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"Am I not a woman" : the myth of the strong black woman

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A Thesis

entitled

“Am I Not A Woman”

The Myth of the Strong Black Woman

by

Carolyn Amelia Kusi

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial

fulfillment of the

requirements for The Master of Liberal Studies

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May 2010

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An Abstract of
“Am I Not A Woman”
The Myth of the Strong Black Woman



by

Carolyn Amelia Kusi

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Liberal Studies

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Black women have struggled for years to live within the confines of historical and traditional expectations. Many Black women’s earliest memories are of being abused and being told that their sole purpose in life is for the benefit of their families, communities, churches, and masters. For generations Black women, as an historical category, have lived a silent existence while pushing back their pain, emotions, and fear. In the early 1800s Sojourner Truth’s challenges and hurdles in the early 1800s vastly resembles that of a woman in 2009. She was faced with the worst kinds of racism, sexism and hate-ism, but her mission for righteousness prevailed anyway. This thesis will examine narratives of personal experience, historical data, and previous research studies, within a theoretical framework, to demonstrate and deconstruct the myth of a Strong Black Women.

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To have a sisterhood and a friendship with someone that lasts more than forty years and to have that person encourage you into accomplishing your highest educational achievement is rare. I have been blessed to have such a friend who pushed me and encouraged me through this process. I want to thank my dear friend Renee Dunnavant who found the strength to support me even from her sick bed.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis will disentangle and deconstruct the myth that defines the identity of the Strong Black Woman to determine its consequences for contemporary Black women. It will examine narratives of personal experience, historical data, and previous research studies within a Black feminist theoretical framework to demonstrate the myths of identity and progress.

Slavery left its mark on the entire Black race throughout the world, regardless of where one was born. Even historically tokenized Black women suffered at the hands of their oppressors. For example, Sojourner Truth (Isabella) was born around 1797. She was faced with the worst kinds of racism, sexism, and hate-ism, but her mission for righteousness prevailed anyway. She was a slave born to a slave, but for her that did not mean the end. Instead it meant the beginning of a new way of thinking about Black women. She is known as one of the most famous African Americans of the nineteenth century. She dared to risk her freedom and her life to represent her Black sisters who were enslaved. She was an abolitionist and feminist, and there are no words to describe the impact she has had on Black women all over the world.

She repositioned herself to move in circles with white people who were being heard and respected. Moreover, Sojourner Truth's challenges and hurdles in the early 1800s vastly resemble that of a modern woman in 2009. As Irvin Nell Painter expresses in *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, "At a time when most Americans thought of slaves as male and women as white, Truth embodied a fact that still bears repeating: Among the blacks are women; among the women, there are blacks" (4).

Black women have struggled for years to live within the confines of historical and traditional expectations. Many Black women's earliest memories are of being abused and being told that their sole purpose in life was for the benefit of their families, communities, churches and masters. For generations Black women as an historical category have lived a silent existence while pushing back their pain, emotions, and fear. They had to function in a secret society of myths and misguided truths. A PBS program, "African American Lives 2," reiterated and exposed the myths that "were made up because they were easier to accept than the truth. But, one had no way of knowing that the truth has been stored in our biological DNA." (*February 13, 2008, 9:00-11:00 pm, WGTE, Channel 30 PBS*).

For Black women there is a myth of strength versus the actuality of strength, and this has been one of the biggest battles of Black women's existence. Too often, Black women have alienated and isolated themselves from their own race through self-hate and low self-worth. Black matriarchs prematurely have grown weak and sickly from the strain of predetermined, constructed expectations, based on the myths and stereotypes. Black women have had to maneuver through the maze of myths and stereotypes to find their own voices and their preferred way of survival. There are too

many myths that have been constructed by white patriarchy to describe Black women. One does not have to look far to gather unrealistic descriptions of Black women's existence that have survived generation after generation. For example, Black women have faced such myths as these: Black women are really not women at all and are not human; Black women initiated sexual abuse on their own bodies because they are all promiscuous; all Black women are too angry, too dominating, too bitter, too masculine, too strong and too outspoken; Black women are less than animals, have given up, are not beautiful and would sacrifice their families before sacrificing themselves; Black women are not worthy of love, respect or protection; Black women are not desirable marriage partners and are the victimizers, and the white man's greed for our bodies became our desire; Black women are mules of the world and have driven their men away and did not allow the Black man to be a man in his own home; and Black women have driven our men to alcohol, drugs and crime.

In *Black Macho and the Myth of the Super Woman*, Michele rejects the myth that Black women have never been able to close our legs to a white man, or deny our breast to a white child (92). Black women's needs are different from white women's, and humiliating segregation left our spirit un-repairable as white society dismantled our soul. There were no warnings about how the determination for survival and the persistence of the myths and stereotypes would resonate throughout generations of women with a cost that would be too high to pay. Wallace further states that, "No one had written a report for her. The Black woman could not and would not effectively fight back because it was a white man's world" (12).

Black women were forced to become domineering figures because of the loss of their men, and their womanhood depended on their being considered strong. For this reason, self-nurturing had no place. Within Black families and communities, Black women lost their identities as their men were demasculinized and lost their place as leaders. The Black women were left with no choice but to become a silent sufferer and to totally sacrifice themselves, no matter how severe the pain. There were negative and positive consequences for this prescribed way of thinking. As Vivian Gordan observes in *Black Women: Feminism and Black Liberation: Which Way*, "Our observation has been that most Black women at any given moment will first and foremost report themselves to be tired and exhausted. Lord, I am weary, is a recurring theme" (15).

Psychological trickery, fueled by the myths and stereotypes, along with social abuse and isolation has hindered Black women's success because there was a whole world that did not want them. They had to overcome all of the games before they could even begin to understand the hatred. There were so many variables, covert and overt, that many Black women had to navigate to find their own voices.

Gender differences and social restrictions have governed Black women and misguided them during and since slavery. Through their determination to survive, they pushed past emotional and physical scarring that was inherent in all of the negative patterns of abuse and oppression. They were suffocating with fear of intimacy, abandonment and rejection. For many, the past has been so painful to relive through conversation and reenactment that many blacks and whites have chosen to invent any past they wanted since they had no roots.

In a suffocating society with the oppressor looming and social inequality

that demanded that Black women be human-less and selfless, they had to fine-tune their survival skills. During slavery and since, Black women have fine-tuned their craft of communication. They had to become strategic and simultaneously learn how to code, decode and double-talk, which were used at a moment's notice. The master did not guard his plans when she was around because she was not human and did not count, so she used all that was available to her, including her listening skills. Patricia Hills Collins shared that very sentiment in her book, *Fighting Words: Breaking Silence*, "These same mammy workers gain access to their private usually hidden knowledge" (47).

Black women have moved from field mummies to corporate mummies and have always operated in the survivor mode, always silently waiting for the next fight. Their role has been prescribed and they have spent their lives trying to live up to unrealistic, unhealthy expectations. Although they were silent sufferers, they often remained very spiritual and connected to a higher power, and no one could take that from them. Although economically poor and sexually unprotected and rejected, they never lost hope.

This thesis is being written in honor of my Black sisters and matriarchs who bravely embrace their Black women-ness in a world that says they do not exist, or, at best, even in 2009, are uncared for as important. Today, Black women, the most disadvantaged group in the United States, have jumped every hurdle and maneuvered through every obstacle to make their contribution; not as superwomen, but simply as Black women. *In But Some of Us Are Brave: All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men: Black Women Studies*, Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith suggest that we do not become our own worst enemy: "In our eagerness to counteract the negative stereotypes, we must not create a different one, which also fails to reflect accurately the

varied lives of Black women. Even though many Black women are able to overcome difficult situations, Black women are not "superwomen" devoid of needs and emotions" (96).

Chapter 2

Historical Context

History tells us that the plantation was a booming business for many white men. He was able to own what he produced, including cattle and Black people. From the early days on the plantation to the present day, Black women's mother/daughter relationships of trust and empowerment helped us survive the master and his plantation and have guided us, fed to us early while suckling our mother's breast by her glance, her conversation, her whispers, and her own behavior of survival displayed throughout our lifetime.

This generational trust system taught Black women to rely heavily on their matriarchs and Jesus. Black mothers were very protective of their children in their hearts, even though outwardly they had to take the abuse and watch their children being abused too. They learned how to live a secret lives, ones that would allow them to protect their families with their wisdom. They would learn how white masters thought and plan their escape as they were being raped and sodomized day after day, knowing that they would be the secret messengers to save the entire black race.

No other member of the Black community held a position as powerful as Black women, lusted after by white men and white women. White men wanted her in their beds,

and white women wanted to use her breast for their babies to suckle. This position of lust made them both weak. Black women understood the necessary sacrifices, and most Black women, by proxy, were willing to make them. As stated by Teresa L. Amott and Julie A. Matthaei in *Race, Gender and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States*, “Black women’s ability to bear children, as well as their attractiveness as sex objects to white men, singled them out for special exploitation and abuse under slavery” (147).

There were Griots (story tellers) and songs in the fields that assisted the slaves in their assembly to freedom, often times conducted while the slave women were busy performing their dual roles, as servant and sex object to the master. Young slave girls watched their mothers on the plantation (in the master’s house and the field) and learned that there was a way to perform that was necessary in order to survive. There was no doubt that a Black woman would never gain the respect of white men, no matter what she did, so she learned to wear a mask of silence that allowed these men to relax around her and trust that she would consider only their needs and wants as important. Marcia A. Riggs states it eloquently in *Arise and Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation*, “When house servants were able to walk that thin line between maintaining the appearance of loyalty to masters with the reality of serving their fellow blacks, they ranked high as individuals in the Black hierarchy” (23).

The Bible was the only written material that most Black people were willing to trust. However, most Blacks could not read or write, so they had to trust their fellow Blacks, who could read, to interpret the Bible for them. Even the Bible left Black people with the challenge of whether or not this book represented all people, including slaves,

equally. The unfortunate truth is that white men wrote the Bible, and their shared interpretation of slavery was as pronounced in the Bible as it was on the plantation.

Too many times young girls heard their mothers and grandmothers reading the Bible and crying and praying to God for guidance and strength. If their elders could depend so heavily on a book for strength, then surely this must be a book that all humankind can trust. However, even the Bible had to be interpreted to fit Black women's own experience of oppression and God's revelation within that context. In *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes, "In the experiences of Black people, Jesus was all things. Chief among these, however, was the belief in Jesus as the divine co-sufferer, who empowers them in situations of oppression" (212).

Black women have always progressed through life in a broken family system. When one is born into a plantation system, one starts life with artificial rules and regulations. Black women had to build a wall of resistance to anything that denounced their existence. Their moral consciousness was shaken and nearly destroyed by white masters, who thought of her and her loved ones as less than human. While her white counterparts could be held with passion and security, Black women had to digest the fact that their world was unprotected, unfair, and unhealthy.

Black women have grown up watching our matriarchs, who were royalty in our communities, being given immeasurable disrespect. Even so, there was always a push and pull of being visible and yet invisible for Black Women, and Black men were the sacrificial lamb of choice for white society. Other than their physical strength, Black men served no real purpose in white society. He could not produce children, cook, clean,

or share the white man's bed. In slavery, Black men were the first one to be sold because they could not offer the master what Black women could. Black women had to accept and remember their mission as they bedded with white masters who emasculated Black men. As Fox-Genovese described it, "This social unmanning of slave men" (372).

