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Black Feminist Thought as Methodology

Examining Intergenerational Lived Experiences of Black Women

ABSTRACT In this essay, we rely on a black feminist lens to challenge and extend what is appraised as rigorous research methodology. Inspired by a diverse, intergenerational group of black women referred to as the Black Women's Gathering Place, we employ black feminist thought (BFT) as critical social theory and embrace a more expansive understanding of BFT as critical methodology to analyze the experiences black women share through narrative. Our theoretical and methodological approach offers a pathway for education and research communities to account for the expansive possibilities that black feminism has for theorizing the lives of black women. KEYWORDS Black feminist thought; Methodology; Narrative; Collectivity; Reflection

What legitimately falls under the umbrella of "research" in the academy is constantly evolving and contested by various scholarly camps. Currently, in the context of educational scholarship, rigorous research is constituted as scientific and evidence-based, which signals the quantitative paradigm.[1] Additionally, in traditionally qualitative educational research, definitions of validity and rigor have been highly debated.[2] A positivistic stance toward research that values understanding the world as measureable and quantifiable also signals that an objective truth is an obtainable possibility. Consequently, other epistemologies approaching research from personal/political standpoints that honor multiple, possibly conflicting, positionalities are marginalized. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, prized traditional scholarship is heavily influenced by the positionalities of "elite White men" who have controlled the academic arena since its inception.[3] Thus, the methods and methodologies employed to conduct research that are considered to be rigorous and respectable are often unduly limited. This is especially the case when it comes to research by and about black women.

Individually and collectively, black women experience marginalization at the intersections of various identity markers including race, gender, sexuality, class,

Departures in Critical Qualitative Research, Vol. 5, Number 3, pp. 55–76. ISSN 2333-9489, electronic ISSN 2333-9497. © 2016 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Request permission to photocopy or reproduce article content at the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints. DOI: 10.1525/dcqr.2016.5.3.55.

religion, nationality, citizenship status, and ability.[4] We focus on race and gender because, in alignment with black feminist scholarship, we believe that neither of these markers can be untangled from the other; both influence black women's standpoints, how we view the world, and how we experience our various truths. In this essay, we forefront the stories and experiences shared among a group of seventeen black women who gathered regularly to give and receive support. Via our narratives, we challenge the rigidity of methodologies that emerge from traditional scholarship, and offer embodied support for a black feminist methodology anchored by qualitative and critical paradigms. Before connecting our work to Collins's articulation of black feminist thought (BFT), we describe the emergence of our group and the theoretical and methodological perspectives adopted at its inception. Then, we provide illustrative examples of the application of black feminist methodology (BFM) as represented in selected stories. Finally, we argue for methodological approaches that center the voices, experiences, and lives of black women.

CONTEXTUALIZING OUR BLACK WOMANHOOD

In spring 2014, approximately 100 teachers, students, community members, and advocates celebrated the success of a three-year, grant-funded critical service-learning initiative led by Valerie Kinloch. The initiative supported public school teachers and educational support staff in developing more than 80 critical service-learning projects in classrooms and community sites across Ohio's Columbus City School (CCS) district. During the culminating event, participants showcased their projects. For example, second graders sold self-designed fundraising raffle tickets advertising an upcoming exhibit of a Tanzanian sculptor they were hosting as an artist-in-residence. A group of middle and high school students addressed how they worked to raise awareness of human trafficking within the local community. High school students recounted visits they made to conferences in Denver, CO, and Atlanta, GA, to talk with educators and policymakers about the importance of community engagement to effective critical service-learning. Excitedly, the high school students also shared their collaborative efforts with a local church to establish the first wheelchair accessible fruit and vegetable community garden. In addition to the projects' observable outcomes, presenters described how they had grown as individuals. They captivated the audience with their candor, and called on those gathered to commit to working alongside schools and local communities.

While the presenters were sharing their projects and reflecting on lessons learned, another story was quietly unfolding. A local catering company had been

contracted to provide refreshments for the event and, at the back of the room, a black female employee who was setting up food moved back and forth noiselessly between the preparation room and food display. Initially, when engaged in conversation with event attendees, she provided limited responses and excused herself to the preparation room. By the end of the program, however, it was clear that she had something to say. With Ashley Patterson and Arianna Howard nearby, Valerie thanked her for her service. The woman's response was: "I just have to say, I have thoroughly enjoyed this program. The work that you are doing is just great. . . I mean, these kids! We *need* this. Our community needs this," she said gesturing toward the buzzing room. She continued with a knowing look, "And I also have to say. . . I never see *us* in charge. And I cater a lot of events. It is just making me so proud to see you up there doing all of this. You da bomb, girl! You gotta keep doing what you're doing!"[5] After thanking the woman for her sharing, we hurried to conclude the event.

Weeks after the celebration, Ashley, Valerie, and Arianna discussed the event and the many black women who had crossed our paths as a result of the initiative. Unbeknownst to each of us, individually we had been replaying the encounter with the catering woman in our minds. We were haunted by her insistence that the opportunity to witness black women in charge of a large-scale event focused on engendering positivity and social justice initiatives was a rare occasion.

