed to engage with any boy or man who touched her because that was what she saw in her environment and how she was socialized. Pamela's promiscuity was also an act of rebellion and resistance. Her mother preferred that she

did not have sex, but her mother and sisters were doing it, so why was it not acceptable for her? Her body, mind, and spirit had already been defiled due to the sexual abuse and other sexual encounters, so Pamela figured if she was going to be sexually active she should be active with boys and men she liked and from whom she could gain something (money, cars, assistance). As she continued to engage with men, she began to shut down emotionally and mentally because she had not seen nor learned how to foster healthy relationships. She was not prepared to be emotionally and mentally involved with boys and men. She sought help from the mental health clinic at 18 but was shunned, as the nurse suggested to her that maybe she encouraged the negative attention or sexual assault that occurred. Figure 7 illustrates the ways the participants described their sexuality.
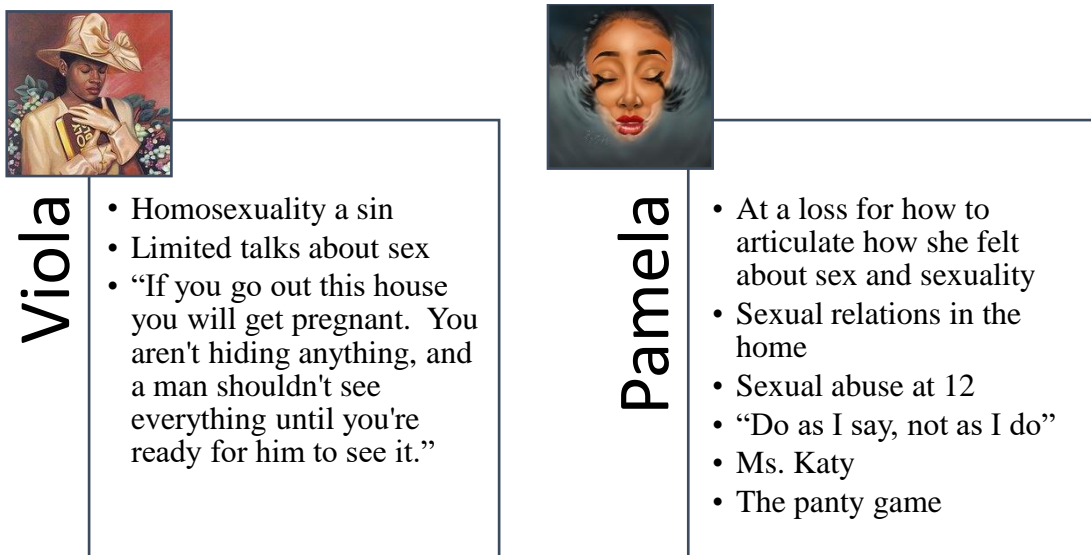


**Viola**
- Homosexuality a sin
- Limited talks about sex
- "If you go out this house you will get pregnant. You aren't hiding anything, and a man shouldn't see everything until you're ready for him to see it."

**Pamela**
- At a loss for how to articulate how she felt about sex and sexuality
- Sexual relations in the home
- Sexual abuse at 12
- "Do as I say, not as I do"
- Ms. Katy
- The panty game

*Figure 7.* Participant descriptions of their sexuality.

Like Viola, Pamela was socialized to believe that the way she dressed warranted a type of attention. She thought bad things happened to her because she was pretty and regarded her beauty as a curse for many years. Both women understood power structures that operated on them in subtle and overt ways and tried to uncover what was behind the veil and inform their

248

actions accordingly.  Neither woman really can discuss sexuality in a way that separates the notion from patriarchal oppression or trauma, or community-based expectations.  While Viola understood that as a person's body matures and develops, the mind also matures and develops, that was not the case for Pamela, a sexual abuse survivor.  She detailed poignantly that when the sexual abuse began at 12, her body began to change by craving and accepting sex—to be womanish—but her mind was not ready and able to accept the acts that were happening to her.  For Pamela, sexuality was understood to be something that has an immediate reaction and response, there was no need to wait to get know a person or build a relationship.  Sexuality, in this case, was to keep her body available for someone else's force, pleasure, and power over her.  The issue of power related to sexuality was seen in both Viola's and Pamela's narratives.

Viola's relationship with power difference was focused on her gender roles as guided by patriarchy.  Growing up, her father dictated what was appropriate for her and her sister Karen to wear and how it was appropriate to act.  In Viola's marriage with Steve, patriarchy and power difference showed up in how Steve maintained control of the relationship and the household.  These are relatable instances to verify O'Neal's (1982) point that Black women do not have the same sense of personal freedom to explore issues as their white or male counterparts because of the multiple social structures of oppression they negotiate, oftentimes resulting in the delayed coming-of-age experiences.

Pamela was often uneducated or deluded about developmentally appropriate behaviors, healthy relationships, self-worth, and creating boundaries.  She was socialized by her environment and influenced by the people in it.  These environments encouraged self-directed learning, as she had to figure things out on her own.  In this context, tacit knowledge and acknowledgment of the bidirectional relationships that reinforce the exchanges are also central,

as Pamela internalized the values, attitudes, behaviors, and morals in her environment. Learning

boundaries is often done through modeling, and Pamela's mom and sisters did not model

boundary setting for her, therefore leaving her to be in compromising situations. She had to

literally and symbolically learn life's lessons on surviving and thriving as a woman, a Black

person, and a Black woman. She was not prepared to navigate the world. Although she holds

herself accountable for her poor decision making, she also faults the people that raised her—

family—because "everything you know comes from the conversations, experiences, and

environment they raised you in and what you learned."

     For Pamela, sex and sexuality were always about feeling good, but have altered her way

of thinking. She engaged in resistance that was loud and easily visible. Due to the enacted

trauma caused by familial, societal, and communal norms and actions, Pamela learned early on

that her survival meant, to some extent, finding reprieve from the oppression, and such reprieve

can only come through a loud resistance. She abandoned religion in favor of spirituality, formal

notions of sexuality, and desire in favor of strategic partnering and went through her life

developing new sets of rules for her own survival. This transformation is attributed to the

culmination of life events, which maimed her spiritually, physically, developmentally, and

mentally. After the molestation began, she no longer assumed she had the protections of her

community and family, and her thoughts about sex and relationships became skewed. From

what she knew, sex was a pleasurable act for men to use her body to please themselves, therefore

resulting in her body being used (with or without consent) more times than she can count.

Initially, Pamela was at a loss for how to articulate how she felt about sex and sexuality; she was

not confused about gender, the act of sex, sexual preference, reproduction, orgasm, etc., but how

to be intentional about what sex and sexuality were to her. For Pamela, sex is a corrupt, guilt-

ridden, dirty, shameful, and controlling word and has been a curse to her, just like her beauty. She has never enjoyed sex; it feels good in the moment and is a means to an end, but after the short-lived, fallacious ecstasy evades, emptiness creeps in and is too unstinting to overlook—that is what she has always felt with sex. The only thing good that has come from this defiled place is her four children who are her constant reminder of her plight to survive.

For Viola and Pamela, three main objectives can be extracted from their orientations to sexuality. First, both women aspire for sexuality to be a safe space, where it can be enjoyed in a loving and sincere way. Second, they ask for companionship with a partner who will respect their bodies, minds, and souls. Lastly, although the sexual experiences of the participants have been markedly different, they do not take sex or sexuality lightly. While these objectives may seem simple, they are not frivolous. Viola operated within the rules and structures clearly presented, but as she matured, she found and continues to find subtle ways to subvert or disrupt the hegemonic structures. On the other hand, Pamela lived outside of the rules—making up her own rules for better or worse, partly because there were no clearly defined rules. She abandoned formal religion and formal notions of sex and sexuality, loudly resists power structure, and is unmasked.

During Viola's upbringing, conversations around sex and sexuality were connected to spirituality or God, so naturally she associated the two concepts as being closely related. In the Baptist school she attended in her formative years, health education was taught. Her teacher taught them about the sexual organs by way of non-descriptive videos that only left more questions. The Baptist school also presented sex education from a Biblically based perspective as the health teacher perpetuated the ideal that sex was for procreation and the way that happens is through a man and woman kissing and having a baby. Neither she nor her siblings had

children out of wedlock, but they had friends who did.  Unlike Pamela, Viola informally learned

that having a baby out of wedlock was something to hide after being exposed to rumors of her

classmate Bianca having to go live with her aunt during the school year because she was

pregnant.  It was this type of incidental learning that helped Viola navigate various aspects of her

development that were not discussed in the home or in school.  In other words, she learned

lessons on becoming a Black person from certain members of her family but learned about

womanly things from her peers and later intersected those identities to understand how to survive

as a Black woman.

Since Viola's mother was a nurse, she received information about anatomy, correct

anatomical terms, and a superficial discussion of how babies were made (a man and a woman

make a baby); but it was her brother Ralph that first told her candidly that boys only wanted sex.

He also communicated to Viola that when the time was right for her to know more about sex and

engage in sexual activity, she would know because she believed in God and she would

understand it.  In other words, God would guide her and let her know.  That moment was

paramount in her foundational development.  After the conversation with Ralph, Viola began to

associate sex with spirituality, and it was from the male point of view.  Viola remembered her

father discussing homosexuality growing up, but never directly discussing sex, at least not to her

until she was married.  In those rare instances, he discussed procreation and expressed

excitement about having grandchildren.  It was not until her wedding day that her aunt decided to

have a talk with her about what to expect on her wedding night because she knew she was a

virgin.  This example of the Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry trope, life's lessons on surviving

and thriving as a woman, shows Viola using her kinship network (her aunt) to assist her search

for self-identification as she entered into a role as a wife.  This additional identity of wife

complicated the already present intersections of Viola's identity she had to navigate. Furthermore, in Viola's household, since spirituality was used as a protective barrier, the expectation was that sex was saved for marriage, established for procreation, and biblically based. Viola's family did not display behaviors that were questionable or that contradicted what was being taught at home or in church. In this way, patriarchy played an important role in the family culture. Viola also held on to the family narrative, which included having Biblically based morals and values. This illustration of tacit knowledge further demonstrated to Viola that sex was a private matter and there was an appropriate age and time at which one could discuss (and engage in) sex.

