Brown Skin Girls, Skin Shines and Tells A Story

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Brown Skin Girls, Skin Shines and Tells a Story

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Dedication

First, this is dedicated to every single Black woman, PERIODT.[1]

Second, this is for the Black women who came before me and paved the way for me to be who I am and where I am today. For Black women like,

Latonya Washington (my mom), Gwendolyn Smith (grand mom), Shannen Mosley (aunt),

and Wanda Smith (aunt) - the women who taught me it is okay to live authentically in my Black skin, to fight back with poise and grace when people try to silence me, and to stand confident in who I am because God makes no mistakes.

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Parks, Maria Stewart, Andre Lorde, bell hooks, and more - some of the founders of the anti-sexual violence movement who gave their blood, sweat, and tears to build a table where Black women like me, could demand our voices and humanity to be heard and respected.

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[1] Periodt is a term used within the Black community to add further emphasis to a point in which one believes they are correct "without a doubt."

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Abstract of Dissertation

Brown Skin Girls, Skin Shines and Tells A Story

Sexual assault is a widespread problem that disproportionately affects Black women. Yet, despite this reality, on an institutional and societal level, healing after experiencing sexual assault is often an issue of racial equity. In research and practice, many scholars and practitioners take a race-evasive, individualized, and psychological approach to meaning making and healing resources that silence and eclipse the needs and intersectional lived experiences of Black women. Therefore, this study acts as a counterstory in an effort to talk back to the narrative of "sameness" that pushes a White ciswomen pattern of meaning making and healing and promotes the erasure of undergraduate students who identify as Black cis women in the literature (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The purpose of this basic qualitative study is to explore how Black college women make meaning of and engage in healing after experiences with sexual assault. The inquiry and data were approached and interpreted from a critical theoretical perspective, specifically, Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, and Black Feminist Thought.

Findings suggest that meaning-making for the Black women in this study was rooted in the cultural socialization they received around Black womanhood. Secondly, healing for the women in this study was an interconnected individual and communal experience and involved understanding how cultural and sexual messages conflated with racist patriarchal beliefs about the bodies, behaviors, and worth of Black women. Such findings could provide a space for scholars and practitioners to better see how social

location (e.g., intersections of identities and social domains/physical places such as family or university) impacts everyday reality, how race is experienced differently, and how that experience impacts meaning making and healing. Furthermore, these findings could also offer institutions of higher education the tools to value and integrate Black women's experiences into policy and practice (e.g., crisis resources and services) which ultimately impacts retention.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Sexual assault is a pervasive problem that disproportionately affects Black women at high rates. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2013), Black women experience greater rates of sexual assault than any other race. Yet, despite its occurrence and negative impact, sexual assault remains one of the most underreported violent crimes especially for Black women (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000, 2006). For instance, for every Black woman who reports her sexual assault, at least 15 do not report (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). Black women do not disclose because there are historical and community pressures, such as hypersexualized and racial images of Black women, communal protectiveness of Black men, White dominated crisis and professional support services, and the strong matriarchy stereotype (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1990; Washington, 2001; West, 2006; Wyatt, 1992)

Despite the former, research suggests that disclosure plays a significant role in healing and as a result, scholars have focused on identifying strategies to address barriers and increase help seeking behaviors for Black women. Yet, this push for disclosure is problematic because the research is primarily grounded on the experiences of White women and that healing happens in the same ways for all women (Ahrens, Campbell, Ternier-Thames, Wasco, & Sefl, 2007; Ahrens, Stansell, & Jennings, 2010b; Borja, Callahan, & Long, 2006; Bryant-Davis, Ullman, Tsong, Anderson, Counts, Tillman, & Gray, 2015; Cohen & Roth, 1987; Skinner, 2009; Ullman & Siegel, 1995). Further, how one makes meaning of their experience with sexual assault also informs the effects of trauma and the steps taken to engage in healing (Park & Amy, 2006). Problematically research on the impact of sexual assault and healing is limited to community-based

participants, underrepresented samples of Black women, and hold the assumption that all women identify with the dominant culture's way of thinking about sexual assault (Draucker, Martsolf, Ross, Cook, Stidham, & Mweemba, 2009; Neville, Oh, Spanierman, Heppner, & Clark, 2004; Rickert, Wiemann, & Berenson, 2000; Taylor, 2002; Tillman, Bryant-Davis, & Marks, 2010; Starzynski, Ullman, Filipas, & Townsend, 2005; Washington, 2001; West and Johnson, 2013; Young & Maguire, 2003).

Due to the fact, that majority of the research on healing and meaning making regarding sexual assault is about White women; their experiences inform our understandings of meaning making and healing around sexual assault and thus is accepted in multiple fields as the way that all women engage in healing. But how do we shatter this master narrative that ignores the impact of systems of domination and resistance and instead make space for Black women to tell us how they make meaning and engage in healing (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002)? Therefore, this study acts as a counterstory in an effort to talk back to the narrative of "sameness" that pushes a White ciswomen pattern of meaning making and healing and promotes the erasure of undergraduate students who identify as Black cisgender women in the literature (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). A counterstory challenges master narratives and tells the stories of those whose stories are silenced or disregarded (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As a result, the purpose of this basic qualitative study is to explore how Black college women make meaning of and engage in healing after experiences with sexual assault at a private Predominately White Research institution (PWI) in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States of America by answering the following questions:

1. How do Black undergraduate ciswomen make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault?
2. How does healing occur among Black undergraduate ciswomen women after experiences with sexual assault?
    a. For those women who do not believe they have entered a process of healing, how do they conceptualize what healing would look like?

In an attempt to narrow the scope of this study and focus on the heterogeneity of Blackness and its impact on meaning making and healing, all participants were cisgender Black women (Collins, 2000). Further, healing in this study refers to a nonlinear journey that Adisa (2001) describes as living free from pain and a transformation of one's lived reality to be in harmony with one's needs. This study aimed to examine this phenomenon at a PWI, therefore, participants did not have to experience sexual assault on their campus or during their time enrolled at the institution. Due to the fact that sexual assault has imminent, immediate, and long-term effects on survivors it does not matter when and where the participants experienced harm, they will still be processing and healing at the time of the study (Adisa, 2001, Bryant-Davis et al., 2015; CDC, 2007). Therefore, it is critical that college campuses create and maintain resources to support Black women's healing no matter when and where they experienced sexual assault.

Statement of Problem and Background

College students enrolled in U.S. higher education face many forms of sexual assault. Throughout research and practice there remains various definitions of sexual assault, ranging from any unwanted sexual contact where force or verbal threats may or may not be present (e.g. physically forced or forcible rape, sexual coercion, attempted or

completed unwanted sexual touching or kissing utilizing physical force, etc.) to unwanted sexual contact where force or verbal threats may or may not be present but that excludes rape or attempted rape (Fedina, Holmes, & Backes, 2016; Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Flack, Kimble, Neacsiu, & Horner, 2008; Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Gohm, 2006; Hines, Armstrong, Reed, & Cameron, 2012).

However, despite varying forms and definitions of sexual assault on college campuses, prevalence findings in research are generally comparable. Overall, one in five women, one in 16 men, and one in four individuals who identify as transgender or gender non- conforming are sexually assaulted while in college (Cantor, Fisher, Chibnall, Townsend, Lee, Bruce, & Thomas, 2015; Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007). Yet, the majority of the literature examining sexual assault on college campuses lacks diversity in their samples, specifically Black women (Fedina et al., 2016; Monson, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Binderup, 2000). Currently, there are a few studies that center Black women's experiences of sexual assault (Tyagi, 2002; Washington, 2001). According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2013), Black women experience greater rates of sexual assault than any other race. National studies that examine the prevalence rate of sexual assault among African American women, support the Department of Justice's (U.S. DOJ, 2013) findings in that roughly three African American women per 1,000 have been sexually assaulted (Rennison & Welchans, 2000). Yet, when Black women are centered in research, scholars fail to recognize or distinguish the diversity that exists within Black women and instead group them into one monolithic group. For instance, Krebs, Barrick, Lindquist, Crosby, Boyd, and Bogan (2011) study represents the largest sample available about sexual assault of African American women students but

grouped them into one category with no mention of their ethnic and racial diversity (e.g., Jamaican, Ethiopian).

Despite, the high rates of sexual assault Black women experience, sexual assault remains one of the most underreported violent crimes especially for Black women (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000, 2006). According to Pollard-Terry (2004), Black women are less likely to disclose their victimization to anyone. Over the past years, a considerable amount of research has advanced knowledge that identifies the impact of the unique intersection of Black women's identities on disclosure patterns. For example, Black women's experiences with racism and historical trauma related to slavery creates a distrust in predominantly white dominated systems (e.g., criminal justice, sexual assault crisis centers) (Bachman, 1993; Donovan & Williams, 2002; McGregor, Wiebe, Marion, & Livingstone, 2000; Palmer & Vil, 2018; Rennison, 2002; West, 2006; Wyatt, 1992; Washington, 2001). In addition, hypersexualized depictions of Black women result in beliefs that their needs will be minimized and overlooked (Washington, 2001).

As a result, Black women are less likely to report their experiences with sexual assault compared to their White counterparts. This pattern of low reporting is problematized because the consensus in research identifies disclosure as a critical component of healing. In fact, literature shows that disclosure where there is a positive social reaction can provide benefits that mitigate the negative effects of a sexual assault (Jacques-Tiura, Tkatch, Abbey, & Wegner, 2010). In particular, many researchers suggest that disclosure where there is a positive reaction is associated with positive psychological and health outcomes (Ahrens, Stansell, & Jennings, 2010b; Bryant-Davis et al., 2015; Cohen & Roth, 1987).

Thus, in an effort to increase disclosure, scholars have focused their attention on unearthing additional barriers Black women face and identifying the best strategies (e.g., culturally competent services, increase the diversity among the helping staff, etc.) to address them (Lindquist, Crosby, Barrick, Krebs, & Settles-Reaves, 2016). However, though research suggests that disclosure plays a significant role in psychological and general well-being, their findings are generally based on majority White samples and assumes that healing looks one particular way. As a result, researchers and practitioners apply a White ciswomen lens to push this one way of healing which encompasses disclosure on all college students who experience sexual assault. However, since we know that Black women disclose at lower rates than their racial counterparts, this push for disclosure conflates and ignores within group differences and thus overlooks the experiences of Black women (Crenshaw, 1989).

Purpose and Research Questions

To address the gaps in the literature, this basic qualitative study explored how Black cis women make meaning of and engage in healing after experiences with sexual assault by answering the following research questions:

1. How do Black undergraduate ciswomen make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault at a private university in a mid-Atlantic city?
2. How does healing occur among Black undergraduate ciswomen at a private university in a mid-Atlantic city after experiences with sexual assault?

a. For those women who do not believe they have entered a process of healing, how do they conceptualize what healing would look like?[2]

Statement of Potential Significance

While any research on Black women can improve understanding of how sexual victimization impacts them, there remains a necessity for research on their experiences with sexual assault and healing in college, that is not measured by this "normative" way of healing that disproportionately represents experiences of White cisgender women (Draucker et al., 2009; Neville et al., 2004; Rickert et al., 2000; Taylor, 2002; Tillman et al., 2010; Starzynki, et al., 2005; Washington, 2001; West and Johnson, 2013; Young & Maguire, 2003). As a result, this study recognized the role race and different axes of oppression play on how students who identify as Black ciswomen make meaning and engage in healing. So, this study acted as a counterstory, to talk back to this master narrative of "sameness" concerning meaning making and healing and instead unveil the lived experiences of undergraduate Black ciswomen in college (Collins, 2000; Delgado, 1989; Solórzano, & Yosso, 2002). Pursuing research to unveil how Black undergraduate cisgender women make meaning of and engage in healing after experiences with sexual assault can provide institutions of higher education the tools to value and integrate Black women's experiences into policy and practice (e.g., crisis resources and services) which ultimately impacts retention.

Further, many studies on sexual assault experiences of Black undergraduate cisgender women treat Black women as a monolith (Ahrens, Abeling, Ahmad, &

[2] Footnote: This question aims to demonstrate that I am not making an assumption that all participants see themselves in a healing process. Yet, I will seek to understand what that process looks like for those who are currently engaging in healing and if they are not yet, I want them to consider and reflect on what healing would look like and what they would need.

Hinman, 2010a; Briones, 2010; Bryant-Davis et al., 2015; Fedina et al., 2016; Krebs et al., 2011; Monson et al., 2000). Therefore, current research and practice overlooks and erases within group heterogeneity that impacts how Black cisgender women make meaning of the world, specifically with experiences of sexual assault and healing. Thus, examining the nuances of being a Black cisgender woman provided a space for scholars and practitioners to better see how social location (e.g., intersections of identities and social domains/physical places such as family or university) impacts everyday reality, how race is experienced differently, and how that experience impacts meaning making and healing. As a result, this study can reduce the continuous stereotypical views of Black women and offer educational institutions with tangible and effective ways to support different experiences of Blackness post sexual assault. The next section briefly describes the theoretical framework that grounds this exploration into the meaning making and healing of Black cisgender college women who experience sexual assault.

Overview of Theoretical Foundation

This study uses a critical epistemology to explore how Black cisgender college women make meaning of and engage in healing after experiencing a sexual assault. A critical paradigm is concerned with examining societal systems and the ways they marginalize and oppress individuals. This epistemological approach also emphasizes the importance of enabling and empowering those who are oppressed to take action to overcome the sociohistorical constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender (Fay, 1987). My use of criticality comes directly from the work of the Frankfurt School and the idea that human nature is within power and identity struggles and thus we must seek to

disrupt the status quo to expose the oppressive structures (Giruoz, 1983; Kincheloe, 2008; McLaren, 2003).

With that, I use the critical work of Solorzano and Yosso (2002), Crenshaw (1989, 1990), and Collins (1989, 2000) as a theoretical and analytic lens to approach this study. Due to the fact that literature on sexual assault is mostly centered on the experiences of White women, there is a failure to consider how systems of domination shape the ways Black ciswomen make meaning and engage in healing (Draucker et al., 2009; Neville et al., 2004; Rickert et al., 2000; Taylor, 2002; Tillman et al., 2010; Starzynki, et al., 2005; Washington, 2001; West and Johnson, 2013; Young & Maguire, 2003). Thus, this framework allowed me to approach the research in a way that values and centers the experiences of Black survivors instead of imposing and perpetuating help seeking behaviors and disclosure as the only way to achieve healing. Though, this study may find similar ways of making meaning and disclosure as a part of healing for Black cis women in college, I did not enter the study with that assumption since the literature that espouses those assumptions are based on primarily White women (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Collins, 2000). Instead, this project provided a space for Black cisgender college women to bring voice to their lived experiences and tell their own stories without being measured by the ruler of White women (Collins, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Summary of Methodology

In this study, I used a basic qualitative approach to understand how Black cis women who are traditional aged college students at a private institution make meaning of and engage in healing after experiences with sexual assault (Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A critical paradigm rooted in the history of the Frankfurt School serves as

the lens through which the entire study is viewed, both in how it was designed and how the data was analyzed (Crotty, 1998). A critical paradigm is concerned with examining societal power systems and the ways they marginalize and oppress individuals (Crotty, 1998). This study rejects the objective view of meaning making and healing and instead acknowledged the historical and social contexts that shape the consciousness and lived experiences of Black cisgender college women. As a result, a critical epistemology serves to disrupt the master narrative that pushes disclosure as the way to heal and in consequence overlooks the experiences of Black women (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). More specifically, I used a theoretical framework that combines critical race theory (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1990), and Black feminist thought (Collins, 1989, 2000) to guide this study.

For this study, I used purposeful sampling because it is time and cost effective and, in an effort, to address the research questions that look to examine the lived experiences of a particular group, Black women (Creswell, 2013). Further, I collected various forms of data in order to cultivate a more trustworthy study. More specifically, I conducted two rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant and collected creative documents and materials (Rose,1994). The first interview focused on the way participants make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault and encouraged reflection on their culture and the second focused on their healing processes and journeys. In the first interview, students were asked to create an identity map and in the second, they were asked to submit creative art of their healing experiences. In addition, each student had the option to keep a journal throughout the study to help them

keep track of any thoughts or emotions that arose as they reflected on their experiences both with sexual assault and on their experience participating in the study.

Data was analyzed using both emic and etic coding, with etic codes coming from the theoretical framework and concepts found in literature (Creswell, 2013). The emic codes helped fill the gaps found in literature by bringing to the forefront Black women's own meaning and experiences as described through their own words (Creswell, 2013). After these processes were completed, I used thematic analysis and dialogue analysis to identify themes, examine the ways participant's crafted and discussed their experiences (Glesne, 2016).

Assumptions

There are assumptions underlying this study that are important to make explicit to readers so this section will discuss the assumptions that exist. To begin, this study assumed that participants would provide honest responses and answer questions to the best of their ability. Thus, confidentiality was preserved, and participants were reminded that they may decide what responses to include in the study and withdraw from the study at any time with no ramifications. Further, due to the fact that this study uses a critical epistemological stance, there exists an assumption that racism and sexism are fully embedded in society and thus power structures exist that oppress certain identities and influences the ways Black women experience issues such as sexual assault (Solórzano, 1997).

As a result, the assumption is that in the U.S., a patriarchal society, men withhold the power and women are oppressed by that power. More specifically, power in this context is derived from a Marxist's critical epistemology that means someone in control

of knowledge and resources and has the ability to make others act in ways against their will or needs (Crotty, 1998). For instance, sexual assault is a tool by which the dominant men class subordinates the marginalized woman class (Kaufer Busch, 2018). However, for Black women, sexual assault functions under multiple forms of oppression to include the intersection of racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1989). Thus, sexual assault is used as a means to keep Black women in an assigned subordinate position in society as demonstrated by the history of slavery (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000).

In Western countries dating back to slavery, White men used rape as a tool of power and control that oppressed and enslaved Black women (Crenshaw, 1990; Collins, 2000; Linder, 2018; Tillman et. al, 2010). Further, because Black enslaved women were considered the property of their owners and had no right over their own bodies, they were often medically experimented on without their consent (Rowe, 2018). The former history demonstrates a representation of how hegemonic racial structures of patriarchy continually serve to reinforce men's power and ownership when it comes to the bodies of Black women.

Therefore, the sexual assault experiences of Black women are situated in racism and sexism that places them in a social location with less power than White women (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000). As a result, this study aimed to problematize the inequity in literature that promotes this idea that all women experience healing and meaning making the same and silences the experiences of undergraduate students who identify as Black cisgender women with experiences of sexual assault.

Limitations and Delimitations

While this study fills the gap by centering the experiences of Black undergraduate cisgender women several limitations warrant discussion. First, participants in this study were recruited from one institution and as a result the findings are limited to this particular institutional type. Therefore, the findings of this study are not representative of all Black women students at every United States (U.S.) college or university or all college students who experience or have been impacted by sexual assault.

Secondly, the study is limited by the number of participants that were interviewed and the amount of time allowed for the study. During the recruitment process, the world was in the midst of a pandemic within a pandemic, where there was a global spread of COVID-19 and increased publicized incidents of anti-Black violence and racism (e.g., murder of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Jacob Blake, and more). As a result, not only did the women have to consider whether they could trust a researcher with their personal and sensitive experiences but had to consider their emotional safety and capacity in the midst of navigating compounded trauma (e.g., historical, acute, chronic, secondary, etc.). Furthermore, because of COVID-19, many institutions, like the study's site, chose to transition to remote learning during the time of this study's recruitment and data collection, resulting in many students experiencing virtual meeting burnout and unwilling to take additional virtual obligations.

Aside from the world experiencing two pandemics during the time of this study, another limitation of this study was that for the women who trusted themselves and the researcher to participate, a minimum of one year had passed since their experiences of sexual assault. During recruitment there was one student who initially signed up to participate in the study and even got as far as to engage in the first interview yet declined

not to complete the study after the first interview. This particular woman had experienced sexual assault two months prior to participating in the study, therefore, as a result of her decision not to participate, this left six Black women who had a minimum of a year between their experiences and participation in the research study. Thus, this study's findings are limited to Black women who are a minimum of a year out from their experiences with sexual assault.

The design of this study poses a few delimitations. This study focuses only on uncovering the healing experiences of Black cisgender women and not those who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming. Studies often only sample cisgender women, thereby creating limited samples that preclude scholars from exploring how gender identity affects and shapes experiences of sexual assault. However, research shows that there are disparate impacts for transgender people when it comes to experiences of sexual assault. In particular, transgender people are at higher risk for sexual assault than their cisgender counterparts (Cantor et al., 2015; Coulter, Mair, Miller, Blosnich, Matthews, McCauley, 2017). As a result, it was important to specify the use of Black women as Black cis women so to not exclude transwomen from womanhood. Although, exploring the impacts of sexual identity, gender, and race on how an individual heals is a valuable pursuit, this falls outside the scope of this study.

Further, this study uses convenience sampling and self-reported data and therefore participants will need to disclose their experiences with unwanted sexual contact or describe similar behaviors to the researcher before completing the study. Thus, given the stigma associated with sexual assault it is possible that several participants will under-endorse their experiences whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Additionally, the length of the study can affect participants resulting in fatigue during the interviews, which causes a decline in the quality of responses (Bryman, 2012). This study had two interviews and took a time commitment of approximately two and half hours to complete. Thus, there is a possibility that some of the participants who completed the study did not answer in a thoughtful manner due to exhaustion, lack of motivation and attention, especially at the end of the study (Lavrakas, 2008). Moreover, this study only examines the experiences of undergraduate students who identify as Black cisgender women who experience sexual assault after entering college and thus does not consider the cumulative impact various forms of sexual assault across the lifespan could have on Black women's healing. Lastly, this study uses a broad definition of sexual assault but there are varying definitions and unwanted sexual contact Black women face that are not reflected in this study.

Definitions of Key Terms

Sexual Assault

As mentioned previously, there are varying definitions of sexual assault in research and in practice. Yet, Fedina, et al. (2016) found that several studies on campus sexual assault utilized broad definitions of sexual assault defining it as:

> a range of sexual victimization experiences including attempted and completed forcible vaginal, anal, or oral rape, physically forced or coerced rape (unable to consent due to intoxication or influence of drugs e.g., incapacitated sexual assault), and sexual coercion (completed or attempted unwanted sexual contact or completed or attempted vaginal, anal, or oral intercourse through the means of pressure, lies, intimidations, arguments, etc.). (p.86)

Problematically, scholars define what sexual assault is for Black women based on findings from majority White samples. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore what sexual assault is to Black women by letting them define it. Yet, to recruit participants this study used definitions from studies on Black women to create loose boundaries for sexual assault. Specifically, in a study with one of the largest samples on sexual assault experiences of African American women at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Krebs et al. (2011) used broad language to define sexual assault as any unwanted sexual contact which they defined as "forced touching of a sexual nature, oral, sexual intercourse, anal sex, and digital penetration with a finger or object" and such yielded an increase in prevalence findings compared to the study previously mentioned (p.3648). While Washington's (2001) study on the disclosure patterns of Black women, she defined sexual assault as, forcible unwanted sexual contact "by the use of emotional, physical, economic, or psychological coercion" including the use of drugs or alcohol (p.1262).

In order to not exclude anyone, this study will combine Krebs' et al., (2011) and Washington's (2001) studies to create the broadest possible definition for sexual assault as any unwanted sexual contact to include but not limited to forcible touching or penetration through the use of sexual, physical, emotional, economic, or psychological coercion. However, I created space for the women to define for themselves what this term means so that a definition that centers the voices of Black women could emerge from this work.

Healing

Similar to sexual assault, there is no one definition of healing in literature. However, literature on healing is centered on determining factors related to negative and/or positive change (Draucker et al., 2009). Therefore, identifying psychological (e.g., coping strategies such as expressing or suppressing emotions or disclosure) and social support (e.g., positive, or negative social reactions) factors related to negative or positive outcomes has contributed to the understanding of healing from sexual assault (Draucker et al., 2009). However, in a meta-synthesis study of 55 qualitative studies on the essence of healing from sexual violence, concrete measures such as disclosure or coping strategies fail to capture the nuance and complexity of healing from sexual assault (Draucker et al., 2009). Further, the definitions used in majority of the research on healing are based on the experiences of a predominately White sample, therefore, this study will use the definition of healing created by a Black scholar by the name of Adisa (2001),

> Healing is the art of transforming our lived reality to be in harmony with our needs. Healing means living free from pain, is saying no to pain, is for- giving the past and learning from it. Healing is about the act: breathing in the moment to experience enjoyment. Healing implies connecting to your purpose, joining forces with the social, physical, and spiritual worlds to find your path and be at peace with yourself. (p. 180)

Further, healing in this study is considered an ongoing process where there is no ending, instead it is something that is multifaceted and continues without a discrete or true ending. This definition will be used loosely, because the same issues exist with defining

healing, in that it is often defined for Black women. As a result, I also created space for the women who participated in the study to offer their own definitions for healing in order to better center their voice.

Black Cisgender College Women

For the purpose of this study, Black women is defined as cisgender women who identify as Black. First, the student must self-identify as both a cisgender woman and Black. The use of cisgender women is important because research shows that gender identity influences one's experiences with sexual assault and as a result, I did not want to ignore or erase the experiences or existence of women who are not cisgender, which aligns with the critical epistemological lens employed in this study. Therefore, by specifying that I am talking about cisgender women, I demonstrate that I am speaking about a specific group of women and not excluding transgender women from the identity of womanhood.

Second, the cultural and ethnic diversity that exists within Black cisgender women could also create a diversity in their meaning making and healing processes (Collins, 2000). As a result, Black was used as an umbrella term that encompasses various ethnicities (e.g., Nigerian, Jamaican, African American, etc.) due to the fact that some Black ethnicities still consider themselves as Black but take great care to define themselves as separate from native born African Americans (Jackson & Cothran, 2003). This allowed me to create boundaries for who is most appropriate to participate in the study without defining Black women communities solely on census or demographic data that imposes race or ethnicity on a person. The intent of the study was to understand the nuance of Blackness as it may impact how participants make meaning of and heal from

experiences with sexual assault and therefore participants were given the opportunity to identify what being Black means and looks like to them (Collins, 2000).

Organization of the Study

I organized this dissertation into seven chapters to clearly and comprehensively address the ways the data provides answers to the research questions. Chapter 1 serves as a broad introduction to the study. In Chapter 2, the Literature Review, I explore literature on college sexual assault and healing, along with venturing through the three larger frameworks of Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, and Black Feminism. Next, in Chapter 3, the Methodology, I detail my use of a basic interpretive design and interview and document methods of data collection. After that, in Chapter 4, I introduce each of the participants with a brief vignette derived from interactions I had with each woman during data collection. Chapter 5 and 6 respond to the master narratives highlighted in Chapter 2 using personal Counterstorytelling. Chapter 5 details the ways the women make meaning of sexual assault and the ways their experiences impacted their lives. The final data chapter, Chapter 6 presents the ways the women theorize and engage in healing. Chapter 7 I offer interpretation and a brief concluding discussion of the study, how the findings from this project engage with the scholarly literature presented in Chapter 2, implications for practice, and a call for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I will review extant research literature on college sexual assault and healing. To begin, I present research on meaning making of sexual assault and the emotional and social repercussions. Preceding, I will discuss the themes present in the literature around healing that identifies disclosure and social support as the most common means to achieve healing. A survey of the literature will reveal that the majority of research on sexual assault and healing involves community-based participants who are mainly White women. Further, in the limited studies that do include Black women, they fail to mention the cultural nuance that exists in Blackness and instead group all Black women into categories of African American or Black. As a result, in this literature review, I will use the terms used in the studies, but want to emphasize that overall researchers continue to overlook the nuance among Black women at the expense of comparing them to their White counterparts (Collins, 1989).

It is important to note that this erasure of Black women in the literature affirms one of the CRT tenets, which suggests that traditional forms of research normalize the experiences of White individuals and silences the experiences of those who are non-White (Bell, 1983; Solórzano, 1997). Thus, due to the fact that the voices and experiences of Black women are absent in traditional literature, I look to literature outside of the traditional scope of research on sexual assault and healing. For instance, I will highlight work conducted by non-White scholars such as hooks (1999) and Angelou (1993) which serve as counterstories, specifically personal narratives that details the lived experiences of Black women which challenge the traditional knowledge of those at the center (e.g., White ciswomen) and informed the data collection and coding for this study (Solórzano

& Yosso, 2002). Finally, I explain why a critical theoretical framework specifically Solórzano and Yosso (2002) critical race theory, Crenshaw's (1989, 1990) prism of intersectionality, and Collins' (1989, 2000) Black feminist thought are appropriate lenses for approaching research that centers Black cisgender women who experience or are impacted by sexual assault while in higher education.

Meaning Making of Sexual Assault

When encountering a traumatic experience, individuals consider the meaning of the event (i.e., what happened?). Thus, meaning making is an integral part of understanding why and how an individual may react to their experiences with sexual assault (Park & Amy, 2006). Yet, there is a dearth of research on how women make meaning of their sexual assault experiences, specifically college women. In an ethnographic study, Young and Maguire (2003) examined the language used by women to describe their experiences with sexual assault and found that women labeled their experiences and themselves in several ways from sexual assault to rejecting a label altogether and from victim to survivor. Young and Maguire's (2003) data showed that factors such as age, ability to give consent or fight back, status of acquaintanceship with the abuser, and feelings of culpability influenced the ways women labeled their experiences.

In addition, Young and Maguire (2003) used Averill's (1980) social constructivist theory of emotion and Mead's (1934) social interaction theory to describe the process by which their interviewees labeled their experiences. For instance, Young and Maguire (2003) claimed that women make meaning of their experiences by comparing them to the dominant culture's social constructions and norms of sexual

assault and placing them in the appropriate category (e.g., sexual assault, rape, neither etc.). In particular, some participants used the terms "sexual assault and rape" because their experiences aligned with the social constructions of those two terms (e.g., stranger perpetuated the sexual assault, consent, etc.) (Young & Maguire, 2003). While others did not because they were either earlier on in their meaning making process, did not like the terms "sexual assault and rape," or felt their experiences fell outside of the criteria of the terms sexual assault and rape (Young & Maguire, 2003).

Young and Maguire's (2003) findings were further confirmed by Briones (2010) who conducted one of the only studies that specifically examined the ways college-aged women make meaning of sexual assault campaign materials and their personal experiences with sexual assault. Briones' (2010) study also found that women make meaning of their sexual assault through their gender where they found slight differences in how race and ethnicity affected perception of the issues overall. In particular, Briones (2010) found that White women believed they are victimized more because they are seen as weaker than their minority counter parts, while Asian and Hispanic women expressed feeling silenced and ashamed to speak about their experiences because they are expected to conform to the ideas of being submissive and protecting their families. Yet, one of the four African American women expressed that she did not believe race and ethnicity affected how she perceives or copes with sexual assault.

However, both Young and Maguire (2003) and Briones (2010) studies were limited by their samples. For instance, Young and Maguire (2003) used a community-based sample where only one of their 11 participants identified as an African American woman. While Briones' (2010) findings were based on a sample that included only four

out of 35 participants who identified as African American with no mention of their ethnic diversity. In addition to their methodological limitations, Young and Maguire's (2003) study was informed by social constructivist theories and as a result assumes that all survivors, including Black women use the dominant culture's constructions of sexual assault to make meaning of their experiences. However, there is an underlying assumption that silences and minimizes the lived experiences and unique cultures of Black people. Young and Maguire (2003) failed to consider how the culture dominant in the greater society might not be the dominant culture in the lives of Black women. Instead, Black women might make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault by comparing the incident to their own cultural constructions of sexual assault not the mainstream's. Yet, due to the dearth of direct research on how Black women make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault as conceptualized within Black culture, I examined research on the relationship between Black culture and healing by using identity maps. Identity maps provided Black women the space to reflect on their social identities and unveiled the ways their culture, traditions, and experiences of intersections of disempowerment influence their meaning making (Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1990; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019).

Black Culture on Disclosure

Over the past few years, a considerable amount of research has advanced knowledge that identifies the impact of Black culture on sexual assault disclosure patterns of African American women. For instance, societal stereotypes paint African American women as indomitable and thus presents a cultural schema Black women might use to make sense of their experiences with sexual assault. Specifically, Black women have

been stereotyped as a matriarch or in other words, “Strong Black Women.” The matriarch stereotype traces back to the 1960s when the government reported that slavery destroyed the Black family by reversing the roles of men and women (Tillman et. al., 2010). Some Black women internalize and embody the strength component of the matriarch stereotype and view themselves as self-reliant and independent. As a result, many Black women are socialized from one generation to the next to view themselves as spiritually and mentally indomitable and capable of overcoming any obstacles placed before them (Washington, 2001).

In fact, in Washington’s (2001) study, one Black woman stated, “In a lot of cases Black women are accustomed to hard times. Getting sexually abused is just one more thing. The attitude is just to endure this one’’ (p.18). Thus, aside from the dominant culture, Black cultural constructions of Black women as physically, mentally, and spiritually strong and capable of persevering through any tribulation could influence how Black women make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault. However, neither Washington’s (2001) study and Tillman and colleagues (2010) literature review focused directly on meaning making and both focused on experiences of a community sample.

Socialization of Black Women

Nonetheless, in addition to the matriarchy stereotype, researchers have identified that inadequate or inappropriate sexuality socialization is associated with African American women’s inability to label or identify abuse (Tillman et al., 2010; Washington, 2001; Wyatt, 1992). In a qualitative study on the disclosure patterns of 12 Black female sexual assault survivors, participants expressed that they were taught about sex either through indirection or through incomplete conversations (Washington, 2001). For

instance, a participant in Washington's (2001) study stated, "My family warned me not to talk to strangers or let boys get under my dress, but I was not told anything specific about sexuality" (p. 1266). However, Washington's (2001) interviewees indicated that they were never warned about family or friends or told why they should not allow boys under their dress. As a result, participants in Washington's (2001) study expressed difficulty defining their experiences as "real" violence because they did not have a reference for what happened.

While on the other hand, for Black women who lived in homes where sexual matters were discussed, they only learned about contraception, pregnancy, and drugs (Washington, 2001). Thus, due to the lack of information on or about sexual assault, one participant expressed feeling responsible and that she was abnormal for what she experienced. In other words, participants in Washington's (2001) study compared their experiences to their culture's constructions of what they learned about sex. However, the generalizability of Washington's (2001) findings is not only limited by their community-based sample but like all of the studies included in this section failed to explain how they used the terms Black or African American. For example, researchers use the terms African American or Black with no mention to ethnicity, as seen in Tillman and colleagues (2010) literature review who used the phrase African American women and Washington's (2001) who also used Black female survivors.

Therefore, this project details how I loosely defined the term Black women and provided Black women the space to define what being Black means to them. For instance, some women considered themselves as Black but took great care to define themselves as separate from native-born African Americans because race did not affect

all women in the same way (Collins, 2000; Jackson & Cothran, 2003). Additionally, my data analysis, which is influenced by Collins (2000), presented data that highlights racial-ethnic similarities and differences among Black women.

Heterogeneity of Black Women

Due to the ethnic diversity within the Black community (e.g., African, Afro-Caribbean, African American), there may exists differences in the ways in which Black women make meaning. For instance, as depicted previously pertaining to gender socialization, African American women are expected to be "strong," however many scholars argue that Black African women are expected to fulfill traditional gender roles that are seen as inferior (Gordon & Collins, 2013; Kalunta-Crumpton, 2015). For example, Black South African women are socialized to believe that they do not withhold ownership of their bodies and that they are to subdue to men and give in to unwanted sexual advances (Gordon & Collins, 2013; Harrison, Xaba, & Kunene, 2000). Gordon and Collins (2013) explored how Black South African female residence students at a South African university understand and experience gender-based violence and found that many of their participants anticipated sexual assault and felt that if it occurred it, was their responsibility.

Thus, many participants revealed that they navigate South African higher education by not behaving in ways that would "provoke victimization" such as not drinking with men or not entering the residence of one's boyfriend. Despite the fact that Gordan and Collins (2013) study was based in South Africa, their findings align with findings surrounding African women in the U.S. In fact, a community-based study on intimate partner violence, found that a role reversal in immigrant Nigerian communities

in the U.S. where women are the breadwinner and oppose the patriarchal ideology deeply embedded in the Nigerian culture (Kalunta-Crumpton, 2015). However, participants in Kalunta-Crumpton (2015) expressed that their opposition came at a cost, in that their husbands use violence to reinforce the dominance in a disadvantaged situation. Thus, African women's inferior social position might affect how they make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault.

