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Young, Gifted and Black: A Narrative of Persistence of Black Women in Academia  
at a Predominately White Institution

Zelda Tackey

A thesis submitted of the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

School of Communication Studies

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## **DEDICATION**

To all the strong Black women, I see you, I hear you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my family and friends for enduring this journey with me when I was too sick physically and mentally to move forward but for never losing faith in me. A wholehearted thanks goes out to all the Black women I know who have poured into me during this entire process and validated the importance of this work. I did it all for you.

To Carlos and Melissa, thank you from the bottom of my heart. This process has been very long and I cannot express how much I appreciate you all not giving up on me, and sticking through all the ups and downs with me. To Jennifer, thank you for being willing to jump in when you did and providing insight for revising how this work could be structured.

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the storied experiences of Black women at predominantly white institutions (PWI) of higher education. I adopt a phronetic iterative approach to the qualitative analysis of interviewed Black women to explore how the image of a Strong Black Woman mediates a storied understanding to microaggressions, invisibility and racial battle fatigue. I present that survivor narratives typically employed to explain Black women's encounters on the PWI are ill-suited for interpreting their experiences of campus life, and that the storying of persistence may be more insightful for generating an understanding of a Black womanhood that is complex and adaptive to the PWI environment. Additionally, this thesis highlights the importance of a Strong Black Woman Collective (SBWC) theoretical framework as means understanding of how the communal practices of Black women validates their experiences. Lastly, major takeaways and hopes for universities are discussed.

*Keywords: Black women, strong Black woman, persistence, self, narrative, stories*

## INTRODUCTION

I removed the syllabus of my graduate seminar in communication theory from my backpack and looked at the title of the assigned book for the week, *Black Feminist Thought* by Patricia Hill Collins (1990). For once I was reading something in my program that I felt that I could relate to and that could aid in explaining my lived experience as a young Black woman and developing scholar. In that book, Collins (1990) addresses many facets of Black womanhood and the Black female experience in professional and academic spheres, stating:

*“Most African-American women simply do not define themselves as mummies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, mules, or sexually denigrated women. The matrix of domination in which these controlling images are embedded is much less cohesive or uniform than imagined....African-American women encounter these controlling images, not as disembodied symbolic messages but as ideas designed to provide meaning in our daily lives. Black women’s work and family experiences create the conditions whereby the contradictions between everyday experiences and the controlling images of Black womanhood become visible.” (p. 99)*

Collins’ words resonated with my transition into my master’s program in Communication and Advocacy, which has certainly been a struggle of everyday experiences. The academic expectations of graduate studies have been more rigorous than my undergraduate experience, but even greater has been the challenge of being a Black woman in higher education. Being a Black woman in higher education comes with many moments of isolation inside and outside the classroom, a sense of othering and struggling



with imposter syndrome. It comes with doubt about your presence and knowledge, and with putting on a façade of control in order to just make it through the day. Some days, you feel like you are all alone in the sea, and other days you are just holding your breath underwater.

It doesn't help that my white classmates, the people I routinely interact with three out of five days of the week, cannot seem to fathom the complexity and intersectionality of a Black woman's experience. The thought of those classmates being "forced" to read Collins' book about the experiences of Black women was going to be my moment to come up for air, a chance to breathe.

I walked into the classroom, ready and excited to dissect Black femininity and womanhood. I was so excited to the point that I could hear and feel that my heart was beating faster. Class began when the clock struck 2:00, but before we could start our discussion of Collins' work, a classmate interjected with an alternative class agenda. The campus library was hosting a screening of a documentary film on Vinegar Hill, a once thriving Black neighborhood in Charlottesville, Virginia. The film screening seemed well timed given recent racist incidents in that town and on the University of Virginia campus grounds. It was proposed then that we end class early so that we could screen the film as a group.

While the film sounded interesting, I had been focused on talking about Collins' book. To be honest, I was outright confused as to why screening the documentary film was even being considered as alternative to that discussion. My distaste must have been splattered across my face because one of my classmates asked, "What's wrong?" I felt like I had been caught in a private and intimate moment with my emotions and I was now

naked. I quickly responded with “Oh nothing, I’m just a little tired”. My response was a forced attempt to suppress my bewilderment and the small papercut pains I was starting to feel. A vote was taken and the majority of the class decided that seeing the documentary would be beneficial. We spent only about 20 minutes of class time discussing Collins work. Twenty minutes! That is all the time dedicated to the complex and important theoretical framework for understanding identity and advocacy: my framework.

The majority of that conversation was led by myself, the only Black woman in the room, as if I spoke for all Black women in the world. My comments were followed by uncomfortable and awkward moments of silence, in which my classmates kept looking at the time, staring at their notebooks or their copy of Collins’ book, maybe with the hope that if they stared hard enough, her words would come to them. Others looked around at each other bashfully. Through their actions and the awkward tension in the room, it felt as if they were trying to find any means possible of not engaging in the conversation and they had little, if anything to share. Twenty minutes.

I chose to share my own experiences with my classmates, instances of sexism, racism, stereotypes and microaggressions that haunt me. As I spoke, I could feel my temperature rising, my blood boiling, and my voice starting to shake. Sharing my experiences triggered me; having to *explain* these experiences to people who voted that a screening a documentary film would be more beneficial than a reflective discussion about the very matters of my daily lived experience was making me angry. My heart beat fast and my voice trembled, but not because I was about to cry; my passion about the subject was so intense that my body found every way possible to let that show. Twenty minutes.