The plantations of slavery were abolished on January 1, 1863, when President Lincoln formally issued the Emancipation Proclamation. However, that did not slow down or erase white patriarchy's appetite to use Black women, and Black women knew it. One hundred forty-six years after slavery, Black woman are being reminded of their history of necessary real or pretend strength, as they must continue to use their age-old, learned survival skills of silence, song, and actual or metaphorical bedding with white men. There were many Black women in history, as famous as Harriet Tubman and as unknown as Jessie Blocker, who did not live long enough to see their granddaughters exist in a social system where they would have the freedom to define themselves. However, it was those Black women's struggles and sacrifices that made this entitlement possible.

Today, there are white women and Black women who are determined to find a way to have freedom of voice and choice. The slave/master system made it very difficult for Black and white women to work together on a level of equal trust, which was necessary and mandatory for Black women's participation. The feminism of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century addressing women's rights, particularly voting rights, hoped to remove all forms of inequality and oppression. It was paraded as a system that would protect and advance all women. However, Black women were not convinced that this was not just another mythical set of words that did not recognize their

suffering and needs. Therefore, Black Feminism and Womanism became new world theories that dared to offer some form of freedom and voice for Black women. Bell Hooks says it best in *Talking Back, Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, “At times, the insistence that feminism is really a white female thing that has nothing to do with Black women, masks black female rage towards white women, a rage rooted in the historical servant-served relationship where white woman have used power to dominate, exploit, and oppress. Many black women share this animosity and it is evoked again and again when white women attempt to assert control over us” (179).

Chapter 3

Black Feminism or Black Womanism

“I discovered unmistakable evidence that racial slavery in the United States was the cruelest of institutions.” (Katie Canon, *Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, (28)

White America has not been able to rest without labeling Black women as something other than Black women. Black women have been vulnerable and exposed, during and after slavery, to every label from Superwoman to Black bitch. Much has angered Black women, but nothing more than the fabricated labels of white society. Black women will not accommodate the agendas of white patriarchy by globally stamping themselves with one assigned description over another. They insist that the label they accept or claim compliments their existence without trying to define them, to mold them into these white patriarchal definitions of the Black woman. Black women have been exploited, humiliated, and suffered every kind of abuse imaginable. Therefore, the thought of yet another label to demean them is worst than death itself. Black women want the freedom to define themselves. As Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, “people who are

oppressed usually know it. For African American women, the knowledge gained at the intersection of race, gender and class oppression provides the stimulus for crafting and passing on the subjugated knowledge of a Black woman's culture of resistance" (10).

Two heavily examined theoretical and political frameworks that battle to describe all Black women are Black Feminism and Black Womanism. Black women know that white feminist theory was created for the benefit of white women and did not initially include their issues. Feminism really meant advocacy for the equality of white women, usually middle-class and educated. Feminism by definition means, "The theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes" (*Merriam Webster Dictionary*). Black women were invisible and treated as outsiders in this new theory. They were still being sexually, economically, and racially abused. Black women needed to have their own voices heard and their issues for equality addressed.

Hence, Black Feminism was born in 1973 through the National Black Feminist Organization in New York City. Black women had waited their whole lives to be included in the consciousness of American society as members and citizens through feminist movements first and then through various black liberation movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalism, and the Black Panthers. All of these movements only accommodated White women (feminism) or Black men (Black Liberation). Michele Wallace writes in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Strong Black Woman* that, "With freedom presumably on the horizon, black men needed a movement that made the division of power between men and women clearer, that would settle once and for all the nagging questions Black women were beginning to ask: Where do we fit?" (7).

Black Feminism broadened the understanding of how important and critical it was for Black women to have a voice and a place for their equal rights to live. For Black women, Black Feminism gave them hope to share with their daughters and granddaughters. It argued that sexism, class oppression, and racism are inextricably bound together. Finally, there was a system in place that specifically spoke to their oppression. According to Bell Hooks in *Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination*, “The context in which African-American women’s ideas are nurtured or suppressed matters” (30).

Some Black women are uncomfortable and unsure about being called Black Feminists because somehow it screams that they are in agreement with white women, who along with their husbands have been oppressors. Black women know that their abilities are not valued in white supremacist patriarchal society on any level. However, they also know that no one’s opinion of them can stop them from being intellectually and common-sense smart. Many Black women approach every day in 2009 as they did in slavery, intent on changing present conditions so that their children and grandchildren do not have to wake up to despair and struggle for the rest of their lives. This concern is brought to our attention by Katie Canon: “This mode of racial domination meant that as chattel slaves none of my ancestors were human beings legally, culturally, socially, or politically. They had no social recognized personhood. White supremacy and racial bigotry excluded Black people from every normal human consideration” (29).

Black women know that they do not have a forum that respects their opinion on every form of equality. They have found some comfort in Black Feminist theory as an obvious measure to have an identity separate from Feminism that clearly did not, and

does not, offer equality to all women where racism, hate-ism, and unequal treatment still exist. This term Feminism has only accommodated the oppressors' women and continues to place a silk screen over the oppression of women of color. Hooks writes in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* that, "Feminism is a very personal movement" (102).

Alice Walker coined the phrase Womanist as an attempt to make her contribution against the negative stereotypes that exist within the American society about Black women and their history. Womanist theory dares to introduce a different way of thinking about Black women's roles in society, church, and community. The definition of Womanist, according to Walker, "*a woman who loves other women, sexually or non-sexually. She appreciates and prefers a women's culture, women's emotional flexibility, and women's strength*" (*In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, 12).

Walker took a firm stand against inaccurate and mythical stereotypes that clogged the pores of white America. Womanism presents an alternative for Black women by linking their own survival to the survival of their community where Black women and Black men are forever linked. Walker wanted to share with readers that Black women's determination to advance and grow in knowledge far outweighed the nonsense that was embedded in the American culture of insisting that Black women were illiterate and incapable of being contributing citizens. Walker highlights Black women's agency, strength, capability, and independence: "Womanist is to feminism as purple is to lavender, that the womanist/black woman is stronger and superior to the feminist/white woman" (*In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, 27). Others interpret Womanism as simply Black Feminism, having nothing to do with sexual preference/orientation or preferring women's

culture(s). More importantly, as I stated previously, Black women do not feel the need to choose one definition over the other.

Chapter 4

Previous History and Research

American history was conveniently written from a white male point of view and excluded any mention of Black women's oppression other than to feature the mythical, stereotypical interpretation of the Black woman as mammy, slave, and illiterate whore. This absence of accurate information propelled African American women to write about themselves and break their silence. Their once silenced voice found a forum to release decades of pent up passion for their families and communities and rage against the system that dared to make them stereotyped and invisible.

Black women and white wives were slaves to the master's promiscuous behavior. This selfish, greedy, self-centered attitude left both women in a precarious situation of dependency. Black women understood their role as care giver and maid; however, the roles of white women were also abusive because they had to pretend not to be phased by their husbands' behavior. White wives had to ignore their husbands' flaunting of Black women and Black babies, while even in the Black woman's womb

were “mammies” in waiting. These white women often punished Black women severely for being a forced/willing participant, and Black women had to bridle their pain and continue to be the daytime companion of white women. “Even when slavery ended, relations between Black women and White women were so damaged that the women were unable to form an effective alliance to win their suffrage. Exploring white and black women’s history together can help us better understand why so many tensions still linger between them” (Wilson 12).

Black women had, and have, one goal: survival. They learned how to give command performances while reinventing their “mammy” image. That image of caring for everyone else except themselves was always at the expense of their own well-being. Black women perfected their dual roles as they carried on one type of conversation at home around the kitchen table (secretly) and another conversation with the white patriarchy (in the open). Black women have always existed, knowing they were the outsider-within, which gave them a unique perspective of existence. Their greatest gift through all of the pain and misery inflicted upon them was the ability to exist invisibly. “As outsiders-within, Black women have a distinct view of the contradictions between the dominant group’s action and ideologies” (Hill Collins 11).

The old myth of mammy and domestic servant, which depicts a fat black woman with a rag around her head and her breast in a white baby’s mouth, has been the backdrop of Black women’s history. To have only this image present in libraries, histories, storybooks, and encyclopedias is an unfortunate loss of true American history. Yet, throughout history there was very little documentation on Black women’s contributions. Throughout the years of determination to break their silence and have an

accurate legacy, Black women have taken advantage of all forms of public and private knowledge.

Today, there are many images of Black women who have shared their collective voices and told their stories through writing, acting, singing, teaching, healing, and speaking from the pulpit all proclaiming their piece of history with a powerful, voluminous voice. Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Alice Walker, Oprah Winfrey, Madam C. J. Walker, Whoopi Goldberg, Maya Angelou, Susan Taylor, Patricia Hill Collins, and so many more black women have bravely broken their silence and remain totally aware of the need to stroke the white man so that he remains relaxed and undaunted in “Social intercourse with whites” (Wallace 5).

The myth continues in the Black woman’s bed when it blatantly claimed that Black women had no use for Black men. There are many Black women who never adjusted to their men’s absence. No amount of silence erased their need to have husbands and fathers for their children. Black men had no choice but to accept and understand Black women’s perceived dominant role, but struggle to acknowledge that she was branded under slavery, just as he was, and suffered the same losses that he did of the broken family structure. Black women’s struggle against the master’s control has blurred the lines between the male-dominant white man’s society and the Black men’s rightful position in their own households. Even today, Black men and women are still in the “getting to know each other again” phase because slavery left communities with broken trust and lost respect. Black men are slowly, but surely, reclaiming their positions in the family while being reprogrammed from plantation and Klu Klux Klan subjects of interest to honorable heads or members of households. “Black woman have always been

supportive of black men in the struggle against racism, even while they were being raped. Even while rape and assault has been going on in our communities” (Sharpley-Whiting 53).

The special relationships that Black mothers have with their children from generation to generation sustained Black families and communities, but left a mythical image of the Black woman’s strength and human frailty. Black women were so conditioned to standing tall, sacrificing, enduring, and fighting past the emotional and physical pain that when the time came for many to surrender to being tired and weak, they did not know how. There were no prior teachings on how to surrender and how to recognize the warning signals of stress, exhaustion and compromised immune systems. *“But even when help was offered, some black women would not accept it. Many, who have internalized the stereotype of unshakeability, when they find themselves in anguish, continue to sustain their strong Black woman persona. They are unable to turn it off, to shift from overdrive to neutral.”* (Shifting 20).

Chapter 5

The Bridge and Methodology

Some of our matriarchs have held so tightly to the myth of the Strong Black Woman with Superwoman strength that they cannot identify themselves any other way. It is in their loins, and it is how they survived. It would be taken very harshly if anyone tried to take that image/myth away from them. These women told themselves that they had super strength and that they could endure anything, and so they did. Through bad health, insurmountable losses, and premature deaths, they declared themselves Strong Black Superwomen. That constant thought sustained them. They wore their Strong Black Superwoman image of strength as a badge of honor through hell and high water.