In addition to the differences that exists pertaining to gender socialization within Black communities, there are similar nuances surrounding the socialization of sexuality. For instance, African women are socialized not to engage in sex. In a mixed-methods research study that examined the experiences of young adult women from African refugee and migrant backgrounds in relation to sexual coercion and violence, Chung, Fisher, Zufferey, and Thiara (2018) found that many of the women felt their parents were stricter in comparison to their male siblings. The participants in Chung et al. (2018) attributed the strictness to the fear of premarital pregnancy and shame and their fathers blaming them for behaving tastelessly for their gender. African fathers' control over their daughters' behaviors was linked to their dowry culture to bring a high bride price (Chung et al., 2018). Though the implementation of dowry may differ when African families cross into the United States, the values placed on women's virginity remains constant (Chung et. al, 2018). While socialization of sexuality for both African American women and men are not only inadequate as described previously but also impacted by the Black church.

As a result, findings in this section suggests the need to explore within-group differences and its impact on how Black women make meaning of sexual assault. Further,

as demonstrated in this section, there is a lack of research on how Black college aged women make meaning of sexual assault and how there might be within-group differences and similarities. As a result, this study aimed to fill these gaps by focusing solely on how Black college women make meaning of sexual assault, while considering the with-group differences and cultural norms both in the design of my study and the data analysis. For instance, the gaps in this research informed my decisions to provide Black women the space to define what being Black means, looks like to them and use identity maps to examine the ways that singular, and multiple forms of oppression are organized under an overarching structure of domination (Collins, 2000). Further, this literature informed my approach to data analysis in that I presented data that highlights the commonality and diversity among Black women. In moving on, how one makes meaning of their experiences has implications on one's emotional and social well-being. Therefore, the next section will examine the impact sexual assault has on wellbeing.

Impact of Sexual Assault

Despite the discrepancy in research on the prevalence of sexual assault, scholars remain in agreeance that sexual assault overall has a negative impact on survivors. In fact, research findings suggest that sexual assault has imminent, immediate, and long-term effects on survivors that are both tangible and intangible (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2007; Draucker et al., 2009; Jordan, Combs, & Smith, 2014; Vilenica, Shakespeare-Finch, & Obst, 2012). For instance, sexual assault is associated with a myriad of emotional, physical, financial, academic, and social costs. However, this study focused on the emotional and social impacts of sexual assault on Black college women and drive the literature on healing.

Emotional

The effects of trauma can be immediate or delayed ranging from hours to years after the traumatic incident. Scholars have discovered that in the immediate aftermath of a sexual assault, survivors experience sleep disturbances, suicidal ideations, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and more which often carry life threatening psychological impact (Bryant-Davis et al., 2015; CDC, 2007). Yet, the psychological effects of sexual assault as experienced by African American women, have received limited attention in the literature (Bryant-Davis et al., 2010; Ullman & Long, 2008). While there are a range of emotional consequences of sexual assault, only depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are empirically supported among African American women (Alim et al., 2006; Bryant-Davis, Ullman, Tsong, Tillman, & Smith, 2010; Bryant-Davis et al., 2015; Hood & Carter, 2008; Rickert et al., 2000; Temple, Weston, Rodriguez, & Marshall, 2007; West & Johnson, 2013). The literature demonstrated a need to examine how and in what ways do Black women make meaning of and are impacted by sexual assault. Thus, this study examined the experiences of undergraduate students who identify as Black women post sexual assault.

Depression

For instance, in a study that examined the impact of sexual assault on the self-esteem of African American and White college student rape survivors, Neville, et al. (2004) found that depression was more common in Black female college students than White female students. Neville et al.'s (2004) findings indicated that self-blame in African American female college students were both directly and indirectly related to depression and lower self-esteem. Unlike White female college students, Neville et al.'s

(2004) found that African American women who blamed themselves attributed their experiences of sexual assault to cultural factors. For instance, with origins dating back to slavery, African American women have been sexualized and viewed as Jezebels, a stereotype that presents African American women as sexually promiscuous and immoral and was created to rationalize why slave masters raped enslaved African American women (Collins, 2000). As a result, some African American women believe because they are hypersexualized and dehumanized that that is why they were raped (Bryant-Davis, et al., 2015; Neville et al., 2004; Washington, 2001). The few studies that found depression as a common emotional effect of sexual assault among African American women are methodologically and conceptually sound but fail to identify or discuss the ethnic composition of their participants (Neville et al., 2004; Rickert et al., 2000; West and Johnson, 2013). Consequently, we know even less about the psychological impact of sexual assault on the various ethnic groups represented within the Black ciswomen community. As a result, the literature in this section informed this project's sampling choices. For instance, in recognition that Black women are not a monolith, in my recruitment inclusion criteria, I will be intentional in broadly defining Black as an umbrella term that encompasses various ethnicities (e.g., Nigerian, Jamaican, African American, etc.). Further, in my data analysis, I will explore the similarities and differences among the themes told by Black cisgender college women (e.g., African, Afro-Caribbean, African American) and how their narratives are crafted and performed.

Nonetheless, feelings of responsibility and depression are not unique to Black women survivors of sexual assault, they are also common across survivors generally (Draucker et al., 2009; Vilenica et al., 2012). According to a summary of multiple meta-

analyses of the impacts of sexual assault, Campbell, Dworkin, and Cabral (2009) found that 13%-51% of women meet clinical criteria for depression. In fact, in a meta-analysis of 51 studies on how men and women heal from sexual assault, self-blame was related to negative thoughts of self, decreased self-esteem, and heighten feelings of powerlessness and helplessness (Draucker et al., 2009). However, despite experiences of depression, some African American women maintain a higher sense of internal locus of control than reported among the majority White participants in studies such as those in Draucker et al.'s (2009). Due to the fact that sexual assault involves the exertion of power and control, where survivors' physical and personal boundaries are violated, this negatively impacts their perceived control of the world (Draucker et al., 2009; Vilenica et al., 2012). Yet, Hood and Crater (2008) found that the experience of being sexually assaulted did not dramatically alter African American women survivors' control-related beliefs in feeling powerless or helpless. The former might be a result of the complex sociopolitical power structures of oppression and discrimination African American individuals face that shape their view of the world as prejudiced and uncontrollable (Hood & Carter, 2008). The literature in this section informed my thinking of this study by showing me that the ways Black women experience and make meaning of their sexual assault are influenced by the ways their race intersects with their gender. Therefore, the former further indicates the importance of challenging the White linear narrative that all women experience meaning making and healing the same and embarking upon a study that centers the lived experiences of Black cisgender college women. Further, the literature in this section informed my research design because I learned that the intersections of disempowerment influence meaning making for Black women and as a result used identity maps as a form

of data collection. The identity maps provided Black women the space to reflect on their social identities and unveil how and the ways their culture, traditions, and experiences of intersections of disempowerment influence how they experience sexual assault and the meaning they ascribe (Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1990; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Lastly, PTSD is also a psychological effect of sexual assault observed among Black women survivors of sexual assault (Alim et al., 2006; Hood & Carter, 2008; Temple et al., 2007; West & Johnson, 2013). In a study on African American women who self-report experiences of child sexual abuse and/or adult sexual or physical abuse, Hood and Carter (2008) found that many of the African American women who experienced adult sexual assault demonstrated PTSD symptoms of at least mild to moderate severity. Yet, Starzynki, et al. (2005) found no difference in the occurrence and severity of PTSD symptoms between White and Black female college students. However, Starzynki, et al. (2005) findings could be a result of the disproportionate sample size between Black women who represented 23% of the total sample while White women represented 33% of the total sample. The literature in this study demonstrated a need for more studies that specifically look at the ways Black women make meaning of their experiences to understand more fully the implications such has on their psychological health. Thus, this study only recruited Black women to focus solely on how they experience sexual assault.

Social

It is important to note, not only does sexual assault impact one's emotional well-being, but it also impacts a survivors' interpersonal relationships. Yet, there is a paucity of empirical research that focuses on the social impact of sexual assault on Black women;

therefore, this section highlighted the literature that is available on the social impact of sexual assault on women generally. In Vilenica's et al. (2012) study, researchers found that because of experiencing sexual assault, women expressed negative beliefs about others. In fact, women express feelings of betrayal and distrust that result in social isolation as a protective method. For instance, Draucker et al. (2009) found that survivors ended relationships with those that hurt them and refused and avoided new relationships. The former decisions allowed individuals to feel like they had some control and power over their lives and withheld access to their time, affections, and bodies (Draucker et al., 2009). As a result, some survivors decide to withhold their experiences of sexual assault as a secret due to the fear of harmful negative responses (Draucker et al., 2009). The former is uniquely true for African American women, who are more likely to receive negative responses and therefore more likely to withhold their experiences of sexual assault (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2010).

However, studies on the social consequences of sexual assault fail to identify and include sizable diverse populations and as a result are generalizable and indicative of the experiences of majority White women. For instance, in Draucker et al.'s (2009) review, there was a total of 56 Black/African American participants across a total of 38 reports where the total number of participants was 1,016. Thus, to address the gaps in the literature, this study loosely defined Black in recruitment criteria, allowed participants to articulate their own definition of Black, and only recruited individuals who identify as Black women as a way to centralize the experiences, impact, and healing of Black college cis women. Further, I learned from this body of research that Black women are more likely to receive negative responses after a disclosure and that compared to White

women, they maintain a high internal locus of control. Although it appears that Black women as a group experience the same challenges, their responses and experiences may be different (Collins, 2000). As a result, I used identity maps to examine how systems of domination are organized in their lives and the influence of such on their meaning making and healing (Collins, 2000). Lastly, I analyzed the data from this study by considering and identifying the heterogeneity of experiences among Black women by naming any thematic commonalities and differences around ethnicity.

Healing

As demonstrated in the previous section, sexual assault has a profound impact on one's emotional and social well-being. Not only does meaning making impact the emotional and social well-being of individuals, the meaning ascribed to experiences of sexual assault also influences how one heals. Yet, despite the emotional and social effects of sexual assault, how individuals respond varies widely. In fact, there is a consensus that disclosure is the main healing pathway women survivors of sexual assault take, but there are healing pathways unique to Black women that are overlooked. Thus, this section will explore literature on healing pathways of survivors of sexual assault and highlight non-traditional studies that suggest unique healing pathways for Black women such as testimony, spirituality, and re-claiming of their bodies.

Disclosure as a Means to Achieve Healing

Disclosure and social support have been identified as critical factors that mitigate the negative effects of sexual assault and impact survivors' healing (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2010; Ullman, Foynes, & Tang, 2010). In contrast to the low rates of reporting to law enforcement and survivor crisis and health care centers, research shows that women

survivors disclose experiences of sexual victimization at higher rates to informal sources like friends, family, or romantic partners (Borja, et al., 2006; Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner, 2003; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012; Orchowski, Meyer, & Gidycz, 2009; Palmer & Vil, 2018).

In fact, survivors express that disclosing to others specifically peers validate their experiences and provides a context within which to not feel alone and to receive emotional support (Draucker et al., 2009; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012). For instance, in a recent study conducted by Orchowski and Gidycz (2012) 95% of college women survivors disclosed to their female friends as a way to work through their emotions (e.g., fears, doubts, etc.) related to the assault. As a result, disclosure is seen as a critical component of healing. Problematically, these studies are limited by the use of primarily White samples. For example, in Orchowski and Gidycz (2012), 94% of their participants identified as White (n = 353) while 2.9% identified as African American (n = 11), with no recognition of the ethnic makeup of their African American participants. The majority of the 56 studies in Draucker et al. (2009) meta-analysis review lacked a diverse sample. Therefore, to address the lack thereof mention and consideration of Black women and the diversity among them, this study only recruited individuals who identify as Black women and provide them the space to define how they view and define being Black (Collins, 2000).

Disclosure and Social Reaction

The usefulness of disclosure in healing is dependent on the social reaction of the support person (Ullman, 1999). Survivors may receive various social reactions, some that are negative and more likely to adversely impact them emotionally or those that are

positive and validating (Campbell, Ahrens, Sefl, Wasco, & Barnes, 2001). When there is a positive reaction to disclosure in the form of tangible support (e.g., advice, resources) and emotional support (e.g., empathy and kindness), disclosure is seen as healing (Ahrens et al., 2007; Borja et al., 2006; Ullman & Siegel, 1995). Yet, research that examines relationships between healing and social reactions to disclosure of sexual assault often focus on the presence of psychological symptoms and outcomes. For instance, many studies suggest that disclosure where there is a positive reaction is associated with positive psychological and health outcomes (Ahrens et al., 2010b; Bryant-Davis, et al., 2015; Burt & Katz, 1988; Cohen & Roth, 1987) while those who do not disclose experience more psychological consequences (Ahrens et al., 2010b; Bryant-Davis et. al, 2015; Burt & Katz, 1988; Cohen & Roth, 1987). In Orchowski and Gidycz's (2012) study, disclosure met with positive social reactions were associated with less self-blame and a greater belief that the sexual assault occurred due to the abuser and/or society.

In a study that explored the impact of disclosure on sexual assault survivors' recovery, researchers found that participants who did not disclose experienced more symptoms of depression and posttraumatic stress as measured by the Posttraumatic Diagnostic Scale developed by Foa, Cashman, Jaycox, and Perry (1997) than others that disclosed (e.g., delayed disclosers, immediate disclosers, and ongoing disclosers) (Ahrens et al., 2010b). One strength of Ahrens et al. (2010b) study is that the representation of their African American participants was comparable to their White participants, 37% and 38% respectively. However, Ahrens et al.'s (2010b) research as well as with the majority of studies that assess the role of disclosure and social support following sexual assault, focus almost exclusively on community-residing women to engage in a retrospective

examination of social reactions (Ahrens et al., 2010b; Bryant-Davis et. al, 2015; Burt & Katz, 1988; Cohen & Roth, 1987).

As a point of illustration, participants in Ahrens et al.'s (2010b) study were on average in their mid-30s and were asked to describe their experiences with sexual assault that occurred several years prior to the survey administration. As a result, these studies may not be generalizable or representative of the relationships between disclosure and healing for college survivors of sexual assault (Ahrens et al., 2010b; Bryant-Davis et. al, 2015; Burt & Katz, 1988; Cohen & Roth, 1987). Further, there is a general assumption that an adverse experience or outcome is a potential catalyst for positive psychological and social change. In other words, many psychological costs or impacts of nondisclosure are found but few potential benefits are specified. Thus, these studies fail to provide an in-depth discussion of the psychological growth (e.g., greater self-efficacy, changed relationships with others, etc.) and instead generalize that disclosure is associated with a reduction in PTSD or depression symptoms (Ahrens et al., 2010b; Bryant-Davis et. al, 2015; Burt & Katz, 1988; Cohen & Roth, 1987).

Yet, scholars have found that survivors may receive various social reactions, some that are negative and more likely to adversely impact them emotionally and cause them to withdraw, blame themselves, or utilize avoidance strategies or those that are positive and validate survivors (Campbell et al., 2001; Ullman, 1996). In fact, some literature suggests that African American women who do choose to disclose are more likely to receive negative responses than their White counterparts (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2010). Thus, when Black women disclose, they are more likely to receive reactions that are detrimental to their healing. As a result, the former data highlights how viewing

disclosure as normative and healthy, erases the lived experiences of Black women and that not engaging in disclosure can be healthy and normative for Black women. Thus, this literature informed the creation of the research questions, to examine how Black undergraduate ciswomen view and engage in healing without being measured by the normative narrative set by White cisgender women. Further, because majority of the research on the role of disclosure and social support is based almost exclusively on community participants in their mid-30s, this study examined the unique experiences of Black cisgender women in college. Lastly, I learned from the literature in this section that the narrative that disclosure is a healthy form of healing is based on positive reactions. Thus, since the literature shows that Black women receive more negative reactions when they disclose, the findings informed my study to examine healthy and less harmful ways Black women engage in healing.

Disclosure to Mental Health Centers

As previously mentioned, college women are more likely to disclose their experiences of sexual victimization to informal sources (e.g., friends, family, etc.) than formal sources (e.g., law enforcement, sexual assault crisis or health center, etc.) (Borja et al., 2006; Fisher et al., 2003; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012; Orchowski et al., 2009; Palmer & Vil, 2018). Yet, researchers find that seeking mental health treatment is associated with healing in terms of posttraumatic growth or in other words positive psychological changes (Hassija & Turchik, 2016; Hanson, Saunders, Kilpatrick, Resnick, Crouch, & Duncan, 2001; Skinner, 2009). In a recent study that examined the relationship between posttraumatic growth, disclosure, and mental health treatment for college survivors of sexual assault, researchers found that only one third of the women

sought mental health treatment in an effort to heal (Hassija & Turchik, 2016). As a result, the formal disclosure provided participants an opportunity to make meaning and cognitively and emotionally process their trauma. However, one limitation of Hassija and Turchik's (2016) study was that 95% of their participants identified as White, therefore their findings are limited to this population.

Nonetheless, not only has research found that therapy allows survivors to conceptualize and make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault, but it also allows survivors to restore feelings of worthiness, alleviates negative psychological symptoms, and improves interpersonal relationships (Kunst, Winkel, & Bogaerts, 2010; Hanson et al., 2001; Skinner, 2009). In a case-centered/personal narrative analysis, Skinner (2009) described feelings of fear, depression, and social isolation after an experience with sexual assault. However, after seeking therapy, Skinner (2009) noticed positive psychological changes when her counselor taught her that she would never "get over" the experience but instead needed to learn to incorporate the event into who she was rather than minimizing or avoiding it (p.174). As a result, Skinner (2009) explains regaining a sense of control and normalcy that comforted her to reengage with friends and family. Skinner's (2009) experiences with therapy further confirmed Resnick's (2001) findings, where through a case-study, a college woman who was a survivor of rape within a dating relationship used brief therapy and was able to restore feelings of worthiness, gain relief from PTSD symptoms, and contextualize the rape. Notable, the majority of these studies are limited by their use of a primarily White sample. Thus, since disclosure results in more negative reactions for Black women, this section points to the

need to explore and center the experiences of Black cisgender college women post sexual assault to determine what methods contribute to healing.

Overall, in research, disclosure as a means to achieve healing is viewed through a White ciswomen lens, that overlooks the impact of race, racism, and intersections of oppressions. As demonstrated in the literature, research on healing is based on predominantly White women and thus, the notion that disclosure is healthy and healing, places and normalizes White women's reality above Black women's (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In consequence, this study talks back to this normative narrative that all women heal the same, by allowing Black cisgender college women to tell us how they view and engage in healing without the assumption that it includes therapy. In moving on, research demonstrates that Black women face unique pressures to remain silent in the aftermath of a sexual assault. Thus, this section informed my thinking of this study and my search of the literature and as a result, the next section will explore the silencing effect of community and sociopolitical pressures on Black women.

Black Women and (Non) Disclosure

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2010) for every Black woman that reports her rape, at least 15 do not report. Similarly, in a study that examined the disclosure patterns at PWIs and HBCUs, Palmer and Vil (2018) found that regardless of institutional type, the probability that a victim would engage in disclosure increased if the victim was White. Researchers have found that previous experiences of racism and historical trauma related to slavery results in a distrust of the dominant system and predominantly White staffed organizations and practices (rape crisis agencies, shelters, health care centers, etc.) (Donovan & Williams, 2002; West, 2006; Wyatt, 1992;

Washington, 2001) and the belief that their needs will be minimized and overlooked (Washington, 2001).

White Dominated Helping Organizations

In fact, the women who dominate the antiviolence movement are racially and economically different from women of color and as a result, their approaches often harm Black women (Crenshaw, 1990). For instance, Washington (2001) found that most of the Black women in her study who sought help from medical professions or crisis intervention services were revictimized. One participant expressed that the hospital personnel laughed at her and her child who were being medically assessed after experiencing sexual assault (Washington, 2001). While another Black woman received a suggestion from her gynecologist to "consider sterilization." The former suggestion confirmed the historic mistrust of White systems because of the historical memory of sterilization abuses performed against Black and brown women. Thus, due to the fact that crisis intervention services often fail to address racial and ethnic diversity, they reproduce what Crenshaw (1990) refers to as "intersectional subordination" which I will talk more in depth about later in the chapter.

Yet, in Crenshaw's (1990) article, she illustrated the inaccessibility of domestic violence advocacy services to immigrant and non-English speaking women. For instance, Crenshaw (1990) detailed a case where a Latina woman was denied a space in a shelter because she was unable to prove her proficiency in English. The shelter exclaimed that all women are required to attend group therapy and that they could not have her in the group if she could not understand or communicate in English (Crenshaw, 1990). The shelters rigidity demonstrates White dominated agencies consumed by White feminist

philosophy that disproportionality results in negative effects on women of color. Instead of prioritizing the danger and physical harm the women were facing, the shelter was more concerned with the woman not being able to attend a support group (Crenshaw, 1990). Thus, intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or racial backgrounds often provide limited help to Black women who face unique obstacles. The literature in this section informed my data analysis in that I used "White dominated interventions" as an etic code when classifying and interpreting the data (Creswell, 2013).

An Adherence to Race

In moving on, not only do societal factors impact the ability and willingness of Black women to engage in disclosure, but their own communities often have silencing effects. Over the past years, a considerable amount of research has advanced knowledge that identifies the impact of Black culture more generally on sexual assault disclosure patterns of Black women. For instance, research indicates the adherence to a Black cultural mandate to protect Black males inhibits Black survivors' disclosure. (Neville & Pugh, 1997; Tillman et al., 2010; Washington, 2001). Across all racial demographics majority of sexual assaults are intra-racial, this is no different for the Black community where 85% of sexual assaults are intra-racial and therefore sheds light on why Black survivors find that reporting sexual assault is problematic (Tillman et. al, 2010). For instance, in Neville and Pug's (1997) study, one participant stated, "I didn't want to tell because the person who attacked me was Black" (p. 375).

The former statement is situated in the collective and cultural mandate to protect Black men (Crenshaw, 1990; Pollard-Terry, 2004; Tillman et. al, 2010). This

protectiveness is rooted in slavery, where Black men were falsely accused of raping White women as a means to rationalize systematic violence against Black men (Crenshaw, 1990; Flood, 2005; Simmons, 2008). As a result, the former is often used as a defense for Black men accused of sexual assault even when the survivor is a Black woman (Crenshaw, 1990). Thus, Black women who disclose their experiences with sexual assault are often overlooked or ostracized by their communities (Crenshaw, 1990).

Thus, this need to protect is further heightened by the high incarceration rate of Black men. Therefore, Black women feel that disclosing or reporting their sexual assault would betray their culture (Crenshaw, 1990; Tillman et al, 2010; Washington, 2001). This is evident in a statement from Washington's (2001) qualitative study:

> If we begin to point out the Black male for specific problems, we tend to get heat . . . even from some women because we as women have been socialized as well. And its 'don't bring the Black man down . . . He's already going to jail, dying, rumored to be an endangered species; so why should we as Black women bring our wrath against him? (p.1269).

Therefore, Black women are often placed in a unique position to uphold notions of solidarity within their racial communities. The literature in this section informed my research design and data analysis in that I used identity maps to further explore if and how cultural pressures such as protecting Black men shape and impact how Black women make meaning of and engage in healing post sexual assault. Further, I used "community solidarity" as an etic code when classifying and interpreting the data (Creswell, 2013).

Historical Stereotypes about Black Women

In addition, societal stereotypes paint Black women as unrapable and indomitable and thus presents another cultural barrier to disclosure. With origins dating back to slavery and Europeans first engagement with Africans, Black women have been sexualized and viewed as Jezebels, a stereotype that presents Black women as sexually promiscuous and immoral and was created to rationalize why slave masters raped enslaved Black women (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1990). These hypersexualized images of Black women conflicts with the norms of women's sexuality and as a result, Black women's reports of sexual assault are often discredited (Crenshaw, 1990). Now, Modern day Jezebels are portrayed in media as hood rats, thots, welfare queens, and more (Tillman et. al, 2010). Altogether, past and present labels continue to present women as sexually available and as a result, Black women fear they will not be believed so they decide not to disclose their sexual assault (Washington, 2001).

In addition to Jezebel, Black women have also been stereotyped as a matriarchy or in other words, "Strong Black Women." The matriarch stereotype traces back to the 1960s when the government reported that slavery destroyed the Black family by reversing the roles of men and women (Tillman et. al., 2010). Unlike the Jezebel stereotype, some women internalize and embody the strength component of the matriarch stereotype and view themselves as self-reliant and independent. As a result, many Black women and girls are socialized from one generation to the next to view themselves as spiritually and mentally indomitable and capable of overcoming any obstacles placed before them – leading Black women to refrain from disclosing information about their

victimization because they believe it is their responsibility to cope with the aftermath of sexual victimization on their own (Washington, 2001).

In fact, in Washington's (2001) study, one Black woman stated, "In a lot of cases Black women are accustomed to hard times. Getting sexually abused is just one more thing. The attitude is just to endure this one'' (p.18). The former illustrates that some Black women are socialized to view themselves as physically, mentally, and spiritually strong and capable of persevering silently through any tribulations placed before them, which inhibits disclosure. In addition, this stereotype of a strong Black woman creates a dichotomy where the notion of weakness is attributed to White women or those who label themselves as victims (Washington, 2001). For instance, in Washington's (2001) study, one of the participants stated that seeking intervention is seen as "a luxury" or "privilege" in that it is a weak White woman's thing. Thus, some Black women subconsciously or consciously seek to distance themselves from sexual assault victims to deny their own vulnerabilities. As a result of the literature in this section, I used identity maps to further explore if and how societal stereotypes such as Jezebel, matriarch, thots shape and impact how Black women make meaning of and engage in healing post sexual assault. Further, I used "stereotypes" as an etic code when classifying and interpreting the data (Creswell, 2013).

The Healing Experiences of Black Women

As outlined in the last few sections, Black women receive more reactions that are negative when they engage in disclosure due to such experiences of racism, community pressures to protect Black men, and historical and modern stereotypes. Thus, for Black

women, sexual assault is often rooted in patriarchy, discrimination and violence based on race and gender.

Yet, when I look to the literature on meaning making, the impact of sexual assault on one's wellbeing, and healing, the voices and experiences of Black women are absent. As a result, I turn to literature on sexual assault that centers the experiences of Black women and provides personal narratives directly from Black women (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Collins, 2000). In this section, researchers found that instead of disclosure, Black women employ different methods of healing such as spirituality, testimonies, and re-claiming one's body to mitigate the negative effects of sexual assault and begin their journey of healing.

Spirituality and Religion

In fact, a few studies found that religion and spirituality are healing mechanisms used by African American women survivors of sexual assault (Ahrens et al., 2010a; Bryant-Davis et. al, 2015; El-Khoury, Dutton, Goodman, Engel, Belamaric, & Murphy, 2004; Knapik, Martsolf, & Draucker, 2008). In fact, two studies (Ahrens et al., 2010a and El-Khoury et al., 2004) suggest that African American survivors are more likely to use spirituality and religious coping than survivors of other ethnicities. For instance, in Ahrens et al. (2010a) study, African American survivors withheld high levels of spiritually based coping that included seeking a spiritual power such as God to help them make meaning and cope with the sexual assault. Additionally, the participants engaged in religious good deeds such as participating in church, helping others, and searching for ways to lead a better life.

However, though these studies included more than 36% of African American participants, researchers failed to examine or distinguish the diversity and heterogeneity that exists within Black women. For example, in Bryant-Davis et al.'s (2015) study, they used a sample of "252 African American adult female sexual assault" survivors and in Ahrens, et al. (2010a) study, of the 103 female rape survivors, "37 was African American." As a result, studies like Bryant-Davis et al.'s (2015) and Ahrens, et al. (2010a) ignore the complexities and ethnic differences among Black women and their healing experiences. Thus, my study addressed the gaps in this literature by identifying the ethnic heterogeneity of experiences among Black women within my data analysis and will present any thematic commonalities and differences.

Testimonies

Despite the silencing effect of sociopolitical and historical factors on the healing experiences of Black women, they find pathways to "talk back" to achieve healing. According to Black feminist researchers, marginalized people have learned to express themselves and resist in narrative forms of opposition, such as "talking back" (Taylor, 2002). hooks (1989) coined, "talking back," as "the expression of our [marginalized individuals] movement from object to subject-the liberated voice" (p.9). As it relates to sexual assault researchers have identified testimonies as a vehicle by which Black women "talk back" and share their stories and perform self-healing. With origins dating back to slavery, it is through testimony that African American women assert themselves as important parts of the world by sharing portions of their lives that are silenced (Cody, 2001; Gates, 1991; West, 1999).

While literature on the healing experiences of Black women impacted by sexual assault is limited, one study examining experiences of intimate partner violence depicts the ways African American women engage in testimony. For instance, in a community-based study that explored research as an act of resistance and healing for African American women survivors of intimate partner violence, Taylor (2002) found that many of their participants believed that telling their stories are synonymous to offering a testimonial. In fact, many participants only offered to tell their stories and give their testimony if it would help and facilitate the healing of other women. In other words, African American women's sense of connectedness and community fostered feelings of social obligation that supported their efforts to talk back through testimony.

Though the intent of offering a testimony was to help others, the act of discussing their experiences turned out to be self-healing. For instance, several participants mentioned feeling shame and sadness but once they gave their testimony, they felt a sense of release and freedom where they no longer felt that the violence had power over them anymore (Taylor, 2002). However, Taylor's (2002) study is limited by its community-based sample (average age 39) and focus on testimonies as healing for African American women who experienced intimate partner violence not sexual assault. Yet, due to the lack of research on the healing experiences of Black women, Taylor's (2002) findings highlight the importance of talking back as a vehicle by which African American women perform healing. Therefore, this study looked to see if Taylor's findings (2002) hold true for Black college aged women with experiences of sexual assault.

The use of testimony as a vehicle by which Black women share their stories and perform self-healing is also observed by various post-colonial feminist authors such as Angelou (1993), Taylor (1993), hooks (1999), Anzaldúa (1999), Adisa (2001) and more. For instance, in a study that explored how creative art serves to develop individual consciousness around healing, Hua (2014) found that feminist postcolonial texts such as Angelou's (1970) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sing*, Walker's (1982) *The Color Purple*, Mootoo's (1996) *Cereus Blooms at Night* , Danticat's (1994) *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and Linda Hogan's (2001) *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*, illustrate authors exploration into how women work through their experiences of sexual assault within written text. The testimony used by the former Black scholars informed my thinking about this study, as I wanted to open spaces where Black women can talk about their experiences with sexual assault and healing in ways that are not centered in Whiteness. Thus, I provided Black women the space to use any method of expression (e.g., poetry, body art, etc.) to develop their consciousness around healing. Moreover, I used "talk back" as an etic code when classifying and interpreting the data to examine if and how Black women engage in resistance as a form of healing (Creswell, 2013).

Re-claiming One's Body

Further, Hua (2014) found that not only do creative texts serve as a way to "talk back" or offer testimony but re-claiming one's body also is a vehicle by which Black women heal. As discussed earlier, sociopolitical and historical contexts (e.g., hypersexualization, dehumanization, etc.) impact the way society views Black women and as result such negatively impacts how they conceptualize who they are. As a result, postcolonial authors illustrate the importance of compassion touching of oneself to

counter abusive touching and provide healing. In her book *In the Spirit,* Taylor (1993) described how she attempted to engage in self-healing by hugging herself and kissing her shoulders and arms to counteract abusive touching. Self-sensual touching allows Black women the opportunity to re-claim the goodness of our bodies and gain power and control over her body (Hua, 2014). Though this section on healing demonstrated the use of spirituality, testimony and reclaiming of one's body as important healing pathways for African American women, majority of the research was based on a community sample that failed to distinguish within-group differences or their findings were based on the author's personal lived experiences.

As a result, there is a need to explore if Black college aged women with experiences of sexual assault also use spirituality, testimony and/or reclaiming of one's body on their healing journey. Therefore, this study examined the unique experiences of Black cisgender women in college, consider, and identify within group commonalities and differences in sampling recruitment and data analysis. Lastly, I used "reclaiming of one's body" as an etic code when classifying and interpreting the data to examine if and how Black women engage compassionate and counter touching (Creswell, 2013).

Summary of Gaps in Literature

Overall, a survey of the literature reveals that the majority of research on sexual assault, its effects, and healing involves community-based participants who are older than traditional aged college students and identify as majority White woman. As a result, findings on sexual assault, the emotional and interpersonal costs, and vehicles by which women heal are indicative of the experiences of majority White women and not generalizable to Black women. Further, the limited studies that center the experiences of

Black women fail to specify or present their findings separately by ethnic groups and thus neglect to examine how those differences shape the ways Black women make meaning of sexual assault and heal. Therefore, there remains a necessity for research on Black ciswomen's experiences with sexual assault and healing in college that is not measured by this "normative" process of healing that disproportionately represents experiences of White cisgender women. Thus, to frame the experiences of Black women, it is important to employ an epistemological and theoretical approach that acknowledges the role that power and social relationships play within the lives of Black women. As a result, I approached my inquiry into the meaning making and healing experiences of Black college ciswomen from a critical perspective.

Epistemology

A critical epistemology accounts for the role of power relationships within society in order to uncover the forces of domination and injustice and illuminate social action (Crotty, 1998). Though some argue that social critic appeared in the early times with 'men and women of the left,' many recognize Karl Marx as one of the key influencers of modern thought that laid the foundation for critical inquiry (Crotty, 1998).

In fact, critical theory can be traced to Marx's critiques of the economy and society in which he argued that those who hold economic power are able to shape the "consciousness," perceptions, and existence of those who do not (Crotty, 1998, p.). As a result, Marx adopted an activist view of philosophy in that he argued the need to change it, which steamed from an awareness that change can only take place at an ideological level (Crotty, 1998). Following in Marx's footsteps, social theorists of what came to be,

called Frankfurt School, Habermas, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse established a philosophical stance that came to be known as “critical theory” (Crotty, 1998).

Though critical theory was never a fully articulated philosophy shared by all members of Frankfurt, they all attempted to rethink the meaning of domination and human emancipation because of the emerging forms of capitalism (Crotty, 1998; Giruox,1983). In fact, one central value of the Frankfurt School was to disrupt the status quo and to uproot structures that oppress some while privileging others (Giruox, 1983; Kincheloe, 2008; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). For instance, members of Frankfurt, rejected the notion of objectivity found in scientific positivism due to the belief that it maintains existing normative systems of social domination (Giruox, 1983).

Yet, it is important to note, the body of ideas associated with critical theory are not homogenous but are comprised of a diverse set of social critique. Crotty (1998) describes that the ultimate aim of critical theory is to work towards a more just and freer society. Critical theorists maintain that human nature is within power and identity struggles and seek to expose the structures of hegemony and injustice to enable personal and political emancipation and social action (Crotty, 1998; Giruoz, 2003; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). My study is critical in nature as it aimed to reject the objective notion that all women make meaning and engage in healing the same. Instead, this study acknowledged the historical and social contexts that shape the consciousness and lived experiences of undergraduate students who identify as Black cisgender women. Further, this project aligns with criticality inquiry as it aims to influence higher education policy and practices by providing tools to value and support the experiences of Black cisgender college women post sexual assault.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

As a result of critical inquiry's goal to transform and emancipate all social structures that bring about oppression, many critical theories have developed in connection with social movements. In fact, one critical theory born out of the civil rights movement was critical race theory (CRT) (Delgado, 1995). In the 1970s, scholars Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman realized that the gains of the civil rights movement had stalled, and that racism was on the rise again (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). More specifically, Bell and Freeman detected this theme in positivist and liberal legal discourse, where scholarship such as critical legal studies (CLS) were constantly failing people of color (Martinez, 2014).

According to Gordon (1990), CLS opposed traditional legal scholarship that legitimated America's class system and instead argued that the law was rooted in societal power relationships. However, CLS scholars failed to acknowledge issues of racial inequity and downplayed the centrality of race and racism within legal systems (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Martinez, 2014). In response, CRT ascended out of the discontentment of law students and teachers of color who looked to develop theories that would validate their lived experiences (Martinez, 2014). As a result, CRT is characterized by a wide range of premises and elements (Martinez, 2014). However, one salient theme of CRT is Bell's notion that racism is not a series of isolated events instead; racism is normal and permanent in America because it is deeply entrenched in the essence of our social order (Solórzano & Delgado, 2001; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Thus, CRT scholars assert that White privilege and domination is so "ingrained in political, legal, and education structures that they are almost unrecognizable" (Taylor, 2006, p.73-74). For instance,

liberal notions of colorblindness, individualism and choice tell the story of White power and privilege and thus perpetuate the marginalization of people of color (Martinez, 2014). Delgado (1989) coined the former as "master narratives," which is the placement and normalization of the dominant group's reality above the racially subordinated group.

In 2002, scholars Solórzano and Yosso (2002) added to Delgado's (1989) terminology and definition, outlining that "majoritarian" stories privilege Whites, men, and the middle/upper class by naming their experiences as normative points of reference. For instance, as outlined, the majority of literature on meaning making and healing after experiences with sexual assault is about White women; as a result, it is stamped as a normative point of reference (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Thus, the majoritarian story is through this White cisgender lens, that all women compare their experiences to the dominant culture's social constructions of sexual assault and heal by way of disclosure.