The discussion ended and we closed up the classroom to view the film. I had done so much emotional labor in the classroom that I was exhausted when it was time to leave. As always, the experiences of Black women were placed on the back burner. After the film, and once I arrived at home, I took a shower and got into bed. I didn't take the time to care for myself or fully process that experience, and I never shared how much that experience took a toll on me.

Months passed when I began a podcast project called, *Tackey Thoughts*, an opportunity to interview guests to explore a range of topics and share my perspective on living and relating with others as a proud Ghanaian woman. The first guest was my assistantship supervisor. When I clicked the red button to end the recording session, it dawned on me that we had spent almost an hour discussing our experiences as undergraduates, graduates and young professionals in higher education. We shared our experiences with microaggressions, racism, and some of the emotional turmoil that takes place when attempting to navigate higher education as Black women. As I began to edit the recording, I realized another major component of missing from both of our experiences: the measures that Black women take to maintain and preserve self after living through those experiences.

How are Black women, especially those in higher education, surviving these emotionally taxing experiences? How do Black women of different roles on university campuses story the intersectionality of their experiences such that they can come through oppressing encounters, great and small, and continue in their lines of work? What can be learned from these accounts of their persistence through the everyday struggle of racism and sexism?

In 1969, Frances Beal described the struggle of Black women in America as a double jeopardy---forced to deal with the marginalization associated with racism and sexism. Twenty years later, Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) would offer a more comprehensive analytical framework for examining how interlocking systems of power create conditions of oppression for Black women. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) further extended the idea of intersectionality as a lens to account for social inequality in societal institutions such as higher education, and to offer standpoint theory as a framework for explaining how socio-political positions occupied by women can be starting points for understanding marginalization as a lived experience. Collins' work would invite scholars of Black feminism to examine the many different social, political and economic locations from which Black women enter and experience the inequality of social world. Perry, Harp & Oser (2012) echoed this point by writing that for many Black women the stressors associated with navigating personal and work experiences are often intensified by concurrent social issues of racism and sexism in society, attributing these stressors to an understanding of their daily lived experience (Perry, Harp & Oser, 2013). Collins (2019) would seek to close that circle by offering intersectionality as a critical social theory that centers themes of power, relationality, social inequality, social context, complexity, and social justice in the analyses of Black women's experiences.

Sixty years of writing then support Beal's (1969) observation that Black women's experience and positionality is unlike that of others within the society, and the perception of their experiences is riddled by a "wall of grave misconceptions, outright distortions of fact and defensive attitudes on the part of many" (p. 19). The experiences of double jeopardy are particularly salient in higher education and can be heard in accounts of

tenure and promotion, representation in administration, and experiences with decision making roles and daily academic cultures (Kelly & Winkle-Wagner, 2017).

Examining the narratives of Black women in higher education at predominately white institutions (PWI) is timely and relevant. Much of the research surrounding Black women in higher education focuses on their limited presence in upper leadership and their overall lack of presence on campuses and instances of discrimination. For example, Bates (2007) asserted that while they have been pioneers in the field of higher education and have made strides in leadership appointments, there is still a need for Black women to attain these positions in order to close the racial and gender gap. Others, such as Beckwith, Carter & Peters (2016), addressed the issue of a “concrete ceiling”. Unlike the more commonly referenced glass ceiling, which solely acknowledges the barriers that exists for women to advance in their profession, the concrete ceiling acknowledges the barriers that Black women encounter in ascension in their respective profession and their ability to co-exist with an institution or system that works against them. Finally, Jackson and Harris (2007) discussed how myths and stereotypes behind Black women impact the desire for people to want to work with them.

From my experiences, the claims and conclusions of these works ring true. Black women are by no means unqualified or incapable of being in certain leaderships roles on campus. Rather, Black women are compelled to deal with everyday instances of racism, sexism and microaggression that prevent them from moving up in the ranks of the university, or that cause them to be so isolated and invisible that their time at an institution is limited. As quickly as they arrive, they are out the door.

The experiences and stories of Black women on these campuses often goes unheard by those who need to hear them most. Many predominately and historically white institutions have attempted to adopt a model of diversity and inclusion on their campuses in order to accommodate the growing diverse population of students seeking higher education. However, these models often do not account for the diversity and inclusion of those who are expected to teach and serve students. The models do not seem to focus on resources that could be provided to support faculty and staff of color or that allow for the creation of spaces to share their experiences amongst each other or with their white colleagues. Black women at PWI's often seek out the support of other Black women as a means of navigating and persisting. It is important then that the experiences and stories of Black women are shared and valued as a means of making sense of the urgency that is our contemporary situation in higher education.

This qualitative thesis project is an important contribution to university practices and the scholarly work centered around honoring Black women's stories. It is my hope that the storied experiences shared in this thesis may inspire a radical shift at PWI's. By sharing the experiences and narratives of Black women working in higher education at predominately and historically white institutions, I am presenting an opportunity for those who do not live these experiences to have a small glimpse of what is taking place on their campuses and use this different perspective as a way to critically reflect on how their attitudes, practices and identity contributes to the invisibility of Black women.

Additionally, my hope is that this thesis gives voice and power to those who feel unheard. Their storied experiences are important and indicative of a large problem on campuses across the nation. Black songstress Nina Simon's 1969 anthem suggests that

“to be young, gifted and Black, that’s where it’s at”, but for the Black women working at these institutions, their experiences often lead them to ask, “*Is being Black and gifted really where it’s at?*” Lastly, I hope that this thesis allows Black women to see and understand that strength does not have to be limited to the scope that society says we must operate in. There is strength in vulnerability. There is strength in the collective.