Together, we thought about what prompted the woman to share her thoughts. We considered the many unspoken elements of her heartfelt comments. Intuitively, we understood that she had a love for us that transcended our newly established acquaintance, a love and pride rooted in our shared identities as black women. We agreed that each of us had *needed* to hear her reinvigorating affirmations. As we expressed thanks for having had this impactful experience, we began to think about how we could continue the conversation beyond our triad and how we could recreate the feelings of visibility, empowerment, and self-love among black women: "Let's get some black women together."[6]

A THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

The notion of creating a space characterized by humanizing visibility, empowered womanhood, and unapologetic self-love aligns with BFT, which responds to the need for black women to have affirming spaces within a society in which we face intersecting forms of oppression because of our multiplicatively marginalized identity markers, race and gender at the forefront.[7] As such, BFT is a necessarily oppositional stance to the features of mainstream society that keep oppressive

power dynamics in place and render black women systemically inferior. BFT provides a self-defined lens through which black women can be seen and our experiences understood.[8] According to BFT scholars, black women's knowledge is acquired through our various experiences living, surviving, and thriving within multiple forms of oppression. It is a self-defined, embodied way of knowing. In other words, black women's subjective knowledges represent a standpoint epistemology.[9] According to Collins, this is a way of being that "calls into question the content of what currently passes as truth and simultaneously challenges the process of arriving at that truth."[10]

Alice Walker describes the power of women who love and revere other women both platonically and romantically, emphasizing the diversity among black women and celebrating our collective existence.[11] She contends, however, that the sociohistorical context that accompanies the word "feminist" is insufficient to capture her meaning fully and instead offers "womanist." Rhetorically, the feminist movement developed in response to the needs of women in general, but in reality it undertook the needs of white women in particular, and this fuels the yet-unresolved semantic baggage around the terms "feminism" and "feminist."[12] Walker clarifies, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."[13] In her examination of the womanist caring practices of black teachers, Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant writes, "because so many black women have experienced the convergence of racism, sexism, and classism, they often have a particular vantage point on what constitutes evidence. . . valid action. . . and morality."[14] This aligns with Collins's belief that "for individual women, the particular experiences that accrue to living as a black woman in the United States can stimulate a distinctive consciousness concerning our own experiences and society overall."[15] The varied experiences of individual black women contribute to a collective understanding larger than any single woman herself, and both womanist and feminist approaches to theorizing black womanhood offer productive insight.

Collins identifies the embodied knowing that black women acquire as a form of wisdom, which speaks to and with bell hooks's articulation of critical consciousness as a politicized understanding of the world and one's positionality that fuels action and activism.[16] The evolution from knowledge to resistant action is essential to black feminism. Through our interpretations of the world from black female positionalities, we resist by disallowing dominant, mainstream interpretations of who we are to overshadow, minimize, or discredit our truths. This act of self-definition, a core theme of BFT, is in itself an act of resistance.[17] Furthermore, while a collective understanding among black women

is a foundational component of BFT, there is no assumption of sameness.[18] Rather, our experiences—both complementary and contradictory—across the spectrum of intersectional identities are all contributive components that can be black and feminist.

Collins explains that "self" is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separation from others. Instead, the connectedness among individuals results in deeper, more meaningful forms of self-definition, empowerment, and solidarity. By establishing group solidarity, collective resistance against oppressive forces can be bolstered. BFT seeks neither to flatten the experiences of individual black women into one monolithic description nor to imply that such a standpoint indubitably engenders critical consciousness.[19] A vehicle for making black women's critical consciousness intelligible to black women and others, BFT opens possibilities for black women to resist oppressive forces that limit our self-empowerment and serves as a powerful methodological tool for research by and about black women.

BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT AS METHODOLOGY

Methodological frameworks impact the form and content of inquiry that researchers apply to the phenomena being theorized. According to Eurocentric, Western, positivist paradigms, there is one single, discoverable, absolute truth.[20] As Shelby Lewis explains, traditional methodological approaches are "based on the values, interests, and views of oppressive power holders," which makes it the responsibility of researchers utilizing black feminism to demystify the value of subjective theories and methods.[21] Other measures constituting traditional academic research include: an assumed separation between power-bearing researcher(s) and the objectified individuals being researched; forms of data collection that truncate the robust exchange of ideas (e.g., rigidly structured interviews and surveys); and presenting results to serve those who author them more so than the people who inform them.[22] Our interpretations, guided by black feminism as theory and black feminist methodology (which exist staunchly outside of this traditional network), follow a different set of assumptions that emphasize humanizing, engaging, and inclusive practices.

Collins articulates BFT as "critical social theory," given that "US Black women's experiences as well as those of women of African descent across the diaspora have been routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge."[23] Situating our interpretations within Collins's theory, we also embrace a more expansive understanding of BFT as critical methodology to underscore the identities, knowledges, and lives of black women as valuable. We named our collective

the Black Women's Gathering Place (BWGP), and BFT influentially guided our group's naissance.

Several researchers use BFT to inform their methodologies, and we rely on their work to outline our own methodological moves.[24] BFM privileges embodied knowledges that emerge through the experiences of black women who name and speak their varied forms of truth.[25] Representative data, taking the form of oral stories, serve as social artifacts that contribute to the connections black women make across the stories we share. During data analysis and reporting, black feminist researchers commit to: making multiple truths visible, incorporating the interests and values of participants as a collective, and creating opportunities for self-definition and self-determination,[26] all while emphasizing the importance of black women's lived experiences.

We rely on Collins's belief that the "set of principles for assessing knowledge claims"[27] available to those who espouse black feminist epistemology can methodologically inform our involvements with black women, ourselves, and our research endeavors.