In opposition, CRT argues that majoritarian and master narratives invalidate the history and voices of those pushed to the margins (e.g., people of color). Consequently, CRT aims to integrate knowledge from people of color through counterstories and narratives, eradicate racial subjugation, and draw relationships between race and other locations of domination (Delgado, 1989). Thus, as observed in my literature review, I used personal narratives and stories of and by women of color to challenge the majoritarian story and found that Black women make meaning of sexual assault and engage in healing in ways unique to their social locations that differ from the master narrative perpetuated in literature and practice. As a result, this study serves as a counterstory that centers Black cisgender college women as a talk back to the way that literature shows us this one picture of healing from a White lens.

Critical Race Theory in Education

Although CRT originated from critical legal studies, it has been modified and applied to different fields and disciplines, such as sociology, history, women studies, and education (Hughes & Giles, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Yet, with CRT as the theoretical underpinning of this study into the experiences of Black cisgender college women, I must turn to the foundational work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) who were the first to bring CRT into educational research. Ladson-Billing and Tate (1995) used a critical race theory to demonstrate the centrality of race and racism in understanding school inequity. A CRT approach to educational research is needed because "schooling is institutional and structural racism."

Thus, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) defined critical race theory in education as "a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom" (p.123). CRT in education is different from other CRT frameworks because it challenges traditional methods and texts and attempts to show how different social constructs intersect to impact communities of color. Critical race theory in education is guided by five tenets: 1) the centrality and intersection of race and racism 2) a challenge to dominant ideology 3) the integration of experiential knowledge 4) transdisciplinary analyses and 5) a commitment to social justice (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The specific tenets and its application to this study will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

Intersectionality

As stated earlier, one of the goals of critical race theory is to examine the relationships between race and other axes of domination. As a result, intersectionality rose as a criticism of antiracist and contemporary feminist discourses. In 1989, civil rights activist and critical legal scholar, Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality as a prism by which to understand the ways that multiple systems of subordination compound themselves to create obstacles that are often not understood or considered within traditional ways of thinking such as antiracism and contemporary feminism (Crenshaw, 1990).

Intersectionality came out of a case from the late 1970s, where an African American woman named Emma DeGraffenreid was denied a job at a local car manufacturing plant and sued the company on the bases of race and gender discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). The manufacturing plant segregated its workers by race and gender, where White people withheld one category of jobs and Black people another (Crenshaw, 1989). Yet, Black women were not hired and instead the Black people who were hired were men and the White people who were hired were women (Crenshaw, 1989). Due to the former, the district court rejected DeGraffenreid's suit brought on behalf of Black women because on the bases of sex, White women were hired and on the bases of race, Black men were hired. As a result, the court refused to consider both sex and gender discrimination.

According to Crenshaw (1989), the court's dismissive approach inferred that the limits of sex and race discrimination are defined solely on the experiences of White women's and Black men's experiences, respectively. The former conflates and ignores within group differences and thus overlooks the experiences of Black women. Thus,

Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality challenges this dominant way of thinking about discrimination that views race and gender as mutually exclusive and "unidirectional" (p.149). Instead, intersectionality argues that oppression cannot be reduced to one form, and that Black women often experience overlapping discrimination that is not the sum of race and sex discrimination but as Black women.

As a result, Crenshaw (1989) recognized that laws and policies fail to protect Black women and instead exclude them because they face overlapping forms of inequality that are uniquely different from White women and Black men. Thus, Crenshaw (1990) argued that discourses such as antiracism and feminism are inadequate in that they do not capture intersections of patriarchy and racism. For instance, sexism experienced by White women often are centered in the anti-rape movement, while racism experienced by men regularly set the parameter of antiracist movements (Crenshaw, 1990).

The feminist movement centered in White women's experiences can be observed in the literature review where Crenshaw (1990) found that intervention strategies (e.g., language requirement) had limited benefits for women of color. The former demonstrates how feminist approaches that strive to respond to violence against women can be ineffective when they fail to consider the intersectional location of Black women. While the fact that Black men have been falsely accused of sexually assaulting White women, such has been used to defend them in the face of sexual assault allegations, even when the survivor is a Black woman. As a result, sexual racism is dominated by a male-centered experience and Black women are disregarded and pushed to the margins (Crenshaw, 1989). For instance, as outlined in the literature review, Black women are expected to protect and stand in racial solidarity with Black men in the face of adversity.

Therefore, intersectionality calls for embracing the "complexities of compoundedness" to influence our way of thinking about identities and discrimination.

Black Feminist Thought (BFT)

In 1989, Collins introduced, Black feminist thought (BFT), which draws upon Crenshaw's (1989) prism of intersectionality. BFT is applicable to this study of Black cisgender college women because it developed out of the lack of appreciation and consideration for the multifaceted identities of Black women. The work of African American activists such as Sojourner Truth and Ida Wells Barnett illustrated to Collins (1989) that African American women were resisting the interlocking systems of race, gender, and class subjugation. In fact, Collins (1989) argued that the resistance work of African American women demonstrated a shared "standpoint" among Black women about the meaning of oppression and the acts of resistance Black women can and should take.

Yet, this alternative way of thinking and production of knowledge challenged the dominant perspectives surrounding studies on the consciousness of oppressed groups (Collins, 1989). For instance, one dominant viewpoint was that oppressed groups identify with the powerful and thus do not have their own consciousness concerning the oppression they experience. Another prevalent assumption was that subordinate groups are "less human" than those in power and as a result lack the capability to communicate their own standpoint (Collins, 1989, p.747). Overall, both perspectives suggest that if an oppressed group withholds an independent consciousness, then it is not their own and is inferior to the perspectives of the majority group (Collins, 1989). Further, both

approaches argue that due to the unawareness of their own oppression, oppressed groups are not motivated for political activism (Collins, 1989).

However, Collins (1989) points to the developing work in Black women's studies to demonstrate that Black women have a "self-defined standpoint" concerning the oppression they experience. For instance, Black women's social and class status (e.g., the unpaid and paid labor Black women perform, the roles they play in relationships, the communities they live in, etc.) provides them with a unique array of experiences that results in a different view of reality than that of other groups. As a result, Black women interpret their reality differently than the dominant group. Nevertheless, to maintain power and control over Black women, their standpoints are silenced and discredited by those with power. As Collins (1989) denotes, oppressed groups lack control and have unequal access to resources to articulate their standpoints outside of their own group.

Therefore, the establishment of Black feminist thought serves three purposes:

1) Counters the dominant perspective by demonstrating that Black women withhold independent and valid knowledge.

2) Provides Black women a different view of themselves and the world around them.

3) Empowers Black women to use their voices as tools of resistance to the compounded subordinations they experience.

Yet, in 2000, Collins' understanding of empowerment changed, and her examination of oppression became compounded. More specifically, Collins (2000) realized that one cannot be completely empowered through resistance until intersecting oppressions are eradicated. Thus, Black women's activism and resistance must be in

conjunction with other broad-based social justice and political actions (Collins, 2000). Lastly, Collins (2000) recognized that though historically African American women hold common experiences and thus, may withhold a unique group consciousness, such a consciousness might not develop among all Black women or expressed in the same ways.

This is when Collins (2000) coined the term, matrix of domination, which refers how intersecting oppressions are organized. Though there are commonalities amongst Black women, there are differences such as sexual orientation, age, region, and class (Collins, 2000). Yet, instead of adding the different oppressions together, Collins (2000) postulates that these different systems of oppression are situated under one overarching structure of domination that are comprised of disciplinary, structural, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power. These spheres signify locations where oppressions of gender, race, class, and more intersect with one another. Thus, understanding the complexity of Black women's experiences with sexual assault requires understanding the need to examine how singular and complex forms of oppression are organized (Collins, 2000). For instance, in the literature review, it was demonstrated that Black women from South African were socialized differently than African American women. More specifically, African American women are expected to be "strong," however many scholars argue that Black African women are expected to fulfill traditional gender roles that are seen as inferior (Gordon & Collins, 2013; Kalunta-Crumpton, 2015). Thus, this study will examine not only the intersectional experiences of Black women post experiences with sexual assault but also the within group similarities and differences.

Overall, this study serves as a counterstory to challenge the master narrative of meaning making and healing that silences Black cisgender women. Instead, this study

aims to empower Black women to their story about how they are making meaning and engage in healing after experiences with sexual assault at a private institution in the Northeast region of the United States. I used a critical paradigm as the lens for approaching this research and specifically called upon the work of Solórzano's (1997), Crenshaw (1989, 1990), and Collins' (1989, 2000) as a conceptual framework by which to give insight and build the foundation for this inquiry into the healing experiences of Black women survivors of sexual assault.

Chapter 3: Methodology

As discussed in chapter two, more information is needed with regards to how Black cisgender college women make meaning of and engage in healing after experiences with sexual assault. In this chapter, I will describe the methodologies used to understand how Black cisgender college women make meaning of and engage in healing post experiences with sexual assault. To begin, I will summarize the critical approach and theoretical framework that grounds the work. Preceding, I will discuss the study's procedures or protocols informed by my theoretical framework to identify, recruit, collect and analyze data about the ways Black cisgender college women make meaning of and engage in healing after experiences with sexual assault.

Research Questions

This study offers an opportunity to expand upon the methodologies used to understand how Black cis women make meaning of and heal from experiences with sexual assault. The gaps in the literature, CRT, BFT, and intersectionality informed the development of my research questions below:

1. How do Black undergraduate ciswomen make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault at a private university in a mid-Atlantic city?
2. How does healing occur among Black undergraduate ciswomen at a private university in a mid-Atlantic city after experiences with sexual assault?
    a. For those women who do not believe they have entered a process of healing, how do they conceptualize what healing would look like?[3]

[3] Footnote: This question aims to demonstrate that I am not assuming that all participants see themselves in a healing process. Yet, I will seek to understand what that process looks like for those who are currently engaging in healing and if they are not yet, I want them to consider and reflect on what healing would look like and what they would need.

I was intentional about asking how participants experience sexual assault and engage in healing, not if they make meaning using the dominant culture or heal through the use of disclosure. This is because, as is emphasized by the tenets of CRT, and concepts of intersectionality and Black feminist thought, racism is prevalent and gender does not affect all women in the same ways, in fact, race among many other axes of domination matters (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Crenshaw, 1989). The second question was also crafted using a Black feminist lens that asks participants to reflect on healing even if they do not believe they are actively healing as a way to provide Black women a different view of themselves and send them back into the world with a new understanding (Collins, 1989). The former serves to encourage Black women to value their own experiential knowledge (Collins, 1989).

Critical Paradigm

A critical paradigm is concerned with examining societal systems and the ways they marginalize and oppress individuals. This epistemological approach also emphasizes the importance of enabling and empowering those who are oppressed to take action to overcome the sociohistorical constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender (Fay, 1987). As a result, a critical epistemology serves as an underpinning for this study, allowing me to approach the research in a way that values and centers the experiences of Black survivors instead of imposing and perpetuating a normative standard of meaning making and what behavior contributes to healing. From a critical epistemological perspective, three theories provided a blueprint for this inquiry into the meaning making and healing experiences of Black college ciswomen: Critical race theory (Solórzano,

1997), Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1990), and Black feminist thought (Collins, 1989, 2000).

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) first emerged in the 1980s among legal scholars, Bell (1983), Delgado (1987), and Crenshaw (1988) and has since expanded into various fields such as education. CRT scholars argue that race and racism are inherent components of American society that shapes and regulates the lived experiences of people of color. Therefore, highlighting that society is divided along racial differences, which are socially constructed to justify one groups' superiority (e.g., White) over others (e.g., Native American, Black, etc.) (Solórzano, 1997). As a result, notions of race and racism privilege those who identify with the superior group and negatively impact others (Solórzano, 1997). While there are many iterations of CRT, here I will call upon the work of Solórzano (1997) to discuss the tenets of CRT in education because this study was interested in the meaning making and healing experiences of Black ciswomen in college.

Solórzano (1997) focuses on five main tenets of CRT including the permeance of race and racism, challenge to dominant ideology, commitment to social justice, centrality of experiential knowledge, and a multidisciplinary approach. The permeance of race tenet acknowledges that race does not exist on its own. Instead, race is a socially constructed concept that functions to maintain hierarchical racial structures that permeate our society and allocates privileges to those who identify as White while Othering people of color to further disenfranchise them (Bell, 1983; Solórzano, 1997). Thus, this tenet offered a more comprehensive way to examine the experiences of Black college ciswomen impacted by sexual assault.

Permeance of Race

Black women's lives have been negatively influenced by both racism and sexism throughout history. Due to the permeance of race and racism, Whiteness is the "normative" standard by which others are measured and judged (Solórzano, 1997). As a result, Black women's unique intersection of identities have created an inferiority paradigm where they are seen as "less than" the dominant White patriarchal majority. The former provided justification for the sexualization and historical abuse of Black and brown bodies, specifically Black women. Yet, despite the end of slavery and segregation, Black women are still disadvantaged and impacted by racist attitudes and practices in their everyday lives. For Black women, reporting and healing from sexual assault is rooted in relationships to institutions of power and loyalty to community.

For example, racism is embedded in the systems that Black survivors face both formally and informally. Due to the unique intersection of Black women's identities, systems of oppression ranging from mass incarceration, police brutality and more shapes their experiences with formal social systems. For instance, one study found that the race of both a survivor and respondent influence how sexual assault cases are handled in the criminal justice system and that law enforcement is "insensitive" and "unresponsive" to violence in the Black community (Washington, 2001, p.1273). As a result, this creates a distrust in the system and results in Black women survivors of sexual assault being less likely to seek assistance from formal social systems such as law enforcement, sexual assault crisis centers, etc. (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010; Donovan & Williams, 2002; Washington 2001; West, 2006; Wyatt, 1992). Further, with origins dating back to slavery and the "Jezebel" stereotype, hypersexualized depictions of Black women have

manifested through sociopolitical contexts and influences the credibility and perceptions of Black women (Collins, 2000). Consequently, Black women who disclose their sexual assault to informal social systems (e.g., friends, family, etc.) are less likely to be believed than their White counterparts.

Resultantly, the permeance of racism tenant not only informed my research questions but also my interview protocol. For example, this tenant challenged me to create questions that disrupted the "Othering" of Black women and instead acknowledge and explore the impact of racism on the women's experiences (e.g., how they see themselves, their experiences, healing). As a point of illustration, one of the prompts given to the participants was to, "Draw a map of your core identities and discuss its impact on your life" (Bell, 1983; Solórzano, 1997). The interview questions such as the one previously stated, also went a step further in that they disrupted the hierarchical racial structures that permeate our society by valuing the women's humanity and consciousness about oppression.

Challenging the Dominant Narrative

In moving on, CRT scholars challenge the dominant ideology of race neutral research, laws and policies declaring that it provides an avenue for the self-interest and power of dominant groups (Solórzano, 1997). Thereby, this tenet asserts that traditional claims of colorblindness and objectivity create deficit-informed research that silences and minimizes the knowledge and experiences of people of color (Solórzano, 1997). This particular tenet offers this study a way to challenge assumption observed in literature on sexual assault and healing that Black woman all share common experiences and backgrounds erases and robs Black women of their historical and political agency and

uniqueness, at the expense of being compared to their White counterparts. For instance, research shows that disclosure where there is a positive social reaction can provide benefits that mitigate the negative effects of a sexual assault (Jacques-Tiura, et al., 2010). In fact, many studies suggest that disclosure where there is a positive reaction is associated with positive psychological and health outcomes (Ahrens, et al., 2010; Bryant-Davis, et al., 2015; Cohen & Roth, 1987) while those who do not disclose experience more psychological consequences (Bryant-Davis et. al, 2015). Thus, through a medical model lens, research views disclosure as a critical component of "healthy" healing and non-disclosure as a detrimental healing mechanism. As a result, the healing experiences of Black women that often do not involve disclosure or the expression of emotions or feelings are seen as deficit because it does not align with the traditional interpretation of healing.

Therefore, using this tenant as a blueprint for this study challenged me to be intentional in my presentation of literature in chapter two, to think about how I represent the women's experiences in chapter five and six, and to consider the ways I analyzed the data. As demonstrated in chapter two, Black women are absent in much of the literature on sexual assault and healing, thus normalizing the experiences of White individuals and silencing or minimizing the experiences of Black women (Bell, 1983; Solórzano, 1997). As a result, this tenant pushed me where applicable, to both begin each section of chapter with available literature that centers and values the voices and experiences of Black women and to search and integrate literature outside of the White dominated spaces of published research on sexual assault and healing.

In addition, this tenant also informed the ways I represented the women's experiences in chapters five and six. For instance, instead of sharing the women's experiences and analyzing how they act in conversation with the literature, mostly rooted in the experiences of White women, I made space for the women's voices to exist on their own. Thus, in chapters five and six, the women can share their stories without interruption and in a manner that forces others to not just hear them, but to listen to them, to feel them, and to recognize their humanity. Further, I challenged the dominant narrative in my representation of the women's experiences, by refraining from labeling headers in chapter five and six with terminology used in literature on the sexual assault experiences of majority White women and instead using the women's words as labels.

Lastly, the challenging the dominant narrative tenant of CRT also informed my approach to data analysis in that it allowed me to honor the complexity and nuance that exist among and across Black women. For instance, during my data analysis I went back to the raw data for a third and fourth read to make note of the women's similarities and differences in experiences and sense making. The former allowed me to disrupt the monolithic treatment of Black women and identify the nuances that are often erased at the expense of being compared to their White counterparts.

Centrality of Experiential Knowledge.

However, applying CRT to this study, specifically the centrality of experiential knowledge tenet, will allow me to challenge the master narrative of healing that silences Black women's experiences and employs a strengths-based lens that centers and empowers their experiential knowledge and healing to be heard and valued (Solórzano, 1997). CRT scholars recognize that the knowledge and lived experiences of people of

color are both legitimate and important to learn about and teach (Solórzano, 1997). More importantly, CRT scholars aim to shift the narrative that distorts the lived experiences of people of color to one focused on their experiences as sources of strength by drawing on methods such as storytelling, testimonies, narratives, family histories, and more (Solórzano, 1997).

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) defines counterstory as a method of challenging master narratives and telling the stories of those whose stories are silenced or disregarded. Counterstories serve four purposes:

1) They build community among subordinated and oppressed groups.

2) They challenge the knowledge of those in the dominant group who withhold power.

3) They provide new and alternate possibilities beyond the ones those at the margins live.

4) They teach others that one can shape another world that is more complex than the story and reality alone.

In addition, there are three different types of counterstories - personal, other people's stories or narratives, and composite stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This study used counterstories specifically other people's stories to challenge and talk back to the narratives of "sameness" that pushes a White ciswomen pattern of meaning-making and healing and views Black women as monolithic.

Counterstory informed both the design and served as the lens for analysis in this study. More specifically, approaching this study using a counterstory lens allowed me to design the study in a way that encouraged questioning and disruption of master

narratives. For instance, in building the interview protocol, I emphasized the agency of the women by providing them space to use any medium of expression to narrate their journey of healing, decide how and if they wanted to engage in grounding techniques during the interview, and more.

This tenant also enabled me to analyze the data to uncover the ways the women viewed themselves, sexual assault, healing, and perceived others' view of them. In this study, I noticed consequences as a result of master narratives and was able to analyze the ways the women deconstructed and resisted "master narratives" of Black womanhood and how they choose to engage in healing. Further, this tenant also encouraged me to explore how providing the women space to tell their stories also allowed them to build community with not only the researcher (another Black woman) but also feel a deeper connection to their Black women community overall. Resultantly, this challenged me to consider how I represent the women's experiences, using six counterstories, specifically other people's stories to value the nuanced ways the women talk back to outsiders' assumptions of who they are (e.g., Black women are a monolith). Overall, counterstory allowed my data collection, analysis, and final representation to stand up against dominant discourses of meaning-making and healing and allows readers to understand a new perspective on Black women, while also respecting and affirming the agency of Black women.

Intersectionality

In 1989, Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality as a lens by which to understand the ways that multiple systems of oppression collide to create obstacles that are often not understood and as a result, Black women are disregarded and pushed to the

margins (Crenshaw, 1990). Thus, Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality challenges this dominant way of thinking about discrimination that views race and gender as mutually exclusive (p.149). Instead, intersectionality argues that oppression cannot be reduced to one form, and that Black women often experience overlapping discrimination that is not the sum of race and sex discrimination but as Black women. Thus, this particular prism offers a lens by which to examine the ways inequalities and historical oppressions shape how Black women make meaning and engage in healing post experiences with sexual assault.

Black Feminist Thought - Matrix of Domination

In 2000, Collins' introduced an epistemology called Black feminist thought which draws upon the intersectional framework of Crenshaw (1990). Crenshaw's (1990) original work focused on the identities of Black women and how their racism and sexism intersect and therefore how sexist, racist, and also feminist lens, which functions as White supremacy, have marginalized their experiences. Thus, Crenshaw (1990) explained the importance of considering how layers of marginalization such as racism and sexism overlap and create multiple levels of social injustice. Though Collins (2000) calls on the work of intersectionality, she differentiates her epistemology by rejecting the "additive approach" to oppression and instead viewing identities such as race, gender, class, etc. as interconnecting under one umbrella structure of domination, which she coins the matrix of domination (p. 554).

Collins (2000) suggests that the interconnecting power and oppression under the matrix of domination results in individuals gaining privilege from some parts of the matrix and being penalized by others. Thereby, Collins (2000) calls for embracing

interconnecting systems of oppression to understand that where there is domination there are also sites of resistance. There are three levels by which individuals experience and engage in resistance: personal, community, and institutional level (Collins, 2000, p. 556). Though Collins (2000) believes it is critical to embrace and understand the interlocking systems of oppression she asserts that it is more critical to provide minoritized groups with new knowledge they can use to define their own reality. With this in mind, when considering meaning making and healing, it is vital to consider that being a Black ciswoman is not a universal experience and is instead shaped by where one sits in the matrix of domination which encompasses a combination of other identities and varying sums of privileges and penalties (e.g., age, class, etc.). Therefore, Collins' (2000) matrix of domination challenges the monolithic view of Black women often seen in research and calls for the recognition of the nuances that exist within and among this group (Neville & Pugh, 1997; Washington, 2001).

Research Procedures

This study offered an opportunity to expand upon the methodologies used to understand how Black college ciswomen make meaning of and heal from sexual assault. The design of this study was rooted in a basic qualitative approach (Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A basic approach seeks to understand how people interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and make meaning of their experiences and the world (Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study sought to disrupt the dominant narrative that meaning making and healing is the same for all women and instead, explored how Black cisgender college women attribute meaning to sexual assault and engage in healing. Further, basic qualitative research is "not guided by an established

set of philosophical assumptions in the form of one of the known qualitative methodologies," so this study drew on critical literature to situate meaning making and healing in sociopolitical contexts (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003, p.4; Merriam, 2002). Further, to honor the BFT framework of this study, I was able to seek out alternate methods and sites of knowledge that valued and appreciated knowledge produced by Black cisgender college women (Caelli et al., 2003; Collins, 2000, Solórzano, 1997).

In addition, a basic qualitative approach aims to obtain a rich description of data through the collection of stories and narratives from individuals about their lived experiences (Lim, 2011). As a result, this study empowered Black women to create personal counterstories to detail their experiences with meaning making and healing (Collins, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Additionally, a rich description of data allowed this study to serve as six counterstories that talked back to the master narrative that every woman heals the same and every Black woman heals the same (Collins, 2000; Creswell, 2013; Solórzano, 1997).

Sampling Strategy

For roughly five months, participants for this study were recruited from a private institution located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Similar to the average for 4-year private nonprofit institutions, Black students make roughly 13% of the more than 15,000 student population and it costs more than $46,014 per year for undergraduate tuition, fees, room, and board to attend the institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The site location also has some of the most politically active and conscious students in the world characterized by students' participation in protests, open debates, letter-writing campaigns, lobbying and more. I focused this study at this specific

institution due to convenience. My relationship to the institution is concealed as a measure to protect the participants. I only share institutional characteristics that I find as important factors impactful to participants meaning making and healing. Throughout the study, I explained confidentiality and provided a list of campus, 24/7 national hotlines and local resources to utilize if the study caused distress to participants. Further, when advertising and recruiting for this study, participants were informed that I was the only one conducting the research, so they had the choice to contact me to participate in the study.

Black cisgender women survivors at the private institution were recruited through purposeful recruitment mechanisms to include: a flyer that was sent out digitally, posted on social media and distributed through university-wide listservs and newsletters (multicultural center monthly newsletter and Black women student organizations). Further, I recruited participants through snowballing in that as participants expressed interest, I asked them to share my study with others they knew (Creswell, 2013).

Participants demonstrated their interest in the study by sending a private email to me. Once individuals' expressed interest by email, I directed them to complete a Qualtrics survey that was informed by the gaps in the literature, CRT, BFT, and intersectionality and asked questions such as: Do you identify as Black? What is your ethnicity? (e.g., African American, African, Afro-Caribbean, etc. to name a few) (an open-ended space was provided for participants to distinguish ethnicity) Have you been impacted by unwanted sexual contact?

I was intentional about asking if the participant identifies as Black and leaving an open space to write in their ethnicity as a way to address the gap in research by

recognizing the diversity among Black women. Further, the former honored Collins' (2000) BFT, by considering the fact that systems of oppression are organized differently among Black women and shape how they see themselves and the world. Thus, the power to self-define what it means to be Black offers a challenge to the external monolithic definition and validates Black women's power and lived experiences.

Moreover, my use of asking about "unwanted sexual contact" aligns with BFT and CRT to challenge the traditionally used definitions of sexual assault that are centered in the experiences of White women and instead allowed Black women to define for themselves what this term means so that a definition that centers the voices of Black women can emerge from this work. In addition, the question about one's experience with unwanted sexual contact is also informed by Collins' (2000) BFT and Solórzano and Yosso's (2002) CRT in that it challenges the traditional and White ways sexual assault is conceptualized and instead honors the voices and substantive knowledge of Black women. Further, I intentionally asked if individuals consider themselves within a healing process as this helped me identify which line of questions to ask during the second interview (e.g., What does your healing process look like? What would it look like if you were to embark upon a healing journey?) If participants met the criteria for the study, they received an email confirmation of the date of their interview, a remainder of the length of the interviews, and an electronic consent form and description of the study.

Data Collection

Over the course of approximately 2 months, data for this study was gathered primarily through two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six Black ciswomen who experienced unwanted contact where I wrote memos, audiotaped, and transcribed the

interviews. To begin, Black women face intersecting systems of oppression situated under structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power, thus it was important that this study named and reduced any power imbalances between the interviewer and interviewees (Crenshaw, 1990; Collins, 2000). To correct this asymmetry, I collaborated with each participant to decide which virtual platform was most accessible, comfortable, and safe for them. For instance, a couple of the women were out of the country or had limited access to a computer, so preferred to use virtual platforms like Google Hangout or WhatsApp that were accessible and maintained a stable connection. Further, I explained before, during, and after each interview that participants reserved the right to stop, skip, and/or leave the interview at any time during the study. In addition, at the beginning and end of each interview, participants reviewed the informed consent document and a list of campus, local, and national resources to utilize if the study caused distress. In another attempt to reduce power imbalances and maintain confidentiality, the participants were empowered to choose their own pseudonyms so they can recognize and see the credit for their contributions. However, I recognize the potentiality for pseudonyms to carry a silencing effect, and such can be harmful specifically for Black women whose voices are often silenced and discredited by those with power (Collins, 1989). As a result, I sought to create trust and encourage participants to use a Black pseudonym that allowed them to name their stories and healing as a way to counter the norm that is often dehumanizing and overlooks Black women and their individuality (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Moreover, due to the sensitive nature of this study, I began and ended each interview inviting the women to engage in a breathing technique to help participants center themselves back in the present and out of any potentially distressing thoughts or emotions (Weil, 1999). The breathing technique did not require any equipment, took approximately two minutes, and could be performed anywhere. For the participants who wanted me to facilitate the breathing technique, I guided them to inhale for four seconds, hold their breath for seven seconds, and exhale out for eight seconds (Weil, 1999). For participants who did not wish to engage in the breathing technique, I asked them to take roughly two minutes to take care of themselves by doing anything that helps to ground them.

Further, informed by the literature and theoretical framework testimony and resistance are inherent in the data collection of this study, in that participants will be able to claim the power of and decide how they want to use their voices (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For instance, participants were given the option to write, record, or produce tangible items (e.g., concept maps, creative work of healing journeys, etc.) for themselves that with their permission, I made a copy of but that they maintained ownership to the original and kept in their possession. The former honors Collins's (2000) BFT in that it acted as a healing modality and encouraged Black women to value their own subjective knowledge while also providing them the space to maintain ownership over their production of knowledge.

Initial Interviews and Mapping

Using the definitions crafted by each participant, the initial interviews focused on the first research question: How do Black undergraduate ciswomen at a private PWI in a

mid-Atlantic city make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault? Asking participants to draft their definition of sexual assault honored Collins' (2000) BFT and Solórzano and Yosso's (2002) CRT in that it challenged the traditional notions of sexual assault centered in White women's experiences and instead values the voices and substantive knowledge of Black women.

The initial interview was semi-structured with a combination of structured and unstructured questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interview began with asking the participants to use a virtual application, OneNote to create identity maps as informed by Jacobson and Mustafa (2019). The use of identity maps honors the critical theoretical and epistemological approach of this study by allowing individuals to make sense of their social identities and realities while considering the constraints imposed by institutional and systemic power structures (Collins, 2000; Fielding, 1994; Futch, & Fine, 2014; Souto-Manning, 2013). Identity maps as a form of data collection upholds one of the theoretical underpinnings of CRT, in that social identities such as race, and gender are socially constructed and thus are fluid and constantly influenced by political factors and individual lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). Thus, drawing on CRT's social construction of race concept, mapping social identities served to help Black women name and identify the specific characteristics and narratives associated with their identities so they can discuss how such shapes the way they make meaning and engage in healing post experiences with sexual assault (Creswell, 2013; Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Identity maps serve as counterstories where participants were able to reflect on their social identities and conceptualize the ways they shape and inform how they make

meaning of their experiences with sexual assault (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). For instance, the identity maps involved three layers: the identification of their core social identities (e.g., race, gender, class, age, etc.), how their social positions influence their lives and extend privilege and/or oppression, and the values/emotions attached to their identities both by them and by others (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). The identity map is intended to be a flexible instrument to guide participants to start reflecting on their intersecting identities as to understand how they ultimately inform their conceptualization of sexual assault (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). Participants were asked questions such as: Please draw a map of your core social identities. How have these identities impacted your life, what does it mean to be [insert identities]? What ways have your social identities influenced how you define sexual assault? (See Appendix A)

As motivated by the literature, CRT (Solórzano and Yosso, 2000), and BFT (Collins, 2000), at the conclusion of the initial interviews, participants were provided the option to keep a journal (written or spoken) to capture thoughts and emotions that arise as they reflect on their experiences both with sexual assault and on their experience of participating in the study. This is because the literature on the healing experiences of Black women outlined that some Black women use creative art such as writing and poetry as methods of healing, therefore, in addition to drawing, I wanted to provide another vehicle for participants to talk back and engage in testimony (Taylor, 2002). Further, as emphasized by CRT and BFT, journaling can serve as a way for Black women to engage in storytelling and use their voices as tools to resist the compounded subordinations they experience (Collins, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Journal entries were kept in a secure system with a folder labeled under the participant's chosen pseudonym. Lastly, participants were asked to draft their definition of healing and given the following prompt to submit two days before the second interview: “Select a medium of expression (e.g., poems, tattoos currently present on their bodies, etc.) and depict your journey of healing (using the definition you submitted to me when you selected interview dates).” Asking participants to define healing after their first interview, allowed participants time to reflect and think about what healing is in a more meaningful way after processing their experiences in the first interview. Further, the prompt for the second interview was informed by the literature on the healing experiences of Black women and BFT, which demonstrate that groups at the margins use alternative ways to create consciousness; in fact, some Black women use creative art (e.g., poetry, movies, etc.) as a method to achieve healing (Adisa, 2001; Angelou, 1993; Anzaldúa, 1999; hooks, 1999; Taylor, 1993). Kirkland (2014) also found that the expressions of lived experiences exist in multiple forms; more specifically that Black men used tattoos as a way to tell their stories and struggles. As a result, the second interview looked to alternative expressions of healing such as tattoos, piercings, poems, and more.

Second Interviews and Creative Art

Due to the sensitive nature of the study, second interviews commenced roughly a week after the first interviews to allow participants time to reflect on the first interview, engage in thinking through what healing means to them, all while de-stressing and employing healing strategies. The participants were asked to upload their definition and creative artistic response to the prompt onto a secure system that only myself and the

individual participant had access to. The interviewees were asked to upload their work two days before the second interview to give me time to review and prepare probing questions for the second interview. After a week, I used emerging data from the initial interviews to conduct a semi-structured individual interview that further explored concepts related to my second research question: How do Black undergraduate ciswomen at a private university in a mid-Atlantic city make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault? How does healing occur among Black undergraduate ciswomen women after experiences with sexual assault? For those women who do not believe they have entered a process of healing, how do they conceptualize what healing would look like?

The second interview started with participants discussing the medium of expression they selected and narrating their journey of healing or what healing would look like if they do not consider themselves in a place where they are healing (e.g., significant moments, emotions, barriers to healing, needs). I asked probing questions such as: What made you choose this form of creative art? How did this decision connect to healing for you? Why did you choose this form of healing (e.g., resistance, other women)? Have you ever used the term healing prior to this project? Tell me more. How do you define healing? The former questions were crafted through the lens of the literature on Black women's healing experiences that outlined that some Black women engage in healing as a way to talk back or to help other Black women (Taylor, 2002). Further, the questions allowed participants to engage in storytelling, which honors the tenets of CRT because it will allow participants to challenge the master narrative of meaning making and healing (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). (See Appendix A)

Data Analysis

Data was obtained from this study through individual interviews, identity maps, images of creative work, field notes, and brief analytic memos which were analyzed by extracting themes told by participants (thematic analysis) and an examination of how stories were crafted and performed (dialogue analysis) (Creswell, 2013). My analysis for this study began the first morning I interviewed one of the women. I began writing field notes during and after each interview memoing the women's nonverbal communications, ideas or patterns I saw emerging, and my personal reactions. When the data collection was completed, I worked tirelessly to listen, read, and edit the automated transcriptions provided by Otter.ai to ensure each transcription accurately matched the audio recording for each interview.

After working with, transcribing, and listening to audio recordings for two months, I began to read through my entire data set, including the transcriptions of the interviews, the identity maps, and images of the women's creative work and made notations of themes I saw. On the initial reading, I conducted first level coding, where I used a combination of emic and etic coding to comb the data for multiple events, concepts, and themes using the coding software, Taguette and printing and highlighting (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). First, I used emic coding which allowed me to center the women's voices and the ways they talked about their lives and their experiences, rather than imposing both literatures and my own interpretation of their lived experiences into thematic codes. Then, in the second reading of the raw data, I used etic coding informed by the study's theoretical framework and concepts pertaining to Black women identified in the literature. These first level etic codes for RQ1 included, White

Dominated Intervention Strategies, Community Solidarity, and Stereotypes/Controlling Images, Therapy and for RQ2 included Talking Back/Resistance, Reclamation of One's Body, and Spirituality.

Then, I used Taguette to begin organizing the data and performing a thematic analysis to segregate the data into categories based on codes (Glesne, 2016). This step involved printing all of the data associated with each individual code, putting them under their corresponding research question, and reading through the data for each separate code for any themes. This included specific quotes, interviews, and images. This helped me begin organizing the data into larger families of codes so that I could move forward to broader themes.

Due to the fact that this study was disrupting the monolithic treatment of Black women and exploring how the thematic ideas vary and compare across social locations, such as different Black cultures (e.g., African, Afro-Caribbean, and African American) or settings like home or university, I went back to the raw data again for another read and listen. This third and fourth engagement with the data set allowed me to honor the commitments of BFT by using dialogue analysis to examine the women's stories and the telling of those stories (Collins, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Glesne, 2016). Therefore, I engaged in open coding by rereading field notes and transcripts of each narrative and made note of the experiences discussed, the feelings and reactions expressed, and the meanings ascribed to their stories (Glesne, 2016). The former was accomplished by using the printed transcripts with wide margins, to further analyze the data. Following, through the lens of BFT, Black women do not have identical experiences nor interpret their experiences the same, as a result, this reread allowed me to focus on

comparing the women's narratives and making note of similarities and differences in experiences and sense making (Collins, 2000; Glesne, 2016). I used colored marking pens and highlighters to assist me in identifying themes and nuances (Collins, 2000; Glesne, 2016). Lastly, using a critical epistemological perspective that acknowledges the impact of societal factors on the experiences of individuals at the margins, as I reread and listened to the data, I worked to situate individuals' stories within their cultural and political context (Crenshaw, 1989; Crotty, 1998; Glesne, 2016).