They were being Strong Black Women when they were cleaning the chitterlings (pig's intestines), slop thrown out as garbage. The Black women picked up the intestines, cleaned them, found a special way to prepare them and served it to their families as a delicacy because they had to eat whatever was available. This is a difficult process that takes hours. To this day chitterlings are a delicacy in Black communities, but it is hard to imagine what that task must have been like in the early 1800s.

They were being Strong Black Women when they went out into the fields alone and birthed their babies, possibly the master's babies, cut the umbilical cord, cleaned

themselves, and walked back to the slave house, dropped off the baby, and went back to work at the master's house or in the field. "Her blood is in their soil, therefore he cannot deny them, nor can they ever be divorced" (Wallace 2).

In 2009, it is time for contemporary Black women to offer relief to our matriarchs and take our rightful place as leaders with a voice. We must be willing to stand toe-to-toe and eye-to-eye with the oppressor and say emphatically that enough is enough. Our matriarchs stayed silent and painfully endured, hung in there, and made it. They pulled through what would break many contemporary Black Women. We owe them relief that perhaps they thought would never come.

As history has demonstrated, a failure to stand up for ourselves and put volume to our voice will result in our forever being silenced and remaining slave-like and subservient to the white patriarchal system that still exists and lurks, waiting to be instrumental in our demise. The oppressor cannot be allowed to tell our story sloppily and inaccurately any longer. We, as contemporary Black women, are strong enough to stand up and tell our own story. We can be brave enough to step from behind the myths of slavery and strength and correct the assumptions and failed accounts, telling our own stories about our material lives and daily experiences. We have to start a dialogue by creating a forum to share our own stories.

Contemporary Black women must break their silence about our past, present, and future. If contemporary Black women do not speak out about their objectification, then their daughters and granddaughters will grow up thinking that the only pretty doll is white and that only white people deserve for good things to happen to them. They will not understand their own beautiful chocolate attributes, they will not know that it is

mandatory to love themselves, regardless of what anyone else thinks of them, and they will not hold their heads up so that they can see all of the possibilities for their life and their future. More importantly, they will not be aware and conscious of the fact that the white patriarchal society that they live in now will continue to exist throughout their lifetimes. They must put on their armor of being well informed and prepare to stand because the white patriarchal society will not disappear any more than our black skin will.

In our constant communication with our young black daughters and sisters, we reinforce to them that they must understand that all positive contributions in the Black community are valuable and necessary and that they too must take their rightful place in history as contributors. They must take advantage of their elders' knowledge while they are here because the grave does not speak. Wisdom lies with our elders who can tell the stories of the past. They can give vivid, first-hand accounts of what the past was like and how and what they did to survive it. Some of those same survival skills can be used today.

As Black women we must heal our own wounds and refuse to be victimized. No one is going to move Black women from despair to repair and self-recovery; we must heal and protect ourselves. This is what Black women of the past did for us. They took their present circumstances and used all of the abuse and suffering leveled at them and slowly but surely wove a way out of the white patriarchal misery that was determined to make them extinct. If they could survive and maneuver on the plantation, the slaughterhouse, then surely we can maneuver and survive corporate America and modern day racism and hate-ism.

Historical models are more than a blessing. Individual Black women scholars such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Angela Davis, and bell hooks have done a remarkable job of capturing our past. However, in the scholarly works, contemporary Black Women have been largely ignored. There are communities of women who are simply missed as if they have disappeared, vanished, or, even worse, never existed. There are gaps in the scholarly body of knowledge in our libraries. Collins, a well-known scholar, writes, “Since I had so few answers, I searched one of Harvard University’s libraries for material on African-American women. I was stunned to find virtually nothing” (*Fighting Words*, 24).

It is my finding that Contemporary Black women still have unfinished business. Contemporary Black women’s voices need to be heard about their concerns and struggles. No one can speak louder or more accurately about us or for us than us. It is time for our works to line the walls of the library shelves. We can make our contribution. As Patricia Hill Collins states in *Fighting Words, Coming to Voice, Coming to Power: Black Feminist Thought as Critical Social Theory*, “It is not that Black women have nothing to say, but rather that they have had no say” (32).

To accomplish these goals, I conducted my research within the methodological framework of Women’s Studies, which puts women at the center of the inquiry. For this thesis, that methodology translates into a focus on contemporary Black women in an effort not only to recover lost and buried knowledge about their history and issues, but also to expose and deconstruct the myths, particularly the myth of the Strong Black Woman, that have impeded their personal and collective progress. In addition, using that methodology allows me to collect and honor the experiential narratives of contemporary

Black women to demonstrate the persistence of the myths and the persistence of racist assumptions about Black women, as well as the way the myths and assumptions play out in the daily experience of contemporary Black women. The specific methods I selected include historical research, an examination of previous studies and new historical accounts that include Black Women, an exploration of Black feminism and Womanism, and one-on-one interviews to gather information from contemporary Black women. These experiential narratives are then qualitatively analyzed in the historical, cultural, and theoretical contexts I have articulated in the first five chapters of this thesis. The chapter that follows describes and analyzes the findings from these interviews.

Chapter 6

Interviews

“I Didn’t Know My Own Strength, But I Do Know That I Was Not Built to Break”
(Whitney Houston)

I conducted interviews of contemporary Black women whose voices have not been heard. These women were not picked as “tokens” for their contributions or accomplishments, as Oprah Winfrey, Michelle Obama, Maya Angelou, and Shirley Chisholm have been. You will not find them in your storybooks, on your television sets, or discussed in any form of media. They are your next door neighbors, co-workers, or those standing next to you in the grocery store. They, too, have and continue to make their contributions and are instrumental in laying the ground work for young Black women who follow. They are the legacy that will bridge the gap from the past to the future.

I specifically picked these women because they have become matriarchs. They have completed their rites of passage, endured racism and other cultural obstacles, as well as the myth of the Strong Black Woman. They also have the experience, age, and wisdom to lead the next generation. These five Black women have similar backgrounds, and their names were changed to ensure their anonymity. All five are lower-middle-class Black women from Ohio. They are in the same age group, between fifty and sixty years

old, and have some college education, from a few courses to a Master's Degree. Four of the five are heads of households and mothers and have been married and divorced, with one remarrying. Three of the five are employed, with one disabled and one recently unemployed. Four of the five women say that race complicates their social category of gender and, as Black women, have been faced with obstacles and struggles which they did not completely overcome. However, all five women expressed that they were making a contribution to their communities and families and that this interview allowed them to share what it means to be a Black woman today.

I asked each interviewee the following twelve questions:

1. Are you a mother?
2. What is your educational level?
3. What is your occupational status?
4. Marital status: Single/Married/Divorced/Widowed?
5. In your experience does race complicate these social categories? If so how?
6. Do you self-identify as a Black woman?
7. Do you feel that you are treated as a Black woman or as a woman?
8. What struggles or obstacles have you faced as a Black woman?
9. Did you overcome your struggles and obstacles? If so how? If not, why not?
10. Describe your contribution to your family, society, friends and church
11. Has this interview allowed you to discuss and share your sense of what it means to be a Black woman today?

12. Is there anything that I have not asked or do you want to add to any answers that you have already given?

I asked my interviewees if they were mothers because Black women have a very strong and protective relationship with their children and families and are known for being nurturers and caregivers. I wanted to know if that characteristic was still prevalent whether or not they were mothers. I asked about their educational level to learn how, or if, it played into their perceptions about their treatment in the workplace, as well as to learn whether there have been positive or negative consequences for them because of a higher or lower level of education. I asked about their occupational status to elicit information about the types of roles they perform at their place of employment and about the ways they perceive race as a determining factor in their daily professional experience, including promotions or other advancements. I asked these women about their marital status because I wanted to know if they operate as wives or as single head of households and how they perceive the consequent level of responsibility and other role requirements. Additionally, I wanted to know about their perceptions of the ways that gender and race have or have not constructed their self-identification, complicated their lives, and/ or dictated their ultimate decisions to remain in uncomfortable situations.

Findings

As a teacher, one of my interviewees, Cassy, spent some years as a single mother raising her children alone after her first marriage ended and before she remarried. Kizzy, however, divorced over twenty years ago and had the sole responsibility for her son as a single mother. She works for a major corporation as an Adjustments Specialist and until the age of forty-six was unable to purchase a home or a nice car. At the age of fifty-two,

her income bracket has still left her in financial difficulty, although she spent ten years pursuing her education and will soon complete her Master's Degree. The "Queen of Ism's" is the mother of two. She was married for twenty-five years, both supported by her husband and working for a major corporation as an I.S. Professional. The strain of the death of her son ended her marriage, and at the age of forty-two she found herself with a new title of single mother. At the age of fifty-two she is currently pursuing her bachelor's degree. Margaret never had children or married and is now disabled. Valerie is the mother of two and married and divorced. She raised her children as a single mother. She is now laid off from a major corporation.

All five women, without hesitation, said that in their experience race complicates these social categories, which are highlighted in their work life. They went into great detail about how they were mistreated on their jobs, how racial disparities required them to find survival modes, and how they relied on spiritual guidance to deal with the racism and disparities. This question elicited deep-seated anger, and several of the women expressed that they were not consciously aware of how much pain still existed until they participated in the interview.

Four of the five women self-identify as Black women. Kizzy, Queen of Ism's, Cassy, and Margaret stated that because of their dark skin color they are always being reminded that they are not white. Their constant companion of "isms" (racism, sexism, ageism and hate-ism) have left gaping wounds of pain.

For example, as Kizzy explained:

Most experiences that I have had outside of my community remind me that I am not white. I have had several bad experiences in stores where I

have been followed like a criminal. I asked a white salesperson why she was following me and to stop. She told me that she wasn't, but every where I went in the store, there she was. I have never had a positive experience in a workplace and am always expected to carry white co-workers by doing their work that they do not want to do. I was devastated when my white leader told me that she likes me and loves me and at the same time wrote in my Performance Appraisal that she expects me to pick up the pieces that others may leave on the table to get the job done. In other words, clean up everybody's mess. She even nicknamed me "bulldog," because she said that I am so good at getting the job done. I had to step to her and tell her that the nickname was unacceptable and that I would appreciate it if she would not call me that.

Kizzy also explained that she has learned "over many years how to survive white people's racist, evil ways and double-talk." Even so, she continually experiences the pain of racist discrimination based on her color:

Most white people determine on site that they do not like me because I am "too black." I do self-identify as a Black woman, and I am sure that my outgoing "Black," confident personality and dark color is absolutely a turn-off to white people. I am what you would call a blue-black woman because I am so Black oriented. I love our clothes, hair, speech, dance, food and spirit, and I am not always willing to put my "real-self" on a shelf just to be in a white person's presence. In other words, I proudly wear all of my afrocentric-ness and make no apologies or excuses for my

blackness. I cannot imagine not being proud of who I am and how I feel about my people. In fact, I am so proud of my blackness that if they seem not to notice my uniqueness, it offends me. I agree with the white people that I encounter at work and everywhere else, that I am not white, but more specifically, I am Black.

