"I'm Still Here:" Black Female Undergraduates' Self-definition Narratives

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Abstract

Drawing on Black feminism and oral narrative research, we examine how Black women undergraduates make sense of their identities as Black females. More specifically, we explore the dual impact of gender and race by considering what it means to be a Black woman on campus. The women in this study articulate compelling, and at times, diverging self-definitions that problematize Black women's representation within predominantly White classrooms. Two themes are highlighted within their narratives: (a) being 'the only one' and (b) Black women's strength.

Keywords: *black feminism; oral narratives; undergraduates; gendered racism; strength*

1. Introduction

> *Mainstream society sees Black women as neck rollin', finger poppin', gum smackin', hair braidin', foot stompin', thick thighs, thick ass, rump shakin', like throw it on the floor, get down, get low, you know: WOMAN. Our [Black] society sees us as Bitch can't keep a man, having three kids. Rolling her neck, snappin' her fingers, on welfare, um, video ho, um, knowing how to dance, knowing how to do hair, knowing how to light your skin. Have that Ebonics down pat. And always down to fight and fuck. You know, that's basically it! . . . But I see us as just all different. You know, multifaceted. We are martyrs for all cultures. We are contradictors. We are ignorant. We are beautiful. We're educators. We're Maya Angelou(s). We are Oprah Winfrey(s). We are Denzel Washington(s), Puff Daddy(s). We're a rainbow of positive and negative things.* (Raven: age 25)

We begin with the voice of a young sistah poignantly defining societal images that dehumanize Black women. Raven highlighted recycled archetypes that have been generated by social institutions: mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, jezebel, and the Black lady. According to Collins (2000), such stereotypical images "are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustices appear to be natural, normal and inevitable parts of everyday life" (p. 69). In a similar vein, Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) delineated five myths that have been potentially damaging to Black women's emotional, mental, and spiritual health: inferiority, unshakability, nonfeminity, criminality, and promiscuity. They noted that the implicit danger is that these myths were pervasive, internalized over time, and have deep material and symbolic roots: "They're insidious. They're sneaky. They have had centuries to sink in. . . . Though invisible, they wield much power" (p. 34).

Due to centuries of internalization, myths, controlling images, and stereotypes have been difficult for Black women to challenge. However, Raven's narrative illustrated how Black women become empowered subjects when they replace gendered racist ideology with more humane self-definitions. Raven demonstrated not only the verbal wit and insight in reading socially constructed images from both out/in group societies (mainstream vs. Black), but also recentered her own subjectivity by acknowledging the multidimensional and contradictory roles Sistas enact. Raven powerfully redefined Black womanhood in both positive and negative terms and participated in Black women's self-definition and self-valuation, the necessary acts of resistance and survival. Collins (1986) explained: "While Black female self-definition speaks to the power dynamic involved in the act of defining images of self and

community, the theme of Black female self-valuation addresses the actual content of these self-definitions" (p. S17). For this reason, acts of self-definition and self-valuation are the crucial foundation for Black women's agency and empowerment and serve as a catalyst for Black women's full humanity and subjectivity. "People who view themselves as fully human, as subjects, become activists, no matter how limited the sphere of their activism." (Collins, 1986, p. S24).

Originally part of a larger project about Black women's academic experiences, this article highlights the perspectives of undergraduates defining what it means to be a Black woman on campus. By analyzing Black female representation, two themes emerged within their self-definitions: (a) being "the only one" in classrooms and (b) the archetypal image of strength. Our reason for studying their narratives is political and personal; we centralize their voices as both narrators and theorists because, like hooks (1994), we believe: "personal testimony and experience are such fertile ground for the production of liberatory feminist theory because it usually forms the base of our theory" (p. 70). In the following section, we draw on Black feminism and an intersectional framework to understand Black women's experiences and the dual constructs of race and gender as socially constructed.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

2.1 Black Feminist Theory

> Black feminist thought stimulate[s] a new consciousness that utilizes Black women's everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge. Rather than raising consciousness, Black feminist thought affirms, rearticulates, and provides a vehicle for expressing in public a consciousness that quite often already exists. Most importantly, this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African-America women and stimulate resistance. (Collins, 2000, p. 32)

Drawing on Black feminist theory allows us to place Black women's voices at the center of research in an effort to rearticulate subjugated knowledge into "specialized knowledge" as well as support epistemologies and theories by and about Black women.   Black feminist theory centers the voices and interpretations of Black women and makes visible Black women's oppression and acts of resistance (Collins, 2000). Derived from Black women's experiences are shared commonalities that have been theorized into a series of themes: legacy of struggle, self-definition and self-valuation, interlocking systems of oppression, and activism (Collins, 2000). Drawing from this collective wisdom, scholars have highlighted: "how Black women think, what Black women say, and what Black women do about an issue, as embedded in their consciousness" (Saunders, 2007, p. 17). Black women scholars have had a political responsibility to conduct research on their communities because transformative knowledge should be "furnished by experts who are part of a group and who express the group's standpoint derived from [B]lack women's stand point" (Collins, 1995, p. 340). Hence, Black feminism has set the tone for challenging interlocking systems of oppression, which has become the guiding impetus for current research on, for, and by Black women. This has certainly been the case in educational research that explores Black women's oppression within the academy. The educational system has been a place where institutional practices continue to devalue Black women's voice, presence, and intellect. Davis (1999) asserted:

> African American women intellectuals have a *place* but not an *importance* in academe. While African American women intellectuals in universities are given academic *homes* from which to, theoretically, obtain mentoring, collaboration, collegiality, and supportive climate, they are often told–by tenure committees and journal editors–that their work and their very existence is not of importance. (p. 370)

Despite the lack of devaluation of Black women's research, Davis insisted that Black women intellectuals must continue to develop their own epistemologies and push toward a more humanist, inclusive vision of activism. We answer this call by placing focus on how undergraduates participate in their own agency through defining their academic realities and experiences of oppression as Black female students.