The conversations about sexuality grounded in spirituality happened at a much older age for Pamela. She was reflective of how she got to this point and recalled watching a television show that had scenes of rape in her formative years that triggered angst inside of her. She also remembered viewing a specific episode of the Black sitcom *A Different World,* which was a spinoff from *The Cosby Show* that dealt with college and young adult themes such as racism, romance, date rape, and friendships. In a specific episode, feisty and worldly Lena James (played by Jada Pinkett Smith) dates respectful, church-going Dorian "choirboy" Heywood (played by Bumper Robinson). Choirboy was made fun of because he did not want to engage in premarital intercourse. Pamela recited the line that had a deep and meaningful impact for her in the 80s, "so Jada was like, 'why are you a virgin?' and he was like, 'on my wedding night I want to give my wife something that nobody had ever had before." She remembers that because that is something that she would have liked to experience. Even though she knew she could not present herself as a virgin, she held on to the marriage narrative, which included being in a faithful, committed relationship. In this incidental learning example, Pamela saw an alternative

253

perspective of relationships she had not had. This emotionally charged experience suggestively provided an ideal framework for Pamela to consider her life and self-worth. It was literally a different world—and that could have been her life, where everything was resolved easily. To some extent, she tried to approximate that through going to college to better her world. This reflective state made her consider that saving herself for marriage was something she would have liked to experience. It took the television shows to challenge her value system, as she was not previously introduced to an alternative way of engaging in relationships.

Viola did not consider herself an attractive or sexual person. She thought since spirituality and sexuality were connected, once she married and engaged in sex, she would feel an overwhelming sense of compassion and liberation, similar to how she felt about her spirituality, but that was not the case. When she married Steve, initially she liked his dogmatic personality, I believe, in part because it was similar to how she grew up within a doctrinaire home. However, her marriage to Steve came with more rules, restrictions, and expectations. Viola was restrained and restricted from continuing her education past a bachelor's degree because Steve thought that was all the education she needed. If she pursued more education, she would outgrow him and possibly their marriage. From Steve's point of view, Viola was to care for the house and the children and support him while he climbed the corporate ladder. Her marriage to Steve replaced the prior control that she had been under in her parents' house, which impelled her to leave the marriage and further her education as a form of resistance and an opposition to the patriarchal structures that were ever present. This point of resistance for Viola was also a moment of growth and self-understanding. Viola typically operated within the rules and structures, so at first glance, one may not notice the subtle ways she subverts or disrupts the dominant structures. Viola's second marriage to Brent is also a demonstration of opposition.

254

Viola disregarded the traditional standards she grew up with and remarried a man of another race in her 60s. In this way, Viola is restoring her vulnerable, empowered, and spiritual narrative, in which her narrative is a building of self.

Throughout the narratives, positive and negative attributes regarding familial relationships and learning environments were demonstrated. For example, the familial relationships provided protection from harm in some instances (i.e., Pamela's grandmother and Viola's brother Ralph); in others, it did not provide that protective barrier, leaving Viola and Pamela to figure things out for themselves, such as puberty, sex, and sexuality. For Viola and Pamela, despite their varied experiences, sexuality, spirituality, and informal learning structures are all intricately interconnected. For Viola, sexuality was also connected to God, and therefore to Viola's understanding of spirituality. Viola also connected emotional issues related to sexuality as issues to be solved by God. Thus, for Viola, sexuality is connected to spirituality through how one makes decisions about their bodies and emotions. Pamela, on the other hand, had understood her body in relationship to sex, through abuse and violation. Therefore, the trauma stunted any developmental progress on understanding sexuality related to mind, body, and spirit. For Pamela, sex was something that happened to her which also meant she had no agency of her own body. She learned sex was something men did to her in invasive, predatory, and abusive ways. Pamela thus demonstrated evidence of self-sacrifice for someone else's benefit. Even at the time of the study, Pamela had a hard time distinguishing sex from sexuality. Even after using a dictionary to look up the difference, she still equated the two as the same thing. However, she also learned that trauma from sexual events and interactions can be healed if one connected to their God. She used her pastor's help to navigate her daughter's trauma and her own surrounding sexual abuse. Thus, sexuality for both participants has been fraught with

intersection of power differences, gendered identities, and patriarchy. Both women identify various ways in which informal learning created their current intersection of sexuality, desire, spirituality, and wounding. And yet both women identified ways they could thrive despite the various boundaries drawn around and imposed on them.

Black feminism, womanism, and Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry were the three theoretical orientations that had significant implications on the research. Black feminism and womanism grounded the study and provided the foundation to create Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry, and Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry provided a way to analyze the data in a culturally congruent way. Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry also allowed the space to create and use wisdom whisper as a data collection method and VES narratives as a way to present the data.

Throughout this process, the participants detailed their coming of age, defined spirituality and sexuality for themselves, and analyzed different concepts relatable to their development because the methodology permitted them the space and safety to do that. The methodology was used to dispel the myth that the compilation of life events is always linear and straight forward with cause and effect. Coming of age is different for some, and in this case, it was different for Viola and Pamela. As Viola and Pamela authored their VES narratives, they discussed their points of resistance as either moments of empowerment or an opening to discover a sense of agency that makes them feel empowered. Viola learned formally and informally that she needs to follow all the rules set for her by her family, by societal norms, and patriarchy, and by communal expectations of putting the needs of everyone else before her own. However, on some level, though she accommodated, she imagined some form of release from these rules when she would leave her father's home. Unfortunately, her marriage came with more rules, and eventually through her VES narrative, Viola shared various points of subtle, subversive, and

disruptive moves of resistance through divorcing her first husband, educating herself well, marrying at 60 years old, and having a group of Black women with whom she is open to talk about sexuality in sister circles. These moves point to a woman engaged in empowered authoring through understanding her vulnerability and strength.

Though Viola often accommodated to some oppressive structures such as patriarchy, she continued to carve her path of resistance to those structures as and when she saw fit. Pamela, on the other hand, engaged in resistance that was loud and easily visible. Due to the enacted forms of trauma caused by familial, societal, and communal norms and actions, Pamela learned early on that her survival meant, to some extent, finding reprieve from the oppression, and such reprieve can only come through a loud resistance. She abandoned religion in favor of spirituality, formal notions of sexuality and desire in favor of strategic partnering, and went through her life developing new sets of rules for her own survival. Both women learned informally that power structures operated on them in subtle and overt ways, and they tried to uncover what was behind the veil and inform their actions accordingly. Spirituality was indeed a barrier and a strength for both women in terms of navigating their lives as they resisted dogmatic norms and carved their own space within their religious or spiritual communities. Neither woman really could discuss sexuality in a way that separates the notion from patriarchal oppression or trauma or community-based expectations. Both women identified various ways in which informal learning created their current intersection with sexuality, desire, spirituality, and wounding. And yet both women identified ways in which they could thrive despite the various boundaries drawn around and imposed on them. This is why their narratives are instructive, vulnerable, empowered, and spirit-driven.

## Contribution to Literature

The three intersecting domains of this study are Black women's sexuality, Black women's spirituality, and informal learning constructs. The narratives of everyday Black women in this cohort discussing spirituality, sexuality, and informal learning explicitly combined are scarce; therefore, this study contributes to the scarce literature to focus on older Black women's sexuality (whether engaged in willingly or forced), spirituality practices, and informal learning spaces combined. These areas combined bring further illumination to the connection of spirituality and sexuality for Black women. Specifically, it contributes to the literature as to how Black women explicitly use spirituality and informal learning to conceptualize their sexuality. This study also addresses a gap in the literature by moving beyond definitions of spirituality, informal learning, and sexuality to explore how these constructs are intertwined in the lives of older Black women.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the current understanding of older women is that they are asexual and unattractive. This notion almost forces seniors to accept a decrease of sexual desires or cessation of sex altogether because there is already an expectation that sexual activities will and should decrease (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003). This limited perspective coupled with the patriarchal view that women's bodies are for procreation and not for women's pleasure (Guthridge, 2004) promotes the diminished value of women. Attending to the idea that older Black women historically have been raised with the sexist patriarchal idea that sex is for reproduction and not for women's pleasure means that if Black women choose sexuality for their own pleasure, in some way they violate the understanding of their own femininity and cross some taboo borders. This study challenges such an idea. The rich narratives provided by the participants empower Black women to gain ownership of their bodies and create the boundaries

that are acceptable to their lives. Both Viola and Pamela became aware of the effects of a lack of boundaries in their own lives related to sexuality and sex, respectively, and tried to educate their children to make more informed and empowered decisions regarding both.

Moreover, added to the patriarchal understanding of sexism, Black women have had to contest the negative cultural images, expectations, and scripts that perpetuate a defective idea of Black women and Black relationships (Allen & Helm, 2013). For example, the images that perpetuate these deviant stereotypes include welfare mother, gold digger, baby mama, the side chick, and others. These terms and images continue to sexually exploit and damage the self-concept of Black women and the value they place on their sexuality (Collins, 2000; A. Harris, 2015). In other words, such terms and images further spread the idea to Black women that these are the expected ways for Black women to act and behave. The imposed tropes further submit that Black women are to fit into the prescribed boxes, which furthermore infers that Black women are incapable of navigating their own lives and that the correct way to live is by the example that has been demonstrated through the dominant narrative. Challenging the hegemonic notions of how Black women should behave submits that Black women are self-determined and have the agency to make their own decisions.