Queen of Isms. too, has experienced constant reminders that she is Black or at the very least something other than white. There is always that double standard that is present, kind of like an unspoken rule. This dual way of being treated has been two-fold. It has torn a piece of me away, but also has strengthened me. I can not afford to allow anyone to take away my joy for living with what time I have left on this earth.

Cassy was forced to drop out of college because she had to enter the workforce after a divorce because she had two children to raise. She fought for a position in the medical field for which she was qualified, and to her surprise she actually got it. However, her employment was short-lived (only about 2 or 3 months) when her employer told her that she had to let her go due to staff cuts. She was told that she would be on contingency, meaning that she could be called back at any time. She was the only dark-skinned woman employed there. Before she arrived on this job, there had only been white women and one light-skinned Black woman. Cassy found out from the only light-skinned Black co-worker that she was only hired to satisfy their minority mandate and that they did not want her. Before that conversation, she felt pretty good about herself, but with this sharing of information she was devastated at the fact that at no fault of her own, she would be left with no way to take care of her children. This incident happened over twenty years ago, and she never received a call from this company to come back

to work. She said that she has never gotten over that experience. Cassy said that in society she often receives the second glances by white people that tell her that she does not belong.

According to Margaret, she does not currently go anywhere to be social because she is disabled, but she did experience racist problems in the workplace. She said that while working, every racial experience was negative. She had to be on pins and needles because she was “Black.” She said that she cannot do anything but self-identify as a Black woman because she is reminded every time she looks in the mirror:

I was a token Black. They did not really understand me or want to, but I was there only to be used for their benefit, to make them look good. As a Black woman in the workplace, one struggle I had to face was being passed over for a promotion and having to train the white person to do the job they wanted done, even though I knew how to do the job already, but they gave the job to a white co-worker. At that time I was very hurt because I realized that they did not appreciate me. Eventually, I did get promoted, but the same obstacles existed, but prayer got me through it. I soon realized that I was not the only Black person struggling with racism. Subsequently, the pain of unfairness and unkindness is still alive in me. The old people in the community would say, “Every now and then the old snake would raise its ugly head.” I did not address every racial issue that occurred, but there were times when I had to stand up and step to the white people that were trying to demean me.

However, Valerie has a unique way of self-identifying as a woman who is Black. She says that racism is not the first thing on her mind everyday and that whites need to look out for their own. As she put it,

They present a pretty face, just like us. We do the same. However, by them being in the power position that they are in, it affects us more unfairly. I think that race was a determining factor in times of advancement in the workplace. I worked for four departments, whereas white women only worked for one. I had been at this particular company at least eight years longer than some of the white women in my department. However, I was laid off first, and the white girl who was far less productive than before I realized that I was the only and first Black person in that department. I am faced with obstacles when people are blatant and go out of their way to be racist. I did not get called a nigger until I moved to Ohio. Some white kid said, "You Black Nigger." I was a grown woman before this happened. In D.C., where I was from, white people held the door for you. I choose to chalk these incidences up as experience. I am not going to let no whitey penetrate me.

All of these women usually function within the myth of the "Strong Black Woman," but they are mired so deeply in the myth of strength and are so used to this state of being that they do not always recognize it and literally cannot separate themselves from it. They just know that they saw their matriarchs operate as Strong Black Women, who took on battles to the death and sometimes cracked under the stress of all of the unrealistic expectations. Because of the legacy of pain that they inherited, these contemporary Black women I interviewed outwardly denounce the myth of the

Strong Black Woman and do see themselves as “Strong Black Women.” However, although this generation changed the name of their strength, they have unconsciously kept the myth of power and strength that their matriarchs had.

These women are locked into their titles. The very need to define their strength as who they are keeps them pinned to and trapped in the myth of the Strong Black Woman. The more professional and more powerful that they feel as individuals, the more they are trapped in the myth. This title of Strong Black Woman and the purpose of the title have been instilled in them since birth. Through their interviews they show a commitment--conscious or unconscious--to the belief that the only way to fully honor their matriarchs is to carry the burden of the myth of strength. This is the way their matriarch and societies said that they must be in order to survive, and survival remains as the primary motivator. The interviewees do not show that they recognize that the myth of the “Strong Black Woman” offers the same set of self-imposed virtual prison walls of brute strength as well. The title of the Strong Black Woman has not set them free, but it has become their badge of honor.

For the five interviewees the workplace serves as the plantation, where most of these women stayed with the same company from ten to twenty-five years, feeling overlooked, underpaid and demeaned. From past experiences at other companies, they are aware that if they leave their present companies, they will most likely be faced with the same racial issues wherever they go, and have to start over at the bottom with benefits, seniority and vacation time. In the workplace they still must speak in code and be in a social dance with white patriarchy. They have to pretend that they do not notice the indifference leveled at them, and they have to be careful not to make the white powers

feel intimidated because their discomfort can cripple Black women's success with "verbal files."

Kizzy defined "verbal files" as what the white power system passes among each other to keep the minority groups oppressed; therefore, there is nothing derogatory written that can be disputed or which they must take legal responsibility. She said that at her present place of employment she learned how they maneuvered with the word "files."

These "files" do not exist in a drawer or computer somewhere. These "files" that hold your career and employment well being are verbally passed between the white people about you. You would think that with all of their power they would not have to sabotage us for failure, but they are so insecure that even though they hold the power, they still feel afraid that somehow we will overtake them. I can never understand their level of hatred and why they feel so threatened by Black people.

Valerie claims indicate that she is not as bothered by racism as the other four interviewees; however, she is also the one who described white people as the whitey Ku Klux Klan and as Satan. in her interview. She stated, "I see people first and not color. If people have a problem with color, that is their problem and not mine. I don't take on their problems. However, I prefer to know what I am dealing with and I cannot deal with the whitey that is undercover and approachable on the surface and go home and turn into Satan and lead the Ku Klux Klan." The white powers have maintained the same unjust behaviors as in slavery and after, but changed the name of Black women from plantation mammy to corporate mammy.

Since, as the interviewees indicated, racism is paramount in the workplace, these Black women feel trapped in their jobs because so many are heads of households and do not have anyone who looks like them in power to help with their concerns. So, they tolerate lower pay, disrespect, long hours, overt favoritism and an obvious lack of career development by their leaders.

For example, Queen of Isms said,

Currently I have two titles associated with my job. I am paid to be an IS Professional, but held accountable to be a Global Operations Leader. This latter title carries an enormous amount of responsibility. Race has definitely played into my work responsibilities versus my pay scale. I can say this comfortably because two of my white co-workers were promoted with title and pay, while I was told that they wanted me to carry the title for a year, while they consider if I should be given the pay. I do think that this would not have happened if I had been a white woman, but the company will justify what they are doing because I do not have a Bachelor's Degree. For white individuals without a Bachelor's Degree they consider their experience. I have been with the same company for twenty-five years and must prove myself repeatedly. Each time I try and advance I come up against a different struggle or reason why the pay scale is tainted.

Kizzy described some of the same problems:

I have been employed at the same company for nine years and I am still one of the lowest paid in my department and the only one who has a Master's Degree. I have professionally fought with the powers that be,

and they have given me a bit of a raise, but they and I know that it was just a tidbit because the raise did not bring me up to the pay level that I deserve. If you don't have a degree, they say that makes you unqualified. If you have a degree, they say that in this present role it does not count. The favoritism is blatant and you are always faced with double talk like the devil.

Although Margaret has been disabled and out of the workforce for several years after working at the same company for twenty-four years, she said, "that subconsciously the pain of unfairness and unkindness are still alive in her."

All of the interviewees were clear about what they are up against. The low numbers of Blacks in the workplace, especially in managerial positions, make these women an even bigger target. At best, they are sure that they are filling a minority quota. Although, as these women indicate, white patriarchy may be threatened by their presence, just as in plantation slavery, Black women are still desired more than Black men in the workplace. Even so, all five of these women stated that they know that they have to work harder than their white co-workers, and they pick their battles because the bottom line is that they must take care of their families, no matter what the cost.

These women also carry the burden of primary responsibility in their families. For example, Cassy said that after her father passed, she accepted her role as the head of her family. She became her mother's overseer, her children's confidant and supporter, the best grandmother a child could have, and a loving wife. Margaret said, "In my family I am the one that everyone comes to. I am the third oldest of eight kids, but the oldest girl. I don't care what happens in the family, I am the go-to person. I am the one they all

feel they can count on and they know that I love them.” Kizzy, too, explained that in her family she is the one who holds everybody up. She said, “I was so use to that role, all the way back to childhood, that when I decided that it was time for me to put myself in the equation as an important member of society, I nearly had a nervous breakdown because I had never treated myself as someone important, I did not know that was okay.”

Three of the five women entered college in their later years, taking on more responsibility, and therefore must do a balancing act with school, work, home, and family. Because of these various responsibilities, they take calculated risk about their futures. They are fueled with energy to make slow, but steady changes in their careers and personal lives. They are also gripped by a constant companion, which is the myth of defeat that life on the plantation fostered, that of being less than, and incapable of doing anything great. Although many years have passed since plantation slavery, the overt and subliminal messages that Black women must remain afraid and unsuccessful, or pay a high consequence, still dictate their overall slow, calculated movement because they are afraid of losing their homes, jobs, men, and power within their communities.

When asked if they had overcome their obstacles and struggles, four of the five women said that they did not overcome all of the obstacles and struggles. For example, Cassy said that she has had a lot of struggles and faced many obstacles, “but I know that I must nurture others from my experience. I have overcome some of my struggles because with age I have learned good coping skills. I have learned to call on Jesus and to trust Him to see me through the tough situations.” Queen of Ism’s said that she has not really overcome her struggles and obstacles because she is still a black, dark-skinned, overweight single, smart woman with pride in her stride, all of which is treated as a taboo.

As she puts it, “The struggle that whites have with non-whites is still there. Their struggle becomes our obstacle.” In other words, she feels that she cannot change the things that bother the white man. Added burdens of age, family, friends, job, and health challenges have begun to filter into the struggles and obstacles that were not there when she was younger.

Margaret said that she did not get over all of the obstacles and struggles, but she trusted in God to get her through. Valerie, too, said that she did get over all of the obstacles and struggles. She explained that she just chalked it up to experience and moved on. She repeated her earlier comment about not being penetrated: “I am not going to let no white person penetrate me.”

Kizzy stated, to say that I have overcome every obstacle would not be a whole truth. I have grown spiritually after many years of heartache and pain experienced at the hands of white people, but my continued success of having a healthy way of thinking and moving forward in this world is a day by day thing. I have some good days and I don’t even notice the injustices around me, and there are other days when I can hear a white person breathe and I get upset on the inside because I am reminded that I cannot afford to relax in certain environments. However, I am a winner and a child of God. So who will I fear? Nobody.

I could not have been prepared for the experience of interviewing these five contemporary Strong Black women. Each woman brought her special uniqueness to the interview, and although I am a Black woman, it was not always easy for them to share their individual experiences. Their level of commitment and love that they have for their

matriarchs and ancestors was evident. Their emotions and passion about taking this opportunity to break their silence left me overwhelmed with their sense of duty and pride.