As Black women wrestle with double jeopardy, it is imperative to explore the diversity from the vantage of their lived experiences and learn from their strategies for communicating place and worth. In this project, I adopted the phronetic iterative approach outlined by Tracy (2020) for inquiring and exploring the experiences of being Black women in settings of higher education. How women understand their situation and make sense of their relations with others was the starting point of my inquiry, informing my selection of the major themes to be reviewed from the published literature of Black women’s experience in the workplace. I further explored how these lived experiences were storied, noting how participants work around and make use of themes regarding persistence. I developed and offer how stories of persistence might be explored for better understanding how Black women thrive, rather than merely survive their work and social environments. Finally, I adopted a feminist perspective that assumes the lived experience of the interview itself as one of a raised consciousness of self and other in relation.

Chapter One overviews qualitative interviews of women as my selected method of collecting storied experiences, including my justification for this interactive approach as most suitable for addressing my research interests.

Chapter Two presents a few features common in Black women’s storying of their social and professional experiences on the PWI. I review the historical image of the

Strong Black Woman that I heard in my interviews and in my own experience, and how the competing values of that narrative continue to serve as a prominent basis and foundation for the daily lived experience of many Black women at home and in the workplace. I describe the storied themes of invisibility and microaggression experienced by Black women in society and documented in the literature, and how feelings of invisibility are characteristic of the experience of working at a PWI. Finally, I listen for feelings of racial battle fatigue and how that exhaustion may contribute to Black women's communication of self.

Chapter Three presents further interpretation of key elements of the women's stories that characterize a storied persistence. As a contrast, I outline dominating cultural narratives of survival found in published health and organization communication to explore what a story of persistence might mean for better characterizing the experience and work life at a PWI and ultimately contributes to sense of self that has both agency and complexity.

Finally, Chapter Four presents an invitation to reflect on implications from my interpretations, as well as on the power of Strong Black Woman Collective (SBWC) theoretical framework as means of critically understanding of how communication practices by women talking with women inspires a communal validation of their experiences. I reflect on some notable qualities for evaluating the phronetic process of my qualitative method, and close by outlining some directions for both personal and institutional action that might begin a desired radical shift for fully seeing Black women at the PWI.



As you might already hear, two questions moved my interpretation and thinking about the situation of Black women in PWI's:

RQ1: What features are common in Black women's storying of their social and professional experiences on the PWI?

RQ2: What structures seem to characterize these storied experiences as persistence?

I found myself cycling between these two matters of communication throughout my inquiry. I don't consider them to be questions to be answered, but more like two poles that I moved back-and-forth and in-between as I reviewed the published literature, listened to interviews, and reflected on my own storied experiences.

## CHAPTER ONE

### A Gathering of Black Women

In this project, I adopted a phronetic iterative approach to qualitative research outlined by Tracy (2020) for inquiring and exploring how experiences of being Black women in higher education contribute to their sense-making practices in university settings. Tracy writes that the phronetic interactive approach “suggests that qualitative data can be systematically gathered, organized, interpreted, analyzed, and communicated so as to address pressing concerns and prompt change” (p. 6). Tracy further writes that the approach prioritizes communication “practice in action, assumes that perception is always related to a specific (self-reflexive) subject position, and that the social and historical roots of the issue precede individual motivations and action” (p. 6). Finally, this approach is a process of alternating between existing research questions, theories and interests on one hand, and qualitative data on the other (Tracy, 2020), while situating the qualitative researcher in the center.

How Black women, myself included, understand their situation and make sense of their relations with others then was the starting point of my inquiry, informing the major themes selected and reviewed in the published literature of Black women’s experience in the workplace. These experiences are marked by particular sensitizing concepts (Tracy, 2020) that stand out in my personal reflections of studying and working at the university.

Throughout the published research literature and in published accounts of successful Black women in the academy, I observed that the experience of Black women in PWI’s of higher education is one of limiting stereotypes met with empowering but over-imposing images of a Strong Black Woman. Black women in higher education

settings experience acts of microaggression and feelings of invisibility in their classrooms and in their professional roles, resulting in a physical, mental and emotional fatigue that is often unknown or misunderstood by their peers. For these reasons and others, it is imperative that students of advocacy explore the diversity of Black women's lived experiences and learn from their strategies for communicating place and worth on university settings. In this chapter, I describe the processes by which I compiled these lived experiences through interviews, as well as how my movement through transcripts of those interviews yielded important insights about their storied experiences.

As with many forms of qualitative inquiry in the field of communication studies, the basis of my approach is an assumption of storytelling and narrative as significant in the making and understanding of self in situation. Questions related to how race and gender were experienced by other Black women working in a predominately white institution formed initial questions of my interviews. Description and interpretation of the way these experiences were individually recounted and collectively narrated—their prevailing themes and structures—formed the subsequent analyses of the interviews. According to norms outlined by Creswell (2014), these objectives are fitting of my qualitative research design.

Narrative analysis or narrative inquiry is a form of data collection that can be overlooked for its simplicity and commonsense design. But narrative inquiry in and of itself is a means of storytelling. According to Clandinin (2006), “Lived and told stories and talk about those stories are ways we create meaning in our lives as well as ways we enlist each other's help in building our lives and communities” (p. 44). Clandinin describes three dimensions of narrative inquiry: the personal and social (interaction)

along one dimension; past, present and future (continuity) along a second dimension; and place (situation) along a third dimension. For my narrative inquiry or analysis, the few focus groups and the one-on-one interview served as a means for me gaining greater understanding of the sense making process that Black women in higher education at a predominately white institution, go through when attempting to understand their identity, coupled with instances of racism, sexism and microaggressions and the idea of maintaining self or self-care. In addition, the narrative inquiry and analysis that I am centering this research on is centered on the first two dimensions of narrative inquiry. The focus groups and interview placed on the interactions that Black women were having amongst themselves as well as the world around them all while focusing on their place or situation, being Black women in higher education at the PWI.