Providing the rich narratives that detail the complicated nature of the life course and the coming of age for Black women illuminates the certain structural oppression and the forces that are still strong in these women's lives. In other words, Viola and Pamela are still dealing with unlearning patriarchal and intersectional oppression. For example, Pamela continues to be an integral part in her children's lives while dealing with her mortality every day. While she has survived against all odds, she is still navigating challenges, which speaks back to the oppressive stances and the literature that discusses them in negative and repressive ways. And yet,

comparatively, others are able to navigate and remove themselves from being oppressed. The standpoint of Black women can assist in challenging and dispelling some of the cultural myths and stereotypes, dismantling the dominant discourse, and demonstrating how valuable and salient Black women's lived experiences are to the research process.

Since Black women's worth in post-menopausal years is minimized, their needs and humanity are often silenced and ignored. It was not my intention to compare white women and Black women in this study; I solely intended to give Black women the spotlight. This study provides a space for those older Black women to tell their stories and make a significant contribution to creating a counternarrative to dispel sexist and racist stereotypes toward older Black women regarding the liberation of their sexuality and how their concepts regarding sexuality were constructed.

Although there is a risk that the narratives will be misinterpreted, I wanted to create a healthy, safe space that conveyed the importance of having specific conversations about how an older Black woman might view the world and understand her truths. With a desire to disrupt traditional interview structures, I introduced wisdom whisper talks as a method of engaging in intergenerational conversations. Wisdom whisper talks are the informal and formal ways of engaging whilst placing value on the wisdom that is shared across generations and respecting one's cultural elder. With this method, the participants understood that these were flexible, down-to-earth conversations and not inflexible interviews. The participants ultimately had the power to share whatever they deemed necessary, and the researcher was an acolyte learning from their wisdom. With wisdom whisper, I had hoped to show that older Black women had the agency to share vulnerable, empowered, and spirit-driven narratives in an open and powerful

way, without fear of being looked down upon, considered loose or imperiled, and further stigmatized.

An introduction to a new methodological framework, Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry, endeavored to expand traditional narrative structures to culturally situate and respond to Black women's ontology. By analyzing novels, novellas, short stories, and coreopoems and inferring themes, Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry centers on Black women's archetypes and celebrates the varied perspectives of being Black and woman, as well as the spiritual, communal, and familial relationships. Additionally, Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry as presented in this study provides a solution to O'Neale's (1982) criticism of Bildung for Black women and other marginalized individuals who are denied the space, time, and resources necessary to nurture mental, physical, and social wellbeing.

Furthermore, in light of the #MeToo, Times Up, and Black Lives Matter movements, I aspired for these stories to resonate with those who may have similar experiences or need sound advice from an elder. By providing an affirming space, this research extinguishes some of the internalized oppressive narratives and empowers young and older women alike to take their disillusionments and inadequacies that provoke the negative self-talk and self-perceptions and mend the fragmented pieces of their lives.

I had no idea of the depth or the breadth that would be shared in this experience. Having participants who had significantly different experiences validates the notion that Black women have varied experiences and their stories are not monolithic. Because of this, the individual stories contribute to a communal understanding that one story is not able to capture. It also corroborates that there are within-group cultural differences; therefore, all Black women cannot be considered the same. To that end, learning also happens in various ways. The revelation of

informal learning approaches in this study reveals how social structures of oppression take form and sustain and maintain themselves.  For example, the tacit knowledge or socialization contributed to what Viola and Pamela valued, as well as their attitudes and behaviors regarding sex and spirituality.  These everyday occurrences include the conversations and interactions, or lack thereof, that Viola and Pamela had with members of their families and friends about sex and boys, how men and women should carry themselves, and the value placed on spirituality and religion.  Speaking to these women at a later point in life also provided the space for moments of incidental learning to occur.  Although incidental learning moments had occurred before the study, as Viola and Pamela reflected on their lived experiences and talked about their understandings, new awareness appeared when neither had gone into the study with the intention to learn.  This study also diversifies the literature on informal learning by exploring informal learning in real-life social settings and situates Black women at the center to the conversation.

## Implications and Future Studies

Implications and possibilities for future studies are varied as a result of the findings from this study.  In this section, I highlight the most salient possibilities.  Implications are organized specifically around interests of women's studies programs, human development and family science programs, family life educators, gerontology organizations, marriage and family therapy programs and therapists, adult education, Black women's community and auxiliary groups, qualitative researchers, and researchers interested in conducting culturally congruent research with older Black women.

The exploration of older adult Black women adds value to the understanding of Black women in various contexts.  The participants' stories provide a glimpse into the reality of experiences of some Black women in the US.  By understanding that Black women do not fit

into a prescribed category, there is a need to continue to discuss education and mentor relationships for Black women, young and old alike.  These conversations can include building safe, strong communities in which Black women can learn healthy ways to express their love, engage in healthy relationships, and be responsible in their sexual decision-making. Additionally, this study and conversations around the topic can add to the Black women's affirmation movement.  These two cultural elders have added to the work of other cultural elders to revel in womanhood and encourage the progression of Black women's stories, which encompass elements of strength, joy, pain, sadness, familism, community, spirituality, and education.  To that end, this study contributes to women's studies programs, adult education, and education broadly, and may also resonate with Black women's community and auxiliary groups. It integrates spirituality, interconnectivity, Blackness, and Black women's sexuality so that we understand how informal learning structures play a critical role in shaping our actions against and with the internalization of various social structures.

The revelation of informal learning approaches in this study reveals how social structures of oppression take form and sustain and maintain themselves.  Disrupting those structures would benefit more than those in the participants' population, as there are implications for religious or spiritual leaders and communities to include awareness and a more open-minded approach to understanding that the communities and the people that occupy space are evolving.  With that (r)evolution, the church leaders could be in a supportive role for their congregation and community.

This study also sheds light on the need for further conversation around mental and physical health needs to address adequate sex education for older adults who may not have had anyone with whom they could discuss their sexuality or those who have survived sexual

263

exploitation.  In this way, this work could be beneficial to marriage and family therapy programs, therapists, and family life educators.

This study offers space to discuss the ways in which Black women make sense of their spirituality and sexuality so we can not only understand and document these experiences, but also be in a position to offer appropriate health care, educational, and community-based services. A study like this then opens up a space to honor these experiences of oppression, survival, and navigation and disrupt the oppressive narratives that force Black women to choose sexual liberation or spirituality.  To this end, this study is beneficial to human development and family science programs and gerontology organizations.  Additionally, as was suggested by the participants, this study serves as a catalyst for Black women's community and auxiliary groups to join together in their own sister circles and share their triumph stories while appreciating love, laughter, and tears, in a womanist way.

Additionally, the use of Black Feminine Narrative Inquiry as a methodological framework, VES narratives as a method for analysis, or wisdom whisper as a method of inquiry in research studies can further promote culturally congruent research about Black women. Finally, since historically Black culture has used storytelling as a method for education and to pass on important cultural knowledge, wisdom whisper can be used as a culturally congruent method to revive and continue that tradition.  Furthermore, the narratives that were presented provide a glimpse into and add variety to the already existing narratives by Black women about their sexuality; future research can continue to carve out a space to further the research on examining the traditional expectations of relationships and family life.

Future research possibilities embrace extending the invitation of talking about the orientation to sexuality through spirituality and informal learning structures to other Black

women and sister circles (Black women who have already established their own groups). Future research studies could also include narratives and analysis of Black women surviving and thriving with HIV to extend the research on this group and to examine the ways Black women negotiate mortality and spirituality. Another future research possibility includes selecting Black men as participants to share their perspectives on their orientations to sexuality through spirituality and informal learning. With the empathetic notion that there are a number of men who have been silenced to varying degrees on a number of issues, they have their own spirituality and sexuality experiences that could extend the womanist framework, since womanism is committed "to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (Walker, 1983, p. xi) and create their own VES narratives about their experiences. Lastly, future research can include studies on intergenerational mentorship to nurture relationships between Black women. The intergenerational mentoring research can also include a culturally congruent component that revives the connection to communities through storytelling.

### Conclusion: Advice from Cultural Elders

This dissertation is for women like Viola and Pamela. Academics may or may not see themselves in this dissertation and other people may be triggered. However, these are stories rarely told but need to be told, not only because these are Black women, but Black women's mental arc of coming of age in some cases does not happen because society is not responsive to helping them resolve conflict, whether it be within the community or the broader community. I entered the relationship to learn and not to extract data. I wanted to learn whatever they wanted to share as a cultural elder. I am a humble recipient of information that was shared. Viola and Pamela were also enthusiastic about this work. In fact, Pamela said she would like to continue to

develop her story, and Viola wanted to continue on with the conversation with other Black women built into the fold to sort and unpack their orientations to spirituality and sexuality.

To conclude, after each wisdom whisper, I asked the participants to share a nugget of wisdom or an important lesson they would like to pass on to other Black women. They spoke as if they were having a conversation with their own daughters and the shared wisdom included elements of self-perception, self-esteem, and self-respect. In the following section, I present their whispered truths to both older and younger women alike. I have combined their wisdom together in a composite first-person narrative to maintain the comprehensiveness of the wisdom.

### Composite of Wisdom Whispered from Participants

There are many things I did not know because I did not ask. There is no such thing as a dumb question, especially if it can save your life. I was afraid to ask for help because I was supposed to be strong, but if I would have listened to my head and not my heart, I would have asked for help. I probably would have gotten more answers, and I would have told about the abuse much sooner. I think it is important to look for other women to build relationships with and have someone who can ask you the hard questions and hold you accountable. Good friendships and mentor relationships will help you through the good and the bad. Mentorship in the Black community is especially important, particularly if someone can help you navigate life and love.