EMPLOYING BLACK FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

To utilize BFM, the lived experiences of black women are paramount to understanding how we resist forces that seek to oppress us daily. To prepare for the narratives that make legible black women's "everyday taken-for-granted knowledge,"[28] to be surprising and unpredictable, we (Ashley, Valerie and Arianna) initially agreed to think deeply about the topics addressed among participants who represented a diverse, intergenerational cross-section of seventeen black women. Our initial list identified twelve individuals from our local educational circles, including the university and public school system. Although we were troubled by not being able to invite every woman who crossed our minds, we decided to keep the group small enough to facilitate intimacy and were intentional about making intergenerational invitations. Ten of the invitees came to the first meeting and all but one continued on with the group. After the fourth meeting, the group agreed to extend invitations to a handful of other women who we thought might benefit from participating, bringing the total number to seventeen. Despite fluctuating attendance, everyone attended meetings with some regularity and remained active on the group email list.

Though we promised meaningful conversations, we did not have specific a priori topics or questions in mind. During our sessions, occurring bi-monthly across the span of eighteen months and lasting anywhere from two to four

hours per session, no topic was off limits. We allowed the dialogue to unfold in accordance with participant interests. We entered the space committed to our roles as participants and with awareness that our shared identities as academic researchers; doctoral degree-seekers and holders; mothers, daughters, and sisters; cisgender and heterosexual women; and partners and activists heavily mediated our existence within and contributed to BWGP. Within the group our ages ranged from high school-age to post-retirement, and our ethnic backgrounds traversed the African, North American, and European continents. Our professional affiliations were tied to education, law, and the corporate world, and our socioeconomic statuses ranged from financially distressed to middle class.

Amid our diversity, our identities as black women were (and continue to be) exceptionally salient, which compelled us to heed hooks's warning to not allow a false hierarchy to manifest among group members.[29] Therefore, we confronted the complexity of the implications of our identities and the ways they sometimes intersected (creating feelings of insider-ness) and sometimes conflicted (revealing feelings of outsider-ness). For instance, during our first meeting, Ryann shared a lesson she had learned from her father as a child: "Not everyone who looks like you is for you." She deciphered the statement as her father cautioning her against befriending peers based upon their skin color. Her insight captured the understanding, often made clear by group conversation, that connections along the lines of race and gender are not guaranteed. The understanding that black women are both similar and different, and simultaneously systemically marginalized and privileged, strengthened our group.[30]

From the use of conversation starter prompts to unstructured discussions to the open exchange of stories, we talked about current events, popular culture, and professional and personal experiences. We conversed about myriad topics ranging from child-rearing and being reared ourselves to workplace and romantic relationships to strategies for encouraging self-care and tactics for disrupting nearly undetectable forms of self-loathing. We initially audio recorded our sessions (with each member's expressed permission), but as our conversations became more candid, we collectively opted out of that practice as we discovered precise conversational records were unnecessary. Participants shared as much as they felt comfortable, which oftentimes included intimate details of disappointment, triumph, hurt, and personal rebuilding. As we were moved to, we provided each other with words and physical embraces of comfort. Increasingly, we spoke without filters or apologies. Introductory statements such as "I don't know if I should say this," or "I don't know if anyone will be able to relate to this, but," became less common as we established organic group cohesion.

As inner-group connection became palpable, Ashley, Valerie, and Arianna grew more interested in how group members conceived of themselves as individuals and BWGP participants. Because such insights are often traditionally gathered through interviews, we were concerned about sacrificing our primary commitment to being group participants. We considered the risk of appearing disingenuous about our roles as "members of the group, just like everyone else" if we requested that group members participate in formal interviews for research purposes. To mediate this, we resisted the term "interview" and its traditional, academic connotations in favor of *recorded dialogic conversations*.[31] At one BWGP meeting, we shared our intentions with the group, requested their participation, and provided time to consider our invitation. Via email, each individual group member consented to being interviewed and for their comments and likenesses to be included in written and oral artifacts.

We must note that despite our desire to disrupt traditional interview practices such as the linearity of the question–response process, as well as the physical and linguistic distancing between interviewee and interviewer, we encountered challenges.[32] Departing from the established norms was uncomfortable for some, and engaging in conversational interviews not marked by linearity and unidirectionality was initially looked upon with suspicion. With the introduction of formalities such as interview questions and re-introduction of a recording device, participants expected to be asked prepared questions and would sometimes wait for the next question instead of engaging in a back-and-forth conversation. In hindsight, it was not enough to achieve disruption to simply *want* to resist traditional practices that position black women beyond knowledge production. However, these challenges encouraged us to reflect on ourselves as participants and researchers, and what we sought to do (i.e., nurture and be nurtured by a group of black women). Instead, we had to articulate our shifting understandings and growing consciousness as participants and be conscious of how group members wanted to enact this role. To address this concern, Ashley, Valerie, and Arianna participated in a recorded three-way conversation in which we were all simultaneously interviewer and interviewee. Methodologically, this allowed us to experience what it meant to flow between the two roles and share the responsibilities of conversational leading and following. In the next subsections, we share narratives that describe selected individual and collective experiences to illustrate how BFM centers the lives and stories of black women.