As a result, some of my first level codes were subsumed by other codes, relabeled, or dropped altogether. After examining and reexamining the data from multiple perspectives, organizing it in ways that allowed me to explore how this data answers the research questions, and rereading the data both in isolation and in context, I was eventually able to organize the data in ways that allowed for larger theoretical conversation and into larger themes for each data chapter to answer the research questions. As I read and reread data both during and after formal data collection and spoke with the women in this study, the principal investigator, and research committee support staff as approved by the IRB about the patterns I was seeing, my analysis continued into the writing process. Thus, continued expanding, reducing, rereading of the data, listening to audio, and more led me to unique writing approaches that allow for a trustworthy representation of the women's stories.

Validity/Trustworthiness

As discussed earlier, Black women are often marginalized and silenced in both literature and in society. Therefore, as I embark upon this basic qualitative study to obtain a deeper understanding of how Black college women make meaning of and engage in

healing after experiences with sexual assault, it is critical for the findings to be credible and accurate to the women I am studying and others. Therefore, I utilized a few validation and trustworthiness strategies suggested by Creswell and Miller (2000) such as: triangulation, member checks, peer review, rich, thick descriptions, and clarifying positionality (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As stated earlier, I triangulated my data by using multiple methods of data collection including individual interviews and creative materials (Creswell & Creswell, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moreover, due to the sensitivity of the research topic and my emphasis on privileging Black women's voices and locating meaning, I engaged in member checks where I solicited participants to reflect on, assess the accuracy and credibility of my findings and interpretations both during and at the end of data collection (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, due to my positionality as an advocate, the member checks were also useful to identify any research biases by asking participants questions such as, "Is this the direction you were going before I asked or stated [insert statement of question]?" (Creswell & Creswell, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In addition, to incorporate and external check of the research process, I had my research committee support staff, approved by IRB to help keep me honest by asking challenging questions about methods and interpretations, and providing me space to talk through tensions and any feelings (Creswell, 2013). As encouraged by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and as a method of transparency, I maintained written accounts of my peer review sessions (Creswell, 2013). Further, I obtained rich and thick descriptions not only to serve as counterstories but also to allow readers to determine whether the findings from this study are applicable or transferable to other settings (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, in my

data collection and presentation of data I provided details that include quotes and physical and activity descriptions (Creswell, 2013).

Subjectivity/Positionality

In moving on, I remained transparent with participants and readers by stating my background, past experiences, and prejudices that have shaped my approach and interpretations of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For instance, in basic research, reflexivity is critical because of the collaborative nature of this approach, therefore due to my work as a Black advocate and survivor of sexual assault I made sure to engage in heavy reflexivity and memoing as to identify and detail where my personal and professional background impact my research design. Lastly, I included thick descriptions of the data because according to Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993), it allowed Black women's stories to be told through their own words and provided readers the opportunity to transfer the findings to other situations that might be out of the traditional academy. Most importantly, thick descriptions acted as counterstories that provided opposing and different viewpoints or insights compared to the normative "truth" held around healing.

Chapter Summary

What has been largely absent from the literature on sexual assault and healing are the experiences of Black cisgender college women. As U.S. higher education continues to become browner, centering the voices of Black cisgender women in sexual assault and healing discourse becomes even more critical. Thus, using a basic research design, I aimed to look at the intersectional space in which Black ciswomen attribute meaning to sexual assault and their healing experiences. More importantly, it was my intention that

this study served to initiate the shift in how institutions of higher education perceive meaning making and healing post sexual assault. As a result, I am to influence the cultivation of higher education spaces where Black cisgender college women's experiences are valued and integrated in prevention and support policies and practices.

Chapter 4: Participant Introductions

For roughly five months, I recruited women for my study through purposeful and snowball recruitment methods to include sharing and resharing the recruitment flyer digitally through listservs, university-wide newsletters, social media postings on Black and advocacy-related student organization accounts, and by word of mouth, and asking the participants who expressed interest to share my study with others they knew, exhausting my recruitment efforts. Several Black identifying ciswomen expressed interest but only six enrolled in the study. During the recruitment process, our world was in the midst of a pandemic within a pandemic, where there was a global spread of COVID and publicized and increased incidents of anti-Black violence and racism. Therefore, this study faced a number of challenges that affected participant enrollment which are limitations discussed in chapter 3.

As a result, only six women felt emotionally available and safe enough to enroll and participate in the study. Yet, the bravery of these six women to participate in this study and the intimate and personal stories they shared were commendable, important, and appreciated. Through vignettes taken from interviews, identity maps, and member checks with each participant, this chapter introduces each of these remarkable women. Yet, due to the sensitive nature of the study, the women chose pseudonyms for me to use and some details about them were reimagined such as majors, interests, and family members. Each woman was given the chance to read their own vignettes and provide feedback.

The participants' vignettes serve as introductions to the six counterstories used in the next two chapters to present the study’s findings. The six counterstories introduced in

this chapter are specifically, the telling of other people's counterstories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Part of the reason I chose counterstorytelling was because it challenges and talks back to the narratives of "sameness" that pushes a White ciswomen pattern of meaning-making and healing and views Black women as monolithic (Neville & Pugh, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Washington, 2001). Secondly, I chose this particular form of counterstorytelling to highlight the distinctions rather than creating a composite and because telling the women's counterstories from a third-person point of view allowed each of the women's experiences to gain validation through the act of re-telling.

Mama Africa

Mama Africa, a senior in college, is the oldest and only daughter of immigrants from a country in West Africa. As a first-generation immigrant, she grew up in a traditional West African home where, as the only girl, her father looked to her to cook for her little brothers because ". . . there's nobody else to...Like, my dad's not going to force that [cooking] upon anybody else." Since there was no other choice but to obey him, she shifted her thinking and began seeing it as an expression of her love because every time she cooks for someone "they show like, a lot of gratitude."

In addition to cooking, Mama Africa is also the strong one in her family, she has to "make sure everybody is okay." She detailed a time in which she was not feeling the best mentally, but her mother was also having a bad day. Yet, Mama Africa had to step in and take care of "household stuff" because she is the ". . . only other girl or woman here [in her home]." Though taking care of her family was something she was expected to do, being there for them and making them happy also brings her a sense of worth and happiness.

While she has many responsibilities helping care for her loved ones, Mama Africa's family also made education a priority. She recalls growing up hearing her African family members associate success with being either a doctor, lawyer, engineer or, marrying a rich man. Thus, Mama Africa enrolled in college and embarked upon a career in the health field with hopes of helping others feel and look more beautiful. As a child of West African immigrants, Mama Africa does not speak the native language fluidly, thus "most people that are [West African] immigrants in America, they won't really accept me as like full [West African]. This was the case for her when she started college and expressed not being embraced or seen as a true West African woman because she did not talk or look West African enough. Despite the former, Mama Africa found community in a same race and gender student organization where she was embraced by other Black women. Her organization has provided her a safe space to learn more about her Blackness and "African American identity in general."

Europa

This participant selected the pseudonym Europa to pay homage to the African woman by which Europe was named after, Europa. Europa was raised by her mother and grandma in a mixed lineal family dynamic and grew up hanging out with her aunts and uncles who were all close in age. In growing up, she never really paid attention to gender differences, she shared,

". . . specific for our like communities of color because I just felt like, first of all, culturally, historically like we're not supposed to really have a difference like we were for one, in like man comes from a woman."

Yet, while in the military academy for some time before transferring, Europa was forced to see firsthand gender differences and recognize that she lives in a "patriarchal" world where "women were abused a lot by men." As one of the few Black women in her military academy, she faced several challenges and hardships rooted in her race and gender,

> . . . the reason why it's so hard to talk to another Black woman at the academies is because they specifically put us up. They say that they want other people to become more diverse and inclusive or, I forget the term that they use something about being diverse and inclusive so what they do is they split all the Black people up in different squadrons so now we have to be surrounded by White people that never seen a Black person before.

Proceeding her time in the military, Europa decided to enroll in a private institution to study linguistic languages, human behavior, culture, and societies. Thus, she is intentional about the words she uses to define herself and others. For instance, Europa detailed the etymology of the word Black,

> ". . . it actually means to become pale . . . you have miscegenation right miscegenation is the mixing up of different cultures and races are really what it was, it was rape. So, the factor that they coined the term onto us. We unknowingly use that word. It just shows how cursive the English language is."

Europa is intentional about the language she uses and strays away from using societal identifiers such as Black or woman and instead refers to herself using words like carbonated wombman or umelanted wombman. As a result, throughout this study

anytime I am referencing Europa's Blackness or womanhood I will use "umelanated" and "wombman" as to center and value her agency and knowledge.

Imani

Imani identifies as a mixed-race Black girl from the Midwest. As a child raised by a single parent, she and her siblings needed places to go after school while their guardian was at work. As a result, Imani, talked about the church being a place in which they stayed often, "I used to go to church Sundays and Wednesdays . . . we would be at church all the time, all summer, we were in the church program, because like, there was nowhere else for us to stay." This spiritual foundation as a Christian who believes in God continues to shape Imani's morals and values today.

Aside from her spiritual identity, Imani sees her race and gender as an interconnected salient identity. She sees herself as a "Black girl" instead of a "Black woman," sharing,

> . . . when you say Black woman, and you say, White woman, those two things have two very different connotations. It's almost like a White woman can be a soft thing. But a Black woman always has to be, you know, some type of aggressive figure almost. So, I feel like that is why sometimes, when I'm describing myself verbally, I say, I'm a Black girl instead of a Black woman because I don't feel that I am, you know, aggressive or whatever.

Imani went on further to detail how though she is mixed with White and Black, she is treated as a Black woman. While working at a bar in her hometown, she described how everyone is attracted to White girls, but with Black girls, people hold preconceived judgments such as,

> What type of Black girl is this? And that there really is no personality that I could have that is not putting me in a box, like, either way it is. The case would be okay, so this is a Black White girl, you know, if I talk, how I talk, basically or is this a ghetto Black girl, you know, if I have braids in my head, it just really depends. If I move my hands around too much . . . like, whatever the case may be, it's never just that I am a woman, it is always, I am a Black woman.

As a mixed-race Black woman, she is intentional about her words and actions as to not perpetuate or fit the harmful stereotypes of Black women. Thus, anytime I mention Imani's race or gender, I will use mixed-race "Black" "girl."

Ebony Rose

Ebony Rose, one of the three seniors in this study describes herself as being like glitter, there are so many different sparkles and components that make her who she is. She was raised in a traditional Southern home by her mother in which financially, things never came easy. However, through thick and thin, Ebony Rose and her mother continue to stick together. Yet, both inside and outside of the home, Ebony Rose detailed different ways her body was controlled, policed, and surveilled. For example, she was often told what she should or should not wear and received comments starting from her young teenage years about her weight and how "grown up" she looked. Ebony Rose recalled an incident in high school that she attributes to being a curvy Black woman,

> I recall a moment in high school where my teacher literally told me, 'Oh I'm sorry, I have to send you to the office because of the dress code and *you* [emphasis added] know why.' I emphasize the 'you' because that's what she said. And she was a White woman, and she was also curvier, and my outfits weren't

any different from any other person . . . I looked more adult, um even though I'm a child."

It was frustrating for Ebony Rose because her White peers could wear the same clothes she wore with no problem, but somehow, she was seen as a distraction to her classmates. Yet, despite the disparate treatment by White teachers that often disrupted her academics, Ebony Rose got into her dream college where she now majors in creative design. During her time in college, she was not embraced by the Black community due to the "very narrow" aesthetic of what Black culture is that she "didn't fit into." For instance, she likes anime and has an obsession with Greek mythology and talked about how many in the Black community do not believe her interests are "Black enough." Although she feels like her social life with other Black students was not the best, Ebony Rose took advantage of opportunities not available to her at home, like working in the field of violence prevention and going to therapy. As a result, Ebony Rose has blossomed into a bold, brave, and funny old soul exploring her queerness who, no longer cares what others think. Every day she gets closer to loving herself, more and more.

Alicia

Alicia is a deep thinker and feeler who is often grounded in her spirituality. To know her is to know her beautiful small mixed-race family to include her mother, father, older brother, nephew, and family dog. Alicia grew up in the upper Midwest region of the United States which was far away from her extended family. Though physically distant, Alicia greatly values and holds a sense of pride in being Black and [Native American]. For Alicia, being a part of a culture that "against, you know, everything, historically that's happened . . . we're still here" meant everything to her,

> Because even when I see my Native American cousins . . . and I see them at like family gatherings and those sorts of things. It's just mind blowing to me, how many of us there um are in our tribe . . . So, for me, it's just some, I guess that kind of means resilience, in a way."

As a mixed-race Black girl, Alicia talked about the implications of that intersection on her life, in that you have to "keep it together when those things [discrimination, unfair treatment] happen, um because they're pretty much inevitable." For Alicia, it was important for her to come to terms with the reality of how she will be treated due to her race and gender.

As a result, she is someone who is "all about peace [chuckles] in my life, in my head and I actively do a lot of things to keep my life peaceful." In fact, within her social group, she is considered the "strong friend who listens and helps. I'm not used to you know being the one whose vulnerable and needs help." Therefore, she finds fulfillment in helping others become healthy both in their body and mind. As a senior studying exercise science, she has aspirations to improve health systems and outcomes for marginalized populations.

Angela

Angela, the youngest participant in this study, is a first-generation immigrant who as a result of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) resided in her home country in Southern Africa at the time of the study. Her parents are immigrants from a country in East Africa and often move around a lot. As a result, Angela is often left asking herself the question of "Who am I really, if everywhere I go, a different side of myself kind of like, shines?" Yet, no matter the number of physical homes, one thing is for certain,

Angela's family is a big part of her identity, so she finds genuine happiness wherever they are. Though she values her family, Angela and her parents have many opposing views such as what it means to be a daughter and a woman. She detailed that,

> Because it's like my parents have this traditional idea of what it means to be a daughter. And my sister and I are very opposed to that. And, you know, it's like, their [parents] ideas with the typical, you know, like, woman in the kitchen.

Through the years Angela realized that in her culture being a daughter means "being the glue of your family" and "the one that people will feel comfortable going to and yeah, like a safe space." Despite having to be a safe space for people in her family, Angela did not often experience a safe environment, specifically at her high school. Her high school was made up of predominantly White students who treated the small number of Black students "horribly." Angela explained it as a catch 22, in a country where communities within the African diaspora descended, who "would expect that people wouldn't give a f*** about Black people in Africa." As a result of experiencing and witnessing Black women being mistreated in her high school, Angela is looking forward to a new environment where she can learn more about herself and connect with people who will treat her better.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the participants in this study and demonstrated six Black girls, women, and umelanted wombman with different backgrounds, interests, and experiences. Supporting the epistemology and theoretical framework for this study, each of the women embodied Blackness and womanness in unique and varying ways (Collins, 2000). This is important because, although there were similarities across all of the

women, there were also nuances that shaped and impacted the ways they made meaning of and engaged in healing after experiencing sexual assault. In the following chapters, I explore the stories and perspectives of these six remarkable Black women.

Data Presentation and Findings

The next two chapters present the data and findings from this study. These chapters together, along with the final discussion answer the overarching research question: *How do Black undergraduate ciswomen make meaning of and engage in healing after experiences with sexual assault?* The data in these chapters have been organized and sequenced to provide a clear and comprehensive illustration of the women's experiences through six counterstories. The counterstories serve to talk back to master narratives and highlight both the distinctions and commonalities among the participants. Aligning with the epistemological and theoretical framework of this study, the headers used in the next two chapters will be based on the women's words and quotes to further amplify their voices and stories. Furthermore, throughout the next two chapters, I will use the collective "we" instead of "I" when speaking about the study's findings to value the humanity and consciousness of the Black women who participated in this study. Yet, there may be places where I will use "I," such as when referencing the research design or procedures.

In particular, chapter 5 is a presentation of the data and discussion addressing the research question: *How do Black undergraduate ciswomen make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault at a private university in a mid-Atlantic city?* While chapter 6 is a presentation of data answering the questions: *How does healing occur among Black undergraduate ciswomen at a private university in a mid-Atlantic city after*

experiences with sexual assault? For those women who do not believe they have entered a process of healing, how do they conceptualize what healing would look like?

Chapter 5: Meaning Making and Impacts of Sexual Assault

In this study, the first research question I sought to address was, "How do Black undergraduate ciswomen make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault at a private university in a mid-Atlantic city?" During the first interview, I focused on the participants' social identities and the ways those identities shaped and informed how they made meaning of their experiences with sexual assault. I began by having them reflect on their core identities followed by asking them to define sexual assault.

I found that when asking the women to define sexual assault, their responses centered around unwanted sexual contact and coercion. Yet, when the women started discussing their lived experiences, their stated definitions of sexual assault (e.g., unwanted sexual contact and coercion) were not what they were using to make sense of their experiences. For example, though their personal experiences fell within their stated definitions of sexual assault, the women had trouble labeling their experiences for a number of reasons that had to do with the ways they were socialized to believe that Black women cannot be sexually assaulted, that sexual assault is rooted in heteronormativity, and that sexual assault is associated with attraction and sexual purity. Thus, this section will first highlight the women's definitions of sexual assault that centered around "unwanted contact" and "coerced consent." Then I will discuss the tension between the stated definitions and the internalized definitions the women used to identify their personal experiences, which were shaped by cultural socialization to include family and peers. Since the women experienced different forms of sexual assault and used a variety of labels, the first time their experience of sexual assault is mentioned, I will include a footnote that will highlight the specifics. Throughout the remainder of the presentation of

findings, please refer to Appendix B. I choose not to include their experiences in their vignettes because I did not want their experiences to define them. Thus, describing their experiences in the footnotes and in the appendices allows me to center their meaning-making and healing processes without emphasizing the experiences of sexual assault. The women are not their experiences, they are more than that, they are Mama Africa, Europa, Imani, Ebony Rose, Alicia, and Angela.

What is Sexual Assault?

What has been largely absent from the discourse on sexual assault and healing are the experiences and voices of Black cisgender college women. As a result, this study provided participants space to create their own definitions of sexual assault, so a definition that centers the voices of Black women emerged from this work. I found that the definitions the women stated were centered around unwanted sexual contact and coercion. Yet, due to the differences in their sources of knowledge, there were nuances in how they talked about sexual assault and the examples they provided. For example, some of the women drew on the experiences of their peers while others were guided by the required training, they received during their first year in college. Additionally, some women, like Mama Africa and Imani explicitly mentioned, "coercion" or "unwanted sexual touching or contact" without further elaboration, while others provided specific descriptions such as "grabbing somebody's waist."

"Unwanted Sexual Contact"

When asked to define sexual assault, unanimously all the women's descriptors pointed towards unwanted sexual contact. Yet, there were nuances in what behaviors each person identified and described as unwanted sexual contact, ranging from verbal to

physical behaviors. To begin, drawing from her work experience, Ebony Rose provided the broadest definition in this study to include, any conduct, "that can be online, that can be physical, it can be verbal. I think a lot of it can also happen with you, not even in the room." Because she worked in the field of diversity, Ebony Rose explained how this equipped her with the knowledge and language to name different forms of sexual assault. Although she was able to define sexual assault, Ebony Rose went further to share, "And I also think I would like, even now I do work in this field. And I don't feel the most confident in speaking about these things." Thus, though her job gave her the knowledge to identify and pinpoint the nuances of sexual assault, she was still hesitant about her level of understanding.

Similarly, Alicia also viewed unwanted sexual contact broadly, yet her definition focused solely on physical and verbal behaviors. In Alicia's definition of sexual assault, she described specific examples she observed at college events, "Like at parties and things of that nature. So, like the slide grabbing somebody's waist or back or butt or anything when you're trying to pass them in a party." Alongside touching someone sexually without consent, Alicia further described sexual assault as unwanted sexual attention. More specifically, she drew on her physical location in a densely settled area in her depiction of sexual assault ". . . in the city and all that, like you see some things too including like people being followed and chased and all those sorts of things." When asked what influenced or shaped her overall definition of sexual assault, she shared,

> Being, uh being a student, like, obviously, [site] I would say that my like, friends and those sorts of things are diverse . . . diverse in a sense of like, sexualities and gender and those sorts of things, and even other races that they identify with. And

so, it's kind of brought in with that as well. Um so like, my friends who are um lesbian or gay, my definition is widened as I learned about their experiences too.

For Alicia, observing the experiences of her diverse group of friends and the physical geography of her college, shaped her definition of sexual assault. She went on to highlight that the first definition of sexual assault she learned painted it as a "very violent" act that "destroys a person." Yet, in high school and college, Alicia saw her friends and family members go through certain experiences that seemed "insignificant but it is still so significant." Resultantly, her definition was adjusted and broadened, ". . . so "that" [friends and family members experiences] can fit in there too, because that's what it is."

"Lack of Consent Due to Coercion"

While defining sexual assault, each of the six women mentioned coercive consent. Yet, this looked different across the women as each described varying coercive tactics, including, the use of manipulation, pressure, alcohol, and physical force. For example, Alicia shared,

> Because it [sexual assault] can be presented as one thing, but then later, you realize this was not[chuckles], not what I thought it should have been, or something like that. So, I feel like that's how it changes too when like, it takes a second to realize like, oh, I actually wasn't cool with X, Y, or Z. Umm Yeah. [thinking face] Like manipulation and those sorts of things, those are just like, mental violence, [chuckles] if you ask me, so it still fits in there in that sense. Like it's still violence. Yeah, it just might not physical violence.

For Alicia, her definition of sexual assault focused on, “mental violence” the use of psychological or emotional manipulation like normalizing and justifying their sexual behavior to coerce another person into a non-consensual sexual act. Similarly, as a former student in the military academy, Europa drew on her military training as she defined a coercive element of sexual assault, “. . . when someone you don't get consent from, you know, and you still push for it and then go for something.” Europa like Alicia focused on psychological manipulation, yet emphasized a different tactic, of making another feel pressured to engage in sexual acts. Thus, Europa understood sexual assault to also involve repeated requests and pressure that result in a person engaging in a sexual act without the consent of the other party.

Separately, one woman’s description of sexual assault focused on the use of substances to manipulate others into sexual encounters. For instance, Angela discussed that as a first-year student she was required to attend a healthy relationships training. With this in mind, when asked about her definition of sexual assault, she explained,

> . . . And I was watching that [Alcohol and Sexual Assault Edu]. And I was like, they mentioned something about how, you know, if you're like if you're drunk, or you're not in the right mind state, you're not able to give consent.

She went further to explain that alcohol is often used as a method to take advantage of someone who is drunker than the other, and thus incapable of making an autonomous decision. Though Mama Africa also agreed that sexual assault involved coercion, she focused on the physical force aspect of sexual assault. For example, Mama Africa shared that sexual assault involves, “. . . Like a guy aggressively like, having his way with a

woman like, no, no, don't do that." Thus, she views sexual assault as an act involving some form of aggression where a man ignores or overpowers the resistance of a woman.

What About "My" Experiences?

When asked to define sexual assault, many of the women offered a broad understanding to include unwanted sexual contact and coercion. Yet, as the women began describing their own experiences, they moved further away from their stated definitions, even when those experiences fell within those definitions. The women did not label their experiences as sexual assault for several reasons that were rooted in the ways they were socialized by their family and friends to believe that what they experienced was not sexual assault and if they used the label, they would experience additional harm.

Resultantly, all of the women rejected the label "sexual assault" to describe their experiences and instead referred to their lived experiences in a variety of ways (e.g., the event, the situation, etc.). To honor the women's decisions and center their voices, I will use the language they used to describe their experiences. It is important to note, though all of the women consistently used labels outside of sexual assault, as the years elapsed one participant experienced a shift from describing the specific behaviors, she experienced to the label sexual assault. Further, it is important to note even though the women did not label their experiences as sexual assault, they did find it appropriate to participate in this study. Thus, they rejected the label but there was still some sense of their experiences being sexual assault. In this section, I have divided the women's responses into two subcategories: "It's Not That Deep" and "Doesn't Bring Me Peace."

"It's Not That Deep"

The women in this study were socialized at home and among their peers to believe that what they experienced was not considered sexual assault. Yet, due to the differences in the women's cultural backgrounds, the reasons why they had trouble seeing their experiences as sexual assault varied for each of the women. In particular, the women were socialized by their families to view sexual assault through a power-based lens specifically one associated between a man or a woman or an adult and a child.

As the women tried to make sense of their experiences, some looked to direct messages they received from family members about sexual assault. The women received direct messages that taught them that sexual assault was a violent heteronormative act or a misuse of authoritative power. As mentioned in the "What is Sexual Assault?" section, Mama Africa defined sexual assault as "like coercion or just unwanted sexual touching or unwanted sexual things." Yet, when she shifted to describing her experience,[4] she diverted from using her stated definition and instead applied her mother's. As a point of illustration, Mama Africa, who lives in a traditional West African home, shared a conversation she had with her mother post her sexual assault, ". . . she [Mama Africa's mother] was like, 'Well, it wasn't really like direct rape because the person's penis did not enter you.'" Mama Africa went further to share,

> I feel like definitely after that, I was like hold up it's not that deep. It's not that serious and I just need to focus on other things, instead of dwelling on the past or dwelling on things that hurt me.

[4] Involved unwanted oral sex perpetuated by her roommate who is a Black woman and her roommate's boyfriend who is a Black man

Mama Africa's mother defined sexual assault as a violent heteronormative act and anything outside of that was not considered sexual assault. As someone who had a man perform unwanted oral sex on her while she was incapacitated, hearing her mother's definition made Mama Africa see her experience as trivial because it did not meet her mother's criteria of sexual assault. As a consequence, not only did she choose not to label her experience as sexual assault but, she did not allow herself the space to understand and process what happened to her as she might have if she labeled it as sexual assault. Interestingly, though Mama Africa demonstrated an understanding of sexual assault with her stated definition when she made sense of her own experience, she used the social constructions of sexual assault found in her West African home to assign meaning. For that reason, Mama Africa did not see her experience as sexual assault and therefore, rejected the label and instead referred to her experience as "the situation."

Similarly, Ebony Rose was also socialized to view sexual assault as a hyperviolent heteronormative act, but instead, it was by her peers. As a student who works in the field of gender and racial equity on campus, she is privy to seeing the students who use university resources to support their healing after sexual assault. With this in mind, Ebony Rose expressed, ". . . just in my work, like I probably saw a Black person uh twice . . . I think Whiteness when I think about sexual assault." Further in our conversation, Ebony Rose continued stating,

> I just feel like they [her experiences] need to measure, I guess, in some ways . . . should I say I've experienced sexual assault because I know different situations and how intense, and all of that can be like.

At her job, Ebony Rose not only saw primarily White women, but those who had experienced sexual assault in the form of force or penetration (e.g., rape or suffered an injury). Resultantly, Ebony Rose internalized sexual assault as both something only White women experience and that also needed to rise to a certain level of intensity (e.g., penetration, injury). Thus, as demonstrated by her statement, instead of using the broad definition of sexual assault she provided in the "What is Sexual Assault?" section, she looked to her internalized definition that was rooted in Whiteness and heteronormativity as she attempted to make sense of her own experience. For example, Ebony Rose questioned the seriousness and validity of her experience because she was Black and had only experienced unwanted sexual comments. For that reason, Ebony Rose had trouble seeing her experience as sexual assault and instead saw it as, "disgusting jokes, or like, racism, or colorism."

Similarly, as Imani made meaning of her experience,[5] she too did not see it as sexual assault because of the socialization she received from her fictive kin, specifically her Methodist church. Imani shared that, "I went to this summer camp or whatever, and we literally watched a video . . . like, they said don't touch my body or like, you know, this [touching] bad and whatever." Imani was taught that her body is a temple and that no one should touch it. She went further to describe the context of the videos and its impact on how she viewed sexual assault,

> . . . only like being rape right or if you're a kid and you are absolutely helpless, and someone who's has some type of power or authority of you is taking advantage . . . power dynamic was like a huge, huge thing for me.

[5] Unwanted sexual penetration by her ex-boyfriend while incapacitated

The examples of sexual assault that Imani observed in the videos, all painted it as harm perpetrated by an adult onto a child. Resultantly, she expressed, “I realized that like, again, that it was because of my definition of sexual assault that I didn't realize all the other things that he [her ex-boyfriend] was doing.” Thus, because Imani’s experience was perpetrated by her ex-boyfriend, someone of the same age, this added to the difficulty viewing what she experienced as sexual assault.

Yet, similar to Mama Africa, when Imani talked more generally about sexual assault, she defined it as, “any unwanted sexual touching.” However, she did not use that definition to make meaning of her own experience. Though she did not label her experience as sexual assault at the time, she did share, “I was just like, you know, yeah, something bad happened.” Unlike Mama Africa, Imani interpreted her experience as abnormal and unpleasant, despite her inability to categorize it as sexual assault because it did not fit the definition she learned in church. For that reason, when referring to her experience she would say “something bad happened” coupled with a description of what took place.

Both Mama Africa and Imani’s experiences fell within their stated definitions of sexual assault, however, they thought differently. When it came to labeling their own experience, rather than using the stated definition offered in the previous section, they used a framework that seemed to be more internalized from direct messages they received from their cultural upbringing. For Mama Africa, she was socialized to believe that sexual assault involved penial penetration of a vagina, while for Imani she was taught to see sexual assault as an adult abusing their power by harming a child. Though there were nuances in their cultural backgrounds that manifested in what messages they

used to make sense of their own experiences, both did not see their personal experiences as sexual assault.

"Watch Out . . . Don't Wear"

Though some women internalized cultural messages from their family and peers about sexual assault being a hyperviolent heteronormative or authoritative act, others received messages that socialized them to see sexual purity as their responsibility and thus resulted in them assuming responsibility for experiencing sexual assault. In particular, some women were taught through indirect messages expectations of being a Black woman, which highlighted how one should dress and behave while others were taught that as Black women, they could not be victims.

For example, Ebony Rose, talked about the messages she received from her mother regarding acceptable behavior for a woman, ". . . definitely need to cover up more, you need to be like a southern lady, you need to do all these things . . . Telling young girls to like to cover up because relatives are coming over." Though Ebony Rose stated that she disagreed with these messages, it still impacted her, as she explained,

> . . . you're automatically labeled a sexual deviant because that's essentially what you're being told because your body is weird, looks weird, but yeah, like, it's curvy, it's Black, it's not normal, definitely need to cover up more, you need to be like a southern lady, you need to do all these things.

Ebony Rose was taught that as a Black curvy woman, men are going to be sexually aggressive towards her, so it is her duty to cover up. If she did not cover up, she was not being a "southern lady," and thus indicated approval of men's sexual aggression towards

her. Therefore, she went on to say that once she had her own experience,[6] ". . . [I] blamed myself or centered myself as someone who is like, the cause of these things." Ebony Rose attributed her experience to something she did wrong, which was rooted in her internalizing that sexual aggression happens to Black women who do not follow the rules of conduct for a "southern lady." As a result, Ebony Rose labeled her experiences as "comments."

Similar to Mama Africa and Imani, the definition of sexual assault that Ebony Rose shared earlier in our interviews was different from the one she used to ascribe meaning to her experience. In fact, the definition, Ebony Rose discussed, was the broadest definition received from all of the participants in this study, "I think it's just any unwanted sexual contact. And that can be online, that can be physical, it can be verbal, it can be, I think a lot of it can also happen with you, not even in the room." With this definition in mind, Ebony Rose's experiences with unwanted sexual comments fit, however, that was not the definition she applied. Instead, when she made meaning of her own experiences, she looked to the gender socialization she received about how a curvy Black woman should dress and behave which resulted in her inability to see her experience as worthy of the label sexual assault.

But Ebony Rose was not alone, Europa was also taught to be on high alert around men. For instance, Europa recalled memories of her mother warning her to watch out for masculine identifying relatives,

> Oh, so if I'm hanging out with them [masculine identifying relatives] oh, did he touch you, did he do anything like that would be a constant question or like my

[6] Unwanted sexual comments by men and women

> mom, if I'm hanging out with like any of her new partners. Even my dad sometimes, like you know I spend some time with my dad, did he touch you do dah dah dah, like constantly, I would be like yo why are you asking me that like what do you, like it was so crazy. I was like, why would you, why [chuckles, confused face]? Why would you think that and then it's like, you don't really know why they are asking you that until it actually happens.

Europa went on to share that, ". . . like I never really could understand sexual assault until it like pinpoint happened to me. And then like even when it happened, I didn't even want to talk about it or say it for a long time." Unlike the other women in this study, Europa received incomplete but consistent messages from her mother instructing her to be concerned with how men, even those who were family members, should be touching her. Yet, because she was not taught *why* she should be concerned with a man touching her, she had trouble understanding how and why it would ever happen to her. However, the comprehensive training on sexual assault she received while in the military, filled the *why* gap from the socialization she received in her family about unwanted touching. As a result, Europa was able to see her experience[7] within the label sexual assault. Thus, unlike the other women, Europa saw that her experience fit the general definition of sexual assault. Nonetheless, she experienced discomfort labeling it as such for reasons I will explicitly discuss later.

"We Can't Be a Victim."

There was also a collection of ways where both family and peer networks compounded with dominant culture broadly which led the women to believe they were

[7] Unwanted sexual penetration by a Black man who drugged her

unable to be victims of sexual assault. More specifically, the women were socialized by broad historical stereotypes to see themselves as unattractive and by their family culture to see themselves as indomitable. As a result, many women in this study internalized that attraction and weakness are associated with sexual assault, which was all rooted in Whiteness. Therefore, this section will be divided into two subsections, "It's All Keep It Together" and "Something Attractive Girls Have to Deal With."

"It's All Keep It Together." Though many of the women in this study received indirect messages centered around how they should dress and behave; one woman in particular differed in this regard. Instead, Alicia was taught in her culture to view Black women as invincible,

> We're [Black women] brought up to feel like we can't be a victim if that makes sense. You know, it's all keep it together and be strong and all those sorts of things. And so we don't really like, actively try to put ourselves in vulnerable positions, or admit to ourselves that we might need to be vulnerable with this thing.

Alicia went on to share that because of the pressure to be strong she grew up keeping everything that bothered her to herself because she believed it was her responsibility to "figure it out." This pressure seemed to be rooted in her identity, as a mixed-race Black woman, as she recognized that many members of her Native American tribe persevered despite the historical harm they experienced. As a result, Alicia internalized this understanding that Black women are resilient and rejected the label sexual assault as to distance herself from what she perceived as a position of vulnerability.

Alicia further described how the label sexual assault impacted her, “Whereas I have always been someone who’s had a hard time like identifying things because I just sit, and I think about it and think about it and think about it.” For Alicia, labeling her own experience[8] as sexual assault pushed her into a mental loop that seemed to threaten her sense of strength and resilience because it brought up feelings of vulnerability (e.g., difficult emotions, admitting might need help). As a result, she expressed how she let her experience “live ominously” because it allowed her a certain amount of control over her emotions and wellbeing. Therefore, different for many of the women but like Europa, Alicia made it clear that she understood her experience to be sexual assault and fit within her stated definition mentioned in the previous section. However, like Europa, she intentionally chose not to use the label or think about it because of the familial socialization she received which caused her to associate the label with vulnerability and in opposition to strength.

“Something Attractive Girls Have to Deal With.” While some of the women in this study were socialized by their family networks to believe what they experienced was not considered sexual assault, some were instead socialized by their peers. When asked to define sexual assault, Angela mentioned in the previous section that it was, “like a sexual act without consent, or the person is not able to be to give consent” and “. . . if you're drunk, or you're not in the right mind state, you're not able to give consent.” With this definition in mind, Angela’s personal experience[9] fit, however, that was not the definition

[8] Unwanted sexual contact by a Black man, who was her boyfriend at the time of her experience. Specific contact was not shared.

[9] Unwanted sexual penetration by a Black man while incapacitated. Black man was her boyfriend at the time of the event

she applied when talking about her own experience. As Angela talked about her personal experience, she shared a conversation she heard in high school,

> This one, one specific person said something and that really rubbed me the wrong way because it came off like, a sexual assault is something that attractive girls have to deal with, that's our [White women] issues. And then you Black girls, your issues is whatever, whatever. It wasn't only this girl who thought that I, I think it was many people, unfortunately, including Black men, which [inaudible noise, rolls eyes] . . . but it seemed like many people made it sound like okay, so racism is a problem for Black girls and sexual assault is a problem for White girls.