Having a mentor and a group of young women helped me develop a healthy self-perception. As I developed a positive self-perception, my self-esteem and self-respect followed. I believe nothing is greater than self-respect. If you do not respect yourself, no one else will. People will treat you how you allow them to treat you. I would suggest that before you get involved with anyone sexually, know who you are and love yourself first. It is your

responsibility to protect yourself and you cannot allow anyone else to protect you when you get caught up in the moment.  Do the work to know who you are.  Know that you are enough; you are loveable, strong, resilient, and beautiful.

Spirituality has helped me through the hardest times in my life, it may take some time to develop spiritually, but don't be afraid of the process to learn who you are and to develop your spirit.  When you understand yourself, your expectations, and desires, it is easier to set healthy boundaries, so when you enter into a friendship or relationship, you are better able to gauge if the relationship meets your needs and requirements.  And if it doesn't, don't be afraid to be alone.  Take the time to understand who you are.  Combat the fear of being alone, and don't be with the wrong person because you are afraid to be alone.  The people who we surround ourselves with are often a reflection of the value we place on ourselves.

Understand that life is about choices, and an indecision by default is a decision.  So, take ownership of your actions and behaviors and discover what makes you happy.  Don't look for anyone else to make you happy.  Know what makes you happy and complete; know who you are and what issues and fears you are holding on to.  If you don't recognize them, you will continue to do the same things.  Most of the time what holds us back is unforgiveness, so learn what it is to forgive.  Remember the lesson that you were to learn but forgive yourself and others, so you don't keep reliving the emotional hurt and trauma.  Also, be kind to yourself—the way you talk to yourself, what you say, and how you treat yourself.  When you make poor decisions, forgive yourself for making that decision but learn from it.

Be careful who you trust and listen to your inner voice.  You only get one body and you really have to be careful about giving it away sexually, whether you're in a long-term relationship or not, because I believe when we connect sexually, our energy links with the other

person.  We can always say "don't sell yourself short," but we always end up compromising

somewhere.  When we are in a relationship with another human being, we intertwine our life

with someone else.  As much as we say we are not going to take on their issues, we do because

now we are exchanging bodily fluid, intermingling, and feeding off of one another.  That may

not be what either person intended, so be clear about what it is that you're doing and who you are

doing it with.  If that person can't respect you, then you don't need them.

      You have power as a Black woman; learn what your strengths are and tap into your

power.  And when you find your power, don't use it for evil, use it to uplift other Black women,

use it to heal somebody, give something to someone that you wish you would've had—

knowledge, respect, validation, help.

# References

Abdullah, A. S. (1999). Cultural healing: Sankofa to Maat. *Psychological Discourse*, *30*, 4-6.

Abeles, R., Ellison, C., George, L., Idler, E., Krause, N., Levin, J., …Williams, D. (1999). *Multidimensional measurement of religiousness/spirituality for use in health research*. Kalamazoo, MI: Fetzer Institute/ National Institute on Ageing Working Group.

Adekoya, A. R. (2014). *Womanism, feminism and relationship satisfaction in AA women* (Doctoral dissertation). Purdue University.

Adriansen, H. K. (2012). Timeline interviews: A tool for conducting life history research. *Qualitative Studies*, *3*(1), 40-55.

Agyepong, R. (2011). Spirituality and the empowerment of Black women in the academy. *Canadian Women Studies, 29*.

Ahmed, K., & Bhugra, D. (2007). The role of culture in sexual dysfunction. *Journal of Psychiatry*, *6*(3).

Allen, B. J. (2002). Goals for emancipatory communication research on black women. In M. Houston & O. I. Davis (Eds.), *Centering ourselves: African American feminist and womanist studies of discourse* (pp. 21-34). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Allen, K. R., & Roberto, K. A. (2009). From sexism to sexy: Challenging young adults' ageism about older women's sexuality. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*: *Journal of National Sexuality Resource Center 6*(4), 13-24.

Allen, T., & Helm, K. M. (2013). Threats to intimacy for African American couples. In K. M. Helm & J. Carlson (Eds.), *In love, intimacy, and the African American couple*. New York: Routledge.

Amadiume, I. (1987). Male daughters, female husbands in an African society. New Jersey: Zed Books.

Amoah, J. (2013). Narrative: The road to black feminist theory. *Berkeley Journal of Gender Law & Justice*, *12*(1), 63-84. Doi: https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38FP3B

Anderson, K. (2002). A tale of two generations: Baby boom and echo boom. *Furniture Today*. Retrieved from http://www.furnituretoday.com/article/414355-a-tale-of-two-generations-baby-boom-and-echo-boom/

Angelou, M. (1969). *I know why the caged bird sings*(5th ed.). Book of the Month Club: Bel Aire, CA.

Angelou, M. (2008). *Letter to my daughter*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks.

Angelou, M. (2013). *Mom & me & mom*. New York: Random House Large Print Publishing.

Anzaldua, G. (1987). *Borderlands: The new mestiza= La frontera*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Books.

Anzaldua, G. (2015). Light in the dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting identity, spirituality, reality (A. Keating, Ed.). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Anzaldua, G., & Moraga, C. (Eds.). (2015). *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color* (4th ed.). New York: Kitchen Table Press.

Armstrong, T. D. (1996). Exploring spirituality: The development of the Armstrong Measure of Spirituality. In R. L. Jones (Ed.), *Handbook of tests and measurements for Black populations* (Vol. 2, pp. 105-115). Hampton, VA: Cobb and Henry.

Armstrong, T. D., & Crowther, M. R. (2002). Spirituality among older African Americans. *Journal of Adult Development*, *9*(1), 3-12. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1013821116396

Arnfred, S. (Ed.). (2005). *Rethinking sexualities in Africa*. Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell.

Atchley, R. C. (2008). Spirituality, meaning, and the experience of aging. *Generations*, *32*(2), 12-16.

Atchley, R. C. (2009). *Spirituality and aging*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

Avoseh, M. B. M. (2011). Informal community learning in traditional Africa. In S. Jackson (Ed.), *Innovations in lifelong learning* (pp. 34-48). London, England: Routledge.

Baer, H. A. (1993). The limited empowerment of women in black spiritual churches: An alternative vehicle to religious leadership. *Sociology of Religion Sociology of Religion*, *54*, 65-82.

Bagnoli, A. (2009). Beyond the standard interview: The use of graphic elicitation and arts-based methods. *Qualitative Research*, *9*, 547–570. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794109343625

Bailey, A., & Snedker, K. (2011). Practicing what they preach? Lynching and religion in the American South, 1890–1929. *American Journal of Sociology, 117*, 844-887.

Baker, T. A., Buchanan, N. T., Mingo, C. A., Roker, R., & Brown, C. S. (2015). Reconceptualizing successful aging among black women and the relevance of the strong black woman archetype. *Gerontologist*, *55*(1), 51-57. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnu105

Bambara, T. C. (1992). *The salt eaters* (First Vintage). New York: Random House.

Bambara, T. C. (2005). *The Black woman: An Anthology*. New York: Washington Square Press.

Banerjee, M. H., & Canda, E. R. (2009). Spirituality as a strength of African American women affected by welfare reform. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought, 28*, 239-262. doi: 10.1080/1542643090070194

Banks-Wallace, J., & Parks, L. (2004). African American women's perspectives on spirituality. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, *25*(1), 25-45.

Banks, A. (2015). Attack part of pattern against black churches. *National Catholic Reporter*, *51*(19).

Banks, L. (2017). *Sister talk*. Retrieved from https://www.sistertalk.org/home-2/

Banks, R. (1988). Health and the spiritual dimension: Relationships and implications for professional preparation programs. *Journal of School Health*, *50*, 195-202

Bastos, J., Harnois, C., & Paradies, Y. C. (2017). Health care barriers, racism, and intersectionality in Australia. *Social Science & Medicine*. *54*(1) doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.05.010

Battle, M. (2006). The Black church in America: African American Christian spirituality. Religious Life in America. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Baumgartner, L. M. (2014). African American women and HIV/AIDS. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, June 2014*, 81-90. doi:10.1002/ace.20097

Beal, F. M. (1969). *Black women's manifesto; Double jeopardy: To be black and female*. New York: Third World Women's Alliance.

Beal, F. M. (2008). Double jeopardy: To be black and female. *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, *8*(2), 166-176.

Beale, F. M. (1995). Double jeopardy: To be black and female. In B. Guy-Sheftall (Ed.), *Words of fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought* (pp. 146-155). New York: The New York Press.

Bednall, T., Sanders, K., & Runhaar, P. (2014). Stimulating informal learning activities through perceptions of performance appraisal quality and human resource management system strength: A two-wave study. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 13*(1), 45-61.

Bell-Scott, P. (1994). *Life notes: Personal writings by contemporary Black women*. New York: Norton & Company, Inc.

Bell-Scott, P., & Johnson-Bailey, J. (1998). *Flat-footed truths: Telling Black women's lives*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Bennet, A., & Bennet, D. (2007). The knowledge and knowing of spiritual learning. *VINE, 37*(2).

Bennett, E. E. (2012). A four-part model of informal learning: Extending Schugurensky's conceptual model. In J. Buban & D. Ramdeholl (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 53rd Annual Adult Education Research Conference.* Saratogoa Springs.

Bennett, E. E. (2015). *Incorporating informal learning in virtual talent development*. Retrieved from https://www.td.org/INSIGHTS/INCORPORATING-INFORMAL-LEARNING-IN-VIRTUAL-TALENT-DEVELOPMENT

Bhattacharya, K. (2013). Voices, silences, and telling secrets: The role of qualitative methods in arts-based research. *International Review of Qualitative Research, 6*, 604-627. doi: 10.1525/irqr.2013.6.4.604

Bhattacharya, K. (2017a). *Fundamentals of qualitative research: A practical guide*. New York: Routledge.