My qualitative research design used in-depth interviews in order to compile stories about experience, meaning and perspective (Hammarberg, Kirkman, de Lacey, 2016). I interviewed some individuals one-on-one and others in small focus groups, following a protocol of a semi-structured questions for both interview situations. The semi-structure of the questions allowed for me to inquire deep emotional ties to one's self and situation that emerged during the interviews.

Centering my interviews with only Black women who work in a predominately white university was intentional and purposeful. My focus is on what it means to be a Black Woman while working in a predominately white spaces, as well as to gain insight into how communication in those spaces contributes to that sense making. Since university structures were created and contribute to patriarchy and the power of white men, it is important to focus on how Black women navigate these spaces. Howard-Vital

(1989) refers to Hull, Scott, and Smith's book, *All the Women Are White, All the Black are Men, But Some of Us are Brave* (1982), where they note "the intellectual void surrounding African-American women is totally related to the politics of a white male society. This society does not recognize, and denies, the importance of African-American women's lives and contributions through racial, sexual, and class oppression" (Howard-Vital, 1989, p. 180).

I chose to conduct my interviews at Mid-Atlantic Public University (MAPU). According to U.S. Census estimates for 2108 of the entire population of Mid-Atlantic State that MAPU calls home, 69% are identified as "White," and 19.5% are identified African American. According to 2018~19 Fact Book published by MAPU's Institutional Research Office, the university employed 1,062 full-time instructional faculty members (tenured, on the tenured track or nontenured), of whom 30 identified as African American (2.8%), while 79.8% were identified as White. Out of its 562 staff members (i.e., non-library, administrative/professional staff), 37 (6.5%) identified as African American, in contrast to 474 (84.3%) who identified as White. Finally, the Fact Book reports African Americans make up only 2.5% of MAPU's 1,410 full-time classified staff (administrative managers, office and clerical, professional-nonfaculty, service/maintenance, skilled crafts and technicians/paraprofessionals). Whites make of 88% of that classified staff.

Further, according to its own publications of student demographics of 2018, only 198 (4.3%) of the 4,541 new students entering MAPU identified as African/Black. Of the remaining undergraduate population of 15,138 students, only 751 (5%) identified as African American/Black. Put differently, Black students comprised 4.8% of MAPU total undergraduate population in 2018, compared to the 78.7% of the students identified as

White. In 2019, those numbers changed only slightly, with Black students making up 4.9% and White students making up 78%. In fact, state higher education data on the MAPU for the past 20 years evidences that Black enrollment since 2020 has averaged at 4% of the student population, with its lowest point of 2.9% in 2004. At the graduate studies level (non-degree seeking undergraduate, graduate, advanced graduate, non-degree seeking graduate and certificate graduate), only 104 (5.7%) of 1,827 students who enrolled in 2018 identified as African American, where 76.9% were identified as White.

Based on these demographic data, MAPU may rightfully be considered a public university whose faculty, administration, staff, and student population does not come remotely representative of the 19.5% African Americans in its state. Further, the number of faculty, administration, staff, and student identified as White relative to that population in the state evidences MAPU as a predominately white institution (PWI).

According to U.S. Census estimates of 2018 data, 50.8% of the population of MidAtlantic State were identified as female. Like most public universities across the nation, much has been written about the gender composition of students at MAPU, where in 2018-19 women comprised 58% of the undergraduate population, and 70% of the graduate student population. However, the state higher education data on gender composition does not account for how many of those female students identify as African American/Black. The same was true when screening the reported demographics of women employed by the university as instructional faculty, staff, or classified staff. There was no reliable way to report how many African American/Black women worked on the campus in any role. The lack of data regarding the intersectional experiences of race and

gender supports the importance of this thesis to highlight the narratives and experiences of Black women working at MAPU.

### **Recruitment and Participants**

Recruitment for this study was purposive. Participants were recruited starting with my personal network and then working through a list serve of Black women in higher education (see Appendix A). Participant criteria and use of the list serve were created to maximize recruitment and obtain a diverse perspective of experiences at a predominately white institution. The sampling criteria required the following: 1) self-identifying as Black and a woman, 2) in a faculty, staff, or administrative position at MAPU (i.e., part- or full-time instructional faculty, deans, program directors, student services, etc.).

The recruitment style also allowed for snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is achieved when participants recommend other individuals who would be beneficial to the study (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Futing Liao, 2004). As participants began to respond with their willingness to participate, a Doodle poll was created to determine available dates and times. Once participants were recruited and dates and times were determined, participants were divided into focus groups. Two focus groups and a one-on-one interview were used. All participants identified as Black and female, and in total six women were interviewed. While not a selection criteria, all of the participants referenced their current work environment as “predominately white” during the interview.

### **Procedure**

After Institutional Review Board (IRB) and university Title IX office approval was obtained, focus group participants were recruited. Participants came from a small community of Black women working at MAPU so effort was made to protect participant

identity, privacy, confidentiality and any other information that may be compromising to their employment. As the primary investigator, I ensured that participants of the study were aware of the purpose, procedures, risk and assured confidentiality. Participants agreed to participate in the focus groups, maintain confidentiality and allow for audio-recording of the session. Written consent was obtained and assured/informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from participation in the study at any time (see Appendix B).