2.2 Intersectionality: Race and Gender as Social Constructions

When considering the experiences and self-definitions of Black female undergraduates, we work from an intersectional framework. It is important to note that we assume identity as a social construction and more specifically, that race and gender are socially constructed. According to Delgado and Stephacic (2001), race is not objective, inherent, or fixed and does not correspond to biological or genetic factors. Martin and Nakayama (2012) listed three reasons why race is not biological: first, racial categories are cultural classifications and vary and change over time; second, US law has historically used different definitions of racial categories (i.e., slavery and the

one-drop rule); and third, race as a social construction is fluid and subject to change. Thus, racial categories are socially invented, manipulated, and retired according to dominant group needs (Delgado & Stephancic, 2001). The same can be said about gender. Butler (1990) argued that gender is a social construction and she specifically used a performance lens to further explicate this process. Assuming that identity is not stable, identities (i.e., gender, class, race, sexuality) are accomplished through the stylized repetition of acts. Warren explained that such identity labels "are constructed on the basis of arbitrary characteristics (e.g., sex on the basis of reproductive organs rather than hair color or height) and have been so repeated through time as to make them seem like natural constructs" (Warren, 2001, p. 95). Although individuals perform gender in nuanced ways certain sanctions and proscriptions influence gender performances that socially construct gender categories based on difference. Warren (2001) continued, "[t]he very fact that race or gender is an identifiable marker of difference, while simultaneously containing variation on those markers, suggests that identities are socially [. . .] constructed" (p. 96).

The social construction of race and gender closely relates to the notion of intersectionality. Crenshaw (2003) argued against a single-axis framework in understanding identity, particularly for women of color, where race and gender are treated as mutually exclusive categories. Instead, Crenshaw (2003) centered the experiences of Black women "in order to contrast the multidimensionality of Black women's experience with the single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences" (p. 23). In other words, dominant conceptions of discrimination often condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage according to single category axis (i.e., being discriminated because you are Black *or* a woman). Crenshaw (2003) asserted that such assumptions work to erase Black women experiences and that an intersectional experience is "greater than the sum of racism and sexism, and any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (p. 24). Thus, the sum of intersectional subordination is greater than the parts of racism and sexism. We advocate an intersectional view of Black women's self-definitions in our analysis that creates a space for understanding their academic experiences as a complex multifaceted cultural phenomenon. In the following literature, we highlight: (a) thematic challenges that Black women face in the academy and (b) intersectional studies that utilize a gendered racial framework to understand Black female students.

3. Literature Review: Black Women's Educational Experiences

Black women scholars have asserted that their experiences are markedly different from those of White females and Black males (Collins, 2000; Houston, 2000). For Houston (2000), "Black women experience womanhood in the context of blackness; they do not experience their gender and ethnic identities as separate 'parts' of who they are" (p. 11). Hence, the double edge of racism and sexism, commonly called "gendered racism" (i.e., racism that is colored by gender), has been particularly detrimental to Black women working and learning in academia.

3.1 Overarching Themes

The academy has been a place of struggle and pain for Black women. When examining the experiences of Black women educators and administrators, scholars have noted the following challenges: scholarship devaluation, tokenism, over-work, isolation, being disrespected, unfavorable evaluations, authority challenged by students and colleagues, balancing family and career choices, and negative stereotypes and perceptions of affirmative action (Allen, 2000; Allen, Orbe, & Olivas, 1999; Davis, 1999; Farris, 1999; Madison & Hollins, 2000; Noble, 1988; Turner & Myers, 2000; Willis & Lewis, 1999). Studies that focused primarily on the experiences of Black female graduate students (Allen, 2000; Johnson-Baily, 2004; Patton, 2009; Robinson, 2013) and Black male and female students and students of color in graduate studies (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Daniel, 2007; Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009; Shealey, 2009; Tyler, Smith, & Pion, 2003) highlighted the following barriers: isolation, invisibility, tokenism, unfair teaching evaluations, the combating of prejudicial stereotypes (e.g., unqualified, confrontational, angry), funding issues, Black student networking and presence, and a lack of faculty support. Many of the obstacles faced by graduate students were also echoed in studies that illuminated the experiences of Black female undergraduates and reentry students (Jackson, 1998a; Johnson-Bailey, 1998; Thomas, 2001). The marginalization of Black women on campuses produced negative effects on their academic and social life (Jackson, 1998; Thomas, 2001) and therefore their "experiences in academia parallel their experiences in society in general. In the outside world these women battle[d] negative stereotyping and marginality" (Johnson-Bailey, 1998, p. 46). The above studies undergirded the emancipatory agenda set by Black feminist scholars and others, which was to highlight and challenge gendered racism experienced by Black women learning and working within the academy.