All of them have taken seriously their roles as historians of their tradition and past and have woven it into their modern-day Black womanhood as innovators of change into the future. Although they were interviewed separately, there were strong similarities in their remarks about their families and communities. There was no doubt where their loyalties lie or their level of commitment. They demonstrated a pride, that some in white society have perceived as arrogance, that could not be ignored or erased. These women articulated that they are standing strong and are vested in surviving no matter what. They have fought past the perceptions, lies, myths, sabotage and stereotypes to give voice to their struggle through all of the injustices. These Black women clearly see themselves as desirable, smart and worthy of love, and respect.

The pain of their experiences in a white supremacist society was present and acknowledged, but, as they all indicated, overcome by their spiritual guidance. As Cassy states, “You have to be patience and wait on the Lord. He will always keep His word. Trust and depend on Him, lean on Him and He will always come through.” Queen of Ism’s said, “Without my spirituality I could not have survived or still survive so many challenges. My spirituality is at the root of my existence.” Margaret explained, “I am a firm believer in paying my tides. I believe in giving God what is due Him.” Kizzy described her love of the Lord: “He is my rock. I can do all things through Christ.” Valerie comments positioned her similarly: “My relationship with God is who and what gives me access to the peace that I need. I know that He is my savior. Sometimes stuff

will sneak up on me and then I realize that I am slipping somewhere in my time that I spend with God. I am never too busy to carve out my time with Him.”

Near the end of the interviews, I asked the interviewees, “Has this interview allowed you to discuss and share your sense of what it means to be a black woman today?” Cassy said, “I am glad that I have the opportunity to share my experiences and different struggles with you. Through all of my struggles, God has favored me, I thank and praise Him every day for bringing me out of the darkness and showed me the light.” Queen of Ism’s replied, “I am thankful that there is such a paper being written that will give black women a place to have camaraderie. Black women will be able to look over these notes for years to come and share our experiences with other young black women that are growing under our tutelage. Margaret said, “It stirred up some emotions that I had not felt in a long time, especially about work. I have not worked since 2002 and forgot how painful the experience was. When I sit down and really look at the world today, I am very glad that I am a Black woman and proud.” Valerie responded, “Honestly, I think that my experience is different than a lot of black women’s experience. Most black women are more focused on racial things than I am. I only focus on it when it slaps me in the face. Other blacks are very keenly aware of racial stuff, but that is not my focus. If it gets in my face I will deal with it.” Kizzy’s answered strongly,

More than any of my Black peers, I am more verbal and obviously more conscious about the effects of racism. I have been treated so harshly at every turn because of my dark skin. Light-skinned blacks have never been treated as bad as dark skin blacks. My heart hurts when I have to accept disrespect and see my people demeaned just because a white

man is insecure with whom he is while he plays the race card against us at every turn. I struggle and pray hard for God to keep me together through these experiences, so that I can one day step forward, in the open, and address all of this injustice.

In the next chapter, I will describe the experiences of several famous Black women, from the early 1800s to 2009, from Sojourner Truth to Michelle Obama. The relationship or the theme that binds these Black women who have been publicly honored for their accomplishment and the contemporary, but unknown Black women I interviewed is that none of them escaped racism or the myth of the Strong Black woman. Black feminism and Womanism have explained that Black women have been seeking a way to be empowered, to define themselves on their own terms, to name and tell their own history, and to tell their personal stories. Through Black feminism and Womanism Black women have found some comfort and the confidence to self-identify and keep our cultural richness alive.

These famous and unknown Black women have individually and collectively constructed a private, strategic navigational system that is universal in their community and that guarantees their longevity and survival. They may still be strongly connected to the myth of the Strong Black Woman, but through this strategic navigational system, they have overwritten the myth to make it their own. Although they still engage in the self-sacrifice that the myth demands, they have simultaneously engaged in personal development and various forms of self-recovery, once again overwriting and reconstructing the myth.

Chapter 7

Narratives of Contemporary Women

In this section, I will introduce a few very high profile contemporary Black women who fought past, and continue to fight past, many of the “isms” and made their contribution all the way from the early 1800s to the present day. However, even their lives were marred by the “isms.” What is reflected in their stories is the outcome of their journeys, which are exceptional, but for them to have reached such acclaim in our history books and current newsworthiness they had to fight past many obstacles and evils that were constructed by the white supremacist societies and leaders, some of whom are still in power today.

These women have also been tokenized by white society, who strongly suggest that the entire Black race of women has reached success because a chosen few have. This is a role these Black women inherited whether they wanted this status or not. They are pushed to the forefront as the visual symbol of “All Black women have made it.” They are paraded before us as our tokens to validate the claim that all Black women have overcome the struggle of all of the isms; (sexism, hate-ism, racism), and are now successful. One could get lost in the success of a few tokenized Black women such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Mia Angelo, Rosa Parks, Mary Jane McLeod

Bethune, Condoleezza Rice, Michelle Obama, and many others. It is impossible to ignore their presence and outstanding contributions because they are indeed exceptional and an encouragement for what can take place in many black women's lives. Just a glimpse of them does offer a touch of hope. However, while my thesis touches on their exceptional lives, it does not cover up their hard and painful journeys, nor does it dismiss all of the hardworking, dedicated, struggling, and sacrificial Black women who will never be considered worthy of being on the cultural radar and who have never been given honorable mention, until now.

For example, Sojourner Truth (Isabella Baumfree) was born a slave on a plantation and grew into a domestic servant. By the time she was nine years old, she had been sold to several different masters and suffered cruelty and unmerciful beatings and rape. Sojourner learned early that cattle were considered to be worth more than she, and she knew the evils of slavery only too well. The change in her name came about because she did not want to carry the surname of her slave master throughout her life. She became the traveling evangelist "Sojourner Truth" and spent her life fighting against human suffering of all Black people. Sojourner's story is one of the first to dare suggest that the master's wife, like him, took pleasure in her body sexually. From the beginning of her life until the end, prayer was the message she shared and practiced. (Alexander 13)

Another example is Harriet Tubman (Araminta Ross), who is as close to a human savior, a Saint, as we have ever seen. She was a runaway slave. Once freed, she risked her life on the Underground Railroad by returning to the very blood soaked plantations that had demoralized her to free other slaves from this brutal existence because she

suffered a great deal of emotional pain for others. She hid in alligator swamps, slept in snake-infested bushes, and ate whatever was available to her in order to carry out her mission. When Harriet was twelve, her master threw a heavy iron weight at another slave he thought was trying to escape. The iron weight missed the slave that the master was aiming at and hit Harriet in the head. She was knocked out and suffered from a fractured skull. She never went to see a doctor, but suffered from seizures the rest of her life. Sometime she would just black out without warning, but she still spent her life leading her enslaved black brothers and sisters to freedom and never lost one. (Stokes Oliver 532)

In the case of Mary Jane McLeod Bethune, her parents were former slaves, and most of her siblings were born into slavery. She remembered working in the cotton field along side of them at a very early age. She was active in the fight against racism and served under several Presidents as a member of the unofficial African American “brain trust,” a group of experts who serve as advisers and policy planners. On the turnover of Plessy vs. Ferguson by the U.S. Supreme court, Bethune took the opportunity to defend the decision by writing her opinion in the Chicago Defender in 1954. Plessy vs. Ferguson is a landmark Supreme Court decision in the jurisprudence of the United States, upholding the constitutionality of racial segregation even in public accommodations, under the doctrine of “separate but equal.” Bethune argued, “There can be no divided democracy, no class government, and no half-free county under the constitution. Therefore, there can be no discrimination, no segregation, no separation of some citizens from the rights which belong to all in the franchise, in economic opportunity, and full equality in the abundance of life.” (Alexander 45; Bethune).

Yet another example, Rosa Parks (Rosa Louise McCauly) was a civil rights activist. She had long demonstrated her dislike for racial segregation. She had worked on numerous cases with the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). She, along with other Blacks, challenged the white system that allowed flogging, murder, and rape. She not only fought past racial inequality, but gender inequality, as well. Rosa was accustomed to fighting for justice long before that infamous day she took a seat on the bus in Montgomery. Her decision to sit and not stand on a Montgomery bus jump- started the civil rights movement. The bus incident led to the formation of the Montgomery Improvement Association, led by the young pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The association called for a boycott of the city-owned bus company. The boycott lasted 382 days and brought Ms. Parks, Dr. King, and their cause to the attention of the world. (Alexander 113)

Condoleezza Rice's father opposed institutional racism, government oppression, and the Vietnam War, and she was politically influenced by him. Her father was originally a Democrat, but was denied voting registration by the Democratic registrar. So, he switched his political party to Republican, and she followed him. The rest of her political career will forever be in our history books. She was eight when her school mate Denise McNair, aged eleven, was killed in the bombing of the primarily black Sixteenth Street Baptist Church by white supremacists on September 15, 1963. Rice has never commented on that moment in her life. (Goodman, August 2007)

Yet another example, Maya Angelou grew up in the Deep South and faced serious southern racism and lynch mobs. She wrote the book, *I Know Why the Cage Bird Sings*, which depicts sexual abuse early in her life by a family friend. This incident in her young

life silenced her voice (she quit talking to everyone except her brother) for at least seven years. The title of the book comes from a poem by African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. The caged bird, a symbol for the chained slave, is an image Angelou uses throughout all her writings. After hearing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speak, she was inspired to join the Civil Rights movement. She organized several benefits for him. Sometime later she spent some time in Ghana, Africa, and was invited back to the U.S. by Malcolm X to work for him shortly before his assassination in 1965. In 1968, King asked her to organize a march, but he too was assassinated. He died on her birthday, April 4, 1968. The assassinations were very painful for her, leaving her so devastated that she refused to celebrate her birthday for many years. (Stokes Oliver 11)

While at Harvard, Michelle Obama (Michelle LaVaughn Robinson), First Lady, participated in political demonstrations advocating the hiring of professors who are members of minorities. At Princeton Ms. Obama wrote her thesis paper on “Princeton-Educated Blacks and the Black Community,” which was about racial division. She writes, “My experiences at Princeton have made me far more aware of my blackness than ever before. I have found that at Princeton, no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my white professors and classmates try to be toward me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don’t belong.” She further says that the path she chose by attending Princeton “would likely lead to her future integration and/or assimilation into a white cultural and social structure that will only allow me to remain on the periphery of society; never becoming a full participant.” Her most focused-on comment came in Feb. 18, 2008, during the election of her husband as President of the United States, “For the

first time in my adult life, I am proud of my country because it feels like hope is finally making a comeback.” (Tomer 157)

These narratives underscore the points I have been making throughout this thesis. These women, like the interviewees, have faced racism. Through strength and courage, and despite their fame, they too, have been victims of the stereotypes and myths of Black women, whether as tokens or as women who sacrificed themselves to help their families and communities.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated in this thesis, Black women have been artists wielding their paint brush on the canvas of life and have helped keep their cultural richness alive, supported and strengthened their families and communities, and given us courage and hope about what we can do and what we must do. Slavery left its mark on the entire Black race with broken family structures and an unhealthy history through the plantation/master system that enforced oppression. Black women were forced to step to the forefront to save their people from total demise.