Focus group style interviews were chosen for this study because they tend to allow for a deeper analysis and examination of experiences, perspectives and voices of the participants. Focus groups were also chosen as a means for participants to use the testimonies and narratives of others, in order to share their own. The original design was to interview several groups comprised of 3-5 individuals, but due to circumstances, I was only able to conduct two group interviews, with two and three participants, respectively. I also conducted a one-one-one interview.

In all three interview situations I used a semi-structured interview protocol with initial questions that focused on their positions and job descriptions. Generative and directive questions that followed were constructed to explore and examine the experiences of Black women in higher education and their understanding of those experiences. Participants were asked to reflect on instances of racism and sexism in the workplace, their interactions with faculty/staff and students, their personal obligations/hobbies and their understanding and practice of self-care in relation to these experiences (see Appendix C). Participants discussed their past and present experiences working at the university and their understanding of how those experiences contribute to



their sense of self and self-care. The interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes and were audio-recorded.

### **Transcript Preparation**

Digital MP3 files of the audio-recorded interviews were submitted to a professional transcription agency and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were saved as DOCX files. Prior to analysis, I listened to each of the recordings and made corrections directly to DOCX files to any areas where the professional transcription agency may have not transcribed correctly or missed. I inserted areas of pausing, sighing, taking a deep breath, etc., in order to for me to understand the tone in which the experiences and narratives were being conveyed. All names and references to specific persons were replaced with pseudonyms; identifying locations and events were likewise edited.

After making these revisions, I printed each set of the typed transcriptions and once again listened to the recordings to ensure that every single word conveyed was transcribed. As stated in earlier chapters, Black women's voices and stories are often not heard, misunderstood or told incorrectly. It was important to me protect the very intimate and personal experiences and make sure they were storied word for word. I then read through each of the printed transcriptions. Reading through the printed transcriptions helped to determine how best to organize them for coding and analysis.

### **Initial Coding**

Prepared transcripts of the group and one-on-one interview were read over several times to generate a deeper understanding of the participants experiences and narratives. I made a first pass through the data (primary cycle coding), moving through transcripts to identify key categories in the participants communication that could describe what was

happening in their accounts of racism and sexism, and that might then be useful for generating themes, exemplars and vignettes (Tracy, 2020) that typify the experiences that Black women encounter in the PWI. However, because of the limited number of interviews performed, I was unable to reach a point where I could confidently identify and richly describe themes across interviews.

Rather than collect more data, I chose to identify key accounts that highlight and add texture to concepts and experiences found in the published literature, specifically the image of the Strong Black Woman, the experience of microaggression and invisibility, and feelings of racial battle fatigue. Working these accounts into my reviewed literature helped me to see and hear where and how these concepts figured into the everyday experiences of Black women on white campuses. On this practice, Tracy (2020) writes:

Because most researchers are under time and subject constraints, many of us pursue analysis directions that align not only with themes emerging in primary coding, but also with themes that mesh well with research goals, past experience, and deadlines...That said, original research interests are merely points of departure and other, more salient, issues may emerge in the data. After some primary-cycle coding, researchers should consider the best direction of the analysis, rework research question/foci, and educate themselves on literature that frames new directions...Rather than trying to tell the “whole story” which is impossible anyway, it’s important to choose which aspects of the data and codes are most promising for the unfolding project and its key audiences. (pp. 223-224)

I then reconsidered how my research questions might explore the idea of global narrative themes that I heard in the storied experiences.

According to Creswell (2014) narrative inquiry is a design method where the researcher “studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives. The information is then often retold or restoried by the researcher” (p. 12). I adopted narrative research as the framework for more global analysis of the storied experiences articulated by my participants. The use of narrative research versus a thematic analysis was beneficial because it allowed for individual stories to remain whole and for experiences to not be taken out of context.

As mentioned earlier, Clandinin (2006) describes three dimensions of narrative inquiry: the personal and social (interaction) along one dimension; past, present and future (continuity) along a second dimension; and place (situation) along a third dimension. As I moved through the transcriptions, I listened for and identified how the women’s stories of their work and home experiences, as told individually and developed conjointly, fell along each of these dimensions. Across the transcripts, I was able to identify a number of discrete stories. Stories that focused on place (situation) seemed less consistent, perhaps because of the limited number of interviews I was able to conduct, as well as the different roles and job positions held by the participants. I subsequently focused on how these stories were structured around interactional relationships on one dimension, and the passing of time along another.

### **Trustworthiness**

Throughout my collection and interpretation process, I was mindful to criteria for producing excellent qualitative work outlined by Tracy (2020). Having made the case regarding Black women’s experiences of working on predominately white universities as a worthy topic, I moved through a dignified recruitment of participants, honored handling

of interview material, and reflective interpretation of their shared experiences with several other criteria in mind. The practices I undertook in pursuit achieving a high-quality research process through ethical procedures and rich rigor are briefly outlined in this section. I reflect on some of Tracy's other list criteria in Chapter 4.

Excellent qualitative work is marked by adhering to ethical research practices, which Tracy (2013) differentiates as procedural, situational, and relational. Procedural ethics refers to "ethical actions that are prescribed by certain organizational or institutional review boards (IRB) as being universal or necessary" (p. 243). As previously mentioned in the procedure section of this chapter, in order to conduct research, approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was necessary. The process of receiving approval presented some hurdles due to my position as a student employee and graduate researcher, and the demographic chosen for this study. As a student employee, I had to account for any instances of sexual harassment or misconduct that could be possibly disclosed during the interview process.