3.2 Gendered Racial Framework

Many contemporary scholars who have investigated the educational experiences of Black women have employed an intersectional framework in order to better understand gendered racial identities (Jackson, 1998a, 1998b; Saunders, 2007; Settles, 2006; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996; Smith & Steward, 1983; Thomas, Hacker, & Hoxha, 2011; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Thomas et al. (2011) conducted dyadic focus groups involving seventeen 15-22 year old African American high school and college women, asking three questions: (a) what does it mean to be African American, (b) what does it mean to be a woman, and (c) what does it mean to be an African American woman? They determined that gendered racial identity significantly influenced participants' self-perceptions: "each time [interviewees] were asked about single constructs, they provided responses based on gendered-race, suggesting high levels of salience to the intersection of race and gender in their identity" (p. 539). Participants discussed gendered racial identity within the context of early awareness of racism, beauty standards, and self-determination (i.e., breaking stereotypes and inner strength). Jackson (1998a) interviewed 135 African American women and concluded that the interrelated constructs of race and gender informed the complex self-definitions of Black female undergraduates as problematic, as conscious beings, and as students who experienced daily struggles. In a second article, Jackson (1998b) focused on 13 African American women attending predominately White colleges and extended educational challenges to include the stressful roles of being a member of the Black community and being Black *and* female. In their study of 17 Black women, Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996) acknowledged the significance of race, gender, and strength within Black female self-definitions. For participants who viewed strength as an important element of self-definition, the authors asserted that participants were psychologically healthier and better prepared for racism and sexism. Settles (2006) examined the experiences of 89 Black women undergraduate and graduate science majors. She noted stereotyping and discrimination, personal esteem, isolation from others, opportunities and resources as common themes:

> [B]lack women frequently mentioned their race-gender combination as providing them with a sense of personal esteem as well as with opportunities in education and the workplace. And yet, many times the comments made about these positive aspects were negatively charged, such as the burden of being seen as strong or the lack of follow-up support when new opportunities are made available. Thus, even the positive aspects of being a [B]lack woman are tied to added pressures that result from the lower positions in the social structure based on multiple devalued statues. (p. 598)

The above intersectional studies underscored Black women's heightened sense of gendered racial identity as they navigated the terrain of gendered racism. In our effort to extend this research, we not only examined common themes consistent within Black women's educational research, but also analyzed divergent perspectives surrounding such themes. Although the (lack of) Black female representation and Black women's strength surfaced as overarching themes within undergraduates' self-definition narratives, how they felt and what they said about those themes differed. The women in this study articulated compelling, and at times, conflicting self-definitions of Black women's representation. Our hope is to fill a gap within the literature that closely teases out the diverse perspectives among undergraduates' self-definitions. Their voices proved to be insightful and discerning about their experiences and self-perceptions of learning while Black and female.

4. Methodology: Oral Narrative Research

We utilized oral narrative research in order to highlight the self-definitions of Black undergraduate females. Scholars from various traditions have employed oral narrative research as a primary qualitative methodology (Etter-Lewis, 1993; 1996; Etter-Lewis & Foster, 1996; Foster, 1996; Hambrick, 1997; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Madison, 1998; Nelson, 1996; Vaz, 1997). Oral narrative research is a "dynamic, interactive methodology that preserves an individual's own words and perspectives in a particular authentic way" (Etter-Lewis, 1993, p. 7). Similar to Black feminism, this methodology honors Black women's experiential knowledge by collecting, thematizing, analyzing, and reinterpreting "theories of the flesh" into specialized knowledge. Madison (1998) defined "theories of the flesh," a concept coined by Gloria Anzaldua, as the "the taken-for-granted knowledge that is often unreflexive, the nuances of which are often foreign to others, yet ingrained in the languages and experiences of the masses of [B]lack women" (p. 320). Using oral narrative research places value on the power of the spoken word, therefore allowing researchers to honor the linguistic integrity and cultural frameworks of their participants. According to Johnson-Bailey (2004), "narrative analysis places emphasis on collecting the story of the participant, while taking care to preserve the holistic nature of the participant's story" (p. 334). By using oral narrative research we highlighted not only their experiential knowledge, but also attempted to capture the linguistic style and elements present within Black women's

speech.

This study included a sample of seven undergraduate interviewees, ranging from 18 to 25 years old. We solicited participants from a Black women's campus group and used referrals from interviewees and colleagues. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identity and a generic label was assigned to universities. Face-to-face, open-ended interviews were conducted in the privacy of participants' homes or in campus offices. The interviews were semi-structured, 45 minutes to 2 hours long, and digitally recorded and transcribed. We asked questions about their academic experiences, challenges, goals and aspirations. To conclude each interview, we asked: *What does it mean to be a Black woman on campus*? We focused on Black women's self-definitions in order to further underscore the empowerment of undergraduates as definers and resisters.

In this essay we address the following questions: How did these students make sense of their identities as Black females? What familiar images or myths were revealed, rejected, and/or replaced within their narratives? Were there challenges highlighted and strategies used that provide added insight into learning while Black *and* female? As a way of honoring their voices, we have quoted at length their narratives and organized the analysis section into two themes: (a) being 'the only one' and (b) Black women's strength.

5. Theme One: The Only One

According to participants, to be a Black woman on campus meant to be the minority or "the only one" (or a few). This major theme is often expressed within the educational research about Black females as students, faculty members, and administrators. Robinson coined the term "spoketokenism" to explain how Black women graduate students strategically use their voices: "Black women must decide to speak or not to speak and for whom and for what purposes" (2013, p. 161). Robinson (2013) further posited that participants viewed the role of "spoketokens" as either "a positive responsibility or negative indictment" and asserted that Black women performed "these obligatory roles [in an effort] to debunk the various negative stereotypes" (p. 161).

In the current study participants shared similar sentiments concerning the role of Black female student representation. Raven, Lashawn, and Latrice expressed a self-assured, assertive attitude toward being "the only one" in mostly White academic settings. In the following narrative, Raven recognized the disparity in Black representation on campus as well as the challenges of being the "only Black girl" in most of her classes.