The contemporary Black women I interviewed are representative of the Black women who are finally beginning to accept that they can say, "I am tired." The myth of the Strong Black Woman is being deconstructed through this new language of admitting that they are only human and have the same frailties as any other human, including white people. They have normal aches and pains, they are flesh and blood, and they are faced with the same human vulnerabilities. These women are living examples for the new generations that follow. They are encouraged to think differently about themselves as Black women. The contemporary women have fought to hold on to their integrity whether they are standing in or out of the myth through their personal choices.

The journey of this thesis introduced me to five very brave Black women who were born into a social system so powerful that it may never be broken. I set out to disentangle and deconstruct the myth that defines the identity of the Strong Black Woman, thinking that because I am a Black woman, this would be an easy sharing of information. However, I learned that Black women's lives are very complex and that they are as diverse as their skin color. I cannot unravel their experiences like undoing a shoestring. Their life experiences and existence is layered with pain, pride, anger, secrecy, duty, and determination. It is a very individual process to understand their past, present and future. Their matriarchs instinctively knew what skills they would need in order to survive because they knew that they were going to have to function with misguided truths. To have the opportunity to sit down with the contemporary Black women was like having a secret society give you access to their hidden chamber that would never be discovered if they were not willing to invite you in.

These women, though they appeared guarded, opened up and allowed me a glimpse of their world as they spoke from their hearts to share their passion for their people and their designated roles as leaders in their communities. Their dual roles of growing beyond the past, yet still honoring it, remains as the push and pull of their assigned responsibility towards keeping their mores and norms alive. The generational scarring has left these women with keloids that cover the pain that is just below the surface. These women accept the challenges within their communities, but they are submerged to the point of drowning in a pool of hatred and deception in the white supremacist society that has been their constant companion for decades.

To feed on a legacy of slavery, these women learned how to maneuver and utilize the silence and observation that their ancestors displayed. However, they are willing to break their silence so that their stories can be heard to help the generations that follow. All of the negative psychological trickery and unrealistic historical expectations must be addressed and reprogrammed into a more positive message with more realistic expectations in order to denounce the myth of the Strong Black Woman, but this is an ongoing process.

Through the interviews and sharing of these women's lives, I am better equipped to understand why they must stand strong and declare who they are. They cannot take off their skin and erase their heritage any more than they can erase life that was lived on the plantations. If they were to completely ignore their early beginnings, they would erase so much of the richness of how they came to be such Strong Black Woman. However, they can exist on their own terms with their own definitions of who they are. They have, in other words, re-appropriated and reconstructed the myth of the Strong Black Woman.

They have been abused and hurt, but have survived. Many of them are in self-recovery to heal. They have historical models and tokenized contemporary black women and sisters who stand with them. Because of their upbringing and experience, they are suspicious of white patriarchy's misguided truths. Utilizing all of their resources and trusting only their matriarchs, they believe that they have all that they need to sustain themselves and to remain strong. These Black women are on a mission to be counted as important.

It seems clichéd to try and sum up these women's stories. So many white people have tried to speak for them and tell their stories in ways that would only benefit the

oppressor. The only way we can honor their journeys is to let them speak for themselves. These contemporary Black women are proudly speaking for themselves, and they carry so much responsibility and commitment to keeping their stories alive. Most of their pent-up rage has been transformed into solid commitment for survival. Whether Black women consider themselves Black Feminists or Black Womanists finally does not matter as long as they are propelled forward.

I hope that my readers can hear their voices, feel their pain, and appreciate their strength. Black women, even the “tokenized” successful ones, have not escaped the slave mentality of the oppressor. Most Black people were, and are, affected by white patriarchal leadership that reaps hate-ism and oppression for anyone who is not white, and they are still faced with the demeaning attitudes of whites that made the plantation a booming business. My research on historical, contemporary, and tokenized Black women demonstrates that the white supremacist system has profoundly affected most Black women and victimized them with the ism’s. In 1776, Thomas Jefferson wrote the *Declaration of Independence*, stating, “All men are created equal.” Two hundred thirty-three years later Black women are still waiting for their rightful place in society as equal and as valuable and included.

Black women have had to find a way to heal and rediscover themselves because no one is going to do this for them. It is challenging and equally rewarding to go on a journey to self-recover and acknowledge the early beginnings of inequality and oppression. The journey from slavery has been draining on the entire Black race, but more specifically on Black women. There have been so many violations thrust upon them through racial discrimination and the master’s gruesome act of separating and

breaking up the Black family. At first glance one would think that they would be forever doomed by this long lasting, poisonous white supremacy system. However, these contemporary Black women have gotten their second wind and are making strides towards reinventing the future they deserve. They have their bruises, and sometime they even stumble, but they have learned great lessons along the way. These Strong Black Women fully understand and embrace why their matriarchs nurtured them in such a strategic way and recognize that it was for their eternal survival. They have, often without conscious awareness, deconstructed the myth themselves and made it work for them.

I wrote my thesis about Strong Black Women because I wanted their individual voices to be heard, and I wanted to honor and praise all of the sisters who came before me and who walk beside me today. I proudly take my place as the “Griot,” the storyteller. I look at the faces of my sisters, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, Bell Hooks, as well as so many other ordinary black women who have made their contribution, and I know that I am part of a strong sisterhood that cannot and will not be broken. I stopped being comfortable knowing so little about my own people, and I am no longer able to sit back and allow Black women’s identity to be mangled and erased. They are purposefully laying down their burdens and are continuing to make their contribution.

This thesis does not speak for all Black women, but many of them are in self-recovery from this male-dominated, white supremacist society and the damage that it caused. Bell hooks in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, says it best for so many Black women: “I was compelled to confront black women’s reality or denial and buried history, our present circumstances. The Thinking, the writing, was an act of

reclamation, enabling me to recover myself, to be whole. The words “self-recovery”, I wanted to know in my heart if this was true for the oppressed, the dominant, and the dehumanized, that the conditions for wholeness, that the whole self existed prior to exploitation and oppression, a self that could indeed be restored, recovered” (34).

There is a new scent in the air and it is called “The New Strong Black Woman.” So, I say to the world, as Sojourner Truth did, “Am I Not a Woman?”

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Appendix A

Interview Transcripts

Kizzy

1. Are you a mother?

Yes, I have a 32 year old son.

2. What is your educational level?

I am completing my Master's Degree

3. What is your occupational status?

I am an Adjustments Specialist for a major company.

4. Martial Status: Single/Married/Widowed?

Divorced/Single

5. In your experience does race complicate these social categories? If so how?

Yes, because the race card is always played.

6. Do you self-identify as a Black woman?

I do self-identify as a Black women. Most experiences that I have had outside of my community remind me that I am not white. I have had several bad experiences in stores where I have been followed like a criminal. I asked a white salesperson why she

was following me and to stop. She told me that she wasn't following me, but everywhere I went in the store, there she was. I had never had a positive experience in a workplace and am always expected to carry white co-workers, by doing their work that they do not want to do. I was devastated when my white leader told me that she likes me and loves me, and at the same time wrote in my Performance Appraisal that she expects me to pick up the pieces that others may leave on the table to get the job done. In other words, clean up everybody's mess. She even nicknamed me "bulldog," because she said that I am so good at getting the job done. I had to step to her and tell her that the nickname was unacceptable and that I would appreciate it if she would not call me that.

I have learned over many years how to survive the white people's racist evil ways and double-talk. Most white people determine on site that they do not like me because I am "too black". I am sure that my outgoing, black confident personality and dark color is absolutely a turn-off to white people. I am what you would call a blue-black woman because I am so Black oriented; love our clothes, hair, speech, dance, food and spirit, and I am not always willing to put my "real-self" on a shelf just to be in a white person's presence. In other words, I proudly wear all of my afrocentric-ness and make no apologies or excuses for my blackness. I cannot imagine not being proud of who I am and how I feel about my people. In fact, I am so proud of my blackness that if they seem not to notice my uniqueness it offends me. I agree with the white people that I encounter at work and everywhere else, that I am not white, but more specifically, I am Black.

7. Do you feel that you are treated as a Black woman or as a woman?

What do you see as the difference?

What does this mean to you?

I am always treated as a Black woman. I have been employed at the same company for nine years and I am still one of the lowest paid in my department and the only one who has a Master's Degree. I have professionally fought with the powers that be, and they have given me a bit of a raise, but they and I know that it was just a tidbit because the raise did not bring me up to the pay level that I deserve. If you don't have a degree, they say that makes you unqualified. If you have a degree, they say that in this present role it does not count. The favoritism is blatant and you are always faced with double-talk like the devil.

8. What obstacles or struggles have you faced as a Black woman?

My biggest struggles as a Black woman has been in the workplace. My visual appearance appears to put white people on notice not to mess with me. So, I have become aware of how they hold us back in secret. Verbal files are what the white power system passes among each other to keep the minority groups oppressed, therefore there is nothing derogatory written that can be disputed. She said that at her present place of employment she learned how they maneuvered with a word called "files." These "files" don't exist in a drawer or computer somewhere. These "files" that hold your career and employment well being, is words that are passed between the white people about you. You would think that with all of their power they would not have to sabotage us for failure, but they are so insecure that even though they hold the power, they still feel afraid that somehow we will overtake them. I can never understand their level of hatred and why they feel so threatened by Black people.

9. Did you overcome those struggles and obstacles?

If so how?

If not, why not?

To say that I have overcome every obstacle would not be a whole truth. I have grown spiritually after many years of heartache and pain experienced at the hands of white people, but my continued success of having a healthy way of thinking and moving in this world is a day by day thing. I have some good days and I don't even notice the injustices around me, and there are other days when I can hear a white person breath, and I get upset on the inside because I am reminded that I cannot afford to relax in certain environments. However, I am a winner and a child of God. So who will I fear? Nobody.

10. Describe your contribution:

Family

In my family I am the one that hold up everybody. I inherited this role as a child. For as long as I can remember, I was expected to take care of others. When I decided that it was time for me to put me in the equation as an important member of society, there were many in my family that felt like I was abandoning them. I was 50 years old before I came to terms with self love, but it is more than OK for me to love me. I am only 52 years old now so family and friends have gotten the best that I possibly give for over 50 years.

Society

To my society I am a healthy citizen and raised my son to be a healthy citizen and a good person. I treat people the way that I want to be treated

Friends

My friends are my extended family. All of my “friends” have been in my life for over 20 years up to 40 years. In order for friendships to last a life time you have to be willing to forgive and grow in love through your experiences.

Church

I love my church. I look forward to kneeling at the alter to lay my burdens down. I don't know what I would do if I did not have my spiritual life. I love the Lord and He is my rock. I can do all things through Christ.

11. Has this interview allowed you to discuss and share your sense of what it means to be a Black woman today?

Yes. It revealed to me that I still have a lot of open wounds. More than any of my Black peers, I am more verbal, reactive and obviously more conscious about the affects of racism and hatred. My heart hurts when I have to accept disrespect and see my people demeaned just because a white man is insecure with who he is, while he plays the race card against us at every turn. I struggle and pray hard for God to keep me together through these experiences, so that I can one day step forward, in the open, and address all of this injustice.

12. Is there anything that I have not asked or do you want to add any answers you have already given?

I feel that I am a Strong Black woman because my survival is tied to it. I have never been called anything else. I was taught to always endure, never say no, and never admit defeat. I appreciate the fact that our mothers sacrificed so much for their children and communities, but I only wish that I had been mature enough to help free them from the burden of it all. They deserved rest and I will forever be grateful.