In order to protect the participants, it had to be determined whether I was considered a mandatory reporter under Title IX and the Title IX office. Title IX prohibits "discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs and activities. All public and private elementary and secondary schools, school districts, colleges, and universities receiving any Federal funds must comply with Title IX" (US Department of Education, 2020). A mandatory reporter under Title IX is someone affiliated with the university, who must report instances of misconduct to the Title IX office. It was determined that I was not considered a mandatory reporter because I was not studying the student population but in order to ensure the protection, safety and health of participants, I

provided each participant with a list of university and local resources, that would be helpful to them if they had experienced any instances of misconduct.

Situational ethics refers to “ethical issues that arise in specific contexts or sample populations” (Tracy, 2013, p. 243). I was aware that I was studying a potentially vulnerable population. Knowing that there was a limited number of Black women working at MAPA, I had to consider that sharing their stories could put their jobs in jeopardy or potentially change their reputation on campus. In order to protect their identities I made sure that interviews were conducted in a discrete manner and setting, as well as removing identifying information. The names I report in excerpted experiences are pseudonyms. I’ve chosen to include the number of years they’ve been employed at MADU, and in some cases their age, so as to add depth and perspective to their experience.

By adhering to ethical and respectful research practices, I was able to immerse myself in the fellowship of Black women who were my interview participants. Key to honoring their experiences were my efforts to undertake practices of rich rigor in light of an intimate topic for me, a modified understanding of my research focus, and an interrupted analysis process.

The topic of this thesis was based on my personal experiences. Therefore it was imperative that the review of the literature was able to support my experiences, the experiences of the participants, as well as highlight the dominant themes within the literature. I considered the validity and relevance of the themes found in the literature and what connection they had to the collected data. I chose to develop the review of the literature using a funneling model. I knew the basis of my experiences were situated in

my positionality of being black and woman and that was the same for the participants of the study. The initial review of literature was situated through the theoretical lens of Black womanhood. Black womanhood was used as a means of understanding and exploring the lived experience of Black women. Since Black womanhood asserts that black femininity is rooted in oppressive structures and ideologies, I found it best to analyze experiences based on frameworks and themes of the strong black woman, microaggressions, racial battle fatigue and invisibility that were found throughout the literature. The narrowing the scope of how Black womanhood is experienced allowed for a rich review of literature and data.

A university closure due to heavy snow interrupted the number of interviews scheduled and recorded. Though the exploration of themes was helpful for developing my review of the literature, exploring themes or a thematic analysis of the interviews could not be performed with so few interviews. I then moved from exploring and analyzing reoccurring themes to exploring larger narrative features. My narrative inquiry was interrupted by a severe and unexpected health situation which not only prevented me from moving through the narrative frames in a timely manner, but inhibited my ability to facilitate a meeting for member reflection with my interviewed participants.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **The Blueprint: Black Womanhood**

I'm a Black woman, period...and we work it out. (Jacqueline, 36 years old)

The purpose of this chapter is to explore and reflexively move through the literature that documents Black womanhood and the Strong Black Woman narrative as a key code heard in storied experiences on the PWI. A Black womanhood asserts that Black femininity is rooted in the history of oppressive structures/institutions, hegemony and gender roles and norms. The historical implications of Black womanhood has led Black women to value the narrative of being a strong. I critically reflect on the image and narrative of the Strong Black Woman and how they shape the lived experiences of Black women. Coupled together, Black womanhood and the Strong Black Woman narrative, serve as the foundation for understanding the lives of Black women. Through the analysis of this foundation, I am then able to make connections to how this contributes to storied instances of microaggressions and Black women feeling invisible at the PWI.

Throughout this chapter, as well as in the remainder of the manuscript, I employ excerpts of accounts and vignettes extracted from the interviews of Black women who participated in this thesis project. As in the opening of this chapter, this quoted material from my interviews voices ideas and sentiments that vividly encapsulate the emotional and stressful experiences of Black women, and how they communicate to make sense of their experiences and environments. This practice that I employ throughout the literature review demonstrates that scholarship must always be in conversation with the actual lived experiences of the Black women who are theorized, storied, and explained therein. Their accounts not only animate the claims of scholarship and social theory, but also point to

the need to center the voices of Black women as part of the theoretical conversation. It is within this practice of Black intersectional feminism, and its focus on centering the subjectivity of lived experiences, that this literature review is framed.

What features are common in Black women's storying of their social and professional experiences on predominately white institutions? Being Black and woman creates complex ways of knowing and being. Black women are constantly faced with the challenges of being a member of two of the most historically oppressed groups. Women are often deemed as "strangers", "others" or "outsiders". However, for Black women, being a woman coupled with being black creates a different outsider perspective that White women will never have to confront. Black women are not oppressed or marginalized simply for their womanhood but rather for the intersection of their race and gender. The experiences associated with this reality, lends to a unique and complex understanding of Black womanhood.

### **Black Womanhood**

...you know, you keep pushing, you keep moving because we [Black women] got to hold it together. (Blossom, 30 years old, at MAPU for 5 years)

African American women's gender roles in the United States have historically and in contemporary times have been impacted by the legacy of slavery and segregation (Konard & Harris, 2002). Economic factors, systematic oppression, and male unemployment led many African American women to compensate for the absence of men by fulfilling both traditionally feminine and masculine gender roles (Cole & Zucker, 2007; Collins, 2004). The gender role flexibility involving work-and-family-related responsibilities that began during U.S. enslavement continues as an adaptive coping



mechanism and strategy to reduce the impact of poverty, racism and discrimination. This adaptive coping mechanism is also affected by hegemonic femininity (Konard & Harris, 2002).