> *I think we have common goals to see other Black women AND men succeed on this campus where we are such few and far between. In many–[well] most of my classes I was the only Black girl. And people would look at me like "oh here comes the Black girl, she's talking, she's speaking for all!" I'm like: I'm speaking from my own point of view–but I can tell you what some other Black people might say or think!* (Raven: age 25)

Raven is no novice in resisting marginalization through speech and statement of personal opinions. What could have been a potentially isolating experience for Raven was actually empowering. Undeterred by classmates' reproaches, she realized her self-worth in speaking from her point of view as well as in boldly asserting her right to articulate the sensibilities of those with whom she shared group membership. In Lashawn's narrative she also not only highlighted experiences of being 'the only Black woman' in the classroom, but also the challenges that awaited her in a White male dominated profession.

> *And I'm just thinking in the field that I'm getting into–it's not easy because it's predominately White males. And I know in a lot of my classes, I have to step up and set a tone–for us women. I'm the only Black person in my class–well Black woman in my class. And I set a tone. One: by letting them know I don't take any mess from anybody–including the professor. In most of the business classes I give presentations. So when I have my first introduction, I speak loud and I give everybody a look in the eye. I let them know I mean business and I usually come dressed professionally, too. So they know to take me seriously, otherwise: don't speak to me–if you're not gonna take me seriously. I would definitely treat you with respect so respect me and take me seriously.* (Lashawn: age 22)

For Lashawn, stepping up/setting a tone implied the performance of a resolute Black female student who refused to "take any mess from anybody–including the professor." The "mess" she alluded to could be equated to gendered racism: "racial oppression of Black women that is influenced by narrow and biased views of gender roles" (Shorter-Gooden, 2004, p. 410). Lashawn's enactment of the highest level of academic professionalism necessitated the reciprocation of respect and seriousness from her professor and peers. Hence, the classroom served as a training

ground for Lashawn's performance tactics: commanding voice, direct eye contact, formal attire, and verbal prowess. Black women must work against the backdrop of denigrating stereotypes by enacting cultural codes most often associated with Whites (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Like her twin Lashawn, Latrice was also critically conscious of a White male dominant career and noted the ways in which she was marginalized and positioned differently:

> *Academically, I think [my university] kinda prepared me in a lot of ways as a businessperson to go into the world. But not as an African American woman to go into the business world because I [would] always tell people [that] the field that I chose to go into is everything that I'm not. You know what I mean? It's conservative–I got a liberal arts education. It's usually older people–and I'm young, and predominately men–I'm a female, and it's predominately White–I'm Black. It's everything that I'm not. But I still feel confident.* (Latrice: age 22)

In Latrice's narrative, she listed the oppositional ways in which she was otherized because of race, gender, age, etc. Collins (2000) noted that "African American women occupy a position whereby the inferior half of a series of these binaries converge, and this placement has been central to our subordination" (p. 71). In spite of not seeing herself fully recognized, Latrice remained confident and undeterred in her endeavors to be successful in a White male dominated department and business world. Performing the confident, assertive student persona before White peers and professors became crucial to Raven, Lashawn, and Latrice's success as Black female undergraduates. To be the only Black female in class meant to daringly speak from both a personal and communal standpoint as well as embody confidence and demand academic respect.

While some students embrace being "the only one," others feel "singled out" and a sense of pressure to represent one's community. According to Winkle-Wagner (2009), Black female undergraduates experienced the external and internal tensions of being in the spotlight and felt (a) a responsibility to Blacks or (b) pressured by Whites to represent one's racial group. In the final two narratives, Theresia and Kendra's "all eyes on you" statements highlighted the sole responsibility of not only representing the gendered self, but one's entire race. Theresia asserted:

> *I think my educational experiences have taught me to be aware of myself being an African American female trying to get a higher education and knowing that I had to do a little bit of extra than the average student or the average White female . . . being Black period–not even really on this campus. I mean we all kinda live by a double standard. I mean, we have to–especially females. We have to think in terms of okay this is what's gonna happen because I'm a Black female. Um, [I'm] thinking of an experience that I've had in the classroom like um–when the teacher might be talking about someone [that's] African American and [then] all eyes come on you or um . . . I really think that it's all about just knowing that you're not only representing yourself but [that] you're representing other African American females that are trying to get a higher education. And that's what I think of when I think about being here on campus and the fact that our, the Black community will have a long way to go. I mean, I'm getting my degree–but at the same time it's important for me to also realize that I'm representing my ancestors that couldn't.* (Theresia: age 21)

To be the only Black female, Theresia's assertion of self was tied to feeling socially responsible for the Black race, women, and ancestors. Her desire to earn a degree was inextricably linked to fulfilling the proverbial creed of racial achievement and paying homage to disenfranchised descendants. Brazell (1992) noted: "The early education of Black women focused heavily on the idea of 'racial uplift.' Both Blacks and Whites believed that Black women bore the weight of the entire race" (p. 38). This can be especially stressful since the academic success of Black women serves as a cultural model for racial uplift. Theresia's phrase, "living by a double standard," captured the dual status or double bind that Black women experienced as having to outperform "average," which intensifies an added level of stress. "Many Black women feel that they must be far better . . . than their White counterparts just to prove that they have a right to be where they are. . . . [They] do not believe that they have the leeway to be average" (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 18). In Kendra's narrative we also see how the obligatory role of representing one's cultural community could be burdensome.