Bhattacharya, K. (2017b). *(Un)Settling imagined lands: A par/Des(i) approach to de/colonizing methodologies*. Unpublished.

Bhattacharya, K., & Keating, A. (2017). Expanding beyond public private realities: Evoking Anzaldúan Autohistoria-teoría in two voices. *Qualitative Inquiry, 24*, 345-354. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417741976

Blair, C. M. (2010). *I've got to make my livin': Black women's sex work in turn of century Chicago*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Blair, C. M. (2014). African American women's sexuality. *Frontiers, 35*(1).

Bobb-Smith, Y. (2007). We get troo… Caribbean Canadian women's spirituality as a strategy of resistance. In N. Massaquoi & N. N. Wane (Eds.), *In theorizing empowerment: Canadian perspectives on black feminist thought.* Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education.

Bobo, J. (1991). Black women in fiction and nonfiction: Images of power and powerlessness. *Wide Angle*, *13*, 72-81.

Boeren, E. (2011). Gender differences in formal, non-formal and informal adult learning. *Studies in Continuing Education*, *33*, 333-346.

Boes, T. (2006). Modernist studies and the Bildungsroman: A historical survey of critical trends. *Literature Compass 3*(2). 230-243. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2006.00303.x

Boucouvalas, M., & Lawrence, R. L. L. (2010). Adult learning. In C. E. Kasworm, D. A. Rose, & J. M. Ross-Gordon (Eds.), *The handbook of adult and continuing education* (pp. 431-440). Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Boylorn, R. (2012). *Sweetwater: Black women and narratives of resilience*. New York: Peter Lang, Inc., International Academic Publisher.

Bridges, F. (2001). *Resurrection song. African-American spirituality*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Brock, R. N. (1988). *Journeys by heart: A Christology of erotic power*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.

Brown-Spencer, E. A. (2007). Spiritual politics: Politicizing the Black church tradition in anti-colonial praxis. In G. S. Dei & K. Arlo. Rotterdam (Eds.), *Anti-Colonialism and education: The politics of resistance.* (pp. 107-128). The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Brown, D. L., Webb-Bradley, T., Cobb, P. D., Spaw, D., & Aldridge, K. N. (2014). African American women's safer sexual practices: The influence of ethnic-racial socialization and body esteem. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *16*, 518-532.

Brown, S. S. (2016). *Intersections of race, spirituality, and domestic violence: The counternarratives of African American women survivors* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). North Carolina State University.

Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, *18*.

Butler, L. H., Jr. (2013). The spirit is willing, and the flesh is too: Integrating spirituality and sexuality. *Currents in Theology and Mission*, *30*(1).

Butler, R. N., & Lewis, M. I. (1993). *Love and Sex after 60.* New York: Ballantine.

Callanan, M., Cervantes, C., & Loomis, M. (2011). Informal learning. Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews. *Cognitive Science*, *2*, 646-655.

Cameron, R., & Harrison, J. (2012). The interrelatedness of formal, non-formal and informal learning: Evidence from labor market program participants. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, *52*(2).

Campbell, B. M. (1989, April). Myths about black female sexuality. *Essence*.

Canda, E. R. (1988). Conceptualizing spirituality for social work: Insights from diverse perspectives. *Social Thought*, *14*(1), 30-46.

Canda, E. R., & Furman, L. D. (1999). *Spiritual diversity in social work practice: The heart of helping*. New York: The Free Press.

Cannon, K. G. (1995). *Katie's canon: Womanism and the soul of the Black community*. New York: Continuum.

Carbado, D. W., & Gulati, M. (2001). The fifth black woman. *Journal of Contemporary Legal Issues*, 701-729.

Cascio, T. (1999). Religion and spirituality: Diversity issues for the future. *Journal of Multicultural Social Work*, *7*, 129-145.

Chaney, C., & Brown, A. (2015). Is Black motherhood a marker of oppression or empowerment? Hip-Hop and R&B Lessons about " Mama." *Journal of Hip Hop Studies*, *2*(1), 8-39.

Chapman, L. (1987). Developing a useful perspective on spiritual health: Well-being, spiritual potential and the search for meaning. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, *1*(3), 31-39.

Chase, S. E. (2018). Narrative inquiry: Toward theoretical and methodological maturity. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 546-560). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publication Inc.

Chevalier, M. (1995). Maintaining an ethnic identity in school: A Folkloric perspective. *Equity and Excellence, 28*(2), 26-35.

Cisneros, S. (1991). *The house on Mango Street.* New York: Vintage Press.

Clandinin, D. J. (2016). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. New York: Routledge.

Cohen, C. (1999). *The boundaries of blackness. AIDS and the breakdown of black politics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Colby, S. L., & Ortman, J. M. (2014). *The baby boom cohort in the United States: 2012 to 2060*. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/demo/p25-1141.pdf

Cole, J. B. G., & Guy-Sheftall, B. (2003). *Gender talk: The struggle for women's equality in African American communities*. New York: One World Book.

Coleman, M. A. (2006). Must I be a womanist? *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, *22*(1), 85-96.

Coleman, M. A. (2008). *Making a way out of no way: A womanist theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Collier-Thomas, B. (2010). Jesus, jobs, and justice: African American women and religion. New York: Knopf Publishing

Collins, P. H. (1989). The social construction of black feminist thought. *Feminist Studies*, *14*(1), 745-773. Retrieved from JSTOR.

Collins, P. H. (1996). What's in a name? Womanism, black feminism, and beyond. *Black Scholar*, *26*(1), 9-17.

Collins, P. H. (1998). *Fighting words: Black women and the search for justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Collins, P. H. (1999). Intersections of race, class, gender, and nation: Some implications for Black family studies. *Sage Family Studies Abstracts*, *21*(1).

Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004

Collins, P. H. (2004). *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender and the new racism.* New York: Routledge.

Collins, P. H. (2015). Intersectionality's definitional dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *41*, 1-20. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142

Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality: Key concepts*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Cone, J. (1972). *The spirituals and the blues: An interpretation*. New York: Seabury Press.

Cone, J. H. (1984). For my people: Black theology and the Black Church. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Cook, S. (2013). Programs "By Us, For Us" support Black women. *Women in Higher Education*, *22*(6).

Coombs, P. H. (1985). *The world crisis in education: A view from the eighties*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Coombs, P. H., & Ahmed, M. (1974). *Attacking rural poverty: How non-formal education can help*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Cooper, A. J. (1988). *A voice from the South*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Counts, S. A. (2012). *Invisible woman? Narratives of black women leaders in southeastern two-year colleges* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Clemson University.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989*(1), 139-167.

Crenshaw, K. (2014). Beyond racism and misogyny: Black feminism and 2 Live Crew. In D. T. Meyers (Ed.), *Feminist social thought: A reader*. Abington, UK: Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. W. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*, 1241-1299.

Cuffee, S. (2006). On sex and sexuality in Black churchwomen's lives: A womanist call. *Journal of Religious Thought*, *59/60*(1/2), 45.

Currie, D. (1999). *Girl talk: Adolescent magazines and their readers*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

D'Emilio, J., & Freedman, E. B. (2013). Since intimate matters: Recent developments in the history of sexuality in the united states. *Journal of Women's History*, *25*(4).

Dalmida, S. G., Holstad, M. M., Dilorio, C., & Laderman, G. (2012). The meaning and use of spirituality among African American women living with HIV/AIDS. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, *36*, 736-765. Doi: doi.org/10.1177/0193945912443740

Daniel-Anderson, A. N. (2009). Adolescent sexuality and the African-American church. Dissertation.

Davis-Carroll, H. (2011). An ethic of resistance: Choosing life in health messages for African American women. *Journal of Religion and Health*, *50*(2), 219-231.

Davis, K. (2008). Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful. *Feminist Theory*, *9*(1), 67-85. Doi: doi.org/10.1177/1464700108086364

deMarrais, K., & Lapan, S. D. (2004). *Foundations for research*. Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assciates.

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Dillard, C. B. (2012). Learning to (re)member the things we've learned to forget: Endarkened feminisms, spirituality, and the sacred nature of research and teaching. Black Studies and Critical Thinking (Book 18). New York: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers.

Douglas, E. P., Jordan, S. S., Lande, M., & Bumbaco, A. E. (2015). Artifact elicitation as a method of qualitative inquiry in engineering education. In *122nd ASEE Annual Conference and Exposition,* Seattle, WA, June 14-17.

Douglas, K. B. (1995). To reflect the image of God: A womanist perspective on right relationship. In C. J. Sanders (Ed.), *Living the intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in theology* (pp. 67-80). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress.

Douglas, K. B. (1999). *Sexuality and the black church: A womanist perspective*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Douglas, K. B. (2003). Sexuality and the Black church: A womanist perspective. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Du Bois, W. (1924). The gift of Black folk: The Negroes in the making of America. Garden City Park, NY: Square One.

Dubois, W. E. B. (1903). *The souls of black folk*. Greenwich, NY: Fawcett Publications.

Dungy, G. J. (1994). In her womb. In P. Bell-Scott (Ed.), *Life Notes: Personal writings by contemporary Black women.* New York: Norton & Company, Inc.

Dyson, M. E. (2003). Open mike: Reflections on philosophy, race, sex, culture and religion. New York: Basic Civitas Books.

Edwards, K. L. (1987). Exploratory study of black psychological health. *Journal of Religion and Health*, *26*, 73-80.

English, L. (2005a). Historical and contemporary explorations of the social change and spiritual directions of adult education. *Teachers College Record*, *107*, 1169-1192.