I hope that from listening to our ancestors stories and my experiences, our young black women can avoid some of the pitfalls and negative feedback that can delay one from progressing. We are programming the new generation of young black women that will follow us to know that they are beautiful just the way God made them and there is no need to apologize for who they are.

Cassy

1. Are you a mother?

Yes. Mother of 2 children: Son 33, Daughter 29

2. What is your educational level?

Graduate from high school - 1/ 1/2 Toledo University Com Tech;

Received CDA (Child Development Associate - University of Owens Tech)

3. What is your occupational status?

Teacher/Teacher Assistant

4. Marital Status: Single/Married/Widowed?

Married (2nd marriage for 5 years)

5. In your experience does race complicate these social categories?

Yes, race complicated things because I was faced with having to find a job in an environment I had never experienced, but as a single mother I had to find a job. So I dropped out of college, and for the first time in my life I interviewed with confidence at a major medical practice and had to sell myself and tell the lady interviewing me that I had done a lot of things that was compatible for the position that I was applying for; ex. administering medicine, monitoring blood pressures and diabetic sugar count, etc.. When I left the interview, I was aware that I was not considered a viable candidate, so I turned around and went back in the interviewing room. I had to be persistent about getting this job and I just felt like I had to fight harder to be considered for the job. I did get the job, but after about 2 or 3 months, the Director said, "we have to let you go due to staff cuts." A nurse with more seniority bumped me out of my position very quickly. I found

out later, from the only light skinned African American co-worker, that I was only hired to satisfy their “minority” mandate. So, I found myself left without a job and no way to take care of my children, I was devastated. I had to make sure that I was there for my children emotionally and socially. Some time later I got a job with my church school which is where I remained for the next 10 years. I don’t think that I ever got over this experience.

6. Do you self-identify as a Black woman?

Yes. In my position at work I was the only dark skinned woman. Before my employment, there were only white women and one light skinned black women. The light skinned women said, “they did not want you, but they had to hire you so they could say that they had met their minority quota.” Before that conversation, I was feeling good about myself because I got the job, but instantly I was made to feel bad because I was not the woman they wanted to do the job. I was just a “minority”. What they really wanted was a white woman. I was told that I would be on contingency, meaning that I could get called back. To this day I am still on “contingency”. It has been over 20 years and I have never been called back to that job. My dark skin was too dark.

7. Do you feel that you are treated as a Black woman or as a woman?

What do you see as the differences?

I am often treated as a black woman by society with the second glances, the lack of consideration or opportunity. When I walk out of my door every day I am aware that I am going to have someone give me a look that says that I don’t

belong here and I will have bosses that expect more out of me than my co-workers.

What does that mean to you?

It means that I must work twice as hard and know that I may never see true fairness and kind treatment from others. But, I get a lot of love from the families that I work with. My role at work is more important to me than who my co-workers are. I work with poverty stricken family's everyday in the school system and I tell them that they are not alone. I tell them that I am there for them. Because they can feel my sincerity, they look at me as their friend. The kids adore me because I protect them. As a Black woman I have learned to wear a lot of different hats. This means a lot to me because I can share so much. I don't want these children to grow up with the same negative experiences that I have had in society and the work place.

8. What struggles or obstacles have you faced as a Black woman?

I have had a lot of struggles and faced many obstacles. I hear my Mother and grandmother's stories and I can identify with what I am going through now as a Black woman. For example, I am an only child. This was a struggle because I wanted to be independent. My father provided for me and my mother. Mom never went through a divorce, but I did and learned the harsh reality of being a single parent. Mom didn't really understand some of my struggles because she had never been divorced. She always had a husband providing for her. Today husband and wife can work together. To keep my kids out of the streets I had to take an active role in their lives, such as after school activities, parent teacher conferences, weekend activities, etc. I did not even know that it

was ok for me to be tired because I had two other peoples lives in my hands. My mom did not have to worry with all of these situations because she had a help mate; a provider. Society has changed. More people are working outside of the home; children are just out there as “latch key”, raise yourself children. Families are being faced with lay offs and medical problems that were never heard of and their condition is devastating their families. I know that I must nurture others from my experience.

9. Did you overcome those struggles and obstacles?

If so, how?

I have overcome some of my struggles because with age I have learned good coping skills. I have learned to call on Jesus and trust him to see me through and I keep a level head in tough situations. I have watched so many people turn to substance abuse and I know that was not an avenue I wanted to go down. But, I had to learn how to step outside of my shell and speak up for myself no matter what.

10. Describe your contribution:

In my family My father instilled in me to hold my head up and be strong. After his passing, I accepted my role as the head of my family. I became my mother’s overseer, my children’s confidant and supporter, the best grandmother a child could have and a loving wife. Looking at Michelle Obama has made me more sure that we can make it, “yes we can”. I am a living witness to say that you can do and be whatever you want all the way to the white house. Michelle is a strong black woman that is helping so many other strong black women and men keep their hope alive.

In my job I teach children and families to cope with society and educate them and make sure they know they can be what ever they want to be, anything is possible. In society I

give of myself in service to others.

As a real friend, I contribute honesty, loyalty, encouragement and love.

I am a leader in my church and serve on church council. I am also a member of the choir and on the Parish Education Board (Church School).

11. Has this interview allowed you to discuss and share your sense of what it means to be a Black woman today?

Yes. I know that God made me unique and able. I am fulfilled every day when I wake up and I have the confidence to go to work where I can spend quality time with children and families of all races. When I see some of the children in our school system that don't have anyone to teach them hygiene and how to brush their teeth, or don't know what it is really like to be a child (age 4 and 5 year olds), because they have to take care of their siblings, I know that I have a purpose.

With their dads in jail and their moms on drugs, I know that I am honored and privileged to have gone through some of my challenges as a Black woman so that I can open up my heart and share empathy with others.

12. Is there anything I have not asked or do you want to add any answers you have already given?

I am glad that I have the opportunity to share my experiences and different struggles with you. Through all of my struggles, God has favored me, I thank and praise Him every day for bringing me out of the darkness and showed me the light. He showed me that I can be that strong woman that I was meant to be. You have to have patience and wait on the Lord. He will always keep His word. Trust and depend on Him, lean on Him and He will always come identity.

“Queen of ISMS”

1. Are you a mother?

Yes, 2 children, 1 living

2. What is your educational level?

Junior in college

3. What is your occupational status?

IS Professional/Global Operations Leader

4. Marital Status: Single/Married/Widowed?

Single

5. In your experience does race complicate these social categories? If so how?

Yes, race complicates social categories. Many things can be viewed as a category in this interview I am choosing the ones I feel affects me. The numbering sequence is in my opinion is how the categories fit in two different situations the first is numbered how I am viewed in the work environment the second from a black prospective in a black environment.

Work environment

- 1) I am first seen as Black
- 2) Black woman
- 3) Middle age black woman
- 4) Education
- 5) Single mother

In my workplace I am constantly being reminded that I am black, or at the very least, something other than white. Currently I have two titles associated with my job,

(1) I am paid to be an IS Professional, but (2) held accountable to be a Global Operations Leader. This latter title carries an enormous amount of responsibility. Race has defiantly played into my work responsibility vs. my pay scale. I can say this comfortably because two of my white co-workers were promoted with title and pay, while I was told that they wanted me to carry the title for a year, while they consider if I should be given the pay. I do not think this would have happened if I had been a white woman. The company will justify what they are doing because I do not have a bachelor's degree. For white individuals without a bachelor's degree they consider experience. I have been with the same company for 25 years and must prove myself repeatedly and each time I come up against a different struggle or reason why the pay scale is tainted. As a single black woman/mother in the workforce, my pay is based on black and woman being the head of a household do not come into play. Let us take for example the white man category is white, need to make more money because he is the head of a household and he does.

Black perspective in a black environment.

As a single mother raising a child you are instantly put in a category that men are not. For example, my mother instilled to the girls in my family from birth to be caregivers, to be strong black women but in my case, I was not raised to be the head of a household and had to learn this from many hard knocks. I found myself after my divorced in the category of:

- 1) Black woman
- 2) Single mother

3) Successful Middle age woman dealing with (Black men threatened by my success & my wanting to continue my education, and my strong will to survive)

4) Alienated by many black women to keep me away from their black men

6. Do you self-identify as a Black woman?

Yes. I get up every morning look in the mirror and know I fit most categories of a Black woman. What are those categories will depend on who you are as a person, you can put 10 different black women in a room and they will all self-identify as many things.

I consider myself as a self-grown, self-taught head of household. I am a Black woman that practiced what I preached. At the age of 52, I went back to school because it was a necessary function to my survival. Many Black women come from different circumstances and for me to identifying as a black woman has come from been different phases of my life. I had my first child at the age of 18 and was single. Shortly after my first child's birth, I married my children's father who was my high school sweetheart. I moved out of my father's house to my husband's house. I became an adult quickly when I became the mother of two children, but nothing in the identifying with self prepared me on how to survive the death of my son. The strain of my child's death led to my marriage ending in divorce, which for me was like suffering a second death. I must say these experiences put me in a category that none of my family nor friends nor associates at that time had ever had to live in, however now that I can look back I realize I now was in the category of survivor. The newfound title that I now wear has come in handy many times throughout learning whom I am and how to identify as a person and black woman in this life.

7. Do you feel that you are treated as a Black woman or as a woman?

What do you see as the differences? What does that mean to you?

I am treated as a black woman and as a woman it depends on what situation I am in, where I am at and what I am doing. With my family, friends and other African Americans I believe I am treated as a woman. In my workplace, I am treated as a Black woman. There is always that double standard that is present, kind of like an unspoken rule. This dual way of being treated has been two-fold. It has torn a piece of me away, but also has strengthened me. I can't afford to allow anyone to take away my joy for living with what time I have left on this earth. As a Black woman I have learned how to say no and to be selfish with myself. I look myself in the mirror daily and appreciate the reflection that I get back.

8. What struggles or obstacles have you faced as a Black woman?

As a Black woman, I have faced so many "ISMS". Racism, Womanism, Weightism, Misunderstoodism, ISMs, ISMS, ISMS and on and on. My dark skin, natural bone structure and education or the lack thereof is used against me daily. It is woven into the fabric of American culture. We have to find different tactics for survival. We are single heads of households and our children are depending on our surviving. At the end of the day, you still have to take care of yourself. Ism's have been a burden my whole life and have followed me mentally, physically and financially, but I must survive to have a result that I can be proud of. A huge struggle I am facing today is working with 30-year-old white women and men promoted in the company I have been loyal to for 25 years only to be told enough is not enough. It sometimes feels like when I make the one-step I was told to make they decide they really want five steps they just forgot to tell me when reality is they did not or do not expect me to succeed at making the one step.

However, I think the trick is to keep putting one foot in front of the other after all who else is going to take care of me?

9. Did you overcome those struggles and obstacles?

If so how? If not, why not?