> *Whenever we get into culture [in my classes]–you're always someone they look at. Like even though in English, I said I was the only Black person in the class, in communication [class], I may not be the only person that's Black in the class BUT I think that I'm the only person that knows that I'm Black in my class. No, there are a lot of Black women in communication [classes] that are Black but they don't know it. I think they see it but sometimes it loses, it leaves them because they*

start to believe that they're White. Even they'll look at me like when you have the question: Why do Black women da-da-da-da? It will instantly be all eyes on me–[and I'm] like, are you serious, can you not answer the question? So I always feel that whatever I say in that class, it's like I'm representing the Black race. Or whenever I walk into that class–I'm representing the Black race. If I do a test or write a paper or when I do a presentation–it's like: That's who I'm representing. It's like I feel like that's my duty, it's like I have to. (Kendra: age 22)

Highlighted within Kendra's narrative is the cultural responsibility of representing the Black race through physical presence, academic focus, and her desire to speak on Black-related issues. Kendra's critical critique of Black women peers who failed to represent is disheartening. From her cultural frame of reference, to be silent was to not know who you are or to internalize Whiteness. Kendra called into question their (lack of) Blackness and their choice in remaining silent.

At this stage of her development, Kendra may not have realized that students may use silence as a survival strategy. Black women burdened with being "the only one" will voluntarily choose invisibility to avoid attention or appear inconspicuous before White professors or peers (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Nonetheless representing the Black race single-handedly was an unexpected burden, which left Kendra feeling she had no choice but to bear the responsibility alone. In this instance, her assertion of self did not come from a sense of sista'hood: "a supportive feeling of loyalty and attachment to other women stemming from a shared feeling of oppression" (Collins, 1986, p. S17). Rather, Kendra's sense of self was actualized in the fulfillment of a commitment to the Black race.

6. Theme Two: Strength Discourse

The following section will be devoted to teasing out the strength discourse present within the self-definition narratives of Black female undergraduates. Raven, Lashawn and Latrice highlighted positive self-identifications of resiliency and strength, whereas Stephanie problematized the identity construct of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) image. In the following narrative, Raven defined herself as being resilient, strong, maternal, and a chameleon of roles.

I would describe myself as: STILL HERE. I am still HERE!!! There are many times I just wanted to give up, like–man, screw this school. I hate this school. These dumb-ass professors don't know what the hell they're talking about! They're interpreting these books one way. Which is all gravy, but let me interpret my way. Or there's times when I want to just give up. But I'm still here. I'm still going. I am woman: Tall. Black. Strong. Free! It's hard to judge me–you know. It's such a cliché but we all are different. And then at the same time we are all the same. It's so funny; it's like a double-sided coin. But um I am a sister-girl-friend. I am a lover of children–a lover of books–a lover of Black people. A caregiver to Black men–a caregiver to Black women. I am your biggest confidant. I'm your biggest cheerleader–your little sister. I'm your momma–your auntie. . . . I'm ANGELA DAVIS reincarnated. I'm Huey P. Newton–I got my fist in the air. Shooooot–I am a Black Panther!!! I am a White girl at a lily fair. [Laughter] I am all these things. It's funny. I can really say that because I know a lot about their culture but can they say they know a lot about me? (Raven: age 25)

Raven poetically expressed affirming roles within her self-definition. Her anthem "I am still here" was emblematic of Black women's survival despite educational discontentment. Her expressions of defiance and determination propelled her into thoughtfully defining a positive self-image: "Tall. Black. Strong. Free." The culturally relevant term "strong" conjured up a familiar image of Black women's strength, or what Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) termed the myth of unshakability: strong Black women who can withstand anything. Implied within Raven's definition of self was the notion that Black women can be everything, and anything–to everybody. She defined herself based on maternal images: a sister-girl-friend, a lover of children and Black people, a caregiver to Black men and women, a confidant, a cheerleader, a little sister, a momma, an auntie. Moreover, Raven's understanding of self was not only in response to what she can do for Black people but patterned after what her role models have done for the Black community. Her statement "I got my fist in the air. Shooooot!!! I am a Black Panther" was an acknowledgement of the 1960s and 1970s cultural symbol of the Black power movement. Raven's desire to claim the identities of Davis and Newton provided her with added strength to persevere despite oppression.

She not only embodied the spirit of Black activism, but also correspondingly articulated a unique sensibility of White femaleness: "I am a White girl at a lily fair." The word "lily" implies a certain kind of gendered racialized

performance: delicate, innocent, and pure. By Raven's standards, the cultural framework of White femaleness was an attribute that could be strategically performed. The advantage of an "outsider within" status (Collins, 1986) afforded Raven the opportunity to boldly assert: "I can really say that because I know a lot about their culture but can they say they know a lot about me?" Tatum (1999) asserted that "the dominants do not really know . . . the experience of the subordinates. In contrast, the subordinates are well informed. . . . The dominant world view has saturated the culture for all to learn" (p. 24). Thus, the adoption of practices and norms of the dominant group served as a survival mechanism for marginalized groups to be successful and competitive in mainstream culture.

In the following narratives, Lashawn and Latrice's self-definitions suggest that to be a Black female student meant to be academically prepared, resilient, and revered. Images such as the "Black Lady" (Collins, 2000) and "Superwoman" (Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008) underscored strength as well as Black women as high achievers and competitors.