English, L. (2005b). Informal learning. In L. M. English (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of adult education.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers.

English, L. M. (2000), Spiritual dimensions of informal learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 2000*, 29-38. doi:10.1002/ace.8503

English, L. M., & Tisdell, E. J. (2010). Spirituality and adult education. In C. E. Kasworm, A. D. Rose, & J. M. Ross-Gordon (Eds.), *Handbook of adult and continuing education* (pp. 285-303). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Ephirim-Donkor, A. (1997). *African spirituality: On becoming ancestors.* Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Epstein, I., Stevens, B., McKeever, P., & Baruchel, S. (2006). Photo elicitation interview (PEI): Using photos to elicit children's perspectives. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 5*(3). Retrieved from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_3/pdf/ epstein.pdf

Este, D., & Bernard, T. (2006). Spirituality among African Nova Scotians: A key to survival in Canadian society. *Critical Social Work*, *7*(1).

Etienne, J. (2016). *Learning in womanist ways: Narratives of first-generation African Caribbean women*. London: UCL Institute of Education Press.

Etter-Lewis, G. (1996). Telling from behind her hand: African American women and the process of documenting concealed lives. In R. Josselson (Ed.), *Ethics and process in the narrative study of lives* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Eugene, T. M. (1994). While love is unfashionable: Ethical implications of black spirituality and sexuality. In J. B. Nelson & S. P. Longfellow (Eds.), *Sexuality and the sacred: Sources for theological reflection*. Westminster: John Knox Press.

Fall, T. (2002). *Spirituality and its impact in the lives of Black women: An ethic of resistance and resiliency* (Doctoral dissertation). Miami University. ProQuest Dissertation and Theses.

Feimster, C. (2011). *Southern horrors: Women and the politics of rape and lynching*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Feng, P. (2000). *The female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston*. Peter Lang, Inc., International Academic Publishers

Few, A. L., Stephens, D. P., & Rouse-Arnett, M. (2003). Sister-to-sister talk: Transcending boundaries and challenges in qualitative research with Black women. *Family Relations*, *52*(3), 205-215.

Franklin, D. L. (2000). *What's love got to do with it? Understanding and healing the rift between black men and women*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Freedman, E. (2002). *No turning back: The history of feminism and the future of women*. New York: The Random House Publishing Group.

Friedan, B. (2000). The problem that has no name. In M. Plott & L. Umanski (Eds.), *Making sense of women's lives: An introduction to women's studies* (pp. 151-162). Lanham:

Friedan, B., & Collins, G. (1997). *The feminine mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Gates, H. L., Jr., & Robbins, H. (Eds.). (2017). *The portable nineteenth-century African American women writers*. London: Penguin.

Giddings, P. (1984). *When and where I enter: the impact of Black women on race and sex in America*. New York: William Morrow.

Gilkes, C. T. (2011). "My mother's god is mine": Finally, the most powerful recognition of the importance of women to African American religion. *The Journal of African American History*, *96*, 362-369. doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.96.3.0362

Gott, M., & Hinchliff, S. (2003). How important is sex in later life? The views of older people. *Social Science & Medicine 56*, 1617-1628.

Greene, T. (2015). *Made a way*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 191-216). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and "Ethically important moments" in research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *10*(2), 261-280. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403262360

Guthridge, D. (2004). *The influences of religion and spirituality on the sexuality of postmenopausal babyboomers* (Doctoral dissertation). California State University, Long Beach. ProQuest Dissertation and Theses.

Guy-Sheftall, B. (Ed.). (1995). *Words of fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought*. New York: The New Press.

Harley, S., The Black Women and Work Collective, & McKay, N. Y. (2002). *Sister circle: Black women and work*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Harris-Perry, M. (2011). *Sister citizen: Shame, stereotypes, and Black women in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Harris, A. (2015). Conflicts within the Black church. In A. Thatcher (Ed.). *The Oxford handbook of theology, sexuality and gender* (pp. 395-410). United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Harris, P. (2014). Spirituality and sexual satisfaction among African Americans. . (Doctoral dissertation). ProQuest Dissertation and Theses.

Harris, T. (1982). *From mammies to militants: Domestics in Black American literature*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Harris, T. W. (2015). *The sisters are alright: Changing the broken narrative of Black women in America*. Oakland, CA: Berett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Harris, Y. J. (2013). *Spiritual health identity: A thematic analysis of experiences of Black women in the Black church*. (Doctoral dissertation). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses

Harvey, I. S., Johnson, L., & Heath, C. (2013). Womanism, spirituality, and self-health management behaviors of African American older women. *Women, Gender and Families of Color*, *1*(1), 59-84.

Harvison, H. (2017). *Sister cirlce*. Retrieved from https://www.sisterscircle.org/

Heap, C (2009). Slumming: Sexual and racial encounters in American nightlife, 1885–1940. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hearn, J. (2014). On men, organizations and intersectionality. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, *33*, 414-428

Heath, C. (2014). Not on my street: Exploration of culture, meaning and perceptions of HIV risk among middle class African American women (Doctoral dissertation). University of South Florida. ProQuest Dissertation and Theses

Helgeson, V. (2002). *The psychology o f gender*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Heo, G. M., & Lee, R. (2013). Blogs and social network sites as activity systems: Exploring adult informal learning process through activity theory framework. *Educational Technology & Society, 16*(4), 133-145.

Herskovits, M. (1941). *The myth of the negro past*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Hicks, C. (2010). Talk with you like a woman: African American women, justice, and reform in New York, 1890–1935. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Higginbotham, E. B. (1993). *Righteous discontent: The women's movement in the black Baptist church, 1880–1920*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hill, R. B. (1999). *The strengths of African American families*. New York: Emerson Hall.

Hine, D. C., & Thompson, K. (1998). *A shining thread of hope: The history of Black women in America*. New York: Broadway Books.

Hines, P., & Boyd-Frankiln, N. (2005). African American families. In M. McGoldrick, J. Giordano, and N. Gracia-Preto (Eds.), *Ethnicity and family therapy* (3rd ed., pp. 87-100). New york: The Guilford Press.

Hodes, M. (1999). White women, black men: Illicit sex in the nineteenth century south. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Holloway, J. E. (Ed.). (2005). *Africanisms in American culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Holmes, S. L. (1999). *Black women academicians speak out: Race, class, and gender in narratives of higher education* (Doctoral dissertation). Iowa State University. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

hooks, B. (1981). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. New York: South End Press.

hooks, B. (1983). *Sisters of the yam: Black women and self-recovery*. New York: South End Press.

hooks, B. (1990). *Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, B. (1999). Embracing freedom: Spirituality and liberation. In S. Glazer (Ed.), *The heart of learning: Spirituality in education* (pp. 113-129). New York: Putnum.

hooks, B. (2000). *Feminist theory: Margin to center* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Hooyman, N. R., & Kiyak, A. H. (1999). *Social gerontology: A multi-disciplinary perspective*. Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon.

Houtrow, A. (2015). At the intersection of poverty and disability: Supplemental security income for children with disabilities due to mental health problems. *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*, *96*, 2094-2095.

Hoyman, H. (1966). The spiritual dimension of man's health in today's world. *Journal of School Health*, *36*(2), 52-63. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.1966.tb05538.x

Hudson-Weems, C. (1993). *Africana womanism: Reclaiming ourselves*. Boston: Bedford Publisher.

Hudson-Weems, C. H. (1994). *Africana womanism: Reclaiming ourselves*. Troy, MI: Bedford Publishing.

Hudson-Weems. (2000). Africana womanism: An overview. In D. P. Aldridge & C. Young (Eds.), *Out of the revolution: The development of Africana Studies* (pp. 205-217). Minneapolis, MN: Lexington Books.

Hurston, Z. N. (2006). *Their eyes were watching God* (75th Anniversary Edition). New York: Harper Perennial.

Jackson, K. F. (2012). Participatory diagramming in social work research: Utilizing visual timelines to interpret the complexities of the lived multiracial experience. *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice*, *12*, 414-432. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325011435258

Jaeger, D. (2004). *Sexuality and spirituality: A phenomenological inquiry of eleven midlife women* (Doctoral dissertation). ProQuest Dissertation and Theses.

Johnson-Bailey, J. (1999). The ties that bind and the shackles that separate: Race, gender, class, and color in a research process. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *12*, 659-670. https://doi.org/10.1080/095183999235818

Johnson-Bailey, J. (2010). Learning in the dimension of otherness: A tool for insight and empowerment. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 126*, 77-88. doi.org/10.1002/ace.373

Johnson, B. K. (1996). Older adults and sexuality: A multidimensional perspective. *Journal of Gerontological Nursing*, *22*(2), 6-16.

Johnson, C. J. C., & Weller, S. C. (2001). Elicitation techniques for interviewing. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and methods* (pp. 491-515). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412973588

Johnson, L. (2015). From the anti-slavery movement to now: (Re)examining the relationship between critical race theory and black feminist thought. *Race, Gender & Class*, *22*, 227-243.

Johnson, R., & Rivera, M. (2015). Intersectionality, stereotypes of African American men, and redressing bias in the public affairs classroom. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, *21*, 511-522.

Jones, C., & Shorter-Gooden, K. (2004). *Shifting: The double lives of Black Women in America*. New York: Harper Collins.

Jones, J. M. (1991). Racism: A cultural analysis of the problem. In R. L. Jones (Ed.), *Black Psychology* (3rd ed.). Berkeley, CA: Cobb and Henry.

Jones, J. (2010). *Where I want to be: African American women's novels and the journey toward selfhood during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Joseph, P. E. (2008). Reinterpreting the black power movement. *Magazine of History, 22*(3), 4-6.

Kim, J. (2016). *Understanding narrative inquiry* (1st ed.). Los Angeles: Sage Publisher.