Angela went on to explain how the former conversation caused her to attribute sexual assault as a heteronormative act that happens because a man is attracted to a woman. Thus, because she was socialized to believe that White women are attractive and Black women are not, she internalized that White woman experience sexual assault and Black women do not. She went on to share,

> Is it, is it real? Like you know can I really call this that [sexual assault], you know . . . And I read up on it myself, I read up on incapacitation, I read up on these kinds of things like okay this is real, so why don't I feel like it's real?

When asked to elaborate on why she does not feel like her personal experience is sexual assault, she bravely replied,

> The first thing that popped into my head was like cuz I'm Black. I don't know, it's just okay straight thoughts it’s cuz I'm Black and no one will get with a Black girl at our school. So this isn't real then. But it is real [visually sad, tears flow]

Angela recognized and understood that her experience was considered sexual assault by the university and societal standards (e.g., first-year training, reading she did on incapacitation). However, she struggled to believe that her experience was sexual assault because she internalized her culture's definition of sexual assault, which was based on sex and physical attraction. Resultantly, as a Black woman in South Africa, Angela was socialized to understand that no one would desire to be with her sexually so there was no way what she experienced was considered sexual assault. Therefore, Angela felt that the term sexual assault was "too legitimate," so instead labeled her own experience as "the thing."

Likewise, Imani was also socialized to believe that no one would desire to be with her sexually, yet it took a different shape. For instance, when Imani initially made sense of her experience, she shared,

> . . . you have to be that sort of way in a relationship. And like, I'm a flirty and fun girl, or, like, you know, I'm an attractive girl to this man, or like, whatever. And this is my boyfriend . . . I guess I'm like, why I allow that to happen, and why I didn't think that there was anything wrong with it.

She went on to state,

> . . . But like here, especially in the Midwest, if you [Black women] do that [shut advances down], like you are a B-word, you know . . . Like, I can't say no, and stare somebody down. Like no, it's just not, you can't do that. You literally can't do that. And if you do, you know, you're every name in the book, you know, people might think that you're ghetto. They might think that you're rude. They

might think that like you're aggressive, you're like to them, maybe it can also make you unattractive . . .

Like Angela, Imani was socialized to believe that sexual advances, whether wanted or unwanted, indicated a man's sexual attraction and lust for a woman. Therefore, as she made sense of her own experience, she did not use the definition she mentioned in the "What is Sexual Assault?" section, instead, she internalized it as a good thing that her ex-boyfriend lusted for her because it indicated that she was attractive, better yet the exception. The former was specifically connected to her identity as a Black woman in contrast to a White woman. As a mixed-race Black woman who aimed to be desirable and attractive, she understood that rejecting sexual advances could risk her being seen as the aggressive and unattractive Black woman she strived desperately to distance herself from. With this in mind, it seemed she had to subconsciously assimilate to Whiteness, by being "flirty and fun" even in the face of both wanted and unwanted sexual advances. Therefore, because she internalized sexual assault as a heteronormative act rooted in sex and physical attraction, she had trouble seeing anything wrong with what she experienced.

"Doesn't Bring Me Peace"

Many of the women in this study also had trouble labeling their personal experiences as sexual assault because they believed it would cause them added harm. In particular, they were unwilling to categorize their experiences as sexual assault because either it challenged their understanding of community and self, which was rooted in collectivism, or they anticipated negative treatment and responses due to their race and gender.

"I Give So Much To . . ."

To begin, when deciding how to label their experiences, a few of the women in this study described an inability to reconcile feelings of hurt and betrayal by the hands of another Black individual with that of support and loyalty. For instance, Mama Africa, who throughout this study focused on an incident she experienced involving a friend and the friend's partner, both of whom were Black, shared,

> Oh, no, it can't be that [sexual assault] because this person says they're my friend. And the person even though these two people were involved in, it was one of the person says, they were my friend, and they're close to me, so they wouldn't do me like that.

She went further, ". . . when I think of like, oh, sexual assault this person really like harmed me then, like, overwhelming of emotions comes over me." For Mama Africa, the use of the label sexual assault was upsetting and "too much to deal with," because it meant that her friend planned to hurt her. As someone who was brought up in a West Africa home, she was socialized to value and uphold notions of communalism, where she was expected to do all, she can protect and take care of her family, even if that was at the expense of her own needs. Thus, as Mama Africa and I continued sharing space, she expressed how her nurturing and protective values extended beyond her family unit to other social relations like her friendships. With this in mind, when she initially began processing her own experience, it felt unfathomable to consider it as sexual assault, because she believed that her Black friends valued and upheld the same communal attitudes. As a result, Mama Africa expressed that she was unwilling to use the label sexual assault and instead referred to it like this "thing, that just happened." She noted

that the former language was easier for her to process because it implied that what her roommate did was a mistake and an unintentional infliction of harm.

Interestingly, Europa expressed similar sentiments, but instead specifically described the communal ties to all those within the Black community. As mentioned in an earlier section, though Europa understood her experience as sexual assault, at the time of the study she was hesitant to use the label. For instance, the incident she focused on during this study involved someone she had just met, so she stated,

> . . . I guess . . . when you asked that question [how do you refer to your experience] is like a part of my hesitation around, identifying with that phrase sexual assault, I'm such a, my identities is from the afro diaspora and Afrocentricity, I just, I give so much to my community [voices gets a little shaky]. And I don't want to cry but it's like thinking about that happening to me and like thinking about the type of person I am. It just makes me not want to think about that . . .

She went further to share,

> this is . . . a man that I would have wanted to, you know, more so, be a man rather being someone who was emulating oppressive behaviors of things that they see. And it's just like that, what that was, that was where sexual assault comes from that's what patriarchy is. And that's hard to think about. It's like scary. You don't really want to [chuckles] discuss it.

As someone whose sense of self is heavily situated in her connection to others within the afro diaspora, the thought of another umelanated person, who she fights to protect every day, it appeared from her expressions highlighted on p. 116 that internalizing oppression

in ways that harmed her, was vividly and emotionally hard to digest. It meant that the community she is drawn to and who is supposed to collectively show up for her no matter what, hurt her. Thus, for Europa, the label sexual assault implied, that not only is the outside world oppressive, so too are members of her community, specifically Black men. For that reason, Europa is consistently faced with a challenge to her sense of self, which causes feelings of hurt, disbelief, and disappointment. As a result, she intentionally chooses not to think about her experience or name it "sexual assault."

"Black And Brown Women Are Silenced."

While it was difficult for some to label their experiences as sexual assault because their sense of self was deeply linked to the collective Black community, for others it was more about the harmful treatment of Black women who ascribe to the labels "sexual assault" or "victim." More specifically, some women observed and anticipated harmful responses they would encounter because of the intensity of their experiences and the intersections of their race and gender. For instance, Ebony Rose wondered that as a Black woman ". . . who is going to care?" if she labeled her experience as sexual assault. This question seemed to be rooted in the discussion from the last section, in that Ebony Rose used a ruler of intensity which was shaped by heteronormativity and Whiteness to determine the validity of her experience as sexual assault. She expressed that her experience was,

> . . . it's just another thing, and like, who's gonna care? It's already hard enough to get people to realize like that sexual assault is a problem and um something that should not be taboo to speak about . . . So how do you like going to incorporate

> words as a form of sexual assault and words are seen as protected and free speech?

As a student leader working in the field of gender and racial equity, she went on to share that, “I think because of my work I've always been exposed to the acts.” For that reason, she understood and recognized how hard it was to get students to see those physical “acts” as problematic and worth the label sexual assault. Therefore, as someone who experienced unwanted sexual comments, Ebony Rose felt like using the label sexual assault would make it even harder for people to believe that sexual assault was a problem because she was taught that “. . . sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” For that reason, she believed it would be easier for people to wrap their minds around sexual assault described as physical acts instead of what she experienced because she considered it normal. As a result, Ebony Rose had a hard time validating and seeing her experience as worthy of the label sexual assault.

In addition to being treated differently based on the level of intensity, others noted differential treatment in contrast to White women. For example, Angela recounted the former reality at her high school,

> . . . people who were completely silent when Black women were speaking about any issues that they had, were now going on and supporting every single person [White women] who came forward with their story about sexual assault, which is amazing. They should be doing that. But when it was a Black woman who came forward talking about our sexual assault, they completely ignored it and they didn't say anything . . . usually like Black and brown women are silenced. I felt like at this point, we weren't even there. It was because it's like, even when you're

> speaking about these issues that specifically are for Black women, you aren't even listening to us . . .

As mentioned in the "It's Not That Deep" section, Angela was socialized to believe that because sexual assault was centered around sex and attraction, Black women who are considered unattractive beings cannot be sexually assaulted. The former rang true also when there were exceptions, where Black women came forward naming and disclosing their experiences of sexual assault. Instead of being believed or supported, Angela observed how Black women were blatantly overlooked and dismissed because of the notion that no one would want to have sex with them. However, when White women spoke up and named their experiences as sexual assault, everyone was supportive and validating because they were considered attractive and thus capable of being sexually assaulted.

More interestingly, Angela went further to share that while Black women were ignored, White women who came forward saying they were victims, even had people ". . . who have been very active in their dislike for that person then go up to that person, and be like, I'll be here for you always." Even when the White women were disliked, they were still viewed as human beings, capable of being sexually assaulted. Yet, because Black women were all generalized as unattractive, they were dehumanized as incapable of experiencing sexual assault, even if they said they were. This was hurtful and "traumatizing" for Angela as she explained, "I literally live in Africa, like you know, who would expect that people wouldn't give a fuck about Black people in Africa, like, idk, its pretty weird [tears flow]." As a Black woman in South Africa, she realized that not only are people like her overlooked and devalued in Western world, but they also receive

similar treatment in a country where they are supposed to be loved, valued, and supported. Resultantly, Angela believed that she would further harm herself if she labeled her experience sexual assault because no one would care or believe her. With this in mind, Angela decided to reject the labels victim and sexual assault.

Not only did the silencing of other Black women impact how Angela made sense of her experience, but it also shaped Alicia's decision not to label her experience. For example, Alicia expressed, ". . . how they [other women of color like her family and friends who experience sexual assault] are also silenced about it or just not believed. .um and it's like that could be me easily." When asked how the former impacted how she made sense of her own experience she stated,

> *Itttt* certainly didn't help [change in tone] [chuckles]. Um I feel like, since I'm not someone who typically expresses anything that I'm feeling or unsure about or uneasy about or anything like that . . .Yeah, so I feel like just seeing how it works and already being someone who doesn't speak out about most things going on with me. Like it just hasn't helped and sometimes is it worth combing over in my head like that? [high pitch voice] Is it really bad *to me*? [emphases]. Because I'm someone whose, I'm all about peace [chuckles] in my life, in my head and I actively do a lot of things to keep my life peaceful you know.

As someone who comes from a family of Native immigrants, Alicia understood that unfair treatment was inevitable. Yet, every time she was in the presence of her tribe she was constantly reminded of their resiliency and ability to keep it together even after facing historical adversity. As a result, Alicia talked a lot about how as Black women, ". . . we don't really like, actively try to put ourselves in like vulnerable positions, or like

admit to ourselves that like we might need to be vulnerable with this thing." Therefore, when she observed the silencing of her family and friends who labeled their experiences and asked for help, it further solidified that if she did the same it would cause her harm. For Alicia, thinking about and naming her experience would put her in a vulnerable position to admit to herself that she might need help which undermined her Black womanhood. Thus, it seemed that if she wanted to be resilient this meant spending less time thinking and naming her experience, and more on moving past it and finding things to keep her life peaceful. For those reasons, she chose to let her experience live "ominously."

Similarly, Imani also internalized this notion of strength as a core component of Black womanness, but distinctly different from all the women in this study, later in her healing journey it shaped her decision *to* label her own experience as sexual assault but *not* label herself as a "victim" or as someone engaged in "healing." Imani shared,

> I don't use terms that I feel like I guess have a connotation of any type of victim or healing or anything that would like denote that I somehow was hurt and then had to recover . . . I think that it has a lot to do with me speaking to anyone else about it because it doesn't matter who I'm talking to, it can be someone that I am you know if I were to tell my little sister what happened as a warning to her right. I do not want to break down and start crying or let her see how it really affected me I want her to know that it's a bad thing and it's something that can happen and yes you know it hurt me and that this was my reaction, but I don't want her to be able to see and hear that hurt in my voice or in my face because I don't want her to, feel that secondhand, you know, no, I just don't want to. And when I talk to

> other people who aren't my family who maybe I just feel like I need to disclose it or there's some conversation, I'm like, you know what I think I'm going to disclose this. The last thing that I want is for them to look at me and say, Oh, I'm so sorry that that happened to you, you're a victim, you're a survivor, stuff that I hate that type of language.

As someone who internalized a dichotomous understanding that Black women are strong and White women are weak, she actively tried to ensure she did not put herself in vulnerable spaces because it took away from her Black womanness. On one hand, using the label "victim" would cause Imani to feel the emotional impact of her experience and cause secondary harm to her loved ones. On the other hand, Imani believed that ascribing to the label "victim" would also imply to others that she needed their help or pity. When asked to further elaborate she went on to say,

> I feel like too that language (e.g. victim, healing), I just don't want to feel bad for myself, either because yes I acknowledge it was bad, but I just, I don't want to think of myself as a victim or like, oh, something bad happened to me and I don't want to feel bad for myself and I don't want other people to feel bad for me either . . . White women like to see themselves as victims . . . it's always a White woman who feels like something has been taken from her and she needs to sit there and you know, constantly talk about it instead of get over it, get on with her life and take some of her power back. Okay. And so, I think that me being a Black woman that, that is part of the reason why because I know that nobody else is going to pick me up. I have to pick my own ass up and work my butt off, you know to get to whatever point. So, yeah, I do think that it has to do with that.

For Imani, acknowledging that something bad happened to her was not synonymous with using the label "victim." She saw that the label "victim" was often used by White women who wanted and could be seen as victims so they could be coddled, in contrast to Black women who are forced to figure things out on their own without the help of others. Thus, as a Black woman, she did not have the privilege nor wanted to constantly process and talk about her own experience. Imani realized that the former would only give her experience power over her, and as a result, hinder her ability to be resilient and strong. Therefore, the rejection of the label victim was empowering for Imani because it protected her loved ones, distanced her from White women who she believed wanted people to feel sorry for them, and allowed her to focus on moving forward and protecting herself.

Interestingly, though Imani refused to use the label victim, over time she began using the label sexual assault, unlike any of the other women. As described in the last section, Imani initially was unable to identify her experience as sexual assault due to the socialization she had in church. Yet, she expressed that, "I only started using that phrase [sexual assault] after I sought help . . ." She went further,

> . . . I don't really like the framing of sexual assault; I feel like it's kind of impersonal. And I feel like a lot of people throw it around and are able to throw it around because of the fact that it is impersonal. But I also acknowledge that maybe that is why it makes it easier for people to talk about, they can say, I was sexually assaulted, instead of saying, I was raped . . . there's just a completely different connotation. So, for me I think that I started using that, just to kind of be

like, yeah, you know, this was a situation and not really have to go into detail about him or really feel anything whenever I am describing what happened.

For Imani, going into detail about what she experienced invoked a lot of overwhelming emotions internally and externally. Therefore, even though she did not like the framing of sexual assault, it seemed to bring her a sense of peace. As someone who does not want others to "feel sorry" for her or treat her like a victim, adopting the label sexual assault allowed her to embody an element of strength by distancing herself from the emotional and psychological burden of what she experienced.

Summary of Black Women's Meaning Making of Sexual Assault

The women in this study understood and could describe examples of sexual assault. Citing sources such as school and peers, the women's definitions broadly encompassed varying forms of unwanted sexual contact and coercion, such as verbal, physical, and online behaviors. Nonetheless, when the women considered the meaning of their own experiences, they compared it to their culture's social constructions of sexual assault and Black womanhood. Yet, due to the nuances in their social location such as their ethnicity, geographic residence, and more the norms they used to make meaning of their experiences manifested in both similar but distinctly different ways. Despite the differences, they all believed their experiences did not fit the category of sexual assault. As some of the women continued searching for the meaning of their experiences, they also considered how other Black women were treated when they tried to use the term sexual assault leaving them to reject the term to protect themselves from further harm. Understanding how Black women make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault

is also a critical step in contextualizing the findings that will be discussed next regarding the impact of sexual assault on the women's wellbeing.

Impacts

The cultural socialization the women received not only informed their meaning-making process but was also a part of the ways the women were impacted by their experiences. More specifically, the women in this study experienced a range of intense emotions as a result of internalizing familial and peer beliefs that Black women are responsible for their sexual purity, are unattractive or less valuable than White women or are responsible for prioritizing the needs and wellbeing of others at the expense of their own. The women's experiences not only impacted their emotional wellbeing but also impacted their relationships with the person who harmed them, with their community, and with the general society.

Emotional

In this study, many of the participants experienced various emotional reactions, such as guilt, extreme sadness and discontentment, and anger. I found that as the women bravely shared their emotions, they seemed to be associated with the internalization that as Black women they were unattractive or were responsible for protecting themselves and/or others. As a result, many of the women faced difficulty regulating their emotions and attempted to manage them through strategic (dis) engagement. However, though some were intentional about taking steps to regulate their emotions, others were not given the time or space. Therefore, throughout this section, as I describe the guilt, extreme sadness and discontentment, and anger they experienced, where applicable, I will discuss the ways the women attempted to manage those emotions. This section is divided into

three subsections: “I Should Have Followed the Rules,” “Inadequacy and Misery,” and “I Don’t Really Rock with You.”

“I Should Have Followed the Rules” (Guilt)

When sharing how their experiences impacted them, many of the women expressed feelings of guilt and shame because they utilized cultural standards to self-define and therefore believed they had to behave in ways that would protect them from harm but failed. Yet, this manifested differently for each of the women due to their cultural backgrounds and physical environment at the time of their experiences. In particular, either the women were socialized to avoid arousing men by conforming to modesty norms and deviated, they were socialized to be on high alert for problematic behavior but overlooked it, or they were socialized to attribute attraction or misuse of authoritative power with sexual assault so normalized harmful behavior.

To begin, Angela and Mama Africa, who were both raised in traditional East African and West African homes, respectively, shared that as Black women they were expected to adhere to traditional gender roles. For example, Angela shared,

> I think that the reason I label myself as, stupid or dumb is because that I tell myself, okay, if you're at a party, you shouldn't be drinking to begin with, this is something you don't do around your parents and then this is your fault. This is karma. So yeah, and it's also like, their ideals and their morals are in me, in a way. And so I, ya know, my mind tries to make sense of it. And it's just doing all these things and all over the place. And somehow the final verdict is it's my fault.

In her community, Angela described that in her parent’s native country, the expectation for being a Black woman meant you had to be, “modest, like A+ version of yourself.”

She was expected to be perfect and responsible for helping men to control their desires and behaviors by watching what she wore, what she said, and how she acted. Thus, since Angela decided to drink at the party, she internalized her behavior as violating the modest norm and welcoming sexual attention. As a result, she blamed herself for what she experienced because she learned how to protect herself (e.g., modesty, not drinking) and did the opposite, thus figured consequences were inevitable.

For Mama Africa, drinking was also problematized in her West African home and denoted as incongruent with gender expectations for Black women. While confiding in her mother after her experience, Mama Africa's mother also said, "you shouldn't be drinking like that, then you wouldn't be in the space for that, those people to do that." Thus, Mama Africa, like Angela, was also socialized to believe that she has control over how she is treated based upon the ways she governs and protects her body. Therefore, since she decided to drink "like that," she put herself in a vulnerable position that invited sexual attention from a man and resulted in consequences. As a result, Mama Africa expressed that after that, she thought, ". . . [I] just like, be different in the future." She thought if she monitored her drinking and was more careful and intentional with her actions, it would help men control their sexual desires and ultimately reduce the likelihood that she would ever be in a similar situation. Though not someone who identifies as African, Ebony Rose also shared, but more implicitly sentiments of guilt, as highlighted in the section called "Watch Out . . . Don't Wear." For instance, she mentioned her mother's expectations for her to be a "southern lady" and that, ". . . [I] blamed myself or center myself as someone who is like, the cause of these things."

While some of the women blamed themselves because they thought their behaviors violated gender expectations embedded in their homes, one woman's guilt seemed to be situated in failing to listen to the socialization she received around experiencing sexual assault and following military rules. For instance, Europa who was sexually assaulted off base expressed,

> . . . my first concern was, first of all, I'm not okay in the head right now. I know I didn't really understand what happened, I do know that I didn't want that, I kept trying to run away from the person. But I also know that I'm going to be in a shitload of trouble if I don't make it to base on time before tab [curfew]. And it's like trying to make sure that I have my uniform. Right, trying to make sure I have my hat, these are all the things that's going on in my head. Although I just experienced that. I'm just more in fear about what's happening with the military thing because I feel like they have such a hold on us because we're literally property, you're property of the military, like for real, you signed the whole shit and stuff like that. So, I'm worried about that.

In the minutes after her experience, she briefly processed what happened and knew it was not something she wanted. Yet, she was only able to process for a short period of time because within seconds Europa felt feelings of guilt and was forced to focus on making sure she did not further violate military orders. She understood that as a Black recruit her military superiors would not understand or care about why she left the base or missed curfew, instead, they cared more about their rules. Therefore, instead of processing what she experienced, she had no choice but to focus on getting back to base on time and in uniform or risk losing her job and her schooling.

As a Black woman in the military, Europa was in search of companionship because she lived in a predominately White environment both on and off base, she did not feel a sense of belonging or community. She mentioned, “I don't know there are 1300 people in a grade or whatever. It's probably like less than 30 Black women may be less than 20 women right . . . they specifically like split us [Black women] up.” Resultantly, this caused her to search for ways to fill that unmet need by deciding to go out with a local Black man, who would be the one to sexually assault her. However, as someone whose mother stressed the importance of being skeptical and dubious when engaging with men, she not only blamed herself for breaking military rules she also blamed herself for not considering that something bad could happen to her.

> . . . I blamed myself, ‘I was like, whoa I shouldn’t have even contacted this guy, I shouldn’t have,’ because there was a point where he kept pressing me, and for some reason, I had already said ‘Nah, I’m good, I’m good’ but because you’re in the military, I was in [state where the academy was located], barely any Black people . . . you just want to get out, you just want to get off base and stuff, so I took a chance, you know. And I just wasn’t expecting that to happen . . . if I had only just stayed in my room.

After her experience, Europa put the onus on herself, that had she understood and listened to her mom’s teachings about the possibility she could experience sexual assault thus needed to more skeptical around men, she would have refrained from contacting the guy and complied with military rules. Unfortunately, due to the same reasons why she left the base in the first place, Europa was unable to process her feelings of blame and guilt with anyone, including herself.

Like Europa, Imani blamed herself for what she experienced because she also believed there were things, she could have done to prevent it. She shared,

> Was it my fault, and how did I enable him to do that? How did it get to that point like was it because I was too nice you know the whole time. . .And I think that my tolerance for all of the things that he used to do, to me, is probably part of the reason that, you know, he thought that whatever, you know, was okay . . . leading up to the actual attack . . . like my reaction to those things, and never really shutting him down.

Imani went on to share how during her previous relationship with her ex-boyfriend, he would do sexual things to her even when she did not want to. However, since she internalized sexual assault as being about attraction and sex, initially she did not think that his behavior was wrong or problematic. Therefore, she did not directly address it or tell him to stop and consequently, Imani felt like that set the precedent and indicated to him that his behavior was acceptable.

Yet, she explained, ". . . and my reason for not being able to do that [shut him down] and not saying no, and like, this or that and whatever, it's because I'm Black because I am a woman." As a Black woman, she was socialized to believe that she could not reject unwanted sexual contact, or she would be viewed as "aggressive" and deter men from pursuing or loving her. Consequently, Imani believed that it was her actions that welcomed or deterred a man from making sexual advances, wanted or unwanted. Therefore, it seemed that because she wanted to be loved by her ex-boyfriend, she did not reject his unwanted sexual advances while they were in a relationship. As a result, in the initial stages of her meaning-making process, she viewed her docile behavior as the

reason why he “attacked” her after they broke up. In addition to her actions before what she called the “attack,” at that point of our conversation, Imani also felt guilty for her actions during the “attack.” She detailed,

> I remember that he kept shining a light and stuff in my face. So, I don't know if that was some type of check to see, if I was consenting, or, you know, whatever, and I just didn't do something right.

Imani looked inward as she made sense of her experience, she considered that maybe her ex-boyfriend tried to ask for consent and because she did not say no, her immobility and silence encouraged him to continue engaging in the “attack.” For Imani, this was further complicated by her relationship status during the time of the “attack.” She explained,

> I think a huge part of the reason that I also feel guilty is because I was in a relationship at the time, and it makes me feel like I cheated . . . So, that is part of the reason I feel so guilty when I think about it because I think about like, cheaters.

At the time Imani was sexually assaulted by her ex-boyfriend, she was in a relationship with another man. Since she believed the “attack” happened because she did not say no, she internalized it as a consensual encounter, therefore indicating she intentionally decided to have sex with another man. Though many of the women in this study, like Imani expressed feeling guilty after their experiences, Alicia was the only participant who did not explicitly or implicitly describe such emotions.

“Inadequacy and Misery” (Sadness and Discontentment)

For some of the women in this study, instead of guilt, their experiences triggered sadness and discontentment with their body image. In particular, the women’s

socialization made them believe they were deficient and thus the reason why they experienced sexual assault. These feelings led to some of the women becoming hyper-aware and hyper-critical of their physical appearances. For example, though Angela experienced feelings of guilt she also recounted experiencing months of "genuine sadness" where "it would be like every day I would just wake up and I don't know I really felt there was really [emphases on really] nothing for me to do." She went on to state both in our interview and in a journal entry,

> . . . umm. like a person becomes like your source of validation. And then you almost need to be around them to literally feel good about yourself. And so that's what it was like for me . . . parts of my childhood filled with trauma and despair, molded and sculpted into a vessel of self-hatred, inadequacy, and misery.

As a Black woman in South Africa, who at the time was reckoning with living within a country and attending a school that devalued and harmed Black women, her connection to others within the Black diaspora was important. Thus, it seemed that Angela's connection with her boyfriend at the time counteracted the dehumanization and harmful treatment she faced at her predominantly White high school and made her feel valued and validated. Therefore, to be hurt by and no longer connected to one of the few people who made her feel important and cared for in the constricting context of a predominately White school, challenged her sense of self. As a result, Angela revealed,

> . . . I had no confidence, like just not. [pause] And it was like, even something that I noticed I did a lot was like, I'd try to cover myself up so much, it would be hot [emphases] outside like burning and I would just wear hoodies, all the time. And I just didn't. I just didn't feel comfortable at all.

Angela dressed covered up no matter the weather because not only was she uncomfortable with men looking at her, but even further, she was unhappy with how she looked. In a journal entry she submitted, Angela detailed, ". . . picking myself apart day by day trying to be what I thought would make you [the person who harmed her] crave me again." After the "event," she felt inadequate because she internalized the hurt, she experienced by someone who made her feel important, as a reflection of her worth. As a result, Angela shared,

> So, an outcome of that event [sexual assault] was also like I said like body issues right, just feeling really self-conscious and then that led to, I had a lot of eating problems and I think I developed a disorder because I had like binge just stuff.

For Angela, the impact her experience had on her self-perception resulted in binge eating, where it seemed she used food to navigate and regulate her intense emotions of inadequacy and inferiority.

Like Angela, in addition to guilt, Mama Africa also began feeling dissatisfaction with herself and body, as she bravely expressed,

> So, first thing about me feeling, you know, bad about myself and I'm not really worth more than a sexual encounter. And I started to let myself go, I don't know how to explain just yeah just not taking care of myself, taking care of my body . . . I didn't really feel like I was worth "a damn" [says under voice]. So, I didn't want to, you know, do that stuff. I didn't want to dress up or look nice or do my hair and things, so I felt like well clearly, you're not really more than, you know what's been happening to you. So, I just, you know I really just wasn't taking care of myself."

After her experience, Mama Africa felt disconnected from her body. It seemed that the only thing men saw was her body, they did not see her as a whole being. As a result, she internalized the former as indicative of a deficiency within her, that she did not have anything else to give or that a man wanted, so it felt pointless for her to continue taking care of herself, as her body was not serving her, only men. Interestingly, Mama Africa went further to share that,

> I've always had this weird thing with my boobs like I'm short and small, but I have triple D-sized boobs. And I didn't want to let them go even though they were hurting my back because you know guys like it, so I don't want to let it go.

For Mama Africa, though she felt worthless and did not see the need to take care of herself, at the time she was unwilling to let go of her boobs, a part of her body that men liked, that withheld value. Interestingly, this feeling of existing to please and meet others' needs were also situated in Mama Africa's socialization, in that she was raised to view herself as a nurturer, one who gives of herself at the expense of doing for others. Thus, it further reinforced her internalization of what Black womanhood means, existing as a vessel for others not as a human being who also has needs and feelings.

Ebony Rose also internalized her experience as further confirmation of a deficiency within her. She shared that as a result of her upbringing (e.g., cover-up, southern ladies dress a certain way, etc.) and the "comments" she received from men, she internalized her Black and curvy body as "weird" and "sexual deviant." She expressed that as a result, she developed "body dysmorphia." Ebony Rose expressed how her White and "light-skinned 3C hair peers just fitting into that skinny White mold" did not receive comments about their bodies or were ever told that they were distracting and needed to

cover up. Thus, as someone who grew up on the receiving end of comments about her body, whether it was her mother telling her to cover up, men passing comments about her body, or peers calling her "big tit-[nickname]," Ebony Rose became hyper-aware and critical of her body, clothes, and skin-complexion, each of which she began internalizing as physical flaws because, unlike White and light-skinned Black women, she captured everyone's attention.

However, in the immediate aftermath of her experience, she was unable to find ways to regulate feelings of discontentment with her body because she shared, ". . . for so many people, the daily grind of just trying to survive coupled with navigating a society actively trying to oppress and marginalize you [Black people] makes it difficult to reflect deeply on your trauma." Though she spoke in the third person, Ebony Rose highlighted how to protect her physical life in the face of anti- Black racism and discrimination she was unable to prioritize time to reflect on her sexual assault and the ways it impacted how she saw herself. As a darker skin, curvier Black woman, Ebony Rose expressed that in comparison to lighter skin, petite Black women, she is often perceived as "a threat" in the spaces she occupies. Consequently, because she must focus on her physical safety, specifically maneuvering spaces in ways that reduce the perception that she is "a threat," she is unable to process her past experiences. Though both Angela and Mama Africa also experienced sadness and discontentment with their bodies because of their experiences with sexual assault, neither Alicia, Europa, or Imani explicitly or implicitly described facing such emotions during our conversations.

"I Don't Really Rock with You Like That" (Anger)

While some women were navigating feelings of guilt and sadness, others were instead restricted from expressing their emotions at all. For many of the women, this looked like shifting attention from them to the person who harmed them, thus resulting in anger or the inability to express their emotions in the ways they hoped. For instance, in the immediate aftermath of her experience, Mama Africa faced feelings of guilt because she believed by drinking, she caused the sexual assault. However, over time she became angry after deciding to confront her roommate, who was involved in the sexual assault she experienced. Mama Africa stated,

> Because right after I told her [friend who sexually assaulted her], I don't really rock with you like that, because yeah, this happened. And y'all took advantage of me. But also, in addition to that her boyfriend was also hitting me up trying to message me one on one, and I was like, leave me alone. And I had to show that to her. So then after that, the very next day, she went to the mental hospital, so I didn't have, I didn't have time to be feeling stuff and be . . . you know, emotional and I remember crying about like, 'Oh she's going to the mental hospital, she wants to kill herself. I shouldn't told her that.'

Over time, Mama Africa shifted from seeing what she experienced as her fault to realizing that it was her roommate's, and thus that brought about feelings of anger causing her to confront her roommate. However, due to her roommate's admittance to the hospital after the confrontation, instead of acknowledging and processing her own feelings regarding what she experienced, Mama Africa's focus shifted to her roommate's. She felt sorry for her roommate and thus initially could not focus on the trauma she experienced, and the emotions associated with it.

The familial socialization Mama Africa received, that as a woman, specifically a daughter it is her responsibility to take care of everyone and "be strong all the time for other people," it was natural for her to prioritize her friend's needs over hers. As a result, Mama Africa was unable to explore her feelings regarding the sexual assault for years due in large part to this notion that she was emotionally indomitable and needed to be there for others. She recalled,

> . . . I just have these times where I just break down and I won't get out of bed and can't get out of bed. And I can't really talk to anybody about it and when I tried to talk to like at least my family, like my mom and dad about it. They're not really much help they are just like well get over it because you have to do this, and you have to do this, and you have to do everything else so there's not really time for me to break down or be thinking about myself because I have to think of others [tears falling].

This familial pressure to be everything for everyone left Mama Africa with limited emotional capacity and support to process and reflect on her own trauma and as a result was visually overwhelmed as tears fell from her eyes during our interviews. Mama Africa was not alone in her experience, both Alicia and Imani were not allowed to feel or express their emotions, but such will be discussed in the next section because it was related to the social impact of sexual assault. Though some of the women in this study were restricted from processing or expressing their emotions triggered by their experiences, Angela, Europa, and Mama Africa (in some regards e.g., guilt, sadness, discontentment) did not express experiencing such restriction.

Social

For many of the women in this study, the sexual assault they experienced did more than impact their relationship with the person who harmed them, but it also disrupted social connections within their communities and society at large because the individual who harmed them was also Black. More specifically, in the aftermath of their experiences, though the women desired connecting with others, the compoundness of sexual assault and racial gendered socialization either left them concerned that their family and friends would respond negatively, focused on the needs of their loved ones over their own, or committed to protecting themselves from future harm. As a result, the women who anticipated negative responses did not share their experiences with others because they did not trust them with their feelings or best interest, while those who had to prioritize their loved one's needs felt obligated to share their experiences against their own desires or as a result of intense emotions. Thus, this section will highlight the social impacts the women in this study experienced, divided into three themes: "What Were You Doing, What Were You Wearing?", "She Knew How Much I Cared," "Why Put Myself in Those Types of situations."

"What Were You Doing, What Were You Wearing?"

In this study, some of the women were socialized that harm was inevitable because the world is prejudiced towards Black women, or that sexual purity was their responsibility. Hence, after the women experienced sexual assault, they became concerned with how their family or friends would respond and questioned whether they could trust them with their experiences or feelings. Consequently, they intentionally and strategically chose not to share their experiences with others. Alicia for example, was taught that as a Black woman, she would face unfair treatment and harm therefore,

needed to be resilient which meant not trusting others with her experiences or feelings. Therefore, she shared that after her sexual assault,

> I was just with my girls, having a good time, that sort of thing, which was helpful, because I wasn't thinking about him or experiencing anything like that it was a break . . . It's more hanging with them [friends] then talking with them [friends] . . . So, um, yeah. I mean, during spring break and stuff, I aint bring it up. I ain't talk about, I ain't really think about it either. Like, it was more just, oh, let's go to the beach ohhh let's hang out by the pool today it was very peaceful. I brought up a book to read for fun, it was very calm.

Before Alicia's sexual assault, she "had been kinda off, and me and my friends had some sort of disconnect for a while." Yet, in the aftermath of her experience, there was a social need to distract herself from feeling emotions related to the sexual assault, so she surrounded herself with activities and superficial connections. When asked, why she chose to hang out with her friends but not share her experience with them, Alicia said, "I was like I still don't actively trust y'all." Because she did not trust her friends before or after the sexual assault and they were mutual friends with the person who harmed her, she knew sharing anything with them would result in harmful outcomes. Thus, as someone who was always taught that strength looked like keeping it together and not putting herself in vulnerable positions, hanging with her friends while emotionally disconnected, both protected her and provided a distraction from sitting with her experience and emotions. Like Alicia, Ebony Rose and Angela also anticipated negative responses from others. As mentioned in the section called, "It's Not that Deep," Ebony Rose was concerned how people in general would respond to should she label or share her

experience because the majority of students who engaged with her office was White and experienced intense forms of sexual assault. She shared, “I just feel like they [her experiences] need to measure, I guess, in some ways . . . should I say I've experienced sexual assault.” Resultantly, Ebony Rose decided not to share her experiences with others.

Angela on the other hand was more concerned with how her family would respond. For example, she detailed her decision not to share her experience with her parents,

> Idk, I feel like it would just be an uncomfortable conversation that I would rather not have. And then my home country in East Africa, I wouldn't, I wouldn't say that because the culture there, it's like, the first thing that will come to mind if you do tell them is: Oh, what were you doing or what were you wearing, and it'll just make me feel bad.