> For me, to be a Black woman here on campus– I think [it] definitely means that you have to try and stay ahead of the game. I try to make sure I am 5 steps ahead of everyone, especially any other student on campus–any other race. So it's definitely gonna be a challenge. You have to be strong. You need to be responsible and you need to make sure you have your stuff together. It's not gonna be easy. One: you're a woman and because you're Black.. . . . And watch out because I am very–very challenging. That's the approach I have to [take]. That's what I have to start off within my class. Actually I'm used to [being the only one and] maybe I get a thrill out of it. For one: I know I am aggressive as far as just a person overall and being a woman. Two: I have an opinion and I voice it a lot and you better believe my opinions are gonna have facts to back it up. And so when I get into these classes, I always make sure that my professor knows what type of person I am. That's how it is–you gotta be strong and aggressive. I usually don't like using the term aggressive because I think most people think most women are presumed aggressive–when [only] they're just acting like a man–or just stepping up and actually speaking for themselves. But I think in many cases, me being aggressive messed up my grade in one of my classes. (Lashawn: age 22)

> For some of the business classes, there weren't a lot of women in there–but I could always hold my own. I made sure I always did my readings. I always made sure I knew what I was talking about–I had my evidence to back it up. Most of the people would not challenge me. They were afraid to challenge me. I think a lot of it had to do with the fact that they only saw one side of me and that was like the school side of me. So they all assumed that I was just this smart, tough girl–and at the same time, when I had something to say, it's gonna have some value. And um I think a lot has to do with because I'm a Black woman. They assume I probably have an attitude–they're maybe intimidated by. At the same time I'm not gonna sit there and let you say something that I don't completely agree with and you don't have evidence to back it up. Most of them are afraid to challenge me. It's just the way I carry myself and that was who I was in class. I was serious. And a lot of people didn't get a chance to see another side of me. And I probably won't let them see another side of me. They don't need to know that side. (Latrice: age 22)

In the above narratives, the twins enrolled strength as an identity concept as a way of debunking Black women's inferiority. For Lashawn, outperforming peers was a challenge that must be met by appearing aggressive, strong, and challenging. Her self-defining power was located within the act of representing an academically strong Black female identity irrespective of the negative consequences or labels (i.e., aggressive, strong). Even at the risk of being labeled attitudinal and intimidating, Latrice performed the role of a tough, smart, girl who should be revered, while deliberately remaining guarded in only showing peers her serious (school) side. The twins relied on their commanding presence, verbal prowess, and intellect as a form of activism. The strength discourse employed by Lashawn and Latrice was an adaptive response to coping with gendered racism and institutional oppression. Their inspiration was guided by the mirroring of women's strength displayed in academic settings. The identification of three resilient women (two professors and a mother) underscored why the strength discourse became meaningful within the Twins' self-definition narratives. In the following narrative, Latrice recalled how a woman professor "held her own" in the mist of sexism:

> I really started to appreciate the business program when I had a woman professor. She was the only woman professor that I had in business and she was new. She came in my junior year and I really appreciated her class because she was a woman, and she also had a family and she also had a career. She was strong and I appreciated that about her. A lot of the time the men would

challenge her just because she was a woman–but I like the fact that she could still hold her own and still be up there, and represent herself, and also the [business] program well. She always had her stuff straight and I respected that. (Latrice: age 22)

Latrice identified with her "one and only" White female professor. The qualities she respected included strength, the balancing of motherhood and career, and an ability to hold one's own despite sexism. Latrice commended her professor for "holding her own," "representing herself and program," and "having her stuff straight." During her self-definition narrative, she recounted similar sentiments of having to do the same. In the following narrative, Lashawn was nostalgic about having her first Black female professor:

I really enjoyed race and critical thinking; it was a Black studies course. I loved it. It was wonderful, the professor was wonderful. Well, first of all, it was a Black woman and I think that was my first Black woman professor EVER. Ahhh, and she was wonderful [and] this is why! One: she's a Black woman! She's me! She mirrors me! I've never seen that before. Two: I think she was an attorney; she was actually the first DA in DC, and the first Black woman–Black person AND woman to be a DA in the DC area! . . . Not only that, but the information she taught. . . . We talked about the Supreme Court and how Black people were inferior . . . and we overcome that! . . . I agreed with a lot of things she said and I was just super excited about having a Black woman teach. I was like WOW!!! She's me! She mirrors me! (Lashawn: age 22)

Lashawn's positive identification with her first African American female professor, who was not only an attorney, but "the first Black woman–Black person AND woman to be a DA in DC," is heartening. She emphasized the word "AND" to stress the conjoining of two identity constructs which mirror powerful Black female representation and activism. The position and presence of her professor and the course material taught symbolized Black empowerment while challenging Black inferiority.

In the following narrative, Lashawn also recalled how impactful her mother's academic achievement was on her:

I can remember the day when she graduated from college. I can cause she's the only one in our family I believe that went that far. She got [the degree] maybe when we were about 6 or 7. So [it was] not only that she had 4 kids. She went to college, got her degree, and was the vice-president of the student body on her campus and got a scholarship to pay for all that–while still supporting her kids. The WHOLE time! (Lashawn: age 22)

Lashawn centralized her mother's simultaneous enactment of familial and academic responsibilities. Her mother not only received a competitive scholarship, held an active leadership role, and graduated with a college degree, but accomplished these tasks while single-parenting four children. The twins' mother served as a strong inspiration to be emulated.

Lashawn's inspirational memory of her mother ("She went to college, got her degree . . . while still supporting her kids") and Latrice's appreciation of her professor ("She was a woman [who] had a family and a career–and was strong") provide exemplars of survival and resiliency. When the twins discussed the multiple roles women must perform successfully, the strength discourse served as a cultural reminder and prototype. This is important because most young Black girls begin to receive their identity cues from their mothers, female family members, and other female role models. The concept of strength serves as a "culturally generated measure for protecting Black women against a life structured against them" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009, p. 25). Wyatt (2006) asserted that, "as in any process of interpellation, the social role has its attraction. . . . The Strong Black Woman image promises power . . . and recognition–for strength, resourcefulness, and independence are all admirable qualities and so must command respect" (p. 62).