Being Invited In and Learning with Each Other

Throughout the group's inception and implementation, our primary goal as conveners[33] and participants of BWGP was the creation of a space where black

women could hear each other and be heard. Grappling with the power that accompanied our positionalities as researchers, we sought insight from group members about their participation. In the following vignettes, two participants share their stories about being asked to join BWGP. From their reflections, we learn that the private reactions to being invited were not instinctually positive, which admittedly works against the black feminist praxis we envisioned. We also see that the reservations we felt about creating the group were not necessarily those shared by fellow group members.

RYANN: It's interesting how past experiences can shape your reaction to present events. Sometimes without you even realizing it's happening. This came true for me when I was asked to join BWGP. When I was initially asked, the first response inside my mind was to say "no." In that moment, I felt a real sense of anxiety about being in a group of all women because of certain experiences I've had in the past. Would I be able to trust these women I didn't know? Do I really want to allow them into my own personal circle? I'd allowed myself to trust black women in the past and that trust was shattered into a million pieces. Those women welcomed me with open arms and warm smiles, but later turned their backs on me. So why would I possibly put myself in that situation again? Well, life has taught me to view every new situation with a new pair of lenses. With that idea in mind, I decided to allow myself to take a leap of faith. Trust me when I tell you. . . it was a very big leap!

While driving to our first group meeting, I wanted to make sure I kept my mind open and positive. Before I walked into Valerie's home, I made the decision to leave my anxiety, mistrust, and fear at the door. I walked in, greeted everyone there, and sat next to a young lady I had never met before. That within itself was uncomfortable for me, but I continued to go with the flow. We eventually got to know each other's names and what we all did for a living. I was willing to share my thoughts with everyone on being asked to join this group. Amazingly, no one made any negative comments or judgments toward me when I shared my concern of trust among women, especially black women. There were some there who also had similar concerns themselves. I appreciated the opportunity to get different perspectives on certain life situations we all had in common and others that were unique to just one or two of us. After the meeting concluded, I realized I was actually in a positive space with women to whom I could truly relate.

Now, I enjoy getting together with the ladies and having a great time. At this point, can I honestly say I no longer have anxiety about being able to trust women? No, but I continue to push myself to be open and to allow each individual to create a genuine relationship with me. I am happy to be part of this great group of black women, and I look forward to all the positive things this group will do in the future.

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TANJA: When I was asked whether I was interested in joining BWGP, I was apprehensive. I wondered what would be expected of me. Would my biracial black body occupy a space that was supposed to belong to a more "authentically" black woman? Would my foreign-born self be out of place in a room full of what I assumed would be US-born black women with their visceral knowledge of racism and sexism in the United States? Nevertheless, I accepted the invitation, partially because my life as an international graduate student is often marked by isolation and loneliness. More importantly, when I asked why I was invited, I was told that it was exactly because of my foreign-born, biracial black, reserved self. I felt reassured that I didn't have to perform a particular type of black womanhood to be a desirable member, but that I could simply come as I am.

The first meeting came. I remember sitting, uncomfortably at first, in the midst of beautiful women. After mere minutes, however, I felt myself drawn into their personalities and their stories of the past and the present. I remember laughing from my core at times, and feeling moved to tears at others. In this first session, I spoke as little as I could, because of my fear of sharing in front of these women, who all seemed so comfortable in their own skins. I wasn't sure if what had brought me to the space would be enough to sustain their desire for my presence. After a few meetings, I began to note that these women with whom I rarely interacted outside of the group were expressing a deep interest in my well-being and happiness. Now, I look forward to each meeting. I recognize how much I have been learning from the experiences shared by the others, for example, experiences of working in white spaces in corporate US America. Most of all, I recognize how much those experiences mirror mine in European workspaces. Despite our differences in age, upbringing, or phenotype, we have come to understand, protect, and sustain each other in ways that have become an important part of my life.

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By reflecting on, receiving, and ultimately accepting invitations to join BWGP, Ryann and Tanja provide examples of how they approached the collaborative research process that characterizes BFM.[34] Research collaborations—even those composed of black women and undertaken with a black feminist approach—cannot be overly romanticized. Both Ryann and Tanja expressed hesitations about joining the group that were founded in their own experiences. Ryann highlighted how her previous interactions with black women significantly affected her interpretation of what it could mean to collaborate and learn within an all-black women collective. Tanja demonstrated a contextualized understanding of herself as a foreign-born, biracial black woman. This self-understanding led her to make assumptions about how she might be seen by the black women in the group whom she perceived to be vastly different from her. Ultimately, both Ryann and Tanja took advantage of BWGP as a space where they could meaningfully self-reflect and encourage learning and collaboration among all participants, reiterating Collins's argument that it is necessary for black women to "find alternative locations and epistemologies for validating our self-definitions."[35]

As conveners and participants of the group, we did not have the same reservations about group participation as Ryann and Tanja. Our hesitations were shaped by concern for how our dual, and sometimes competing, positions as group members and academic researchers would be interpreted by other members and affect our group dynamic.[36] We engaged in self- and collective-reflections regarding our desired positionalities as we determined tangible ways to mediate our apprehensions (e.g., eliminating meeting agendas, openly and vulnerably contributing our stories to the group, sharing our reflections about data collection). As a group, we came to understand that there are always unspoken stories behind the stories shared aloud. Likewise, we welcomed complexities into our conversations such as discussions about conflicting understandings of what it means to be a black woman (nationally and globally) and the oppressiveness of heteronormative understandings of blackness. Our anti-essentialist embrace of conflicting and complex dialogue challenged assertions of objectivity and a singular truth.