As discussed in previous sections, Angela grew up learning that as a Black woman she was responsible for her sexual purity, in that she needed to be modest and nurturer for her family. Thus, after her experience, she believed that due to cultural understanding, her parents would blame her for what she experienced. With this in mind, Angela could not trust her parents with her experience or emotions and as a result, chose to refrain from sharing what she experienced with her parents to protect herself from further harm. Therefore, she had to navigate the emotional impact of her experience by herself which caused her to become socially isolated from her family, as she shared,

> And then it just kept being Netflix but then with that... I found that I kind of isolated myself from my family and I don't like doing that because I just, I feel bad because they didn't do anything to me, you know.

As discussed in the emotional impacts section, Angela became consumed with watching Netflix because it distracted her from feeling like she did not matter. However, as she attempted to find ways to navigate her range of emotions alone, she unintentionally isolated herself from her parents. The former invoked feelings of shame for Angela because as discussed in her vignette, family is an important part of her identity. Therefore, to isolate herself from them felt like a punishment they did not deserve as they were not responsible for harming her. Yet, at the same time, refraining from disclosing to her parents and binging Netflix protected Angela from further harm and allowed her to have some control over her emotional wellbeing. Though Angela could not trust her parents with her experience and feelings, she did trust her friends, however only with a limited amount of information. She explained,

> You know my friends all know about it but like, because once again back on the point of, it was so normalized in our school. It was like, alright, next, you know, I don't want to say that they under... minded..idk cuz I get them, I totally get it, these guys at this school are awful and they did things and no punishment, right. So, they're so used to it and stuff, so I guess what I'm trying to say is I don't really like bring it up in conversations with people, right.

At Angela's high school, sexual assault was normal, many of the women, specifically White women experienced it and for the Black women who experienced it, they were the exception and thus should be happy because they were attractive. Nonetheless, whether

Black or White, Angela understood through her friends' experiences, that the men who sexually assaulted women in her high school were never held accountable. Therefore, when Angela told her friends about her experience, they were unbothered because they were desensitized to sexual assault, they experienced it and so did everyone else. As a consequence, their reactions made Angela believe that she could not be honest and open with them about the ways her experience was impacting her emotional and physical wellbeing because they would see it as her making a big deal out of something normal. Though Alicia, Angela, and Ebony Rose expressed concern with how their family or friends would respond and therefore strategically chose not to share their experiences with them, Europa, Mama Africa, and Imani did not describe similar feelings during the study.

"She Knew How Much I Cared About Her"

Before experiencing sexual assault, some of the women in this study were socialized to cater to the needs of others within the Black community (e.g., men, family, friends) even if that was at the expense of their own needs. As a result, in the aftermath of their sexual assault, some of the women felt a sense of obligation or pressure, that as Black women it was their duty to share their experiences with those they cared about, even against their own will. Unfortunately, their commitment to upholding communal attitudes and beliefs resulted in hurtful and alienating responses that harmed them socially and emotionally.

For instance, in an attempt to process her experience, Mama Africa believed that she could talk with her mother, someone she valued and trusted. As discussed throughout the "I Should Have Followed the Rules" and "It's Not that Deep" sections, unfortunately,

the response left Mama Africa blaming herself and internalizing what she experienced as minuscule. Yet, after telling her mother, she felt obligated to inform her roommates because the assault happened in their room and the person who harmed her was the boyfriend of their other roommate. Mama Africa shared,

> . . . after a situation [sexual assault] had happened to me and, I had to uhh tell my friends or people living with me . . . so I was talking to my roommates about a situation that had happened, da night previously, and they were like, that sounds like sexual assault and I was like, really? I didn't really think... thattt was cuz I didn't verbally say no. So, I didn't really think it would be seen as that . . . they were very like ohhhh fuck that person for life.

As someone who was taught to care for the wellbeing of her family and friends, she felt it was her duty to inform her roommates of what she experienced to protect them from future harm. However, she was surprised to hear validating and comforting responses that placed the blame on the people who hurt her. They were unwilling to remain friends with their other roommate, who they saw as responsible for the harm that her boyfriend caused Mama Africa. In a follow-up question, I asked Mama Africa how her friend's responses impacted her, and she went on to describe that even though it was confusing because it conflicted with her mother's responses, it made it more bearable to talk about what happened.

However, although her friends were supportive in that moment, their actions soon after socially harmed Mama Africa. She detailed,

> . . . My main friend, she was dealing with a guy that could have messed with the girl. And she was going off of him and stuff and they recorded the conversation.

> And she brought it back to me and my other friend to listen to. And she was just talking about, “Well how could you be with that person you know I don’t rock with her because of Mama Africa’s stuff.” And I really didn't feel comfortable with them discussing me and my sexual assaults like that. And then she was just making it seem like she couldn't fuck with the guy because it harmed me. And then she went back to the guy right afterwards and was crying and that's when I was the only person consoling her, and I was really looking at her like, why did you even have to mention me, there was no point.

Though Mama Africa’s friends were comforting and validating, they proceeded to share her experience without her permission. For Mama Africa, it was uncomfortable hearing her experience discussed between others because it made her feel like she did not have control over her own story and experience. On one hand, her experience was shared with people she did not know, which meant that a stranger knew some of her most intimate and sensitive moments. On the other hand, her friends were labeling Mama Africa’s experience as “sexual assault” even though she had not and was still in a place of trying to understand and label for herself what she experienced. Yet, because Mama Africa was socialized to be selfless and to take care of those she loved, this resulted in the centering of her friend’s needs over hers. Thus, even though she was negatively impacted by her friend's decision to share her experience, Mama Africa was unable to process that harm because she was left nurturing and consoling her friend.

Similarly, Imani also had to nurture someone she loved, specifically the mother of her ex-boyfriend, but only after being pressured. The next day after Imani was sexually

assaulted, her ex-boyfriend informed his mother what happened, and she contacted Imani. Imani shared,

> . . . She [ex-boyfriend's mother] asked me to meet with her and that was an abuse of power because she knew how much I cared about her and stuff and that I would be willing to meet with her so I'm like okay. So, we meet at a gas station next to her house and they had tabletops in there so we're sitting here, and I told her what happened I literally told her that I was not conscious. I told her that he came in literally while I was sleeping and stuff, and literally, he came in through the window of my basement and, you know . . . Then she told me a story basically about her and his father and about how his father was drunk at one point and how they had intercourse and that that's when she got pregnant with her first son, and that he hadn't had intercourse with her before that so he called that ''sexual abuse on her part''. . . she just said you know "he[her son] loves you and that he would never try to purposely hurt you and sometimes we give people the wrong impression."

Though Imani was actively trying to forget what she experienced, she trusted and valued the relationship she had with her ex-boyfriend's mother so agreed to meet with the mother. Yet, as Imani bravely shared her experience, it was overshadowed by the ex-boyfriend's mother's personal experience which was used to minimize Imani's experience to a misunderstanding. As someone who had been told she sexually abused her husband, the ex-boyfriend's mother attempted to rationalize her son's actions by telling Imani that people who love her would not intentionally hurt her. Instead, if

someone does hurt her it was a result of something she did to make them think it was okay.

In consequence, Imani experienced confusion and self-doubt, as outlined in the last section, leaving her to ponder, ". . . even though it was wrong . . . maybe I am being dramatic or . . . maybe, maybe I did do something wrong?" The ex-boyfriend's mother's response that, "those who love you would not intentionally hurt you," further confirmed the socialization she internalized, that sexual assault is a heteronormative act rooted in sex and physical attraction.

Yet, because Imani was under the influence when she was sexually assaulted, she was having trouble remembering the details. Thus, when the ex-boyfriend's mother stated, "sometimes we give people the wrong impression" she began reevaluating her behavior during the assault and considering that maybe she gave consent by not responding when he shined a light in her face. With this in mind, the ex-boyfriend's mother's response left Imani thinking that her ex-boyfriend loved her and though he hurt her, it was because she made him think what he was doing was welcomed. For that reason, when the ex-boyfriend's mother pressured Imani to meet with her ex-boyfriend immediately after that conversation she complied. On one hand, she agreed to meet with him because she felt guilty and on the other hand, she said it was, "I loved her so I was like okay I will, just for her [meet with the ex-boyfriend]."

During the meeting with her ex-boyfriend, she asked him "Why did you do this?" and he responded, that he "didn't know it was this stuff [sexual assault]." His response upset Imani, and just like the conversation she had with his mother, made her question

her account of the situation. Resultantly, Imani decided to “let it go” and move on from talking about it and trying to understand what happened, until,

> And then I found out from one of his friends that he was telling everybody that he was moving to California to be with his dad because he just wants to experience new things and all this stuff and after that point, I just got angry.

When asked more about the anger she felt, Imani described that,

> . . . people should know what he did basically and this that or whatever and I don't want to send him to jail and ruin his life that way, but I think that what if he does this to somebody else because he clearly doesn't care and maybe it wasn't you know because he was trying to show his love to me, or whatever the hell right yeah.

For Imani, learning that her ex-boyfriend was moving with his dad to experience new things made her feel like he was carrying on about his life unaffected by the situation while she was stuck constantly thinking about what she experienced. This did not feel fair to her that he did not suffer any consequences and got to “pretend like nothing really happened.” She thought that if he truly felt remorse for what he did, he would tell people the truth that he was moving with his dad because his mother wanted to protect him from the potential repercussions of what he did to Imani. However, though she wanted him to reap the consequences, her identity as a Black woman and her connection with him and his mother, made her view calling the police a dangerous option. As a Black woman, she felt obligated to protect and stand in racial solidarity with this Black man in the face of the harm she experienced because she knew the ways the system and overall society harms and treats Black men, making calling the police a life-threatening option.

Consequently, she decided to find another way to hold him accountable, in that she shared,

> I told my old friends about what had happened and so apparently there was a fight you know in the school where they were, cursing him out, I guess, basically, because they knew what happened and they were tired of him, you know laughing and or something in class . . . And then after that I kind of felt like I got my vengeance, I guess, or whatever.

Since Imani did not see calling the police as a way to safely hold her ex-boyfriend accountable, she sought help from her community. Resultantly, her friends took matters into their own hands which were neither life-altering nor permanent but severe enough that Imani felt like at that moment he was punished for what he did. Though Mama Africa and Imani only shared their experiences with others because they were socialized to cater to the needs of those within the Black community, even if that was at the expense of their own needs, such was not the case for Europa, who did so naturally and voluntarily. In chapter six, I will discuss in depth Europa's reason for sharing her experience with another umelanated wombman.

"Why Put Myself in Those Type of Vulnerable Situations"

In this study, several of the women's sexual life and desires were also impacted by their experiences with sexual assault. More specifically, many of the women experienced shame or fear because they internalized their cultural definitions of sexual assault which made them believe they were responsible for what they experienced. Thus, to protect themselves from future harm, they exerted control over their sexuality by either refraining from some or all interactions with men, engaged in more sexual relationships

with men, or both. Yet, this manifested differently for each of the women because of their cultural background, skin tone and body type, access to basic needs, and more.

"Fear of Boys."

For many women in this study, they feared any interaction with men and as a result made intentional decisions to refrain from engaging with men either altogether or sexually. Angela who was raised to be a "modest, like A+ version of yourself" stated,

> So, I think an outcome and something that I've noticed in myself since those events, was like this fear of boys not even like a romantic sense but just like even speaking to one at a store. I just can't do it like I'm generally uncomfortable and yeah, I just don't want to.

After her experience, Angela started to believe that not only are White people harmful but so too are Black people, more specifically Black men. On one hand, the former realization further demonstrated to Angela that Black women are not valued both in society and in her country. Furthermore, it also solidified the socialization she received in her home, that due to their inferiority, Black women are responsible for their own sexual purity in that they need to be modest and shy, any deviation could result in consequences. Therefore, since Angela drank and interacted with men, she internalized her behavior as the reason why she was sexually assaulted which caused her to fear any interactions with men.

Angela was not alone, Mama Africa also avoided men, but more specifically she avoided relationships with men. She explained,

> I was like well, I don't want to be in no relationship type of stuff [waves hands no], cuz basically I was like, yall men been doing too much stuff to me. That I'm not finna be entering no relationship with yall.

Mama Africa experienced many incidents of sexual assault before the one she focused on during this study and each involved a man she had some form of an established connection with (e.g., uncle, boyfriend, friend's boyfriend). Resultantly, she associated relationships with harm because she believed that the relationship aspect made men think they had certain rights or access to her body. As a result, she avoided relationships with men, because she felt like it would prevent future harm and give her control over who had access to her body and life.

Europa also internalized her behavior as the cause of her sexual assault and as a result shared,

> I had a fear not like a fear, but I didn't want to be in a relationship. I was kind of scared of it. I didn't want a man to touch me, I didn't want a man to, you know, sexualize me, wanna kiss me, like me. I didn't like that you know, so that made it harder for me to trust anyone that peaked an interest in me for a long time.

She went on to explain,

> . . . like why am I even engaging in interactions with other men, it's like, you know, they probably don't, our society, you know doesn't treat women and especially melanated women very well so why put myself in those types of vulnerable situations like that . . . then I went through a process of being abstinent or calling, calling it celibate at this time.

While growing up, Europa was socialized to see sexual assault through a heteronormative lens and to always be on high alert around men. For a long time, Europa expressed that she never understood why until her experience, when she realized that as a umelanated wombman, people, including umelanated men would try to cause her harm. Thus, her experience with sexual assault reinforced her mother's guidance, that it was her responsibility to protect herself which looked like being careful and wary around men.

However, it seemed that her experience caused her to associate any and every form of sexual contact or attention from a man as sexualizing. As a result, Europa thought since it is likely that men are going to hurt her because they only see her as something to fulfill their sexual desires, then why engage with them at all. Therefore, instead of being cautious in her relationships with men, it seemed that she exerted control by removing sexual relationships altogether. For Europa, she believed that being abstinent, it was a protective method that would remove men's ability to sexualize or hurt her.

While Angela and Europa were making intentional decisions to protect themselves by exerting control over their sexuality, Ebony Rose's decision happened subconsciously. She shared,

> I think, also just queerness in general, just like, I was just telling my friend today that the way I would perceive myself in a relationship with a man versus the way I like to see that with a woman is different. And that is something that needs to be explored on my part, but also just as a reflection of what we consider safe.

While growing up in the South, Ebony Rose was consistently taught that men are unable to control their sexual desires, so it was her responsibility to protect herself by covering

up. Therefore, when she had her own experiences, she internalized them as her fault because she had internalized that sexual aggression happens only to Black women who do not follow the rules of conduct for a "southern lady." Thus, over time, this realization that men are sexually aggressive and that she had to change how she talked, behaved, and dressed impacted who she desired sexually, romantically, etc. As a result of her socialization, reinforced by her experiences, it seemed that Ebony Rose began subconsciously seeing men as unsafe, and being in a relationship with them could mean experiencing harm and not being able to be her authentic self (e.g., dress how she wants, say what she wants, etc.). Thus, Ebony Rose became more attracted to women, in part because she felt like she could be herself without being judged or harmed. Though a critical social impact for Angela, Mama Africa, Europa, and Ebony Rose, experiencing a fear of boys was not expressed by Imani or Alicia during our conversations.

"Feel in Control of My Body."

While some women exerted control over their bodies by refraining from interacting with all men, others also/either felt more in control by becoming more sexually involved with men. For instance, in addition to refraining from exclusive relationships with men, Mama Africa shared,

> Like I at least in relation to men, I didn't see that I could offer somebody anything more than a sexual encounter . . . I definitely was very hyper-sexual, which is bad because I'm the type of person that, I am very much like a relationship type of person, whoever I'm with, I point to them, and I love them. But if sex is the main thing keeping it and I'm not really trying to get to know them or anything like that, that was clearly adding problems . . . I know I was doing it because I wanted

> to feel in control of my body and I wanted to be connected to someone, even if it's just for a short period of time.

Throughout the interviews, Mama Africa briefly discussed that in addition to the sexual assault she focused on during this study, there were multiple incidents where she was harmed by someone she knew, namely an intimate partner, uncle, and acquaintance. As a result, she began internalizing her mother's understanding of sexual assault, in that if it is not a violent heteronormative act, it is not that serious and is instead reflective of her and her actions. Therefore, since many of her relationships with men resulted in them sexually assaulting her, she internalized that as they only wanted sex from her and thus indicative of her worth. Though she desired a nourishing and emotional connection with a man, her experiences caused her to believe that her value only came from her sexual appeal or behavior. As a result, she decided to refrain from seeking established relationships with men and instead focused on sexual relationships. Thus, Mama Africa became more sexually involved with men because it gave her control over when and who had access to her body and it allowed her to feel connected to a man, no matter how temporary.

Similarly, Imani also expressed gaining control by becoming more sexually involved with men, as she shared,

> . . . I became pretty hyper-sexual, so I ended the relationship with the person that I was in a month after the incident and then I went back to the person[ex-boyfriend] that did that to me. And I was like, I had sexual intercourse with that person [ex-boyfriend] . . . I'm the one who you know initiated it . . . when I think about that

> experience, I come to understand it as like me, taking my power back because I was in full control of that situation and after that happened.

At the time Imani was sexually assaulted, she had a boyfriend, but after her experience, she broke it off with him and ended up having sex with her ex-boyfriend. Throughout our conversations, Imani talked a lot about the ways that during her sexual assault and after she felt like she did not have control (e.g., was incapacitated, her ex-boyfriend got to leave town with no consequences, she was emotionally overwhelmed, etc.). Thus, initiating sex with her ex-boyfriend, the person who sexually assaulted her, was her way of regaining control of the power she lost, because, unlike the last time, she was able to choose whether she wanted to give him access to her body without any pressure from him. This feeling of empowerment cycled into what Imani shared,

> . . . I mean, I didn't engage in more sexual relationships, but I definitely interacted with more men, like, allowed more men to touch me or I had a couple of different guys like over in my room, and I would just cuddle, I just cuddled I wouldn't let them kiss me.

For Imani, hanging out with men, on her time and under her rules, empowered her and made her feel in control of her own body. During these interactions, it seemed like she felt in charge of the interactions and emboldened to tell the men what she wanted and did not want, which she felt like she could not do with her ex-boyfriend or generally, due to her socialization. Both Mama Africa and Imani felt more in control by becoming more sexually involved with men, however this was not a sentiment expressed by Alicia during our conversations (or Angela, Europa, and Ebony Rose who experienced a heightened fear of boys).

Summary of Chapter 5

In this study, the women's definitions of sexual assault centered around unwanted contact and coerced consent. Yet, although each of their personal experiences fit within their stated definitions of sexual assault, the women did not see their experiences as sexual assault because they were socialized by their families and peers to believe that Black women cannot be sexually assaulted, that sexual assault is rooted in heteronormativity, that sexual assault is associated with attraction and sexual purity, and that they would experience harm if they applied that label to their experience. Thus, as a result of using their culture's definitions and understanding of sexual assault to make meaning of their personal experiences, the women faced a range of emotional and social effects. For instance, many of the women experienced and had difficulty regulating emotions, such as guilt, extreme sadness, and anger so attempted to manage them through both strategic and unintentional (dis) engagement.

Yet, despite the emotional effects of sexual assault, the women desired social connections, however, those were disrupted on an individual, community, and societal level. The compoundness of sexual assault and racial gendered socialization left them concerned that their family and friends would respond negatively, focused on the needs of their loved ones over their own, or committed to protecting themselves from future harm. With this in mind, the women who anticipated negative responses did not share their experiences with others, while those who had to prioritize their loved one's needs felt obligated to share their experiences against their own desires. Thus, as the women engaged in healing, practices that addressed their emotional well-being were intertwined with their social wellbeing, specifically their connectedness with their Black community.

Chapter 6: Healing

In this study, the second research question I sought to address was, *"How does healing occur among Black undergraduate ciswomen at a private university in a mid-Atlantic city after experiences with sexual assault?* For those women who do not believe they have entered a process of healing, how do they conceptualize what healing would look like?" During the second interview, we specifically focused on what the journey of healing looked like for the women and what avenues contributed or would contribute to their healing. I began by having them define healing followed by answering the prompt, "In your experience so far, describe your journey of healing."

I found that when asking the women to define healing, their responses centered around a state of peace and acceptance where they were able to validate their experiences, themselves, and their decisions. As the women shared their personal healing journeys or conceptualized what their healing process would look like, they gained peace through understanding and connectedness. More specifically, one step of the healing process for many of the women was understanding that what they experienced and how they came to understand Black womanhood was rooted in racism and patriarchy. Thus, another component of their healing process involved connectedness, between their own mind and body, to others, and a greater being. For the women in this study, because their understanding of sexual assault was an individual and collective experience, healing encompassed both individual and collective aspects. Three pathways brought about understanding and connectedness, including shared spaces with other Black women, body-based practices, and spirituality.

Therefore, this section will first highlight the women's definitions of healing which manifested differently based on how they made meaning of their experiences with sexual assault and the emotional and social impact it had on their wellbeing. Then I will discuss in more detail the three avenues they found to be essential to their healing: community spaces, body-based practices, and spirituality.

"Peace of Mind" (What is Healing?)

Majority of research on healing from sexual assault has overlooked the intersectional healing experiences of Black women and instead equates healing for all women to that of White women. Thus, to account for the systems of domination that compound to influence the ways Black women experience sexual assault and healing, this study provided the women space to offer their own definitions of healing. I found that the women's definitions were centered around a state of peace and acceptance. However, there were nuances in how the women talked about healing since they drew from their personal experiences which were shaped by their unique cultural socialization and the specific emotional and social impacts they experienced. Even further, there was one participant, Imani who actively chose not to define or identify the time after her experience as healing because she believed the word carried connotations of being a victim and wanting pity. Yet, while she had similar experiences as other participants it was important for her not to name it as healing but instead as an "adjustment or process." Therefore, to honor Imani's language, as I discuss her definition and specific experience post sexual assault and how it was parallel to other women's experiences of healing, I will use the term, adjustment.

In this study, the women's definition of healing centered around a state of peace. Peace varied and included recognizing their experience as harmful and authentically expressing themselves without the constraints of external standards. For example, Mama Africa and Alicia viewed healing as a journey of accepting what they experienced and the way it made them feel valid. Mama Africa specifically described healing as,

> I see healing as moving on . . . like, keep, keeping going. Not in a way that I'm neglecting things. So, I feel like I would, accept like, yeah, this happened. This is not a reflection on me. Be the best person that you can be and go about your life that way . . . and you can't control other people's actions.

As discussed in previously chapters, because Mama Africa is someone who was socialized in her home to be a nurturer and responsible for the growth and wellbeing of others within her community, she internalized that any wrongdoing of others was indicative of a failure on her part to uphold the standards of Black womanhood. Therefore, when she experienced sexual assault at the hands of her roommate and her roommate's boyfriend, she internalized it as a deficiency in her and thus blamed herself for their actions. Resultantly, when defining healing, she viewed it as recognizing that while she can uphold communal attitudes and beliefs, it did not mean excusing harm others in her community caused or taking responsibility for their decisions. Instead, healing was granting herself permission and space to name that something did happen, it was wrong, it hurt her, and it was not her fault. This sentiment was echoed by Europa who went further to describe healing as,

> I would define healing as ongoing, really being able to sit with yourself, kind of like be able to be still with yourself and feel through what you're feeling. And be

> okay with what you're feeling and still be able to operate at your full capacity. Use whatever experiences that may have shaped you, may have been negative, as a tool, as a power to persevere, really. I think that's the biggest thing of healing, not sitting in the regret or not sitting in the guilt or in the sadness, it is really being able to feel it and understand it. . .

Due to the socialization, she received from her mother and during the military, Europa felt guilty for what she experienced. Therefore, as she defined healing, it was centered not only around understanding and accepting both who she is and her feelings but also using such as fuel to continue through her life.

While Alicia's definition of healing also encompassed accepting that something happened, her definition as illustrated through poetry also incorporated several other facets,

> Healing is unlearning, healing is trial and error, healing is reexperiencing, healing is heartbreak, healing is new perspectives, healing is letting go, healing is time, healing is distance, healing is reality, healing is unmanipulation, healing is sacred, healing is sacrifice, healing is removal, healing is processing, healing is hard, healing is personal, healing is letting go[emphases], healing is acceptance, healing is finding peace.

As she searched for the words to define healing, Alicia's stream of consciousness chronologically outlined her personal healing journey. When asked to further elaborate on her definition and her use of "letting go" twice, she shared,

> I mean the letting go kind of like, comes in trials and letting go of different aspects of a situation in different aspects of a person. Um even how having it

> towards like the middle, beginning, and then at the end too, is like, why I did it that way. And then just the letting go and then having time, distance and basically re-evaluating the situation and being able to see it for what it is, and not what it was in your head, kind of a thing was important for me . . . And then acceptance and um finding peace it's kind of like I feel like where I sort of am with it, or getting there, you know, like it's not an end goal, though.

As someone who was socialized to view Black women as resilient and strong, she had internalized what she experienced as it's not that serious so should not complain about it. Instead, she thought love was supposed to hurt to some degree and expressed that as a Black woman at a predominately White institution she had to accept and deal with it because it would be hard finding another partner on top of one that would not do things she did not like. Thus, healing for Alicia was a state of peace that involved unlearning those social norms and engaging in self-validation of what she experienced as wrong and abnormal.

While Mama Africa, Europa, and Alicia defined healing amid their healing journey, Angela found herself defining healing during a time of not knowing if she had actually begun healing. Thus, instead of defining healing from a place of experience, Angela conceptualized what healing would look like, stating,

> I think healing would bring me a peace of mind and I guess less care about how I'm being perceived by others and just kind of letting myself do my own thing . . . I guess also healing would look like not feeling any anger towards the person and just anger in general too. I think also being comfortable in my body again.

On one hand, Angela was socialized to be responsible for her purity, and on the other hand, as discussed in "Something Attractive Girls Have to Deal With," she felt like her experience confirmed her inferiority as a Black woman in the racial hierarchy. Thus, through a lens centered on Whiteness and patriarchy, she began criticizing and critiquing all aspects of herself, resulting in self-hatred. Hence, as Angela conceptualized what healing looked like, she viewed it as a place of racial self-realization, free of anger where she no longer lived under the White patriarchal gaze and instead was able to be and embrace her unapologetic Black self, as defined by her.

Unlike the women in discussed in this section so far, Imani and Ebony Rose's definition did not center around a state of peace or acceptance because either they intentionally chose not to ascribe to the word healing and/or used another word to label the time after their experiences. For instance, as described in section, "Doesn't Bring Me Peace," Imani, doesn't ". . . like terms that I guess have a connotation of any type of like victim or healing, or anything that would denote I somehow was hurt and then had to recover." Therefore, instead she did not provide a definition of healing. However, when asked how she refers to the time post her experiences, she responded with, "I mean, I think if anything, I might use like process, or I'll say, adjusting, like I kind of adjusted in this way or I reacted in this way." As discussed in previous sections, Imani was socialized to view words like "healing" as synonymous with the attention White women desire and ask for after experiencing anything harmful. Thus, for Imani, words such as process or adjust seemed to hold connotations of an experience that is temporary where one is able to keep moving in the midst of unexpected events.

Ebony Rose, on the other hand explained that instead of using the word healing to describe her experience,

> . . . I probably would use like restorative more in just, but yeah like different synonyms of restorative. I always say whenever something happens, I need to back to my room and kind of like rebuild myself up from what has happened.

When asked if there is anything else she wanted to add, Ebony Rose went further to state,

> I think accessibility too, it's like for me, if I had my own room, which I don't [at home in the South], I mean I do now, but I would not if I wasn't in college. But I think you can restore a lot easier and its more accessible . . . I've always been able to restore throughout my whole entire life. But with restoring, I have not had like the tools and the knowledge to know how to properly go through my emotional needs. But I've had the tools and the capacity to go through emotions with self-care. . .If I can't pay for a [insert ride share company] because I don't have a car so if I can't pay to get to work every day, if I can't do X, Y, and Z, then I'm not going to care about navigating my body dysmorphia as much if I can't get like the physical needs met.

For Ebony Rose, the time after such an experience of sexual assault involves getting back to oneself, a better self, using self-care tools that are accessible. Ebony Rose's definition of restorative illustrates not only the intersection of race and gender as a Black woman but also socioeconomic status. Though the act of restoring is a norm for her, it is easier and more attainable if a person's basic needs are met.

Summary of Healing

For many of the women in this study, their definition of healing centered around a state of peace, where they can validate themselves, their feelings, and their experiences. In particular, healing was not solely associated with the impact of sexual assault, but the impact of harm on a societal level where they are devalued, unseen, and unheard. Thus, healing involved being able to live in the world as their authentic selves, unapologetically without the constraints of external standards (e.g., cultural and dominant).

Healing Pathways

The majority of research on healing from sexual assault focuses on healing modalities (e.g., disclosure, reporting, and counseling) that reduce psychological effects, such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Yet, this push for disclosure and psychological outcomes is primarily grounded in the experiences of White women and thus, overlooks the intersectional experiences of Black women. As a result, this study provided Black women the space to describe their journey of healing without being measured by the ruler of White women. We found there to be three methods of healing, often intertwined, that were essential to the women's healing journeys: community with Black women ("Don't Really Often Trust Anyone Who Isn't a Black Woman"), body-based practices ("I Had Never Had Anyone Touch Me Like That"), and spirituality ("I Got to Understand the Systems").

"Don't Really Often Trust Anyone Who Isn't a Black Woman" (Community with Black Women)

For several of the women, community with Black women was integral to their healing journey as they provided a safe space for the women to understand racism and patriarchy in a collective way which was both individually and collectively healing. In

particular, the women identified several spaces with Black women as healing such as therapy and the research study itself. In these spaces, the women were supported and affirmed at their race and gender intersection, which allowed them to both shift the blame from self to society and resist the expectations and socialization they received about Black womanhood. Yet, there were some nuances in their healing experiences, in that some women noted that in addition to race and gender, sharing space with a Black woman who also had similar spiritual beliefs and skin complexion were also important to their healing.

"A Black Therapist."

For example, when exploring her healing journey, Ebony Rose shared, "I think what got me here was like therapy, therapy is so important and having a Black therapist." When asked to explain, Ebony Rose stated,

> Okay, a Black therapist because like as a Black woman, she was also dark, I loved her so much that she was dark-skinned super nice. And I think that's important because when I was bawling in her office every single week, I just felt warmth and like protection and just validation. Even though she didn't say anything directly like "I relate to this so I've had that same experience," I just felt as a Black woman you might have gone through or had a friend, you've been exposed to Black culture. And that's important because I was able to open up more and to say things that I probably wouldn't say to a White therapist. I think therapy is important because . . . I know that having that person to help me navigate my thoughts in a constructive way and just being vulnerable helped me get here. And without that person I don't know if I would be able to do this, take that picture.

For Ebony Rose, she juggled being Black, woman, curvy, queer, and dark-skinned, all of which compounded to create unique experiences (e.g., being viewed as a threat, unattractive, and less feminine than lighter-skinned Black women). Thus, in addition to having a Black woman therapist, having a dark-skinned Black woman as her therapist was integral to her healing because as she bravely shared her experiences and emotions, she knew her therapist deeply understood. For instance, as a dark-skinned Black woman, her therapist understood from a personal level how she is perceived as a threat or viewed as unattractive compared to lighter skin Black women or White women. For this reason, the knowledge that her therapist possibly experienced some of the same things she experienced, brought a sense of release and affirmation. As a result, Ebony Rose was able to focus on and address the roots of her negative self-image and perception, instead of having to engage in the laborious act of explaining feelings tied to her intersectional experience or worry that someone was going to cause her harm accidentally or intentionally. Thus, the more she engaged in talking about her experiences and feelings in a safe and affirming environment, the more she validated herself and her experiences. She began to realize that she was no longer the cause for her sexual assault and as a result "no longer try to dress more covered up, like slowly but surely." Although therapy was healing, being vulnerable and open with her therapist was still scary as she shared,

> I looked forward to the feeling afterwards, but I would dread it every week because I have a shield up 24/7. And so, like, knowing that I have to show someone the underside of the shield or open up the wall, that I have was so daunting I just didn't want to do it every week. I hated doing it and often I would think about canceling before every single session. But I did it, and I needed it.

As someone who was socialized to protect herself, she was emotionally apprehensive right before each session. Though she trusted her counselor, as a result of her race, gender, and skin complexion she was used to hiding her true feelings and whole self from others, to protect herself from harm. Yet, she expressed that being able to connect with another Black woman was freeing and counteracted her fears after a while.

Like Ebony Rose, Europa also found that in addition to race and gender, having a Black therapist who shared similar spiritual beliefs was also important during her healing process. More specifically, Europa, who had seen several therapists throughout her healing journey explained specifically how having a Black woman as a therapist was the most helpful,

> The third therapist I had, she was a Black woman, and I felt like with her, she asked some good questions from a woman's perspective . . . in that process of hearing myself talk, you know, talking myself through things, helped me get a better understanding of me and what I'm actually feeling and then you go back to an experience that you had that you didn't even remember. Yeah, or that you didn't remember it that well or that it had that much impact on you or if you say something out loud is like literally triggers you to cry.

As someone who first spoke with a White woman followed by a Black man, she talked about how unhelpful they were as therapists because they either could not understand her needs tied to race or "was like talking to a wall." Therefore, when she began seeing a Black woman therapist, Europa noticed she had a certain level of understanding built into her that positioned her to ask questions that allowed Europa to unpack certain aspects of her life, specifically those tied to her wombman identity. Yet, despite being able to gain a

better understanding of who she was and the ways her past, in general, impacted her, Europa explained,

> I feel like she didn't really dig really deep, I feel like her guidance was more so like, 'Oh no, you should definitely try out trying to trust or not' and whatever I was kind of trying to ask a question about she just encouraged me to do it and I feel like that wasn't necessarily the right thing to do.

As someone who at that time had begun reading and studying different religions to better understand who she was, it was unsettling to have a therapist who was not equipped to access Europa's spiritual belief system in the exploration of her questions and challenges. Instead, it seemed like for Europa, the therapist was offering guidance without accessing and incorporating her sense of connection to something greater than herself. Unlike the other women in this study, Europa's sentiments were also echoed by Angela, who shared her experience with her therapist who identified as a Black woman,

> I feel like it [therapy] didn't help in the way that, I feel like a lot of the conversations I had with my therapist were, idk I would say, idk I feel kind of bad because she was so great. But like, idk, I feel like it was really surface level superficial conversations, like are you ready to be yourself and I am like okay yeah but who is myself? Right? And like it's almost like I didn't recognize who I was before that and I didn't know how, idk, I just feel like we didn't really go deep in certain things. But something that it really did help me with, was like kind of seeing food as something that our body needs, and you know she helped me kind of get control over that.

Like Europa, Angela believed her therapist was helpful in some regards, but overall, she did not feel like her Black therapist helped her in the ways she hoped. Angela went on to talk more about the racial ethnic background of her therapist, sharing ". . . so she's South African . . . she's colored. . .it's not like colored in American, but it's like your kind of mix like you're Indian South African but you're also White and Black." She further shared the impact her therapist's racial background had on her experience with therapy,

> . . . She would always tell me like some stuff I would tell her about you know, issues I was having myself like yeah when "I was younger I also had that too . . ." This sounds weird but I also was like alright, so she also caters to White people too, so I'm like are you just putting on this act because like I like you or is this how you also communicate to your other clients?

As someone who had a therapist that identified as "colored," Angela not only felt like her conversations were surface level, but it also made her question her therapist's authenticity during their interactions.

In addition to therapists, some women experienced healing by sharing space with Black women who were campus advocates. For example, Imani explored more explicitly how having a therapeutic relationship with a Black woman who was a campus advocate provided validation through connection,

> I'm a person who heals through talking and stuff . . . I did need to be told you know that "I was not alone," which I know is very generic right, obviously when you go through anything that's what people tell you but it doesn't matter, it's something that I did needed to hear, and especially because of the way that I reacted to the situation I needed to be told that I was okay and that it was okay

> that I chose to respond that way . . . Yeah, I was very hard on myself and the way that I chose to proceed, after that happened. So I was very grateful you know for that and that is something that I think of that sticks in the back of my head was okay, you know, how I chose to react I wasn't alone I think of [name of advocate] and I'm like, okay, I know that she said that she faced something similar and that she had this similar process so I'm not a crazy person, I'm not by myself . . . I'm just going to accept that.

For Imani, she initially blamed herself for several things but one thing in particular that she emphasized was having more interactions with men after her experience. As someone who was brought up in church, she viewed her body as a temple, and when she became more involved with men it ". . . made me feel like I'm a hoe or something." Yet, in speaking with a Black woman who was an advocate, she learned that her experience and increased contact with men were not her fault and instead, an effect of her sexual assault. However, hearing the former from a Black woman, in particular, was critical because it provided an individual and collective experience where Imani was able to talk and share in another Black woman's talk. As a result, she was able to understand that others in her community also experienced the same things based on race and gender and responded in the same ways. Hence, receiving advocacy services from a Black woman was valuable in her healing because it further helped her overcome feelings of isolation and blame that occurred. As a Black woman, she felt like the only person in her community that experienced this harm and believed that Black women, in general, could not experience sexual assault.