Although the strength concept was internalized as a "positive" identity construct in the narratives of Raven, Lashawn, and Latrice, Stephanie's self-definition narrative provided a conflicting, opposing perspective of the SBW. Raised in a White middle-class environment, Stephanie's academic experiences were not easy due to her lack of positive relationships with Black students. Her first few years in college proved difficult. Stephanie asserted that Blacks have treated her poorly because "they're not used to seeing a person of color saying the general point of view." The general point of view, for Stephanie, was the dominant, White perspective. She had been reprimanded for being a Republican and been called "white-washed" by Black peers. In tears she explained: "it makes me mad when people tell me that I don't like my race or I don't like dealing with other Black people. My whole life, they've only shunned me out." In Stephanie's narrative, she provided a complex definition of herself while also problematizing the restrictive characteristics most associated with Black womanhood.

I come from [a town]–which is a predominately White area and I come from a really nice family that isn't poor. They [other Blacks] try and think that I don't accept being Black, and that I don't understand that "portion" of me–or whatever. And I resent that statement–just because I talk differently, I have a different tone of voice, or that I act differently, and think differently than other people. It's what defines me–and I don't think that people want to listen or step out of that image of what a Black woman should be. I don't think I make a definition of what a Black woman is supposed to be. I only see myself. I see myself as Stephanie. I don't see myself as the image of a Black woman, which is supposed to be a strong woman who is dominant, confident and takes charge of her life. That's the way it seems like the image is–or whatever. And I'm fragile and not as confident as that type of person. For me, being a Black woman means doing the best that I can to understand myself. You know what I mean? Like I wanna be an individual. I want to be Stephanie. And I'm still trying to figure out who Stephanie is so I can't really define what a Black woman is or what type of Black woman I wanna be yet. Cause I'm still trying to find out. In class one time, we took a survey and [my teacher was] like describe yourself. Everyone was saying: I'm a Mexican woman. I'm a Mexican man. I'm a White man. I'm a White woman. I never identified with the gender or the race. I said: I'm Stephanie. I'm shy. I'm quiet. I don't identify with just one thing. I'm an individual and I want people to judge me by my character and what I have to say. I want you to be with me because I'm Stephanie. And you like the way that I talk. You like what I have to say. So I think a Black woman should be a person that understands herself and doesn't just identify with just being Black–or whatever. (Stephanie: age 19)

The archetype of the Black woman as strong, dominant, and confident felt distant and unattainable for Stephanie. On the contrary, these comparable attributes were internalized as assets by Lashawn, Latrice, and Raven. Stephanie's narrative illustrated the essentializing power behind the socially constructed image, the SBW. In the face of challenges, this empowering image was meant to impart ideas of resiliency; however, it served as a source of pain for her. She rejected the ascribed identity constructs of gender and race and wanted others to judge her as she saw herself: fragile, shy, quiet, uncertain, and self-discovering. Consequently, growing up in a mostly White, middle-class environment may shed light on Stephanie's unexamined exploration of her gendered racial identity. According to Brush (2001), a person illustrates race and gender consciousness when she or he "begins to know [what] and how the personal is political" (p. 176-178); hence, this consciousness is predicated on personal experience, familial upbringing, environment, social and economic conditions, and exposures to political discourse. Stephanie's narrative illustrated the alienation Black students and others may feel when their performances and perceptions of self do not measure up or reflect cultural expectations and ideals.

7. Implications and Conclusions

In this study we examined the self-definitions of seven undergraduates by asking *what it meant to be a Black woman on campus*. Two themes emerged within their narratives: (a) being "the only one" and (b) Black women's strength. Undergraduates' experiences of being "the only one or few" in classrooms influenced the use of their voices and self-perceptions of Black female representation. Their narratives suggested that spoketokenism could be viewed positively or unfavorably. Raven, Lashawn, and Latrice assumed the role of spoketokens in order to enact an intelligent, self-assured student persona. Raven spoke not only from her own point of view, but proudly asserted "what some other Black people might say or think!" For the twins, spoketokenism entailed assertively establishing credibility and demanding respect. Lashawn noted, "I have an opinion and I voice it a lot and you better believe my opinions are gonna have facts to back it up." Echoing a similar sentiment, Latrice affirmed: "I always made sure I knew what I was talking about–I had my evidence [and] when I have something to say, it's gonna have some value." While some of the students interviewed embraced the role of spoketokenism, others felt "singled out." Kendra and Theresia's self-definitions underscored the responsibility of representing not only themselves, but other Black females, the entire race, and ancestors. The "all eyes on you" statements from both women suggested that these obligatory roles could be burdensome (i.e., "it's like I feel like that's my duty").

These Black women felt the pressure to represent and outperform because of double standards, which may produce unrealistic societal expectations. One such example was Kendra's critique of Black female peers who "chose" to remain silent and not enact the role of spoketokens. On a personal level, Kendra's dissatisfaction with her peers was understandable; however, on a structural level, her thoughts on "not being Black enough" were problematic because they were framed within the context of internalized oppression. Internalized oppression can be defined as "the

turning upon ourselves, upon our families, and upon our own people the distress patterns that result from racism and oppression of the majority society" (Lipsky, 2004, p. 145) and the "narrow[ing] and limiting view of what is 'authentic' [B]lack culture and behavior" (p. 146). Kendra may not have realized that her peers employed silence as a survival or resistance strategy; some may have chosen silence because their voices have been devalued and ignored while others may have used silence as a protective strategy to elude costly consequences and deflect negative attention or harmful labels.