Who You Callin' an Angry Black Woman?

After all the women in attendance at our first meeting had helped themselves to food, we sat in a circle in the living room to inhibit any one person being seen as "the leader." To begin the conversation, Ashley posed an ice-breaking question: "Who are some of the important black women in your life and why

are they important to you?" Participants began to speak one at a time, while everyone else listened intently before offering affirmations and asking clarifying questions. Ryann, the first participant to share, mentioned her mother, as did the two group members who followed her. Then, Katrina,[37] cleared her throat before saying, "I'll go." As our attention shifted to her, she said:

> This kinda conversation is always hard for me because I'd say 90% of people—in my circles anyway—the first person that they would say is their mother. I would never say my mother. We have a [pause] relationship under construction. Growing up was very hard. I was the middle child. It was just lots of things going on at home. So, my family back in Cleveland, they are surprised that I turned out to be who I am, what I am, do what I do—bought my own home, all these things, before I was 25, all that—you know, like, "You?" And, you know, that I "talk white" and, you know, all these things. So there's, in my bloodline anyway, no women I would say. So it just kinda, it almost kinda just happened. I kinda, you know, took a little bit from women that I saw who were leaders, who were caregivers in their own families and kinda put myself together. And I'm actually still doing that.[38]

Katrina ended her commentary with nervous laughter. Her facial expression settled into a contemplative stare at the floor as we waited to be sure she had finished. Engaging in witnessing, Arianna met Katrina's eyes and offered, "I'm so glad you said that."

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After our third meeting and with group members' blessings, Ashley, Arianna, and Liz traveled to a national conference to share the group's experiences in a practitioner-focused educational setting. After sharing narrative examples to illustrate our experiences, we introduced our group and its purpose to the audience. While illustrating the inquiry approach we used, Ashley paraphrased a conversation from one gathering in which the controlling image of the angry black woman was demystified and, in the process, rejected by some group members and embraced by others.

Instead of ending our conference session with a question-and-answer segment that utilizes the teaching–learning binary, we invited audience members (many of whom were black women) to share their own lived experiences in response to the collective we described. One of the first audience members to speak began her commentary by thanking the panel. Paraphrased here based

upon our collective memory, she then provided insight into what, for her, was a crucial moment:

> I just wanted to say we have to be really careful about the words we use, because words are powerful. When you said the words "angry black woman," I could literally feel my response to hearing that resonate through my body. . . and it was not a good feeling. Actually, I almost just got up and left. I really wanted to. But, I didn't. And I'm glad I stayed because, like I said, I really did enjoy the talk. . . but I was *this close* to leaving. I mean, I've been called an angry black woman before. And it's something I just hate to hear.

The commentator added an invaluable perspective to our presentation as well as to BWGP topics. In fact, she motivated us to consider the impact of controlling images[39] that seek to limit black women's social mobility and caricature us via "white supremacist capitalistic patriarchy."[40] Mindful of her insight, we were also more cautious of how mere mention of controlling images could be painful and potentially result in BWGP members choosing to leave or forego participation.

Two common controlling images—mammy and sapphire[41]—are illuminated by the preceding vignettes. Katrina alludes to the imagery of the mammy in prefacing her comments with a confession that she would not name her mother as a black woman who is important to her. The mammy image historically emerged as a way to naturalize black women caring for white families. In so doing, they sacrificed their own families and themselves in ways that prioritized white families and their needs. Katrina may have felt compelled to share her divergent narrative because the mammy has normalized an embodiment of black motherhood that starkly contrasts her own lived experiences. To foster her personal growth, she sought out black women who embodied the black feminist notion of "othermothering"—the practice of women from the community at large sharing responsibilities of supporting younger generations alongside biological mothers.[42] Similarly, the conference audience member who took pointed issue with use of the phrase "angry black woman" was responding to the controlling image of sapphire—an angry, loud, rude, disrespectful, unsociable black woman.[43] The psychological oppressiveness of the sapphire image had such an effect on her that she reported a visceral reaction to its mention. From a black feminist perspective, we are compelled to acknowledge and draw insight from manifestations of embodied understandings of controlling imagery.

In both instances, we were able to "bear witness" to black women's experiences,[44] affirming their input by acknowledging their voices and maintaining spaces

where multiple truths could coexist. Our interpretation of safety and comfort, indicated by the willingness of participants to bear witness to one another, forged opportunities for self-definition and self-valuation.[45] While Katrina appeared to be impacted by ideological remnants of the mammy image juxtaposed against her relationship with her mother, she also resisted it as she sought othermothers beyond her biological family members. The conference audience member's resistance to the sapphire image was clear and explicit. Though she was less descriptive about the model(s) of black womanhood that she endorsed, we interpreted her willingness to stay for the remainder of our presentation as an indication of interest in locating a replacement image. From our BWGP experiences, we learned that many black women associate a host of characteristics—compassion, integrity, admiration for self and others, love, respect, and loyalty—with black femininity that resist the imposition of the mammy and sapphire. These characteristics were present during our BWGP meetings and sutured to our understandings of black femininity as black women.

Black Women and Mentoring

Liz is a group member and veteran high school teacher working in CCS. In the following vignette, she describes how BWGP impacted her beyond the few hours each month we spent together.