No not really. I am still a black, dark skinned, overweight single, smart black woman with pride in my stride, all of which is treated as a taboo. The struggle that whites have with non-whites is still there. Their struggle becomes our obstacle. In other words, I cannot change the things that bother the white man. Added burdens of age, family, friends, job and health challenges has began to filter into the struggles and obstacles that were not there when you where 25 or 30.

10. Describe your contribution:

Family

In my family I am dedicated, loyal and loving.

Job

I thank God for a job in these challenging times. I thank God for giving me the desire to look forward to teaching men and women to get their education earlier, rather than later life. Experience has been my best teacher. When I speak with young adults, I use myself as an example.

Friends

My real friends are family. I can truly say I love them all and can't imagine not having them around. Now the factually speaking I only have a few friends that I can say are family.

Church

Without my spirituality I could not have survived or still survive so many challenges. My spirituality is at the root of my existence.

11. Has this interview allowed you to discuss and share your sense of what it means to be a Black woman today?

Yes. I am thankful that there is such a paper being written that will give black women a place to have camaraderie. Black women will be able to look over these notes for years to come and share our experiences with other young black women that are growing under our tutelage.

12. Is there anything I have not asked or do you want to add any answers you have already given?

I had to learn how to do self-evaluation and this was the hardest thing I have ever had to do. Change is not easy, but I am very proud of my self-evaluations and I am getting better at it. All of my experiences have helped mold me into a better person and a stronger Black woman, NOTE...I did not say superwoman. I am so happy I have learned that I do not have to be a superwoman. We all have a purpose to fulfill. I am determined to fulfill mine.

Margaret

A 61 year old proud Black woman

1. Are you a mother?

No

2. What is your educational level?

Associates Degree in Accounting

3. What is your occupational status?

Unemployed - Disability

4. Marital Status: Single/Married/Widowed?

Single

5. In your experience does race complicate these social categories?

No

If so how?

If not, why not?

Honestly, I don't go anywhere to be social at this time in my life, but I only experienced racist problems in the workplace. While working every racial experience was negative. I had to be on pins and needles because I was "black". Now due to my disability, I have been forced to interact with white people in my personal life. The maintenance man always checks on me and brings me fruit from Florida every year and his mother who is a great baker every now and then brings me goodies. The land lady on me and when I have a problem she always makes sure it is fixed quickly. My aid who is a sweetheart comes twice a week and helps with housekeeping and personal hygiene. I have been blessed to experience both sides of the coin of racism.

6. Do you self-identify as a Black woman?

Yes. I can't do anything but self-identify as a Black women. I am reminded every time I look in the mirror. I grew up in a black home and for 26 years being black was something to be proud of. James Brown, sang, "I'm Black and I'm Proud". Reality set in by the time I became an adult and I found out that everybody did not believe in, I'm Black and I'm proud." My world soon was turned upside down with hatred and racism. I had a rude awakening to how the majority in the world felt about me and my people and it was not good. This is 2009 and it still exist today, even though I don't see it personally towards me, but on the news, movies, radio in all forms of communication being black is still being challenged by the white man.

7. Do you feel that you are treated as a Black woman or as a woman?

What do you see as the differences?

I do feel like I am treated as a woman, but in the workforce I was treated as a Black woman. They looked at me as a woman when it came to Leadership, when they wanted to use me to get a job done because I was the best worker there was in the department. I never had a problem voicing my opinion about something so they wanted me to break the ice and bring the issues to light. The department looked at me as a Black woman when I voiced my opinion my way. The white world I was surrounded with did not understand my way. They soon referred to me as "militant". There was no winning with them.

What does that mean to you?

To me I was a token black. That they really did not understand me or want to, but I was there only to be used for their benefit to make them look good.

8. What struggles or obstacles have you faced as a Black woman?

Being passed over for a promotion, having to train the white person to do the job they wanted done even though I knew how to do it already. Eventually they gave the job to the white lady. At that time I was very hurt because I realized that they did not appreciate me. That here again I was only being used for their benefit. It appears my career or dedication to the job was never appreciated or considered. This small fact made it very hard for me to want to remain at a place that devalued me. Yet, because I was not aware of my rights as a “Black” person, I remained for 24 years with the same company. Upon leaving my employment with them I realized nothing had changed. If you were white you were right, and if you were black you had to get back. I felt that racism was not only alive but practiced. Even when I mentioned to my superiors that there were race issues involved in my employment, they said, “No Gloria, we are not being racial against you.” I told them that they were not in my shoes and therefore did not want to see it.

9. Did you overcome those struggles and obstacles?

If so, how?

Eventually a couple of years later I did get promoted, but in truth the same obstacles existed. Prayer got me through it. Around this time I was more involved with going to church. I realized that I was not the only black struggling with racism as a whole. But I trusted in God to get me through.

If not, why not?

Subconsciously the pain of unfairness and unkindness was still alive in me. The old people in my community would say, “every now and then the old snake would raise its head.” I did not address every racial issue that occurred, but there were times when I

had to stand up and step to the white people that were trying to demean me.

10. Describe your contribution:

Family

In my family I am the one that everyone comes to. I am third oldest of eight kids, but the oldest girl. I don't care what happens in the family I am the go to person. I am the one they all feel they can count on and I love them.

Friends

To my friends I am a good listener and not judgmental. They know that I am always there for them. I am blessed to have 4 close friends for over 20 years and many, many associates.

Church

A firm believer in paying my tides. I believe in giving God what is due Him and He only ask for 1/10th. Weather permitting, I am a firm believer in fellowshiping with my church family and I am blessed to have a loving and caring church family.

11. Has this interview allowed you to discuss and share your sense of what it means to be a Black woman today?

Yes, it stirred up some emotions that I had not felt in a long time, especially about work. I have not worked since 2002 and forgot how painful the experience was.

12. Is there anything I have not asked or do you want to add any answers you have already given?

The bottom line is that I am proud to be a Black woman. Every experience I have had has made me more proud and a stronger person inside, spiritually, emotionally and mentally. You cannot judge another persons life until you walk in their shoes and

experience the bitter and the sweet. When I sit down and really look at the world today I am very glad that I am a Black women and proud.

Valarie

1. Are you a mother? Yes
2. What is your educational level?
3 years of college
3. What is your occupational status?
3 Part Time Jobs and getting ready to start a fourth
4. Marital Status: Single/Married/Widowed?
Single
5. In your experience does race complicate these social categories?
If so how?

Yes, white people look out for their own even though they present a pretty face of equal employment. By them being in the power position it affects us more unfairly. There are situations where I believe I should have been selected with all things being equal and even tilted in my favor with experience and education, but I think that race was a determining factor in times of advancement in the workplace. At my last place of employment, I was in the job 8 years longer than all the women that were in the same job. I worked for 4 departments and did outstanding work, but they ended up letting me go. However, there was a white girl that only worked for 1 person and they kept her. I knew that I was a high producer, so I was not let go because of my lack of production. I eventually did file a grievance with the EEOC. Once my employer was served with my complaint they involved their lawyer and I could not afford one, so after 5 or 6 months I let it go because I could not fight corporate world. With the exception of one place of

employment, I was there at least 3 years before I realized that I was the first and only black person in that department. I probably would be affected by racism more than I am, but I see people first not color. If people have a problem with color that is their problem and not mine. I don't take on their problems.

With my unique way of viewing the world, I prefer to know what I am dealing with. I cannot deal with the white people that are undercover, approachable on the surface and go home and lead the Klu Klux Klan. I have been faced with white people that seem like SATAN himself, and other the other hand I have met white people that are encouraging and kind.

6. Do you self-identify as a Black woman?

Yes. I identify as a woman who is Black. First as a woman and then as a Black women.

7. Do you feel that you are treated as a Black woman or as a woman?

What do you see as the differences?

My focus is not on racism because nothing will ever change who I am. If a person has a problem with me, that is there problem. Even when walking down halls of my place of employment I still feel like a woman. Of course there are circumstances that happen, but I have so many things to focus on that I refuse to have racism to be my focus. On any job I have, I am focused on what I am suppose to be doing. I am keenly aware that more is expected of me and I have demanded more of myself than what was necessary. Anything associated with me is not going to be mediocre, it is going to be exceptional.

8. What struggles or obstacles have you faced as a Black woman?

The only time I have noticed racism is when it is blatant. There is no other reason for such unkind and unfair treatment other than race. In my last job the new leader was clearly of a different persuasion in his thoughts about race. He tried to be a black whitie, but he is a whitie. I know that he is use to being around black people, but as far as being fair, he gave the appearance, but not true fairness. I did everything in the office as office assistance administratively; researching and writing grants. The person who took my place had very low self confidence and was demeaning when talking to other people. Because I have the personality of tolerance, I allowed some things that she was doing to just pass over me, but the time came that I had to stop her and tell her that she was a cracker. When I left they were suppose to be having a farewell for me. The day that it was schedule it snowed terribly so the Director called me and said that she was going to stay in the bed. 3 weeks later the Director was suppose to write me a letter of recommendation, it took him 6 weeks to write it and then he called and asked when could I come in and show them the mass emailing, and oh by the way if you want we can have some cake. I told him that I was between Detroit and Toledo so I did not know when I would have time for a cake. About two weeks after that, I received a call to attend a staff meeting and was told that “Oh, if you want I can take you cake out of the freezer and have a party.” This to me was so inconsiderate and phony so to me they were acting like crackers, which is something that I don’t ever say until it is warranted.

9. Did you overcome those struggles and obstacles?

If so, how?

Oh yes, I just chalked it up to experience and move on. I am not going to let no

white person penetrate me. Ironically, I did not get called a nigger until I moved to Toledo in the early 80's. I was pumping gas one day and some kid said you black nigger. I was a grown woman before this happened. In DC where I was from white people held the door for you.

10. Describe your contribution:

Society

If I see there is a need that needs to be met I will step up to help. I have a thing for people that are hurting and need someone, I am automatically drawn to them to offer assistance. It might not even be personal to me, but I over to help people to help themselves. Example: I do volunteer work with "Wake Up Youth" which is a ministry and nonprofit for women and girls that have been sexually exploited through prostitution, raped, runaways.

Family

The way I grew up there were unrealistic expectations, which caused me to have unrealistic expectations for myself. If you brought home a "B" my father never showed proudness, and if you brought home an "A", he would say that you are suppose to.

11. Has this interview allowed you to discuss and share your sense of what it means to be a Black woman today?

I honestly think that my experience is different than a lot of black women's experience. Most black women are more focused on racial things than I am. I only focus on it when it slaps me in the face. Other blacks are very keenly aware of racial stuff, but that is not my focus. If it gets in my face I will deal with it. People have

always known that with me what you see is what you get. There is a side of me that most people fortunately don't get to see. My radar is on and when I detect something I will not dismiss it. I don't have to verbally acknowledge disrespect in order for it to be noticed. I can assure you that what I will say behind a person's back, I will say to their face.

12. Is there anything I have not asked or do you want to add any answers you have already given?

My goal in life is peace at all cost. I just want peace inside of me and then whatever I can do to achieve that it is my ultimate goal. My relationship with God is who and what gives me access to the peace that I need. I know that He is my savior. Sometimes stuff will sneak up on me and then I realize that I am slipping somewhere in my time that I spend with GOD. I am never too busy to carve out my time with Him.