Historically, Black women's educational achievement has always meant the racial uplift and success of an entire community. The old familiar adage, "You educate a man; you educate a man. You educate a woman; you educate a generation," still holds weight because "Black women are more likely than black men to be socialized to remain part of the community rather than focus on individual success" (Rosales & Person, 2003, p. 60). The expectation of this weighty endeavor conjures up a powerful image that becomes internalized: the Strong Black Woman. The self-definitions of Raven, Lashawn, Latrice, and Stephanie were explored in relation to Black women's strength discourse. In both the opening epigraph and self-definition narrative of Raven were not only expressions of *I'm every woman*: Maya Angelou, Angela Davis, and a White Girl at a lily fair, but also served as insignias of *I'm every Black person*: Denzel Washington, Puff Daddy, and Huey P. Newton. As she avowed an exhaustive list of multidimensional roles, Raven also defined herself based on maternal images (i.e., a momma, a sister-girl-friend, a caregiver to Black men and women).

What lied beneath these "affirming" roles was the monolithic mammy. For bell hooks (1991), "racist and sexist assumptions that Black women are somehow 'innately' more capable of caring for others continues to permeate cultural thinking about Black female roles" (p. 154). Raven's aspiration to embody multiple roles, metaphorically, suggested that Black women must be strong in order to be everything–to everyone, at all times. In this sense, the rearticulated image of the mammy was, essentially, the SBW (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009, p. 28). Woods-Giscombre (2010) elaborated:

> The concept of Superwoman developed partially as a result of African American women's efforts to counteract negative societal characterizations (such as Mammy, Jezebel, and Welfare Queen) of African American womanhood, and to highlight unsung attributes that developed and continue to exist despite oppression and adversity. (p. 669)

In Lashawn and Latrice's self-definitions, strength as an identity concept was noted in response to debunking Black women's inferiority. Being an African American woman meant being academically prepared, resilient, and revered. For Lashawn, "you have to be strong. You need to be responsible and you need to make sure . . . you have your stuff together." The same was true for Latrice in her enactment of the tough, smart, and serious student. Images such as the "Black Lady" and "Superwoman" underscored strength as well as Black women as high achievers and competitors. The strength concept continued to be internalized as a positive identity construct. However, Stephanie's narrative suggested that this concept could be constricting and a source of pain. Disguised as a form of internalized oppression, Stephanie had to deal with ascribed labels (i.e., white-washed) by Black peers. Stephanie admitted that she did not perform the role of a Black woman, which "is supposed to be a strong woman who is dominant, confident and takes charge of her life." Stephanie rejected the identity construct of strength along with gendered racial definitions of self. She highlighted opposing descriptors such as "fragile," "shy," and "quiet," and redefined herself: "I'm an individual and I want people to judge me by my character."

Regardless of how Stephanie wished to be perceived, however, people still defined her based on race and gender, and viewed her according to longstanding cultural images and stereotypes. The "raceless" and "genderless" personas Stephanie espoused may crumble when she experiences first-hand racism and/or sexism. For Raven, Lashawn, and Latrice the internalization of the strength discourse may also have costly effects later in life. Many contemporary scholars have argued that the acceptance of the SBW image places unrealistic expectations on African American women and causes stress-related health problems (i.e., emotional, psychological, and physical), strained relationships, and hinders career advancements (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003, 2007, 2009; Collins, 2005; Woods-Giscombre, 2010; Wyatt, 2006). As with Stephanie, this image can cause pain because it is unrealistic and unsustainable. According to Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009), the notion of the SBW and the emphasis on struggle

> play a critical role in marking a Black woman's strength so that women without observable or adequately adversity in their lives become contradictory figures. Their characterization by family and peers as 'weak,' not Black, or 'white' expresses moral admonishment for behavior or circumstances deemed inconsistent with authentic Black womanhood. (p. 72)

The Strong Black woman continues to be a powerful, controlling image that is internalized as an "embodied armor"

to be worn as a survival mechanism.   Black women continue to experience gendered racism and oppression and therefore, like their mothers, grandmothers, and great grandmothers, may perform this unrealistic and at times debilitating role.   Although this role is historically rooted in the Black female community and does serve some positive functions, it can also be an exhausting, unrealistic one-dimensional role that has psychosocial consequences. Romero (2000) notes that the "Strong Black woman is a mantra so much a part of U.S. culture that it is seldom realized how great a toll it has taken on the emotional well-being of the African American woman. As much as it many give her the illusion of control, it keeps her from identifying what she needs and reaching out for help." (p. 225).   For educators and administrators, our research indicates that support systems and mentoring are desperately needed for Black females, and that special attention should be paid when a Black woman is "the only one" in a classroom setting. For Black female students, internalized racism and oppression is situated within the structural discourse of white privilege, and serves to silence Black female students or leave them feeling that they are ostracized from their own community.

In conclusion, we highlighted the self-definitions of Black women undergraduates in order to explore how they made sense of their identities. The implications of representing one's gendered racial identity through physical presence and speech became central to understanding the challenges undergraduates faced as being the "only Black female" in most classes. We argued that the enactment of spoketokenism had favorable and unfavorable advantages for undergraduates. Also, the images revealed in the undergraduates' narratives suggested that the rearticulation of the SBW (i.e., the Black Lady, Superwoman, contemporary Mammy) helped to buffer gendered racism and institutional oppression. Although we drew on a small sample size for this project, the narratives of these young, Black women were significant and worthy of study. In addition to noting similarities in participants' responses, we also highlighted differences. These women articulated compelling, and at times, conflicting self-definitions of Black women's representation.

Researchers should not reduce or diminish the diverse experiences of Black women, mute certain voices, and/or privilege certain kinds of knowledge. Bell et al. (2000) suggested reflexively exploring the heterogeneity among and diversities of Black women's standpoints. Participants in this study shared self-definitions that reflected different stages of racial and gender identity development. As they continue to face gendered racism and internalized oppression, and grow into or out of the controlling images that may either limit Black women or help them grow, their narratives will continue to unfold.

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