> I really find myself reflecting on the things we share here all the time. I had these two girls in my class—both sweet, sweet girls, good girls—who were literally about to fight one day. And they are not that type of girl so I'm just thinking, "What is going on?" So, I had to separate them and talked to each of them separately, and through the conversations, I started to realize that colorism was playing a big role in the situation. I don't think I would have picked up on that right away if not for participating in this group. I mean, I would have known if they would have said it outright, but I think just having this space where we're talking about things like that. . . I don't know. Maybe it was in the forefront of my mind, because I'm not sure I would have picked up on that element so easily a few months ago. They're both beautiful girls and I hate to see them having this issue! So, anyway, I thought about it more after that first day and then I asked the girls, if I brought them lunch, would they both be willing to meet over lunch and to have a discussion about what was going on. Try to find some common ground. And they agreed, so we're going to do that next week.[46]

Mindful of black feminism's commitment to connecting theory and method to everyday praxis,[47] we interpret Liz's comments as reflective of a tangible pathway to render black feminist sensibilities accessible to high school students.

Our third BWGP meeting was held at a local restaurant, in a private room. The eleven participants included almost all the women from the first and second meetings, as well as one participant's mother. As conversations flowed and naturally shifted from topic to topic, a member raised the question, "So, what do we want to do with this group? What do we want it to be?" The ensuing discussion highlighted the importance of fostering connections, understanding, warmth, and space among black women.[48] Mentoring was identified as one key reason and viable means for us to purposefully come together to create what hooks terms "homeplace," or "a site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist."[49]

Mentoring surfaced across the next several meetings and the question was eventually posed, "So what exactly do we want to do with the mentoring? How do we want it to look?" Participants registered concern with replicating mentoring programs they had previously participated in or witnessed in which "troubled" or "needy" individuals were required to engage with a person with whom they did not have a genuine connection. "I don't want to be spinning my wheels working with someone who doesn't want to work with me," Lauryn insisted. The body language among the group displayed confirmation before Liz asked, "What about something like this? Like what we're already doing here? Meeting just to talk and get to know each other?" Kimmy added, "You know, it's not what we called what we're doing here or anything, but this kind of *is* a group of mentors who are also getting mentored. We're all playing different roles at different times."

Methodologically, BFM not only seeks and organizes the information that is gathered throughout the research process, but also guides how the information gleaned is put to work. Concerned with research that is attentive to the nuances of black women's needs and contributive to the everyday development of black women, BFM necessitates that truths made visible by the research process be translated into action, resistance, and/or activism. While BWGP became a site for us to think about scholarship, it was always first a place for us to *practice togetherness* and *alliance* among black women.[50]

As a collective, we were unsatisfied with leaving BWGP at the discussion or scholarship level. The desire to reach other black women who could benefit from a similar experience motivated us to contemplate forming a mentoring program. Connecting to women beyond the group provided opportunities to embody insisting upon self-definition, speaking aloud our truths in spite of forces working to dismantle our knowledges, and supporting black women.[51] These practices informed our transition from theory to praxis as we questioned

the power dynamics reinforced by traditional mentoring scenarios.[52] Envisioning a mentoring model focused on creating opportunities to hear and be heard by other black women, our efforts aim to bridge the sometimes disparate worlds of scholarship and engagement as necessitated by BFM.

CONCLUSION: BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT AND ESTABLISHING A BLACK WOMEN'S COMMUNITY

The adoption of a BFT lens has fostered particular conclusions about our dialogic endeavor. We are acutely aware of the many ways our simultaneously marginalized and privileged identities impacted our roles as participants and researchers in BWGP. Additionally, daily encounters with other people, media, and societal structures remind us that, as black women, we are constantly engaged in a struggle to combat those features of everyday life that may otherwise break us down, suppress our capacities for self-knowing and self-love, and prevent us from deepening our interactions with others. Collectively, we are humbled to have connected with each other as BWGP members. Bearing witness to the divisive politics that can and do divide black women, we are especially grateful that the catering employee we reference at the beginning of this essay openly shared her thoughts with us and helped spark what became BWGP. As participant researchers, we remain committed to collaborating with other black women to name, share, and validate our multiple truths by embracing the influence of black feminist epistemologies in our lives to embody a methodology that privileges black women's embodied ways of knowing.[53] While mainstream, positivistic research traditions may raise questions about the validity of our research because neither the existence of a singular truth nor the necessity of researcher objectivity is pursued, we disagree. Not only does our utilization of BFM operationalize BFT as Collins contends,[54] it also legitimizes our methodological approaches. Guided by black feminism, our methodological decisions yielded significant insight into the lived experiences of black women.

At the time of publication, group members are still in contact although the frequency of face-to-face meetings has slightly reduced.[55] With our inner strength fueled by participation in BWGP, we remain committed to practicing black feminist methodologies within the many settings we navigate as black women.

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Aspects of this research were funded by a grant titled "Bringing Service Learning to Life: Service-Learning for All Educators," from the Corporation of National and Community Service, Learn and Serve program. We thank the reviewers and editors for input and critique that greatly improved earlier versions of the manuscript.

NOTES

1. See Richard Delgado, *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Arlette Ingram Willis et al., *On Critically Conscious Research: Approaches to Language and Literacy Research* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008).

2. Jeasik Cho and Allen Trent, "Validity in Qualitative Research Revisited," *Qualitative Research* 6, no. 3 (2006): 319–40.

3. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 251.

4. Patricia Hill Collins, Alice Walker, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Elsa Barkley Brown, bell hooks, and Deborah King, among others, argue that the influences of race, gender, and class cannot be separated from one another when examining the nature of societal oppression.

5. See Lisa M. Given, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008).

6. BWGP members whose stories are featured here have given their permission for us to do so. Each story, unless otherwise noted, is a (re)presentation of a speaker's utterances. See F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin, "Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry," *Educational Researcher* 19, no. 5 (1990): 2–14; Coralie McCormack, "Storying Stories: A Narrative Approach to In-Depth Interview Conversations," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 7, no. 3 (2004): 219–36; Valerie Kinloch and Timothy San Pedro, "The Space Between Listening and Storying: Foundations for

Projects in Humanization," in *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Research with Youth and Communities*, ed. Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 21–42; Deborah A. Gordon, "Border Work: Feminist Ethnography and the Dissemination of Literacy," in *Women Writing Culture*, ed. Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 373–89.

7. See Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99; Deborah K. King "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," in *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (New York: Routledge, 1997), 219–44; Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 3 (1989): 610–33.

8. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

9. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, "A Womanist Experience of Caring: Understanding the Pedagogy of Exemplary Black Women Teachers," *Urban Review* 34, no. 1 (2002): 71–86; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Camille Wilson Cooper, "The Detrimental Impact of Teacher Bias: Lessons Learned from African American Mothers," *Teacher Education Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2003): 101–116 ; Cynthia B. Dillard, "The Substance of Things Hoped For, the Evidence of Things Not Seen: Examining an Endarkened Feminist Epistemology in Educational Research and Scholarship," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 13, no. 6 (2000): 661–81; April L. Few, "Integrating Black Consciousness and Critical Race Feminism into Family Studies Research," *Journal of Family Issues* 28, no. 4 (2007): 452–73.

10. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 271.

11. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1983).

12. See Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *But Some of Us Are Brave: All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: Black Women's Studies* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982); Patricia Hill Collins, "What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond," *The Black Scholar* 26, no. 1 (1996): 9–17.

13. Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, 31.

14. Beauboeuf-Lafontant, "A Womanist Experience of Caring," 72.

15. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 23–24.

16. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

17. See Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

18. See Collins, "What's in a Name?"; bell hooks, "Marginality as a Site of Resistance," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990): 341–43; *Teaching to Transgress*.

19. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 35.

20. Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1985).

21. Shelby F. Lewis, "Africana Feminism: An Alternative Paradigm for Black Women in the Academy," in *Black Women in the Academy: Promises and Perils*, ed. Lois Benjamin (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 49.

22. See Lilia I. Bartolome, "Beyond the Methods Fetish: Toward a Humanizing Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 64, no. 2 (1994): 173–94.

23. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 251.

24. See Nadia E. Brown, "Negotiating the Insider/Outsider Status: Black Feminist Ethnography and Legislative Studies," *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 3 (2012): 19–34 http://www.jfsonline.org/issue3/articles/brown/; Marya R. Sosulski, Nicole T. Buchanan, and Chandra M. Donnell, "Life History and Narrative Analysis: Feminist Methodologies Contextualizing Black Women's Experiences with Severe Mental Illness," *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 37, no. 3 (2010): 29–57; Katrina E. Bell, Mark P. Orbe, Darlene K. Drummond, and Sakile Kai Camara, "Accepting the Challenge of Centralizing Without Essentializing: Black Feminist Thought and African American Women's Communicative Experiences," *Women's Studies in Communication* 23, no. 1 (2000): 41–62; Marquita Pellerin, "Defining Africana Womanhood: Developing an Africana Womanism Methodology," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 1 (2012): 76–85.

25. See Beauboeuf-Lafontant, "A Womanist Experience of Caring"; Camille Wilson Cooper, "The Detrimental Impact of Teacher Bias: Lessons Learned from the Standpoint of African American Mothers," *Teacher Education Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2003): 101–116; Jeanine M. Staples, "'There Are Two Truths': African American Women's Critical, Creative Ruminations on Love through New Literacies," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 20, no. 3 (2012): 451–83.

26. Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): 514–32.

27. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 256.

28. Ibid., 35.

29. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

30. Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within"; and Patricia Hill Collins, *On Intellectual Activism* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2013). See also Brackette F. Williams, "Skinfolk, Not Kinfolk: Comparative Reflections on the Identity of Participant–Observation in Two Field Situations," in *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, ed. Diane L. Wolf (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), 72–95; April L. Few, Dionne P. Stephens, and Marlo Rouse-Arnett, "Sister-to-Sister Talk: Transcending Boundaries and Challenges in Qualitative Research with Black Women," *Family Relations* 52, no. 3 (2003): 205–15; Brown, "Negotiating the Insider/Outsider Status"; Kathryn Anderson, Susan Armitage, Dana Jack, and Judith Wittner, "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 15, no. 1 (1987): 103–27. Juantia Johnson-Bailey, "The Ties that Bind and the Shackles that Separate: Race, Gender, Class, and Color in a Research Process," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 12, no. 6 (1999): 659–70.