King, D. K. (1988). Multiple jeopardy, Multiple consciousness: The context of a Black feminist ideology. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 14*(1), 42-72. https://doi.org/10.1086/494491

King, D. K. (2016). Multiple jeopardy, multiple consciousness: The context of a Black feminist ideology. In B. Landry (Ed.), *Race, gender & class: Theory and methods of analysis* (1st ed.). New York: Routledge.

Kirylo, J. D., & Boyd, D. (2017). *Paulo Freire: His faith, spirituality, and theology.* The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Kolar, K., Ahmad, F., Chan, L., & Erickson, P. G. (2015). Timeline mapping in qualitative interviews: A study of resilience with marginalized groups. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *14*(3), 13-32.

Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

La Bell, T. J. (1982). Nonfomal and informal education: A holistic perspective on lifelong learning. *International Review of Education*, *28*(2), 159-175.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2012). Through a glass darkly: The persistence of race in education research & scholarship. *Educational Researcher, 41*(2). https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12440743

Lander, T. F. (2017). *She just did: A narrative case study of Black women student leaders at a predominantly white midwestern institution* (Doctoral dissertation). Kansas State University. ProQuest Dissertation and Theses.

Leasure, L. T. (2004). *Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker–Womanist and feminist theories meet in the garden: The Perspective of difference* (Ph.D. thesis). Indiana University of Pennsylvannia.

Leseur, G. (1995). *Ten is the age of darkness: The Black Bildungsroman* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Missouri.

Lewis, L. M. (2007). Spiritual assessment in African-Americans: A review of measures of spirituality used in health research. *Journal of Religious Health, 47*, 458-475. doi.org/10.1007/s10943-007-9151-0

Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis and interpretation. Applied social research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Lincoln, C. E., & Mamiya, L. H. (1990). *The black church in the African American experience.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications.

Livingstone, D. W. (2001). *Adults' informal learning: Definitions, findings, gaps, and future research.* NALL Working Paper, No. 21. Retrieved from https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/retrieve/4484/21adultsinformallearning.pdf

Lorde, A. (1984). *The transformation of silence into language and action. Sister outsider*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.

MacKnee, C. M. (1996). Peak sexual and spiritual experience: Exploring the mystical relationship. *Theology and Sexuality, 3*(5), 97-115.

MacKnee, C. M. (1997). Sexuality and spirituality: In search of common ground. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, *16*, 210-221.

MacKnee, C. M. (2002). Profound sexual encounters among practicing Christians: A phenomenological analysis. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, *30*, 234-244.

Macunovich, D. J. (2000). The baby boomers. In D. Ekerdt (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of aging*. New York: Macmillan Reference USA.

Mahoney, A. (2008). Is it possible for Christian women to be sexual? *Women & Therapy*, *31*(1), 89-106.

Marable, M. (2001). Groundings with my sisters: Patriarchy and the exploitation of Black women. In R. Byrd & B. Guy-Sheftall (Eds.) *Traps: African American men on gender and sexuality* (pp. 119-152). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Markovitz, J. (2004). *Legacies of lynching: Racial violence and memory.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Martin, E. P., & Martin, J. M. (2002). *Spirituality and the Black tradition in social work.* Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Mattis, J. S. (1995). *Work(i)ngs of the spirit: Spirituality, meaning construction and coping in the lives of Black women* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Michigan. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Mattis, J. S. (2000). African American Women's Definitions of Spirituality and Religiosity. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *26*(1), 101-122.

Mattis, J. S. (2002). Religion and spirituality in the meaning-making and coping experiences of African American women: A qualitative analysis. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 26*(4). https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-6402.t01-2-00070

Mattis, J., & Jagers, R. J. (2001). A relational framework for the study of religiosity and spirituality of African Americans. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *29*, 519-539. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.1034

Mbiti, J. S. (1989). *African religions and philosophy* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Heinemann.

McBride, D. (2005). *Why I hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays on race and sexuality*. New York: University Press.

McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *30*, 1771-1800. Doi: doi.org/10.1086/426800

McDonald, K. L., Putallaz, M., Grimes, C. L., Kupersmidt, J. B., & Coie, J. D. (2007). Girl talk: Gossip, friendship, and sociometric status. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, *53*, 381-411.

McNickles, J. (2009). *Interracial marriage and black women's racial identity*. Adult Education Research Conference, 2010 Conference Proceedings, Sacramento, CA.

Merriam, S. B., & Bierema, L. L. (2014). *Adult learning: Linking theory and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S. B., & Kee, Y. (2014). Promoting community wellbeing: The case for lifelong learning for older adults. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *6*(2), 129-144. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713613513633

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. B. (2016). *Qualitative research design: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mills, L. A., Knezek, G., & Khaddage. F. (2014). Information seeking, information sharing, and going mobile: Three bridges to informal learning. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *32*, 324-334.

Moody, J. (1994). Professions of faith: A teacher reflects on women, race, church and spirit. In K. Vaz (Ed.), *Oral narrative research with Black women* (pp. 24-37). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Moore, S., Robinson, M., Dailey, A., & Thompson, C. (2015). Suffering in silence: Child sexual molestation and the black church: If God don't help me who can I turn to? *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 1-11. doi: 10.1080/10911359.2014.956962

Morrison, T. (2015). *God help the child*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Moynihan, D. P. (1965). *The Negro family: The case for national action*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Labor.

Musgrave, C. F., Allen, E., Allen, C., & Gregory, J. (2002). Spirituality and health for women of color. *American Journal of Public Health*, *92*, 557-560.

Nafukho, F. M. (2006). Ubuntu worldview: A traditional African view of adult learning in the workplace. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, *8*, 408-415.

Nancherla, A. (2009). Knowledge delivered in any other form is... perhaps sweeter. *T + D*, *63*(5), 54-60.

Neal-Barnett, A., Stadulis, R., Payne, M. R., Crosby, L., Mitchell, M., Williams, L., & Williams-Costa, C. (2011). In the company of my sisters: Sister circles as an anxiety intervention for professional African American women. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, *129*(1), 213-218.

Nelson, T., Cardemil, E. V., & Adeoye, C. T. (2016). Rethinking strength: Black women's perceptions of the "strong black woman" role. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *40*, 551-563. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684316646716

Newman, S. (2002). Breaking the silence: The church and human sexuality. *Mississippi Link,* 8.

Ngwainmbi, J. M. (2004). Feminism, feminist scholarship, and social integration of women: The struggle for African-American Women. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *5*(5).

Norwood, D. (1978). "Have a little talk with Jesus." *Dorothy Norwood Live.* Los Angeles: LA Records.

O'Neale, S. (1982). Race, sex and self: Aspects of Bildung in select novels by Black American women novelist. *Melus*, *9*(4), 25-37.

Ogunyemi, C. O. (1985). Womanism: The dynamics of the contemporary Black female novel in English. In L. Phillips (Ed.), *The womanist reader*. New York: Routledge.

Ogunyemi, C. O. (2006). Womanism: The dynamics of the contemporary Black female novel in English. In L. Phillips (Ed.), *The womanist reader*. New York: Routledge.

Overwien, B. (2000). Informal learning and the role of social movements. *International Review of Education, 46*, 621-640.

Pannell-Goodlett, C. L. (2016). *Spirituality as a transformative experience in the lives of Black Catholic Women* (Doctoral dissertation). ProQuest Dissertation and Theses.

Paris, P. (1995). *The spirituality of African peoples: The search for a common moral discourse*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Pathak, V., Jena, B., & Kalra, S. (2013). Qualitative research. *Perspectives in Clinical Research*, *4*(3). Doi: https://doi.org/10.4103/2229-3485.115389.

Patton, L. D., & Harper, S. (2003). Mentoring relationships among African American women in graduate and professional schools. *New Directions for Student Services*, *104*, 67-78. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.108

Perkins, L. (1983). The impact of the "cult of true womanhood" on the education of Black women. *Journal of Social Issues*, *39*(3), 17-28.

Phillips, L. (Ed.). (2006). *The womanist reader. The first quarter century of womanist thought*. New York: Routledge.

Plachuta, A. (2016). Virtual human resource development and adjunct community college faculty: A qualitative study of how faculty developed and learned to teach online through informal learning (Doctoral dissertation). Northeastern University, Boston, MA. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling sexual stories: Power, change and social worlds*. New York: Routledge.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Preissle, J. (2008). Subjectivity statement. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 845-846). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. doi: 10.4135/9781412963909.n439

RB-Banks, Y. (2015). African American women scholars in Christian higher education: A perspective on sistah-hood. In A. B. Bradley (Ed.), *Black scholars in white space: New vistas in African American studies from the Christian Academy*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications.

Riedinger, K. (2012). Family connections: Family conversations in informal learning environments. *Childhood Education*, *88*(2), 125-127.

Riessman, C. K. (1987). When gender is not enough: Women interviewing women. *Gender and Society*, *1*(2), 172-207

Riessman, C. K. (2001). Analysis of personal narratives. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interviewing*. Sage Publications.

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage Publications.

Riley, S. S. (1994). A sistah outsider. In P. Bell-Scott (Ed.), *Life notes: Personal writings by contemporary Black women.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Roberts, D. (1998). Killing the black body: Race, reproduction, and the meaning of liberty. New York: Vintage.

Robertson, C. (1996). Africa into the Americas? Slavery and women, the family, and the gender division of labor. In B. Gaspar & D. Clark Hine (Eds.), *More than chattel: Black women and slavery in the Americas*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Rose, T. (2003). *Longing to tell: Black women talk about sexuality and intimacy*. New York: Picador.