Hegemonic femininity assumes the superiority of White over Black women, valuing those who follow White feminine norms by awarding privileges and benefits while devaluing other femininities that fall short of meeting the hegemonic standard of whiteness. Similar perspectives have emerged regarding Black masculinity (Bryan, 2018; Clatterbaugh, 2018; Hall, 1997) and Asian femininity (Hall, 1997). Intersectionality theory (Collins, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989) has highlighted how oppressing systems that sustain social inequality between groups tend to overlap in such ways that subject positions of identities, such as that of gender and race, are complexly arranged in ways that privilege some and marginalize others. For instance, Black women in the U.S. experience racially and gendered oppression as both women and Black people simultaneously. The term hegemonic femininity thus highlights the intersection of race and gender as it applies to Black women in the U.S., and concludes that Black women's femininity ideology is not the same as those of White women, although they share some commonalities.

The pressure for Black women to adhere to nontraditional gender roles places them at great risk for gender role stress and conflict (Littlefield, 2003). Gender role stress may arise when Black women believe that they are unable to meet the standards of societal gender role ideas that are aligned with hegemonic femininity. Furthermore, personal and social expectations to adhere to both traditionally feminine and masculine norms creates gender role conflict, which may result in psychological distress (Fallon &

Jome, 2007). As a result of their attempting to fulfill a combination of traditionally masculine and feminine gender roles, recurrent environmental cues depict Black women as aggressive, hypo-feminine, undesirable, independent, domineering, and assertive.

The limiting and oppressing scope of these qualities becomes felt when they are articulated within stereotyping characterizations of Black women in domestic, social, and professional spheres. For example, regardless of the sphere, “Mammy” is a characterizing image of a Black woman as being warm and nurturing. Historically the mammy image symbolizes the faithful and obedient domestic servant who would often put the needs of the white family she was caring for, above the needs of her own family and herself (Collins, 1990, p. 72). The historic mammy image has been muted as Black women have found themselves in different sectors of the work force, however, the contemporary image of the Black woman as Mammy still places an emphasis on Black women neglecting themselves in the service of [White] others. The mammy image marks the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality and class and the oppressive elements of each (Collins, 1990, p. 73).

Similarly, “Jezebel” is an archetypical representation of a Black woman as sexually aggressive. The image of the jezebel serves as a means of trying to control Black women’s sexuality by deeming them as sexuality deviant (Collins, 1990, p. 81). The image of being deviant juxtaposes hegemonic femininity, which dictates women should be passive and men are to be aggressive (p.83). Lest they be seen as Jezebel, Black women are compelled to ensure that they navigate their sexuality within the realms of what is deemed decent by [White] society.

Scott (2017) writes that in response to their historically challenging circumstances and negative stereotyping, Black women have crafted alternative images of themselves. Among the most pervasive and widely accepted self-constructions is the Strong Black Woman. However, this empowering image is not without its own challenges.

### **Strong Black Women**

Jasmine is 60 years old, and has been at MAPU for 30 years. She has been a role model for countless Black women throughout the campus. The wisdom of her longevity is a testimony of her competence, leadership, and ability to confront her challenges head on. Reflecting on this positioning, she states:

I'm just as wide across my tail as [he] is across his shoulders, meaning that I can hold my own. I can hold my own. Because when you get to know your power, you use your power...you gotta learn your power...walk in your authority. I'm a proud Black woman and I'm so excited about other Black women in the field, but I think sometimes that's [the work and racial burdens] what's killing us, you know? That we take on the burden so easily of other people and, um, you know that then turns into our burnout, that then turns into the lack of self-care, that then turns into some health issues or whatever that is.

As with most strong women who speak with wisdom, Jasmine is well aware of the toll that she has endured and hopes to that those that follow in her footsteps are aware of the cost.

The Strong Black Woman archetype serves as the standard for many Black women who must determine how they will present in society. Harris-Perry (2011) summarizes:

By its idealized description, Black women are motivated, hardworking breadwinners who suppress their emotional needs while anticipating those of others...[It] serves as a constructive role model because Black women draw encouragement and self-assurance from an icon able to overcome great obstacles. Independence and self-reliance can be crucial to building and maintaining a positive image of Blackness in a society that often seeks to negate and vilify it (p.185).

The image of the Strong Black Woman is one that has been drilled into me from a young age. My parents always stressed that I had to work 10 times harder than my white classmates because I had to prove that I had it all together, at all times. I had to prove that the limiting images of Blackness were not true; that we did not need handouts and no matter the circumstances. Quite the opposite; we would face our hardships head on and come out on top.

My first panic attack came in graduate school. It felt as if the world was closing in on me and was going to swallow me whole. I didn't have anyone in my cohort I felt I could confide with, and there was no way that I was going to let anyone know that I didn't have it together, because as far as they were concerned I did. My first instinct was to then call my mother and hoped that she would be able to help me through.

"Mom, I really can't do this," I sobbed. "It's just really too much for me and I'm just so tired." My mother immediately told me to stop crying and that I needed to push through and be strong. She reminded me all the odds that I had stacked against me as a Black woman; feeling "overwhelmed" was a small obstacle that I had to endure. She

preached about how difficult life was going to be for me, so that I had to better learn to fight because “that’s just how life was always going to be”.

I felt small in that moment. I needed her to comfort me, but I did not get that at all. I told her that I would be fine and that I’d figure it out, and then quickly hung up. I had to suppress all my emotions and pull myself together. It felt as if pushing down on a heavy weight. I really did not have the time to process my emotions because I had to run to a meeting with a student I was mentoring. I was struggling emotionally, but in that moment, I justified that their needs were way more important than mine.