31. There are numerous examples of researchers who advocate for critical, anti-positivistic interview methods in alignment with those we employ and who comfortably utilize the term interview. See Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey, "The Interview: From Structured Questions to Negotiated Text," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 645–72; Laura L. Ellingson, "Interview as Embodied Communication," in *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*, 2nd ed., ed. Jaber F. Gubrium, James A. Holstein, Amir B. Marvasti, and Karyn D. McKinney, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012), 525–40; Carolyn Ellis and Leigh Berger, "Their Story/My Story/Our Story: Including the Researcher's Experience in Interview Research," in *Postmodern Interviewing*, ed. Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), 157–83.

32. Fontana and Frey, "The Interview"; Ellingson, "Interview as Embodied Communication"; Ellis and Berger, "Their Story/My Story/Our Story."

33. Rather than "leaders" or "creators," the term "conveners" describes our role more accurately.

34. Leith Mullings, "African-American Women Making Themselves: Notes on the Role of Black Feminist Research," *Souls* 2, no. 4 (2000): 18–29.

35. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 269.

36. Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within"; *On Intellectual Activism*.

37. Pseudonym, as are all other names excluding those of the authors.

38. This is a transcription of the participant's commentary, re-presented here with her stated permission.

39. See Mae C. King, "The Politics of Sexual Stereotypes," *Black Scholar* 4, no. 6/7 (1973): 12–23; Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "From Slavery to Social Welfare: Racism and the Control of Black Women," in *Class, Race, and Sex: The Dynamics of Control*, ed. Amy Swerdlow and Helen Lessinger (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), 288–300.

40. bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981).

41. For detailed descriptions of controlling images of black women, see Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," in *Black Feminist Thought*, 69–96; Marilyn Yarbrough with Crystal Bennett, "Cassandra and the 'Sistahs': The Peculiar Treatment of African American Women in the Myth of Women as Liars," *Journal of Gender, Race and Justice* 3, no. 2 (2000): 625–57; Carolyn M. West, "Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Their Homegirls: Developing an 'Oppositional Gaze' Towards the Images of Black Women," in *Lectures on the Psychology of Women*, 4th ed, ed. Joan C. Chrisler, Carla Golden, and Patricia D. Rozee (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008), 287–99; Gloria Ladson-Billings, "'Who You Callin' Nappy-Headed?' A Critical Race Theory Look at the Construction of Black Women," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 12, no. 1 (2009): 87–99.

42. Beauboeuf-Lafontant, "A Womanist Experience of Caring"; Linda Blum and Theresa Deussen, "Negotiating Independent Motherhood: Working-Class African American Women Talk about Marriage and Motherhood," *Gender and Society* 10, no. 2

(1996): 199–211; Norma J. Burgess, "Female-Headed Households in Sociocultural Perspective," in *African American Single Mothers: Understanding Their Lives and Families*, ed. Bette J. Dickerson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), 21–36; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Patricia Hill Collins, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood," in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York: Routledge, 1994), 45–65; Katherine Ferrell Fouquier, "The Concept of Motherhood among Three Generations of African American Women," *Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 43, no. 2 (2011): 145–53; Audrey Thompson, "Caring and Colortalk: Childhood Innocence in White and Black," in *Race-ing Moral Formation: African American Perspectives on Care and Justice*, ed. Vanessa Siddle Walker and John R. Snarey, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 23–37; Audrey Thompson, "Not the Color Purple: Black Feminist Lessons for Educational Caring," *Harvard Educational Review* 68, no. 4 (1998): 522–54.

43. See Regina Austin, "Sapphire Bound!" in *Critical Race Feminism: A Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Adrien Katherine Wing (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 301–307; K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Yarbrough and Bennett, "Cassandra and the 'Sistahs.'"

44. Janette Taylor, "Womanism: A Methodologic Framework for African American Women," *Advances in Nursing Science* 21, no. 1 (1998): 53–64.

45. Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within."

46. Paraphrased and shared with the participant's consent.

47. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989 (1989): 139–67; Liz Stanley, ed., *Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

48. See bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007).

49. hooks, *Yearning*, 44.

50. See hooks, *Yearning*; Lorde, *Sister Outsider*.

51. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

52. See Laura L. Ellingson and Patty Sotirin, "Academic Aunting: Reimagining Feminist (Wo)Mentoring, Teaching and Relationships, *Women & Language* 31, no. 1 (2008): 35–42; Bernadette Marie Calafell, "Mentoring and Love: An Open Letter," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 7, no. 4 (2007): 425–41; Colette M. Grant, "Advancing Our Legacy: A Black Feminist Perspective on the Significance of Mentoring for African-American Women in Educational Leadership," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 25, no. 1 (2012): 101–117; Andrea Cooper, "Mentoring as an Inclusive Device for the Excluded: Black Students' Experience of a Mentoring Scheme," *Social Work Education* 19, no. 6 (2000): 597–607; Sharon Fries-Britt and Jeanette Snider, "Mentoring Outside the Line: The Importance of Authenticity, Transparency,

and Vulnerability in Effective Mentoring Relationships," *New Directions for Higher Education* 2015, no. 171 (2015): 3–11.

53. We are aware of the important contributions to transformative forms of qualitative research and community building advanced by scholars such as D. Soyini Madison, June Jordan, and Paulo Freire. As we use BFM, we do so with attention to how the call for action and the enactment of intersectionality lead to embodied methodology.

54. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

55. See Beauboeuf-Lafontant, "A Womanist Experience of Caring"; hooks, "Marginality as a Site of Resistance."