Rose, T. (2013). Public tales wag the dog. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race, 10*(2), 447-469. doi: http://dx.doi.org.er.lib.k-state.edu/10.1017/S1742058X13000234

Rosen, H. (2008). Terror in the heart of freedom: Citizenship, sexual violence, and the meaning of race in the postemancipation south. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Russell, C. (2012). *The baby boom: Americans born 1946 to 1964* (7th ed.). Ithaca, NY: New Strategist

Rutledge, E. M. (1990). Suicide among Black adolescents and adults: A rising problem. In A. R. Stiffman & L. E. Davis (Eds.), *Ethnic issues in adolescent mental health* (pp. 339-351). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Sackey, D. J., Nguyen, M. T., & Grabill, J. T. (2015). Constructing learning spaces: What we can learn from studies of informal learning online. *Computers and Composition*, *35*, 112-124. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2015.01.004

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. London: Sage Publications.

Sandu, A. (2013). Transnational homemaking practices: Identity, belonging and informal learning. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies, 21*, 496-512.

Schugurensky, D. (2000). The forms of informal learning: Towards a conceptualization of the field [Working Paper No. 19]. (New Approaches to Lifelong Learning). Toronto, ON: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto.

Scott, K. D. (2017). Young, shifting, and black: Leaving the language of home and back again – A cautionary tale of crossing race and gender borders. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *23*(2), 119–129. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416655824

Seawood, F. (2015). *Sexual repression and Black women's sexuality* (Unpusbilshed master's thesis). California State University San Marcos.

Settles, I. H. (2006). Use of an intersectional framework to understand black women's racial and gender identities. *Sex Roles, 54*, 589-601. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9029-8

Shange, N. (2010). *For colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Sheared, V. (1994). Giving voice: An inclusive model of instruction—A womanist perspective. In E. Hayes & S. A. J. Colin III (Eds.), *Confronting racism and sexism in adult education: New directions for adult and continuing education* (pp. 27-37). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sheared, V. (1999). Giving voice: Inclusion of African American students' polyrhythmic realities in adult basic education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, Summer*(82), 33-48.

Sheared, V., Johnson-Bailey, J., Colin, S. A. J., III, Peterson, E., & Brookfield, S. (2010). *The handbook of race and adult education*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Sheldrake, P. F. (2010). *Explorations in spirituality: History, theology, and social practice*. New York: Paulist Press.

Sheridan, J., Chamberlain, K., & Dupuis, A. (2011). Timelining: visualizing experience. *Qualitative Research*, *11*, 552-569. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794111413235

Shin, R. (2011). Social justice and informal learning: Breaking the social comfort zone and facilitating positive ethnic interaction. *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research in Art Education, 53*(1), 71-87.

Shupe, A., & Eliasson-Nannini, J. M. (2012). *Pastoral misconduct: The American black church examined*. New York: Routledge.

Simone, N. (1967). "Take me to the water." *High Priestess of Soul.* New York: Phillips Records.

Smelt, T. (2017). *Race and sexual identities: Narratives of women navigating intersecting identities* (Doctoral dissertation). Capella University.

Smith, B., & Smith, B. (2015). Across the kitchen table: A sister-to-sister dialogue. In Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, G. *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color* (4th ed.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Snežana, L. (2010). Influence of parents' informal and formal education on a youngster's learning achievements. *AS: Andragoška Spoznanja, 16*(1), 65-76.

Sollinger, R. (1992). Wake up little Susie: Single pregnancy and race before "Roe v. Wade." New York: Routledge.

Sollinger, R. (2002). Beggars and choosers: How the politics of choice shapes adoption, abortion, and welfare in the United States. New York: Hill and Wang.

Sommerville, D. M. (2004). *Rape and race in the nineteenth century south*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Springer, K. (2005). *Living for the revolution. Black feminist organizations, 1968-1980*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Starks, S. H., & Hughey, A. W. (2003). African American women at midlife: The relationship between spirituality and life satisfaction. *Affilia, 18*(2), 133-147.

Steptoe, L. C. (2011). *Droppin' knowledge: Black women's communication and informal learning in an online community* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Colorado at Boulder. ProQuest Dissertation and Theses.

Taylor, J. (1998). Womanism: A methodologic framework for African American women. *Advances in Nursing Science*, *21*(1), 53-64.

Taylor, K. (2017). Beyond atheism: An intersectional approach to exploring secular identity and religion among Black women.

Thomas, V. G., & Jackson, J. A. (2007). The education of African American girls and women: Past to present. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *76*, 357-372. Doi: https://doi.org/10.2307/40034578

Tisdell, E. J. (2003). *Exploring spirituality and culture in adult and higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Tisdell, E. J. (2008). Spirituality and adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *2008*(119), 27-36. doi.org/10.1002/ace303

Tolman, D. L., & Miller, M. B. (2001). *From subjects to subjectivities: A handbook of participatory methods*. New York: New York University Press.

Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight a"big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *16*, 837-851. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121

Travick-Jackson, C. J. (2003). *Christianity in the lives of highly educated African American women: Womanist narratives* (Doctoral dissertation). ProQuest Dissertation and Theses.

Truth, S. (1851). *Ain't I a woman*. Retrieved from https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp

Turner, D. R. (2007). *Religion and womanism in the lives of Central Texas AA Baptist women* (Doctoral dissertation). Texas A&M University. ProQuest Dissertation and Theses.

Ugwu, S. U., & de Kok, B. (2014). Socio-cultural factors, gender roles and religious ideologies contributing to Caesarian-section refusal in Nigeria. *Reproductive Health*, *12*(70).

Valerio, A. (2015). It's in my blood, my face, my mother's voice the way I sweat. In G. Anzaldua & C. Moraga (Eds.), *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color* (4th ed.). New York: Kitchen Table Press.

Van Hook, M., Hugen, B., & Aguilar, M. (Eds.). (2001). *Spirituality within religious traditions in social work practice*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Vastine, S. (2015). *Spiritual activism through storytelling: Derrick Bell and womanism* (Master's thesis). Texas Women's University. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses

Vella, J. (2000). A spirited epistemology: Honoring the adult learner as subject. In L. English (Ed.), *Addressing the spiritual dimensions of adult learning. New Directions for adult and continuing education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Vogel, L. J. (2000). Reckoning with the spiritual lives of adult educators. In L. English (Ed.), *Addressing the spiritual dimensions of adult learning. New Directions for adult and continuing education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wade-Gayles, G. (1995). *My soul is a witness: African American women's spirituality*. Boston: Beacon.

Waite, R., & Killian, P. (2008). Health beliefs about depression among African American women. *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, *44*(3), 185-195.

Walker, A. (1982). *The color purple*. New York: Harcourt Brace Javonovich.

Walker, A. (1983). *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose.* New York: Harcourt Brace Javonovich.

Walker, A. (2003). *In love and trouble: Stories of Black women*. New York: Mariner Books.

Walsh, F. (Ed.). (2009). *Spiritual resources in family therapy*. New York: Guilford Press.

Wane, N. (2002). Black Canadian feminist thought: Drawing on the experiences of my sisters. In N. N. Wane, K. Deliovsky, & E. Lawson (Eds.), *African Canadian feminisms: Back to the drawing board* (pp. 29-53). Toronto: Sumach Press.

Wane, N. N. (2002). African women and spirituality: Connection between thought and education. In E. O'Sullivan, A. Morrell, & M. O'Connor (Eds.), *Expanding the boundaries of transformative learning: Essays on theory and praxis* (pp. 135-150). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Wane, N. N. (2007). Canadian Black feminist thought: Re-imagining new possibilities for empowerment. In N. N. Wane (Ed.), *Theorizing empowerment: Canadian perspectives on Black feminist thought*. Toronto, ON: Sumach Press.

Washington, O. G. M., Moxley, D. P., Garriott, L., & Weinberger, J. P. (2009). Five dimensions of faith and spiritually of older African American women transitioning out of homelessness. *Journal of Religious Health*, *48*, 431-444. Doi: doi:10.1007/s10943-008-9198-6

Wellner, A. (2001). The forgotten baby boom. *American Demographics*, *23*(2), 46-51.

West, C. (1993). *Race matters*. New York: Vintage.

West, C. (2001). Black sexuality: The taboo subject. In R. Byrd & B. Guy-Sheftall (Eds.), *Traps: African American men on gender and sexuality*. (pp. 301-307). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

West, C. M. (Ed.). (2013). *Violence in the lives of Black women: Battered, black, and blue*. New York: Routledge.

West, T. C. (1999). *Wounds of the spirit: Black women, violence, and resistance ethics*. New York: New York University Press.

Whatley, R. (2015). Pulling the arrows out of our hearts: A heuristic inquiry into the lived experience of internalized racism of African American women. (Doctoral dissertation). ProQuest Dissertation and Theses

Whitaker, E. (2017). *The feminine mystique*. London: The Macat Library.

White, G., Hailemariam, C., & Ogbay, S. (2013). Towards the development of a plurilingual pedagogy: Making use of children's informal learning practices. *TESOL Quarterly, 47*, 638-643.

White, R. T. (1997). Talking about sex and HIV. Conceptualizing a new sociology of experience. In K. M. Vaz (Ed.), *Oral narrative research with Black women* (pp. 99-118). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Williams, D. S. (1989). Womanist theology: Black women's voices. In L. Phillips (Ed.), *The womanist reader*. New York: Routledge.

Wimberly, E. P. (1995). *Counseling African American marriages and families.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Wyatt, G. E. (1997). *Stolen women: Reclaiming our sexuality, taking back our lives*. New York: John Wiley & Sons

Yanchar, S. C., & Hawkley, M. (2014). "There's got to be a better way to do this": A qualitative investigation of informal learning among instructional designers. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, *62*, 271-291. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-014-9336-7

Yellin, J. F. (1989). *Women and sisters: The antislavery feminists in American culture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks: CA, Sage.