Though therapeutic relationships with Black women therapists and advocates fostered healing when discussing specific experiences of sexual assault, they were also healing even when women did not share their personal experiences with sexual assault. For example, Alicia, who did not share her experience, still found that having a Black woman therapist was healing because it made her feel comfortable trusting them with her thoughts, feelings, and experiences. For example, Alicia shared,

> It was everything [chuckles]. I mean I don't really often trust anyone who isn't a Black woman . . . I think that's, you know, baseline what it was . . . don't know, I just don't think I would have felt comfortable allowing anyone else into my mental space. It's just like, there are so many things that are just understood . . . Um, so it's just, you don't have to explain, even more which is already hard for me, so like this just we're starting off with a base level of general understanding which is great, which is necessary. Cuz we can't get into the deep stuff if we still trying to sit here and talk about it, but I experienced this because why.

As someone who grew up learning about the ways her tribe was harmed and mistreated solely based on their race, she was intentional about keeping her experiences and feelings to herself as a form of protection and strength. With this in mind, at the time she did not have a person that she trusted, outside of the person causing her harm. But, having a Black therapist inherently created a relationship based on trust, which allowed her to feel comfortable exploring and naming her feelings without fear that someone was going to take advantage of her. Alicia went on to describe the specific characteristics of her Black therapist that were critical to her healing,

> She just seemed very blunt, straight to the point and a little bit in your face about things. And I needed that. I will talk around, talk everywhere else but at what people are asking, so I was like that's what I need . . . so she was the first person that made me sit down and realize. Wait, I don't actually want to be in this situation, but I just feel like I need to be. And she helped me learn more about my emotions in general too, just the emotion wheel, that sort of thing so I could actually pinpoint, oh this is how I'm feeling. So, she helped a lot. Even just to name, what I was feeling even if it wasn't like having to do specifically with that [ominous experience].

Alicia was considered the "strong friend" in her social network; therefore, she was used to being everything for everyone and helping others navigate hard times. The former, allowed her to protect herself by deflecting and keeping the attention off of her experiences and feelings. Yet, having a Black therapist, who was unwavering and kept the attention on her resulted in Alicia being vulnerable. Alicia realized through her connection with her therapist that there was strength in sitting with and naming her feelings, as it allowed her to unpack and identify what it was that she needed and wanted. Resultantly, she was able to reevaluate her relationship with the person who harmed her and realize that she was only in the relationship because she thought he was the only person she could trust, and that love was supposed to hurt. Though most of the women explicitly discussed the impact sharing community with a Black therapist had on their healing, Mama Africa did not. During our last conversation, Mama Africa shared that "last year before like COVID hit" she began seeing a therapist and further stated,

> I started talking to that therapist about that [experiences with sexual assault] and she started asking me how I feel about the situations and like saying things, and I was like you know actually I do feel worthless, I feel like my worth in regards to men especially is the sexual encounter aspect of it.

Unlike the other women in this study, Mama Africa did not mention the race of her therapist, and though implicitly there seemed to be a positive impact on her healing in her ability to identify how she perceived her worth, Mama Africa did not specify that therapy was critical or important to her healing.

"Ubuntu."

During the second interview, the majority of the women explicitly expressed that they found the study to be useful in their healing because the researcher was a Black woman. In particular, many of the women felt having a Black woman researcher validated their experiences and affirmed their identities because either they believed helping the researcher, facilitated healing for them or the researcher provided a space for them to connect and understand racism and patriarchy.

For instance, Europa, Alicia, Ebony Rose, and Imani all stated that the only reason they participated in the study was that the researcher was a Black woman and wanted to help. Europa went on to explicitly share in more detail how having a Black woman as the researcher encouraged her healing process,

> I wouldn't have done it [the study] if you were a White woman right. So seeing that you were a young melanated woman that's trying to do research on something I was like yeah I'll definitely support this, of course and I want to have other women heal from whatever experience I have or have women be able to read what

> I went through and be like, oh, you know, you shouldn't feel shitty about going through your experiences it happens and it's not because of a "you" thing it's because of a "society" thing, an "US" thing right like how we are contributing to it. So, when I saw that I was like yeah, I definitely want to be a part of this, help and share my story and hopefully my story can help other people and I feel like that knowing that was like a huge relief off my shoulders . . . so it's kind of like doing it for myself. I would want someone to do it for me. It's like that Ubuntu thing, I am because we are so that's kind of how I was saying the research you do and want to publish is going to help that other "we."

Europa is a spiritual umelanated wombman who sees herself as interconnected with nature and others within her umelanated community. Thus, participating in this study seemed to align with her meaning and purpose in life of helping others, specifically those within her umelanated community. Due to Europa's sense of connectedness, she believed by sharing her story within a safe space guided by another Black woman, would facilitate healing for her community which would inherently be healing for her. Throughout Europa's healing journey she learned the ways that racism and sexism amongst other things, exist and are internalized by umelanated folks and thus perpetuate harm such as sexual assault. Hence, sharing her experience, feelings, and things she learned about herself, and the world was believed to be a way to help other Black women who may blame themselves for their experiences.

In addition to the study helping the women connect with other Black women and themselves, some women also found that together the research design as facilitated by a Black woman researcher fostered healing. In the second interview, Alicia was asked to

depict her healing journey with no definitional parameters and minimal interruptions. As a result, she shared,

> I obviously haven't talked about anything, or any of it before really so idk…. I've never sat down and looked back at it like, Oh, you did this and then you did this and then you did this and that's how you got here but even just in my thinking. I'm kind of proud of myself [chuckles]. Like, we've come a long way. So yeah, being able to acknowledge the healing process and where I am versus where I was, which was really helpful. Definitely[smiles], um I'm proud of myself for even being able to be like I'm proud of you type thing because usually I'm just like alright improvement, improvement, improvement but like, I'm learning now how to be like, Oh, you're proud of ourselves right now let's enjoy that for a second.

For Alicia, speaking with a researcher who had a fundamental understanding of her lived experience as a Black woman cultivated a trusting relationship where she felt safe to disclose her experience with sexual assault for the first time. As a result of the trusting foundation and the research design, Alicia was also able to reflect and admire her healing openly and honestly. The validation and affirmation from the Black woman researcher compounded with the open-ended question, cultivated a space for Alicia's voice to be centered, where she could hear her own story out loud and pause to show herself love and kindness. As someone who believed that harm was inevitable for Black women because society views them as less than, she knew she had to fight twice as hard to be just as good as her White counterparts, thus leaving minimal room for error or vulnerability. Yet, being able to speak with another Black woman who made space for her to use her voice, gave her the freedom to simply be and feel without comparison or risk of harm.

Like Alicia, Ebony Rose also felt the freedom to let her hair down during the study because of both the collective company of another Black woman and the research design that helped her to further understand the impact racism and patriarchy had on her self-image. As a response to the prompt, "depict your healing journey," Ebony Rose responded with a collection of images of herself and quotes that corresponded to different times in her healing journey. As she described each of the images she shared,

> I think the way that what you can or can't see is like the way I'm approaching femininity is slightly different . . . I think I'm open to considering different forms of femininity, and that how you express femininity is not the same, like it doesn't need to be to this White like standard.

As Ebony Rose talked through each of her images, she noted the ways that she approached femininity differently, highlighting that over time she began to shed the expectations of her culture and society. After experiencing sexual assault, Ebony Rose began evaluating her body and femininity through the lens of Whiteness. As a result, she highlighted in the first image, how she internalized the need to conform to White beauty standards. For example, in the first image (Figure 1), she was "dressed up more like pearls, more really feminine," yet described how in reality and visually she did not look into the camera, was "awkward" and "did not know what to do." Nonetheless, as she began therapy and started to analyze her body dysmorphia, sexuality, and Blackness she began validating herself, resulting in pictures where she engaged directly and confidently with the camera. Ebony Rose went on to speak about how reflecting on her

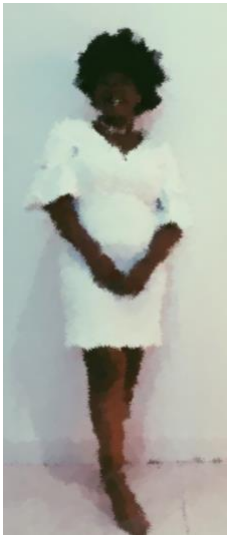

Figure 1 Picture from Ebony Rose's Collage

healing journey through the images fostered healing and aided in the work she did with her therapist. For example, she shared,

> I think, healing is like, I finally come to terms with the fact that it's not linear. It's just kind of one of those everyday things that you kind of have to navigate mentally. So, for me, like, today I woke up and I was not feeling my face, I was not, it's very masculine, not masculine. Yes, masculine. And I'm grappling with that. I'm not the standard of super feminine like hyper beauty. And so, I think, healing is knowing, first of all, where those thoughts came from. And what got me to those thoughts and then naming them and then working to unpack them and deal with them.

In the aftermath of her experience, Ebony Rose encountered a shift in her self-perception and body image. She began viewing her body as abnormal and inferior to White, lighter skin, skinnier women, thus deeming herself unrepresentative of femininity. Therefore, coupled with her therapy, reflecting on the images she used to answer the prompt allowed her to recognize those beliefs of inadequacy and identify where they originated. For Ebony Rose, this meant pinpointing and exploring how her experience with sexual assault impacted her body image and as a result unpacking how the ruler she was using to measure her beauty was rooted in racism and sexism. In particular, the creative art she used during the study compounded with a Black, dark-skinned woman researcher she was able to engage in positive self-talk in a safe and affirming environment, which further counteracted the White centered lens she was learning to challenge when evaluating herself. Thus, for Ebony Rose healing was deeply rooted in her Black identity and shifting from self-blame and critique to understanding that her experience is a community

issue by which there was a societal attack on her Black, darker-skinned, curvy, and woman identities.

Similarly, Mama Africa also obtained healing by sharing space with a Black woman researcher coupled with the research design. In this study, each of the women was given the option to journal in between interviews one and two, for Mama Africa both this aspect and sharing space with a Black woman researcher fostered healing. She shared,

> Mmm All of those like thoughts, I kind of just, I guess journaling cuz like I was actively thinking of those. And then when I felt them, I would put it in my notes and I was just like, oh well I have to remember this for you know the thing [second interview]. So, I guess preparing for this like was my journal because I feel like I was actively reflecting on what happened to make me think of all this stuff, in that little week we've spent apart.

In the first interview, Mama Africa expressed and displayed shame and sadness as a result of her experience because she had internalized it as her fault and indicative of something being wrong with her. Yet, her reflection on the first interview and preparation for the second interview, acted as a journal, forcing her to think about and evaluate how she was making sense of her experience and the impact it was having on her emotional and social wellbeing. As a result, she shared, "I'm trying to organize myself better and make a plan to do what's going to help me in my future and what's going to help me personally like as a person." For Mama Africa, receiving validation by simply sharing space with a Black woman compounded with the understanding that she was worthy of a healthy encounter and of prioritizing her needs over others, was healing as it provided her a sense of release and freedom.

In addition to therapeutic spaces, Alicia found peer support from other Black women as integral to her healing as well. She shared,

> I think it might have been mostly just like having line sisters because I had people I actually trusted like before this school's communities kind of shaky like it's not [chuckles] too great, all the time in the friend aspect of things mostly. So, I just had other people to trust, I guess that I actually fully trusted.

Sometime following her experience, Alicia joined a historically Black sorority, and, in that process, she was able to build community, trust, and friendship, all of which had been missing in her life during that time. However, Alicia did not feel a need to disclose her specific experience with sexual assault within the context of her sisterhood and friendships to process and heal. Instead, feeling a sense of belonging within a community with Black women while attending a PWI was healing in and of itself. She was able to be herself unmasked and unaltered in a safe and protected space of other Black women who understood her unique intersectional struggles.

While integral for several of the women, neither Angela nor Imani explicitly cited that sharing space with a researcher who identified as a Black woman was important to their healing. Yet, at the end of our second conversation, when asked if there was anything that may have come up for her or any additional thoughts she wanted to share or wish she was able to say that she had not been able to say, Angela mentioned,

> . . . I feel like something that would be really helpful is having this conversation I'm having with you, like with more people, and preferably more Black woman, and also like of course have you know other women present too, but for them to understand that like to let other people talk, let other people speak.

Though Angela did not explicitly specify that sharing space with the researcher was healing, she did describe the importance of having similar communities and discussions with more Black women where she can talk without interruption about her thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

"I Had Never Had Anyone Touch Me Like That" (Body-Based Practices)

For some of the women, body-based practices were critical during their healing journey as they allowed them to reclaim ownership of their bodies and affirm their value to live authentically and freely. The women in this study explored different types of body-based practices that split into two categories, showing body compassion to oneself and others treating their bodies with kindness. For example, some women engaged in body-based practices such as getting tattoos or breast reductions, while others' bodies were shown compassion through baths and hair-braiding. For some of the women, body-based practices were integral at the beginning of their healing while for others it was crucial later in their healing journey. Nonetheless, body-based practices fostered healing that was both individual and community oriented.

"What It Meant to Me."

Alicia, for example, spoke about the healing nature of getting a tattoo (Figure 2),

> Um I chose my tattoo just because of, I guess the time when I got it and kind of like "what it meant to me" [lower tone]. It was like the first tattoo that I got that was solely for myself, I guess. Because my other ones have some sort of tie to someone else like I have one that was me taking my parents with me to college, I have another one that was my grandma

Figure 2 Alicia's tattoo

wrote me a letter before she passed. And so, this is the first one that was just, this is for me, and it was just a really weird time I guess, in my life like it's a lot of

> uncertainty and discomfort, almost and a lot of relationships and that sort of area of my life. So, um as an exercise science major, you know, I um get a lot of inspiration from nature. And so, sunflowers always grow towards the light, and I'm like, I don't know it really resonated with me at the time. Because you know you're going through like a kind of a dark period, almost, and so you're looking for that light and trying to help that guide you through your healing and through your process, and everything. So, I choose that.

As described in her vignette, Alicia's family and culture were core to her identity and therefore her body was a cultural site of remembrance and memorialization of family. It seemed that the sunflower was a representation of Alicia and getting it tattooed on her was her way of penning herself into the collective story of strength and resilience. Like a sunflower, Alicia was in the midst of multiple storms, navigating a relationship she did not necessarily want, sexual assault, and feeling like she could not trust anyone. Nonetheless, she knew the sun was somewhere and that she withheld ancestral gifts to persevere. Therefore, for Alicia, getting her tattoo seemed to foster healing because it was a way for her to validate and express herself and her identity without risking further harm. She knew that if she disclosed her experience, she would be silenced and that it would undermine her Black womanhood, therefore getting a tattoo for herself was an act of resistance and reclamation.

Mama Africa relayed similar sentiments of reclamation but instead of a tattoo she spoke to how a breast reduction fostered healing,

> So, like I tell my mom cuz she's a woman and she asked me if I wanted to get it [breast reduction] even before I went to college and I was like, no "I need my boobs, I like my boobs" [high pitch mocking voice]. Yeah, now I'm just over it, I'm like, this is too much . . . it's hurting my body and it's not even positive attention that I'm even getting. We went to see a surgeon like literally yesterday and now I'm in the process of doing that . . . I'm just trying to change things about myself that will improve my better quality of life and make me happier.

Growing up in a traditional West African home, Mama Africa was socialized to view her body solely for the use of other people, specifically her future husband and children. Mama Africa's familial socialization was further confirmed after experiencing sexual assault and as a result made her believe that she was only worth what she could sexually provide a man, which was her breast. Yet, as she embarked upon her healing journey, she realized that her sexual assault was not her fault nor indicative of some kind of self-deficiency. As a result, she reflected and decided that she would get a breast reduction and no longer sacrifice her own needs to prioritize others. Thus, getting a breast reduction was healing because it allowed her to shed herself of others' expectations and needs and do what made her happy and healthy.

"In that Intimate Way."

For the women in this study, not only were tattoos and breast reductions critical to their healing but so too were compassionate ways that others treated their bodies. More specifically, after the completion of our second interview, Mama Africa and I began to talk more about healing, in which she shared an experience where she was touched compassionately. Thus, with her permission, I wrote a summary of the encounter,

> There was one time with my boyfriend where he ran a bath for me and bathed me. I instantly started crying uncontrollably and couldn't understand why and I realized it was because I had never had anyone touch me like that.

For Mama Africa, she expressed that a lot of her encounters with men involved some level of unwanted touching. Therefore, when her partner offered to run a bath for her and offered to wash her it fostered healing because it counteracted the bad touches she experienced and demonstrated to her that he saw her, all of it. It seemed that the positive touch during the bath allowed Mama Africa to see that a man can do things to please and protect her without a selfish intent to fulfill their sexual desires.

Europa shared similar feelings about how having someone show her body compassion fostered healing,

> Being with her [Black woman friend in the military], and having her do my hair, I hadn't had that done in a while like in that intimate way, actually ever from a friend that was my age or whatever. So that kind of helped me, because we're able to talk and watch movies and I told her what had happened. I felt like a will to tell her, and she was like, yeah, that happened to me before. She shared her experience and having that space to be able to trust someone in that moment and share and have her be able to share her story. It kind of helped me be like, oh wow it just helped me.

A few days after experiencing sexual assault, Europa's Black woman friend was scheduled to braid her hair. Yet, because the military separated the four Black people in her class and they were not allowed to be in each other's room, Europa and her friend were forced to do hair in a public space. Nonetheless, they did not let that stop them and

proceeded to come together and create their own intimate community within a White-dominated public space. Thus, both the verbal and physical aspects of hair braiding were healing for Europa because the process involved parting, oiling, braiding, and combing all intentional, caring, and loving acts that counteracted both the sexual assault and racism she experienced during the academy.

As a result, they were able to build a foundation of trust and collectivism where Europa's experience was validated and heard. It was integral to her healing to not only have her hair braided but by someone who shared her race, gender, and age. Europa did not feel comfortable talking with her mother about what she experienced because she thought her mom would ask the wrong questions since she was socialized to be on high alert around men. Thus, speaking with someone her age removed some of the risks of being blamed and allowed her to freely express herself at that moment. Though body-based practices were healing for many of the participants, it was not described as a healing pathway Imani and Ebony Rose, who instead explicitly mentioned the criticality of building community with other Black women.

"I Got to Understand the Systems" (Spirituality)

While many of the women found shared spaces with Black women and body compassion as important to their healing, spirituality was also important for a few of the women. Though unique to only a few of the women, spirituality as a method of healing was rooted in their identities as Black women, making it important to bring to the center and discuss. For example, in an attempt to assign fault after her experience, Mama Africa believed at one point it was God's fault. Yet, as she talked about her healing journey she mentioned how "I've been revisiting my spirituality, but just doing it more consistently

and intentionally now." Alicia shared her sentiments and went further to describe more specifically how her relationship with God was healing,

> As far as like Christian/spirituality and that sort of thing. That's definitely a big part of it. Like I said before, it was definitely a control thing for me. So, letting things be, and just kind of following whatever, you know, whatever steps, I guess, God wants me to take or those sorts of things, was a big part of it as well [healing].

Since Alicia internalized that love was supposed to hurt and that because she attended a PWI, she felt that finding another Black man would be laborious, she kept "circling back" and dating the guy who harmed her. Thus, in combination with therapy and getting a tattoo, seeking God was healing for Alicia as it helped to reduce her worry and be at peace. As someone who in the earlier stages of her healing did not trust anyone, God was the only being she could and did trust. Therefore, the trusting relationship she had with a higher being allowed her to give her experience and feelings to him as he would guide her towards the "light" (as referenced in the body-based section).

Europa explored more explicitly how her spirituality cultivated peace and understanding,

> So, they [studying different religions] kind of really helped me in a way where I got to understand the systems, more like the systems on a global scale, the type of systems that we live in, like the evil principles we live by in our society. And I think that's what really grounded me in that somehow, you know, I was already studying a little bit about Islam, and I ended up just going with Ramadan when it happened because I had already been fasting, I was like, Oh, this was happening

> and I was like, let me actually reflect and do this and then start to learn the Quran and start to learn Arabic . . . like for me studying different religions just helps me get to know myself better . . . it's just, it's like ancient wise words you know what I mean.

Before her experience with sexual assault, Europa practiced the Christian faith and prayed to God to find balance in her life. Yet, after both her experience with sexual assault and leaving the "Jim Crow" like environment at the academy, she began reevaluating her spirituality and exploring various religions, beginning with the beliefs of Islam. It was at this point in her healing that converting to an ancient spirituality belief system affirmed her identity as a umelanated wombman in the world with collective morality and responsibility to her umelanated community. Furthermore, the conversion provided her a collective lens by which to better understand and name the racists and patriarchal systems responsible for the harm embedded in the environment. Europa went on further to explain more explicitly the "systems that we live in,"

> . . . it [sexual assault]really has to do with melanated men not being able to be men in this White society because of how they're you know recognized and labeled for a long time . . . and because we're in White America and we're only 12% of the makeup there has been these underlying racist notions that exist and that affects people's psyche, and that affects men's psyche . . . you know, having toxic masculinity in a way where he doesn't know what masculinity is right so he doesn't necessarily know how to treat or acknowledge women, and especially women of color and I felt like I that was part of the healing process for me to understand that and to not only understand it but accept, you know.

As discussed in the emotional impact section, Europa, blamed herself for what she experienced, because she felt like had she not contacted the man and followed military rules she would not have been sexually assaulted. Yet, in studying religions and different spiritual belief systems, she was able to explore and understand the root causes of her experience, which included recognizing the ways that Black men internalize and perpetuate systems of power and oppression that harm umelanated women. Thus, for Europa, healing was accepting the truth that the reason she was harmed was not indicative of anything she did wrong but instead was a result of a larger societal problem centered in racial patriarchy and the dehumanization of umelanated women. As a result, she was able to shift the blame from her to the White patriarchal structures that caused her and other umelanated women harm. Though spirituality was a healing pathway used by a few of the women, it was not mentioned or thoroughly discussed as an avenue of healing for Imani, Angela, or Ebony Rose. In fact, Angela mentioned her experience trying to further develop her spiritual connection during her healing,

> I found that I would read the Bible and it would be some really general verse, and it's well written and its great right? I'm like oh this is cool. Then I'm like okay now what? You know like I read this, I pray, you know. So, I don't know, that's kind of where I left off with like connecting my spirituality with my healing.

For Angela, engaging in spiritual traditions such as reading scripture and praying was a good practice but not one that she felt provided her healing. As described in the "Peace of Mind" section, Angela conceptualized healing as a peace of mind where she no longer felt angry nor cared how others perceived her. Therefore, as she attempted to explore her spirituality, she did not experience the healing she was in search of.

Summary of Chapter 6

The purpose of this chapter was to provide insight into how healing occurs among Black ciswomen. The first set of findings demonstrated that the women in this study defined healing as a state of peace and acceptance. For them, this meant understanding the roots of sexual assault, specifically racism and sexism, and its impact on both how they view their Black womanhood and made sense of their experiences. Thus, for the women, the healing process was both individual and collective and involved connecting with other Black women in shared spaces, showing and having others show their bodies compassion, and connecting to their spirituality. This is significant because it demonstrates that Black women engage in healing in ways different from White women.

Chapter 7: Discussions, Implications, and Recommendations

This study sought to answer two questions: *"How do Black undergraduate ciswomen make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault at a private university in a mid-Atlantic city?" "How does healing occur among Black undergraduate ciswomen at a private university in a mid-Atlantic city after experiences with sexual assault?"* The findings presented in Chapters five and six provided answers to these questions and contributed to the literature in a couple of ways. First, it helped address the gap in the literature by exploring how Black women make meaning of and engage in healing after experiencing sexual assault without equating their experiences to that of White women (Neville & Pugh, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Washington, 2001). Secondly, it responded to the need for more research that recognized and highlighted the nuances that exist within and among Black women who experience sexual assault (Ahrens et al., 2010a, Briones, 2010; Bryant-Davis et al., 2015; Fedina et al., 2016; Krebs et al., 2011; Monson et al., 2000).

As a result, this study demonstrated common themes across the experiences of Black women which are important to highlight but also that just as these women are not a monolith neither are the ways they conceptualize sexual assault, make meaning of their own experiences, and ultimately pursue healing. First, meaning-making for the Black women in this study was rooted in the cultural socialization they received around Black womanhood. Secondly, healing for the women in this study was an interconnected individual and communal experience and involved understanding how cultural and sexual messages conflated with racist patriarchal beliefs about the bodies, behaviors, and worth of Black women.

Thus, in this final chapter, I will outline how these findings relate to extant literature concerning Black women who experience sexual assault and healing and highlight the emic headings that correspond with the interpretation presented in each section (See Appendix C). Following, I will explore the implications of the findings from this study for institutions of higher education (e.g., victim advocacy, counseling, and Title IX departments) and scholars. Once I have presented the implications of this work, I will end with a discussion regarding the next steps and directions for future research.

Black Women's Meaning-Making Shaped by Cultural Socialization

When encountering sexual assault, individuals search for ways to understand and make meaning of what they experienced. More specifically, studies have found that women make meaning of their experiences through their gender or by comparing them to the dominant culture's norms of sexual assault then placing them in the appropriate category (e.g., sexual assault, rape, neither) (Young & Maguire's, 2003; Briones, 2010). While there is research on meaning-making post-sexual assault, most studies use community-based samples that lack diversity, specifically Black women. Thus, one significant contribution of the current study is its response to the dearth of literature on how Black women who are college students make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault. In this section, I will supplement the women's experiences presented in chapter five by interpreting and discussing data from sections, "What About *My* Experiences," Emotional Impact and Social Impact.

The current study addressed the paucity in literature by centering Black women who are college students and using identity maps to explore if and how their cultures and experiences of intersections of disempowerment influence their meaning-making

(Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1990; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). As a result, one of the most important findings was that the women in this study made meaning of their sexual assault by comparing their experiences to gendered racial norms within their Black culture and society more broadly that reinforced an idea that Black women cannot experience sexual assault.

Black Women are Sexual Beings

As highlighted in chapter five, specifically, sub sections, "Watch Out . . . Don't Wear," "I Should Have Followed the Rules," "Inadequacy and Misery," "What Were You Doing, What Were You Wearing," "She Knew How Much I Cared About Her," and "Why I Put Myself In Those Types of Situations," some women's experiences demonstrated how the Jezebel stereotype was a significant cultural script used by the women to make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault. For example, Angela shared that in her East African home, Black women are socialized to be "modest" and a perfect "A+ versions of yourself." Therefore, she internalized that as a Black woman it was her responsibility to conduct herself in a way to help men control their desires and behaviors. When it was time for her to make sense of her experience of sexual assault, she naturally examined it through the explicit and implied gendered racial behavioral guidelines found within her culture. As a result, she expressed feeling "stupid or dumb" and at fault, because she "shouldn't be drinking to begin with" as such was viewed as inappropriate behavior for a Black woman.

Angela's meaning-making process was echoed by both Mama Africa and Ebony Rose, who was also taught that as Black women, they "should not drink" or "should cover up." Yet, though implied by Angela's socialization, Mama Africa and Ebony

Rose's families explicitly taught them that Black women who choose to behave or dress inappropriately are deviant and sexually promiscuous. For example, Mama Africa's mother stated, "you shouldn't be drinking like that, then you wouldn't be in the space for that, those people to do." Thus, because Mama Africa was under the influence of alcohol and Ebony Rose was not "covered up like a southern lady" when they experienced sexual assault, neither saw their experiences as worthy of such a label. Instead, they both internalized their experiences as consequences for behaving and dressing in a way that communicated implicit messages of sexual availability.

The findings indicate that the intergenerational transfer of stigma related to the Jezebel stereotype sets the standards for appropriate sexual beliefs and behaviors for Black women (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000). Thus, as the women assessed their experiences using the Jezebel stereotype it seemed to compound their experiences with sexual assault. In other words, the findings suggest that for Black women, other forms of oppression, such as racialized stereotypes reinforced the women's experiences of sexual assault, in that it dismissed their sexual agency and socialized them to believe they do not have the right or ability to feel secure and safe in interactions with men (Collins, 2000). For example, as a result of the socialization she received, Mama Africa internalized her sexual assault as indicative of her worth sharing, "I'm not really worth more than a sexual encounter . . . I felt like well clearly, you're not really more than, you know what's been happening to you." For many of the Black women in this study, they viewed their experiences as normal because it was indicative of their worth as one-dimensional sexual beings.

Thus, consistent with prior research, these findings suggest that the Jezebel stereotype is a significant cultural schema that Black women use to make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault (Bryant-Davis, et al., 2015; Neville et al., 2004; Washington, 2001). However, the aforementioned studies all focused on a community sample of Black women with no mention of ethnicity or consideration of within-group differences. Therefore, the findings of the current study contribute to the literature by providing insight into the specific ways the Jezebel stereotype influences Black college women's meaning-making.

Furthermore, in exploring commonalities and differences across social locations, this study also added to the literature with its findings that the majority of women who assessed their experiences using the negative Jezebel stereotype identified as Black African women. This is consistent with and extends the work of Gordon and Collins (2013) who found that Black college women in South Africa saw their experiences with sexual assault through the lens of the negative Jezebel stereotype in that they believed they "provoked victimization" in how they choose to interact with men.

Interestingly, there was one Black participant, Ebony Rose who did not identify as African but whose meaning-making process was also shaped by the Jezebel stereotype. Yet, this manifested differently compared to the participants who identified as Black African women, in that this participant was socialized to not only see her behaviors as deviant but more specifically her curvy body type as the site of deviance, responsible for transmitting implicit messages about her sexual availability and approval (Collins, 2000). These findings demonstrate how varying forms of oppression based on gender, race, body type, and more intersect with one another to influence Black women's meaning-making.

Thus, these findings are one of the most significant contributions to the literature because they affirm the importance of recognizing the diversity that exists among Black women and the criticality in using an intersectional approach when theorizing and addressing sexual assault (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989)

Black Women are Unattractive

As highlighted in chapter five, subsection "Watch Out . . . Don't Wear," not only did the Jezebel stereotype influence many of the women's meaning-making process, but cultural messages that Black women are unattractive also shaped how they made sense of their experiences. For Angela, she received consistent messages from her peers in South Africa, that "sexual assault is something that attractive girls [White] have to deal with and you Black girls, your issues is whatever . . . racism." As a result of various forms of oppression based on gender and race, Angela believed that as a Black woman she was unattractive so no one would desire to be with her sexually. Thus, she felt it was impossible to consider or categorize her experience as sexual assault.

Like Angela, Imani received similar messages about sexual assault and attractiveness growing up in the Midwest. Yet, one difference was that instead of viewing all Black women as unattractive, she was socialized to view Black women who shut down wanted and unwanted sexual advances as "aggressive" and "unattractive." To distance herself from the label as an "unattractive" Black woman, Imani intentionally aligned her behavior with being docile, and "flirty and fun" in the presence of wanted and unwanted sexual advances. As she attempted to make sense of her experience, she viewed it as normal and something to be happy about, that a man was attracted to her.

These findings are consistent with literature that found a harmful and often internalized belief that to experience sexual assault; one must be deemed sexually desirable (Zidenberg, Sparks, Harkins, & Lidstone, 2021). Since colonization and imperialism, western beauty standards are based on a particular type of beauty – one that centers White women. Thus, because beauty is seen through the eyes of the colonizer, society has historically labeled Black women as undesirable and as less attractive than White women (e.g., Mammy stereotype) (Jackson-Lowman, 2013). As a result, not only have scholars found that Black women receive less empathy and minimizing responses due to their perceived unattractiveness, but such race and gendered standards impact socialization and become a frame of reference for Black beauty, as further demonstrated by Angela and Imani (Arogundade, 2000; Taylor, 2002; Tillman et. al., 2010). This study also suggests that Eurocentric beauty standards have also shaped standards of African beauty for some women, particularly in South Africa.

Black Women are Indomitable

As the data highlighted in chapter five, sub sections, "Watch Out . . . Don't Wear," "Doesn't Bring Me Peace," "I Don't Really Rock with You," What Were You Doing, What Were You Wearing," and "She Knew How Much I Cared About Her," women in this study were also socialized to view themselves as physically and mentally invincible. As a result, many looked to this knowledge and social norming to make sense of their experiences with sexual assault. For Imani, not only did she compare her experience to the norm that Black women are unattractive, but she also looked to cultural constructions of Black women as indomitable. She explained that, unlike White women, as a Black woman she does not have the privilege nor desire to constantly talk about her

experience because “nobody else is going to pick me up, I have to pick my own ass up.” Further, she went on to describe that labeling her experience would give her experience power over her and hinder her ability to be resilient and strong.

This was echoed by Alicia, a mixed Black woman from a Native American family, who throughout each of our conversations talked about the pressure she felt as a Black woman to “keep it together and be strong.” Thus, Alicia believed categorizing her experience as sexual assault would undermine her Black womanhood because it would put her in a vulnerable position to admit to herself that she might need help. Though neither Imani nor Alicia believed that their experiences fit the category of sexual assault due to their socialization around the “Strong Black Woman” stereotype, at one point in their meaning-making process, they did begin to acknowledge that something bad happened to them. Yet, the former awareness that what they experienced was wrong was not synonymous with labeling their experience sexual assault or calling themselves victims.

These findings were consistent with several other studies. For example, in both Washington’s (2001) and Tilman and colleagues’ (2010) studies, participants described how cultural constructions of “Black and African American” as physically, mentally, and spiritually strong influenced their decision not to disclose their experiences with sexual assault. However, both studies focused on a community sample and failed to examine the specific ways the “Strong Black Woman” social construction shaped meaning-making before the decision to disclose. The current study addressed this limitation by focusing solely on Black college women and asking specific questions about the ways their cultures influenced meaning-making. Furthermore, neither Washington (2001) nor

Tilman & colleagues (2010) reported how they used the terms Black or African American to refer to the women they interviewed. This limitation was addressed in the current study by providing the women space to define their Blackness. As a result, this study identified that mixed-race Black women, in particular, used the "Strong Black Woman" script to make meaning of their experiences with sexual assault.

Black Community Should Value Black Women

In addition to being a "Strong Black Woman," chapter five, sub sections "Doesn't Bring Me Peace" and Inadequacy and Misery" demonstrated that many of the women were socialized in their culture to uphold notions of racial solidarity and protection. For instance, in her West African home, Mama Africa was taught that as a Black woman it was her duty to protect and care for her Black family and friends, even at the expense of her own needs. With this in mind, when she initially began ascribing meaning to her experience, the label sexual assault felt misplaced. For Mama Africa, she believed that her Black feminine identifying roommate upheld the same communal values and therefore could not imagine that she would intentionally cause her harm, as she believed the label sexual assault suggests.

This sentiment was also shared by Europa, who described, "a part of my hesitation around, identifying with that phrase sexual assault, my identities is from the Afro diaspora and Afrocentricity, I just I give so much to my community [voice becomes shaky]." Europa was socialized to fight for and protect her Black community and to expect the same in return. Thus, as she searched to ascribe meaning to her experience, it was disorienting for Europa to consider it sexual assault because her sense of self was deeply connected to the collective Black community. For Europa, the label sexual assault

would mean that the community she loves and protects is also capable of harming her like the outside oppressive world and as a result, she felt uncomfortable placing her experience in that category. Angela echoed her sentiments and described how her connection with her ex-boyfriend who was Black counteracted the dehumanization she faced in her country and predominantly White high school. Therefore, as she attempted to ascribe meaning to her experience, she thought it was reflective of her inadequacy and inferiority because why else would someone in the Black diaspora cause her harm.

These findings are consistent with other literature that speaks to the experiences of Black women and sexual assault. For example, many studies have found that the cultural mandate to protect Black men inhibits Black women's willingness to disclose their experiences (Crenshaw 1990; Neville & Pugh, 1997; Tilman et al., 2010; Washington, 2001). For instance, in Washington's (2001) study, one participant stated,

> because we as women have been socialized as well . . . its 'don't bring the Black man down . . . He's already going to jail, dying, rumored to be an endangered species; so why should we as Black women bring our wrath against him?' (p.1269).

The current study takes this a step further by demonstrating another cultural mandate to protect and value all members of the Black community, not just Black men. For example, both Mama Africa and Europa described being socialized to show up and fight for all members in their Black community, which left them expecting the same in return. Therefore, as the women made meaning of their experiences with Black men *and* women, they rejected the label sexual assault because such caused them to feel betrayed by their community and challenged their entire existence as collective beings. This is important

because literature that explores Black women and sexual assault often focus on nondisclosure due to the fear of betraying others in their community. However, this study provides insight that communal values and cultural mandates to expect and give protection to all Black people impact Black women much earlier than the decision to disclose their experiences. More specifically, for the Black women in this study, it was not just the fear of betraying the community but also having to admit that they were betrayed by the community and the impact it had on their understanding and sense of self.

Black Women's Healing is an Individual and Collective Experience

In addition to examining Black women's meaning-making after experiences with sexual assault, the current study also addressed a gap in the literature by empowering Black women to share how they define and engage in healing post-sexual assault. Although the women's definitions manifested in unique and varying ways, they centered on reaching and sustaining a state of peace, as highlighted in chapter six, subsection, "Peace of Mind." For example, Alicia shared that peace was, "being able to see it [her experience] for what it is and not what it was in your head." As someone socialized to believe that as a mixed Black woman, she did not have the right to a secure and safe relationship; peace looked like validating that what she experienced was wrong and unacceptable.

Both Mama Africa and Angela echoed Alicia's sentiments but went further to add that peace was also recognizing their worth and value as Black women. For instance, as someone socialized to view herself as sexually deviant, Mama Africa defined healing as a state of peace where she can say, "yeah, this happened. This is not a reflection on me." Thus, as the women went further to describe their healing journeys, it was learning about,

remedying, and resisting the root causes of sexual assault, such as racism and sexism that provided them peace they were in search of. In particular, this study found three culturally specific practices to be integral to the Black women's healing: community with Black women, body compassion, and spirituality.

Community with Black Women

As presented in chapter six, specifically sub section, "Don't Really Often Trust Anyone Who Isn't a Black Woman," the women in this study identified building community with other Black women as essential to their healing. Many of the participants talked about how their Black women therapists, advocates, friends, or the researcher provided them a counter space that increased their consciousness and affirmed and supported them at the intersections of race and gender. For example, when exploring what helped her heal after experiencing sexual assault, Imani shared,

> I did need to be told you know that 'I was not alone . . .' I know she said that she faced something similar that she had this similar process so I'm not a crazy person I'm not by myself.

Hearing her advocate, who was a Black woman, explain that she had similar experiences helped Imani position her trauma as a collective experience, which allowed her to shift the blame from her to the society that caused her harm in the first place. Ebony Rose's experience was similar when she talked to a therapist and researcher who were Black women. She shared how those relationships were healing because not only did it increase her awareness about the ways racism, sexism, and colorism shaped her self-image as a dark-skinned curvy Black woman, but also it empowered her to "name them and then working to unpack them and deal with them." Thus, for Ebony Rose, not only was it

important to her healing to have a therapist with the same race and gender, but also the same skin tone.

Europa and Alicia echoed her sentiments, they both felt like their therapists embodied a certain level of understanding that made them feel validated and protected at their intersections. Europa described that although her therapist was important during her healing journey, she felt like her therapist "didn't really dig really deep." She needed a therapist who was not only Black and a wombman but also someone who shared her spiritual belief system so she could evaluate the harm she faced from a spiritual perspective. Despite not having the former, Europa and many women in this study went on to share that building community with other Black women, specifically, the researcher, allowed them to facilitate healing for other Black women, which was inherently healing for the participants. For example, Europa shared,

> I want to have women be able to read what I went through and be like 'Oh you know, you shouldn't feel shitty about going through your experiences' it happens. It's not because of a "you" thing it's because of a society thing, an "US" thing . . . hopefully my story can help other people . . . it's like that Ubuntu thing, I am because we are.

Europa only shared her story to help support the healing of other Black women. This sense of connectedness she felt with her community supported her efforts to talk back through testimony. This finding is consistent with Taylor's (2002) community-based study, which found that African American women who experience intimate partner violence use research as an act of resistance and healing only when they believe sharing their stories would facilitate healing for other African American women. As a result, this

study confirms that Taylor's (2002) findings also hold for Black college-aged women who experience sexual assault. Additionally, the findings support the epistemological and theoretical framework used in this study, in that Black women do not develop consciousness about oppression in the same ways nor is it expressed in the same ways (Collins, 2000).

Yet, countering previous scholarship that depicts healing as existing in a vacuum, where a person addresses the psychological consequences (e.g., depression, anxiety, PTSD) specifically associated with the trauma, these findings suggest that for Black women, healing is holistic and rooted in culture and community (Ahrens et al., 2010b; Bryant-Davis et. al, 2015; Burt & Katz, 1988; Cohen & Roth, 1987; Hanson et al., 2001; Hassija & Turchik, 2016; Skinner, 2009). For instance, in a study conducted by Orchowski and Gidycz (2012) 95% of college women survivors disclosed to their female friends as a way to work through their emotions (e.g., fears, doubts, etc.) related to the assault. Yet, the women's narratives in this study demonstrate that healing was less about addressing their emotional and social responses related to the sexual assault and more about understanding and remedying the impact of the root causes of sexual assault on how they viewed themselves, others, and made meaning of their experience. Thus, supporting the only study on women of color who experience campus sexual assault, that found community was integral to women of color's healing because it allowed them space to reflect on and learn about systems of oppression, which simultaneously addressed the harm associated with sexual assault (Harris, Karunaratne, & Gutzwa, 2021). Based on my review of literature, it is rare for scholars to acknowledge Black women's consciousness and understanding of oppression and its impact on their lives

(e.g., racist beliefs about beauty, worth, etc.). Therefore, in alignment with Black feminist perspectives, these findings combined with Harris et al., (2021) disrupt the silencing and marginalization of Black women's voices in research on sexual assault in college (Collins, 2000).

In addition to the lack of consideration for community practices in holistic healing and Black women's consciousness, most research on sexual assault fails to account for not only intersections of race and gender but also other identities (Harris et al., 2021; Tilman et al., 2010; Young and Maguire, 2003, Briones, 2010, Washington, 2001). Aligning with this study's epistemological framework, these findings demonstrate the importance of centering the intersections of race, gender, and other identities like skin tone and spirituality as they add additional layers of oppression that shape healing. Though community was critical to the women's healing, sharing their experience within those relationships was not always. For a majority of the women, sharing their experiences in these community settings was healing but mostly when it involved therapists, advocates, and researchers. Thus, countering research that argues women survivors are more likely to disclose to informal sources like friends, family, or romantic partners (Borja, et al., 2006; Fisher et al., 2003; Orchowski et al., 2009; Palmer & Vil, 2018; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012).

For other women, disclosure was not necessary to obtain healing while in community with other Black women. Many of the participants explored sharing their experiences with their peers and described how it did not guarantee positive reactions or healing. For instance, Angela and Mama Africa both shared their experiences with their peer groups, the majority of which mirrored their race and gender. Angela explained that

because sexual assault was normalized in her high school, her friends carried an "alright, next" attitude. As a result, Angela's friends did not cultivate an environment that allowed her to feel safe and comfortable to process her feelings and experiences. This was also the case for Mama Africa, who shared how she told her friends about her experience and without her permission, shared it with other people. These findings support previous research on disclosure and provides some insight into possibly why Black women may be less likely to disclose to their peers than White women students (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012).

Yet, unlike Angela, Mama Africa, and the other participants, Alicia was the only individual in the study who identified community with her peers as healing. However, Alicia did not feel a need to share her experience with sexual assault in the context of her peer group. Instead, she explained that having people she "actually fully trusted" was healing because it countered oppressive views of herself by cultivating a sense of belonging with other Black women who valued her, affirmed her Black womanhood, and understood her intersectional experiences.

Body-Based Practices

In addition to spaces with Black women, in chapter six, subsection "I Had Never Had Anyone Touch Me Like That," body-based practices were also critical to the women's healing in this study. In particular, body-based practices allowed the women to reclaim ownership of their bodies and develop a sense of agency (Hua, 2014). For instance, in supporting the Black postcolonial author's research on the healing power of compassionate touching, Mama Africa shared an experience she had where her boyfriend at the time of the study ran a bath for her and washed her without any additional attempt

to engage in sex. She described how she "cried uncontrollably" and realized it was because "I had never had anyone touch me like that." Susan Taylor (1993) described in her book how sensual touching such as hugging and kissing her shoulders and arms was healing because it counteracted abusive touching (Hua, 2014). The same holds for the participants in this study, yet the findings also add to literature regarding body-based practices that baths, in particular, might also be healing for Black women. Baths where there is sensual touching, specifically by a Black man. For Mama Africa, the sensual touching by a Black man counteracted not just the trauma she experienced but more importantly remedied the impact of racism and sexism that left Mama Africa internalizing that as a Black woman her worth came from her body and what she could provide a man sexually.

In addition to baths providing healing power through sensual touching, women in this study also received sensual touching through hair braiding, a body-based practice grounded in African culture. For instance, Europa shared "being with her and having her do my hair . . . in that intimate way . . . kind of helped me." The physical aspects of parting, combing, and braiding were healing for Europa because it not only counteracted the sexual assault but most importantly nurtured her and communicated her value and worth as a Black woman. According to oral and written accounts, hair braiding, and cornrows can be traced back to West and East African cultures, where hair symbolized a women's heritage and helped women survive slavery and hunger during the transatlantic slave trade (Coleman, 2002; Dirshe, 2020; Mbilishaka, 2018). Therefore, braids have always promoted survival in African culture, yet in my review of this literature, the healing power of braids after Black women in college experience sexual assault has yet to

be explored. Thus, this finding serves as one of the most significant contributions to research on healing that use predominately White samples and other sites of knowledge and literature that center Black women.

In addition to body-based practices such as sensual touching, creative art was also a vehicle by which the women received healing. Alicia shared how getting a tattoo of a sunflower was healing because "It was the first tattoo that I got that was solely for myself . . . it was just for me . . ." and it represented her being in a dark period searching for light to guide her healing. Thus, the tattoo acted as Alicia's testimony, one in which she was able to share her story in a way that was rooted in her culture and allowed her to engage in resistance and reclamation. This finding is consistent with the work of feminist postcolonial authors who used their creative art of writing as a vehicle of healing (Adisa, 2001; Angelou, 1970; Anzaldúa, 1999; Danticat, 1994; hooks, 1999; Hua, 2014; Mootoo, 1996; Taylor, 1993; Walker, 1982). This study takes this a step further by demonstrating that creative art on the body was also healing for Black women.

One of the last body-based practices that fostered healing for the women in this study was breast reductions. For Mama Africa, engaging in community with other Black women helped her realize her self-worth and develop agency to search for what makes her happy and to create her well-being. As a result, she decided to get a breast reduction in that it was a way for her to reclaim ownership of her body and to shred the mental and physical impact of racism and sexism. This finding coupled with tattoos as healing demonstrates Black women healing in silence, not needing to talk about their assault, which challenges deficit-based discourse that argues disclosure as healing and non-disclosure as detrimental to healing (Ahrens et al., 2010b; Bryant-Davis et. al, 2015; Burt

& Katz, 1988; Cohen & Roth, 1987; Fisher et al., 2003; Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012). Overall, healing from sexual assault by way of breast reductions, bathing, tattoos, and hair braiding, particularly centering race and gender were all healing practices unfounded in my review of literature; thus, these findings make a significant contribution to current and future research and practice.

Spirituality

In chapter six, subsection "I Got to Understand the Systems," the women denoted spirituality as also integral to their healing processes, which was consistent with the literature on religious coping. Scholars found that African American survivors are more likely to use spirituality and religious coping than survivors of other ethnicities (Ahrens et al., 2010a & El-Khoury et al., 2004). For instance, in Ahrens et al. (2010a), African American survivors sought a spiritual power such as God, participated in church, and more to help them make meaning with their sexual assault. In this study, specifically Black women who were mixed race, West African, and identified as umelanated found spirituality to be healing. Therefore, this study extends Ahrens et al. (2010a) study by demonstrating that religious coping was critical for specific Black women, not all.

Additionally, unlike the women in Ahrens et al., (2010a) study, going to church was not healing for the women in this study, only prayer and reading spiritual documents were essential to their healing. For instance, Alicia shared how prayer and her relationship with God allowed her to "let go and kind of follow whatever steps, I guess God wants me to take." Prayer helped her to see her experience for what it was, wrong. She was able to reach consciousness about oppression and with God was able to unlearn certain social norms and arrive at a state of peace, where she understood her value in a

world that devalues her. Her sentiments were shared by Europa, but instead of prayer being the spiritual practice; it was spiritual documents and readings.

After experiencing sexual assault and gendered racism in the military academy, Europa's healing was centered on her conversion from the Christian faith to an ancient spiritual belief system. She shared how studying ancient religions helped her "understand the systems, more like the systems on a global scale . . . like the evil principles we live by in our society." For Europa, the Islamic faith provided healing that the Christian faith could not. In particular, she shared that it made her "want to be more in tune with who I am my own identity to like further help our communities specifically." Thus, for Europa, the Islamic faith along with other ancient spiritual belief systems was healing because they are grounded in collectivism and provided a theological foundation to understand and resist forms of oppression based upon racism. This finding is one of the most significant contributions of this study because in my review of literature converting to ancient practices or spirituality as a form of healing after experiencing sexual assault has not been explored in previous research, and especially for Black women.

Summary of Discussion

This study filled many critical gaps in literature by centering Black women and considering intersections of disempowerment on their meaning making and healing processes and the nuances across Black women. More specifically, this study contributed to literature by providing insight into how cultural scripts related to viewing Black women as sexual beings, unattractive, inhumanely strong, and the belief that their Black community values them all reinforced an idea that Black women cannot experience sexual assault. Lastly, this study shed light on the fact that Black women approach and

engage in healing in unique ways that differ from much of the research on sexual assault, specifically those studies with a majority White sample. Instead, this study demonstrated that community with Black women, body-based practices, and spirituality all provided healing to the women in this study.

Implications

Each of the themes that emerged from this study has implications for stakeholders in higher education, researchers, and Black women themselves. While the implications in this section are supported by research and the women's experiences, they are also informed by the recommendations received from the women in this study. In particular, they are inspired by the women's responses to the following question: What did you need to hear to help you during your healing process and what do you want other Black women to know? Overall, this section will highlight the specific implications for practice and research.

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study have many implications for institutions of higher education that would help to create campus environments that value Black women and support their healing, no matter when they experienced sexual assault. The first implication I will discuss is the need for education, specifically, that links sexual assault to oppression. This implication addresses the need for understanding that survivors, specifically Black women do not live single-issue lives and are impacted by various forms of oppression. Next, I will explain the importance of identity specific community spaces. This implication addresses the need for counterspaces that are accepting and reaffirming for Black women. Lastly, I discuss the need for culturally diverse Black

women helping professionals which addresses the need for support at various intersections of identity, such as race, gender, spirituality, and body type.

Education

One implication of this research on the experiences of Black women at private PWIs is the need for intersectional prevention education that interrogates the role of systematic oppression. Unanimously, the women in this study were able to define and describe different forms of sexual assault as a result of college trainings and peer interactions. Yet, the cultural messages they received about the attraction, strength, and sexual behaviors of Black women forced them to believe that Black women cannot experience sexual assault. For example, Angela shared that during the mandatory training she received as a first-year student,

> I was watching that, and they mentioned something about how you know if you're drunk or you're not in the right mind state, you're not able to give consent . . . So, after I did more research and found out more about it.

After the training, Angela recognized and understood that if someone is incapacitated, they are unable to give consent. Thus, she understood from a university standard her experience could be considered sexual assault. However, she struggled to believe that her experience was sexual assault as she asked herself, "Is it, is it real? Like you know can I really call this [her experience] that [sexual assault], you know . . . okay this is real [based on what she read and the training], so why don't I feel like it's real?"

The former suggests that while university-wide training on sexual assault like mandatory first-year orientation are important for increasing students understanding regarding oppression based on gender, it is even more critical that it centers race and

gender to prevent the erasure of Black women. Higher education institutions must teach students that sexual assault is rooted in systems of domination and thus creates different circumstances, experiences, and realities for survivors, specifically Black women. More specifically, this education should include modules about intersectionality, power, and oppression based on racism and sexism to help develop Black women's consciousness concerning the oppression they experience and its impact on how they understand harm and trauma.

Another part of intersectional prevention education involves the use of language. As demonstrated by this study, none of the women used "sexual assault" to refer to their experiences. Therefore, institutions must also consider how the use of "sexual assault" in their training offerings, websites, and brochures centers the dominant narratives of White college women and promotes further erasure and invisibility of Black women's experiences. For the women in this study, the label "sexual assault" did not bring them validation and instead often caused more harm. For instance, Angela and Imani talked about the differential and harmful treatment Black women experienced when they used the word sexual assault to refer to their experiences. For instance, Angela shared,

> . . . [the] people who were completely silent when Black women were speaking about any issues that they had, were now going on and supporting every single person [White women] who came forward with their story about sexual assault, which is amazing. They should be doing that. But when it was a Black woman who came forward talking about our sexual assault, they completely ignored it and they didn't say anything . . .

Angela's quote demonstrates the need for teaching that because of oppression based on race and gender, the use of the label "sexual assault" is often a privilege that some communities have over others. For many of the women, the search for validation was less about their experience and more about valuing and believing them as Black women. For instance, Angela shared that she needed to hear that as a Black woman, "Love doesn't have to hurt, doesn't have to you know feel unsafe and uncomfortable or anything like that." Therefore, it is critical to the well-being of Black women to receive education that speaks directly to and counters the stereotypes and misinformation that society communicates to Black women about their value and worth (e.g., Afrocentric beauty standards and being worth more than a sexual being). During the study, the women also shared how critical aspects of the research design were to their healing and meaning-making. For instance, Ebony Rose shared how creating a collage of images and words was healing because it helped her to further understand the impact racism and patriarchy had on her self-image. Therefore, institutions must integrate culturally relevant pedagogies such as identity maps, journaling, and collage making as they serve to help Black women name and identify the specific characteristics and narratives associated with their identities so they can unpack how such shapes the way they view themselves, make meaning and engage in healing post experiences with sexual assault (Creswell, 2013; Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Sanctuaries and Counterspaces

In addition to intersectional prevention education, one of the most commonly identified pieces of advice provided by the participants was the importance of small communities with other Black women. Black women make up one of the largest educated

groups in the U.S. and since literature highlights that they experience greater rates of sexual assault than any other race, there are a large number of Black women that may be sexually assaulted on campus (U.S. Department of Education, 2019; U.S. Department of Justice, 2013). As a result, it is our responsibility to be proactive in not only preventing sexual assault but providing spaces for Black women to engage in healing and we can do that by creating counterspaces for them (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998).

Counterspaces are active sites where people of color, Black women, in this case, can challenge deficit perspectives, receive validation, and develop agency (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). The need for counterspaces was emphasized by all of the participants when describing their healing processes and giving advice to other Black women. For some women, counterspaces with other Black women was important because it provided them the chance to be understood and to receive validation. Angela, for example, advised other Black women experiencing similar "events" to,

> Have Black women around you regardless if they've been through the same thing. Just someone who can tell you that your experiences as a Black woman are valid, you know. Just because a White person or whatever other person says, "Are you sure?" Pay no mind to that, there are people who do hear you and understand you.

Angela's quote was echoed by many of the participants including Ebony Rose, who shared,

> I just felt as a Black woman you might have gone through or had a friend, you've been exposed to Black culture. And that's important because I was able to open up more . . .

Both quotes demonstrate the need for institutions of higher education to provide Black women counterspaces so they can develop trusting relationships with someone who understands their intersectional experience (both in spoken and unspoken ways) which would cultivate a safe environment where they have a voice and can talk about anything.

In addition to feeling understood, the women also expressed how building community with other Black women gave them understanding, specifically about oppression and White supremacy, and equipped them with tools to engage in resistance. For instance, while in community with a Black woman researcher Ebony Rose reflected on the collage she made in response to a prompt,

> I think that what you can or can't see is like the way I'm approaching femininity is slightly different . . . I think I'm open to considering different forms of femininity, and that how you express femininity is not the same, like it doesn't need to be to this White standard.

Building community with another Black woman cultivated a safe and trusting space to reflect and bravely unpack the ways that Western standards of beauty rooted in Whiteness impacted her self-image before and after experiencing sexual assault.

She went on to speak about how reflecting on her healing journey with another Black woman coupled with the work she did with her Black woman therapist provided her strategies to engage in resistance. For example, she shared,

> So, for me, today I woke up and I was not feeling my face, I was not, it’s very masculine . . . And so, I think, healing is knowing, first of all, where those thoughts came from. And what got me to those thoughts and then naming them and then working to unpack them and deal with them.

Ebony Rose's authenticity and transparency were particularly powerful because she acknowledged that healing is a process that requires a certain level of intentionality and consciousness to remedy the impact of various forms of oppression she experiences.

As a result, practitioners should be intentional about creating consistent and regular programs geared towards building community for Black women. This could take different forms including Black women support groups for those who experience trauma, monthly spaces for Black women (e.g. students, faculty, and staff) not related to trauma but just to reflect, talk and engage in identity development work, co-hosting social events with student organizations such as hair braiding programs (e.g. National Council of Negro Women or the Black Women's Forum), or events where they can engage with creative tools such as body art, identity mapping, and collage making.

Therapeutic Services

One of the last implications of this research on the experiences of Black women after experiences of sexual assault is the need for therapeutic services by and for Black women. In this study, all of the women engaged in some type of therapeutic services (e.g., counseling, advocacy) during their healing journey. For many of the women, it was healing because it allowed them to make sense of their experience from an intersectional and systematic standpoint. Yet, such was only healing when the helping professional's identities mirrored the Black women's identities.

In particular, it was integral for the therapist or victim advocate to be a Black woman but also for some of the women to withhold other similar identities. For instance, Ebony Rose stressed the importance of having a therapist who was a dark-skinned Black woman as it provided "warmth and protection and just validation. Even though she didn't

say anything directly like “I relate to this so I've had that same experience I just felt as a Black woman you might have gone through or had a friend, you've been exposed to Black culture.” This was echoed by both Angela and Europa who both expressed the need to have a therapist with the same race, gender, and other identities. As someone who had a therapist who identified as “colored” meaning “you’re Indian South Africa but you’re also White and Black,” Angela felt like she would have received more understanding from a therapist who was Black South African.

Thus, institutional leaders, specifically those working in and with campus counseling services or victim advocacy departments, must hire Black women counselors. Yet, in hiring Black women counselors, institutional leaders must recognize and ensure there is diversity among the Black women counselors (e.g., sexuality, spirituality, skin tone, etc.). It is important to note, increasing the number of Black women counselors is irrelevant and harmful, if they are tokenized or subjected to racist and sexist campus environments. Therefore, in addition to hiring more Black women therapists and advocates, all institutional leaders need to engage in interrogative and reflective work to ensure they too are culturally competent.

In addition to hiring more Black women as therapists and victim advocates, the women’s experiences also demonstrate the need for financially supporting the healing modalities employed by Black women. As discussed, many participants engaged in healing practices that were founded and grounded in their culture (e.g., hair braiding, tattooing), while some used other body-based practices such as breast reductions. For instance, getting a breast reduction was critical to Mama Africa’s healing because it was

an act of resistance that allowed her to shred herself of others' expectations and notions about her and do what made her happy and healthy.

Therefore, institutional leaders who maintain survivor funds that help those who experience sexual assault access healing resources must resist the urge to create blanket policies and criteria for categorizing what healing practices survivors can use the money towards (short-term therapy, legal fees, medical and health fees, and interim safe housing). Instead, institutions must center the healing practices of Black women by allowing funding for practices such as breast reductions, massages, and more. Lastly, many survivor funds restrict funding for those who experience sexual assault as defined by federal or state legislature or regulations. Yet, as the women detailed the use of the label sexual assault and the acts categorized as sexual assault promotes the erasure of their Black experiences. Thus, institutions must recognize the power of language and the ways that it privileges and oppresses others. Therefore, institutions must consider how they talk about harm and their use of the label sexual assault because until they do Black women may not feel like they can or should access resources like survivor funds.

Although the previously mentioned implications – education, sanctuaries and counterspaces, and therapeutic services– are beneficial for supporting Black women's meaning-making and healing at predominately White private institutions, it is important to note that these are reactive actions. These recommendations are responses to the negative consequences Black women experience after exposure to racism and sexism, among many other forms of oppression. However, Black women deserve better. We can no longer tell them to wait because their lives depend on it. Black women deserve support that does not require suffering first. Black women deserve educational spaces where they

do not have to be taught how to navigate or heal from harm. As Angela put it, “In a utopian world it starts with changing society, society needs to just do a 180.” Thus, institutions need to be intentional about dismantling the hegemonic structures embedded within the campus culture that cause sexual assault and contribute to the negative consequences experienced by Black women (Collins, 2000). Until Black women are free, none of us are free.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study initiates an important line of inquiry into understanding Black college women’s experiences with sexual assault and healing at a private institution of higher education, there is still more to learn. This study emphasizes the need for research on sexual assault and healing in college that centers on marginalized survivors, in this case, Black women, and moves beyond psychological and disclosure-based approaches to healing. Future research should continue the work of this study by disrupting notions of meaning-making and healing centered on the experiences of White women. Scholars could disaggregate meaning-making and healing experiences by Black ethnicities (Ethiopian, Nigerian, and Jamaican) or other identities such as exploring how healing and meaning-making might differ within the Black women community when sexuality, spirituality, or class are centered.

In addition, this study demonstrated that healing is not the same for all women, thus highlighting the importance of continued decentering of White women in the literature on sexual assault in college. Therefore, researchers should conduct more research on the experiences of other women of color including but not limited to indigenous, Latinx, and Asian Pacific Islander Desi American. Not only is an exploration

of the healing experiences of different races needed, but scholars should also explore how institutional type and culture influence Black women's experiences with healing. In my study, the institutional context (e.g., private institution and predominately White institution) may have influenced the women's meaning-making process and what practices were available for healing. For example, many of the women engaged in therapeutic services because of the shared identities they had with their therapist, but future research might explore students' experiences with healing at campuses that were specifically designed to serve or have taken on a mission to serve Black student populations. This study also emphasized the importance of body-based practices such as tattoos, baths, hair braiding, and breast reductions for Black women's healing; future research must narrow in on how and why such body-based practices are important for the women and their communities.

Also, in this study, a majority of the women experienced multiple forms of harm based on their race and gender (e.g., childhood sexual assault, additional sexual assault in college, gendered microaggressions) but were not discussed in detail because it was outside of the scope of this research. Therefore, scholars should take the time to understand how multiple experiences of sexual assault or trauma unrelated to sexual assault impact Black women's meaning-making and healing after sexual assault. Furthermore, research should also address this study's design limitations, in that it limited recruitment and complete participation of Black women who had at least a year between their experiences of sexual assault and the study. Thus, researchers who choose to explore the experiences of Black women, should also consider designing their study in a way that could minimize triggers often experienced by women who are sexually assaulted

(e.g., one interview, or a survey). Furthermore, this limitation also suggests that scholars should explore the impact time distance from one's experience of sexual assault (s) shapes the meaning-making and healing processes for Black women.

Finally, the women in this study shared the importance of having creative art as a way to participate in the study. As found in literature, regarding identity mapping, this study found that additional creative and visual methods used such as poetry, collages, and journal entries were mutually beneficial for both the participant and the researcher. In particular, the creative and visual methods allowed the women space to conceptualize, narrate, reflect, and represent their range of thoughts, emotions, and complex selves, contradictions, tensions, and all (Futch & Fine, 2014). While for the researcher, the creative methods produced useful tools in eliciting discussions with Black women as it centered their individual experiences in the creation of the questions. Therefore, because it is important to acknowledge the needs of Black women both in practice and in research, it is also important for scholars interested in understanding Black women's experiences with sexual assault and healing to use research tools such as creative art to honor and center the needs of Black women.

Conclusion

Throughout history Black women have been under the White and masculine gaze, both in research and practice. This study disrupts and resists such oppressive tactics by demonstrating that Black women exist not in comparison to another (e.g., White women, Black men) but simply as themselves, as human beings. In this world it can be easy to turn away or ignore the intersectional experiences and compounded disempowerments Black women face on a daily, when you do not see or value the Black body behind it.

But, amid a double pandemic, the women in this study shared their pain, their victories, and their healing. Therefore, it is written into the conversation, you hear it and cannot nor should not turn away. Black women have always looked out for each other, and as a reader, it is now your turn to either take or pass the baton. As you reflect on what to take away from what they have shared, I implore you to consider the words of Maya Angelou and Dr. Jones together, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." "We thank them by listening, but we honor them by *doing*."

The time is now, not later, not tomorrow, *now*; lives depend on it, PERIODT.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interview 1: Research Question

1. One of the things this study intends to do is explore how the heterogeneity of Black women influences meaning making and healing after experiences with sexual assault. As a result, we will start our interview with an exploration of your identities.
    a. Using the materials provided with this project, please draw a map of your core social identities. This should be an illustration of how you see yourself. You are free to design the map as you wish. You can use drawings, colors, symbols, words to name a few, choose whatever you would like to reflect on your multiple selves. (Sirin & Fine 2007). Here are some examples [will show examples]
        i. Share with me what you drew
        ii. Probing questions: I see you drew [fill in the blank] tell me more about that
    b. Now that we have discussed some of your core social identities, I want you to depict on your map how these identities impact your life, what does it mean to be [fill in social identities on participants map]
2. In addition, to exploring identity, we are also here to explore sexual assault. Generally, when you hear the term sexual assault, what comes to mind?
3. Have you ever used the term sexual assault?
    a. Tell me more
4. When have you heard the term used?
    a. Tell me more
5. How do you for yourself define sexual assault?
6. What things do you think influence that definition for you?
    a. In what ways has your experience informed how you define sexual assault?
    b. Is there anything else you think influences how you define sexual assault?
        i. For instance, we have talked about your core identities, in what ways have they influenced how you define sexual assault?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share before we end the interview?

Prompt for Healing Journey

Please select and respond to one of the following options: A, B, or C. As you think about your response to one of the prompts, it can be helpful to use visual art. You are free to choose how you want to respond to the prompts. For instance, you can use poetry, a song, a journal entry, something you already have such as a tattoo or blog you have written, to name only a few. These are just suggestions. Be as creative as you like as you reflect on your healing journey.

- ***Option A***

- In your experience so far, describe your journey of healing. Examples of items you can include, but are not required to use are significant moments, emotions and feelings, barriers to healing, and more.

- ***Option B***
  - What do you think could bring healing to you?

- ***Option C***
  - Both Option A and B

Interview 2: Research Question 2

1. What made you choose this form of creative art?
   a. How did this decision connect to healing for you?
2. What made you choose this prompt (s)?
3. Talk about what you created as your response to the prompt (s).
4. Have you ever used the term healing prior to this project?
   a. Tell me more
5. When have you heard the term used?
6. How do you define healing?
7. How do you see your identities influencing your understanding of healing?
   a. In what ways do they connect to your experiences of healing or not healing?
   b. What specific identities do you see play that role?
8. Before we end, did you engage in journaling during this project?
   a. If so, is there anything you captured that you would like to share with me?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share before we end the interview?

Appendix B: Summary of the Women's Experiences

- ***Mama Africa***
    - Involved unwanted oral sex perpetuated by her roommate who is a Black woman and her roommate's boyfriend who is a Black man
- ***Europa***
    - Unwanted sexual penetration by a Black man who drugged her
- ***Imani***
    - Unwanted sexual penetration by her ex-boyfriend (a Black man) while incapacitated
- ***Ebony Rose***
    - Unwanted sexual comments by men and women (racial demographics not explicitly mentioned)
- ***Alicia***
    - Unwanted sexual contact by a Black man, who was her boyfriend at the time of her experience. Specific contact was not shared.
- ***Angela***
    - Unwanted sexual penetration by a Black man while incapacitated. Black man was her boyfriend at the time of the event

Appendix C: Codebook

Theme: Cultural scripts that paint Black women as solely sexual beings shaped the ways the women made meaning of their experiences with sexual assault
Third Level (Pattern Codes): ● *Watch Out . . . Don't Wear* ● *I Should Have Followed the Rules* ● *Inadequacy and Misery* ● *What Were You Doing, What Were You Wearing* ● *She Knew How Much I Cared About Her* ● *Why I Put Myself In Those Types of Situations*
First and Second Level Codes: ● Blame/Blamed Self ● Responsible ● *What did I do?* ● Shouldn't of ● It's my fault ● *I am the cause* ● Your body is never yours ● Cover up ● Body is weird and deviant ● Hyper sexualization ● Adultification ● Objectification ● *It's just another thing, who is going to care* ● Stereotypes/controlling images ● Can't offer more than a sexual encounter ● *Don't feel worth a damn* ● Don't put self in vulnerable position

Theme: Cultural scripts that paint Black women as unattractive socialized women to believe they are incapable of experiencing sexual assault
Third Level (Pattern Codes): ● *We can't be a victim* ● *Something attractive girls have to deal with* ● *Watch out… don't wear* ● *It's Not That Deep* ● *Black and Brown Women Silenced*
First and Second Level Codes: ● *Its normal, you're overreacting* ● Attractive ● *White girl issue*

- Stereotypes/controlling images
- Aggressive

Theme:
The women were socialized to view themselves as physically and mentally invincible, shaping how they make meaning and engage in healing.

Third Level (Pattern Codes):
- *We can't be a victim*
- *It's all keep it together*
- *Doesn't bring me peace*
- *What were you doing what were you wearing*
- *She knew how much I. . .*
- *I Don't Really Rock With You*
- *Black and Brown Women Silenced*
- *I Give So Much to…*

First and Second Level Codes:
- Indomitable
- *Keep it pushin*
- Distracted self
- Suppressed
- Don't trust others
- Nurturer
- Pressure in all aspects of life
- Stereotypes/controlling images
- Strong for others
- Put up with it
- Take care of others
- Others over self
- *Strong Friend*
- *Who's gonna care?*
- Not that bad

Theme:
The women were socialized to believe that the Black community values and take cares of Black women.

Third Level (Pattern Codes):
- *Doesn't bring me peace*
- *I Give So Much to…*
- *Inadequacy and misery*

First and Second Level Codes:

- Community solidarity
- When others are happy, I am happy
- Fuck everything, everybody
- Betrayal
- *Always there for others, nobody there for me*
- *Someone I care about hurt me*

Theme:
The women's healing is an individual and collective experience

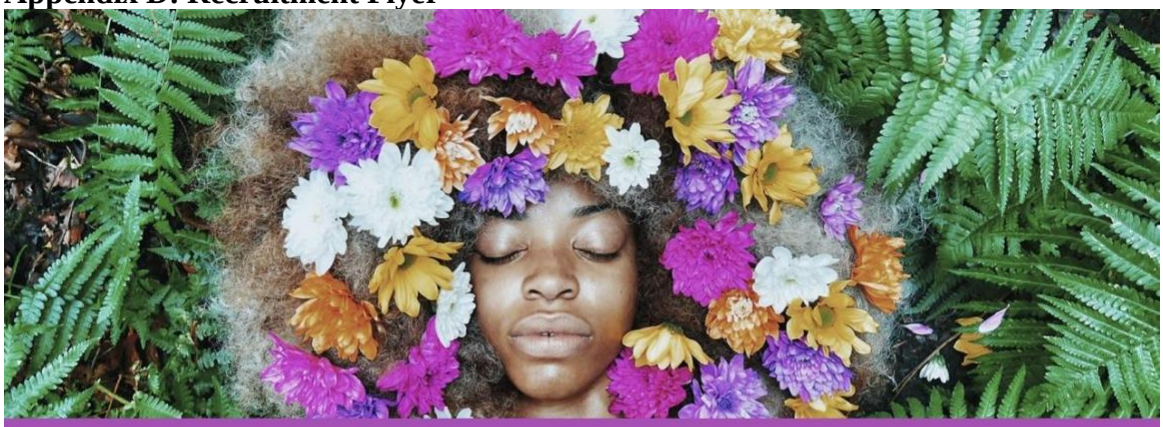
Third Level (Pattern Codes):

- *Doesn't bring me peace*
- *I Had Never Had Anyone Touch Me Like That*
- *Don't Really Often Trust Anyone Who Isn't a Black Woman*
- *I Got to Understand the Systems*
- *A Black Therapist*
- *What it Meant to be me*
- *In That Intimate Way*

First and Second Level Codes:

- Body compassion
- Spirituality
- *All Black Everything*
- Therapy
- Acceptance and peace
- *Healing is…*
- Talking back/resistance
- Reclamation of one's body
- *Letting go*
- *Restoration*
- *Adjustment*
- White dominated interventions

Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer



Making space for Black cisgender women

Overview

A Black female researcher invites you to participate in a research study on how Black ciswomen make meaning of and engage in healing after experiences with sexual assault.

Eligibility

- Current undergraduate student at [redacted]
- Identifies as a Black ciswoman
- Has direct or indirect experience with sexual assault

To learn more

For more information or to participate,

Please contact:

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