The Strong Black Woman image serves as a symbol of emotional resistance because for hundreds of years Black women have fought to define themselves in the face of racist and sexist structures that project the Mammy and Jezebel image. The Strong Black Woman rejects the docile and submissive image of Mammy and the sexually aggressive image of Jezebel, placing emphasis on the ability to articulate and define Black womanhood and emotions in a different way. The Strong Black Woman image stresses the idea that Black women are in control of their emotions and body and that is demonstrated through their strength and ability to overcome (Collins, 1990, p. 93-94).

The image of the Strong Black Woman also serves as a political resistance because it highlights the ways in which Black women act to resist negative attitudes and demeaning practices. When Black women push back against such attitudes and practices, they actively resist underlying macro-level ideologies or racism and patriarchy that have been used to define Black womanhood. Among all of her other accomplishments, the image enforces the idea that Black women are successfully strong caregivers in both their homes and in their communities.

Moreover, the Strong Black Woman image honors Black women for their behavior in challenging times, rather than for who they are as persons. Scott (2017) frames the situation as this: “When Black women are expected to be super-strong, they cannot simply be human” (p. xvii). Tressie McMillan-Cottom (2019) further explains this superhuman complex in relation to being competent. Black women are considered to be competent or having the necessary skills thrive when serving others. “Black women are superheroes when we conform to others’ expectations of us. When we are sassy but not smart; successful but not happy; competitive but not actualized—then, we have some inherent wisdom” (p. 79). When Black women chose to be in service to themselves, that strength or superhuman complex exhibited also deems them incompetent and invaluable (McMillan-Cottom, p. 80)

From this perspective, any mistake, any shortcoming, has the potential to be seen as a sign of failure. During my time as a graduate assistant, I have been expected to juggle multiple projects and tasks at one time. When I once missed an important deadline for one of the projects that I was working on, I knew that I was going to be reprimanded by my supervisor. Despite my mental preparation for that meeting, I was really nervous and my heart was pounding. My supervisor explained that they assumed that I “had it under control,” and so they were “surprised and disappointed” that I wasn’t able to follow through with the deadline. I sat there and thought to myself, “I am only one person and there is only so much one person can handle at one time. I’m not superhuman.”

Black women are required to persevere through the pressures of society all while having few resources, thus creating more opportunities for Black women to be shamed. Black women use the Strong Black Woman narrative as a shield against negative

stereotypes and shaming. The narrative is used as a means of not being seen as inferior and a declaration of being capable but ultimately there are consequences to this form of protection.

Thus, the Strong Black Women image is not only deeply rooted in historically racist and sexist ideas of Black women, but is also based on unrealistic expectations that construct Black women as unshakeable, unbreakable and even physically strong (McMillan Cottom, 2019, p. 79). Because of this many Black women have “internalized self-reliance as central to their identities” (p.xx). Fleming’s (1983) early work, for instance, found that Black women at predominately white institutions “exhibited self-reliance and assertiveness, traits” which can be tied to the Strong Black Woman narrative.

Many believe that in order to be considered a “good” Black woman, you must also be strong, thus serving as the basis of their identity. The act of being self-sacrificial and independent aids in solidifying Black women’s identities. I heard this in Blossom:

There have been days where I didn’t want to come to work. But faith and knowing that you’re here for a higher purpose, and, you know, that, that’ll keep me going. I can’t think of it as just a job or position. I have to think of it as making, really making an impact, and touching people, and building those relationships and building those connections. Maybe it’s a student coming from an underserved school. They didn’t expect to see a Black person on a campus like this. You know, even if it’s just serving that purpose, I’m happy with that. I’m happy to serve a purpose instead of thinking of it as serving as institution.

(Blossom)

While this characteristic may be helpful for Black women, it creates some problems---the room for weakness and shame. The Strong Black Woman narrative suggests that Black women are able to handle “losses, traumas, failed relationships and the dual oppressions of racism and sexism” (Scott, 2017, p. 20). Not being able to live up these expectations is seen as a failure.

The complexity and contradiction of the Strong Black Woman image is also found in its association with respectability politics within the Black community. For example, Higginbotham (1993) writes of the communal politics that associates tropes of the Strong Black Woman with racial-uplift discourse. She observed that the goal of racial-uplifting discourse is to refute the dominant, racist narratives of Black women as being immoral, promiscuous, unclean, lazy and ill-mannered, as well as resisting the stereotypes of Mammy and Jezebel, often by way of assimilating to White ideals of dignity and poise. The challenge of such assimilation without ever being fully accepted contributes to the superwoman mythos. The Strong Black Woman image is essentially then a performative blueprint for Black women in the context of White idealism. It is the act of responding to and overcoming overwhelming challenges, and represents a “peculiarly unique and distinct position, particularly when presented against constructions of White femininity” (Corbin et al., 2018). The Strong Black woman narrative has become the never-ending performative act of Black womanhood and femininity.

The image of Strong Black Woman is tied to both historical and contemporary African American resilience, fortitude, creativity, agency and spirituality through the



cultural code “making a way out of no way.” Drawn in part from “a way of no way” found in Christian and Negro spirituality (Williams, 1993) and the innovation of African Americans to make “something out of nothing” while living in racist Jim Crow society, “making a way out of no way” has been called up by such institutions as the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture to capture the spirit of “perseverance, resourcefulness, and resilience required of African Americans not only to survive, but to thrive, in America (Smithsonian, para. 2). It can be argued, however, that the colloquialism as commonly used by many Black women today was popularized by Sweet Honey in the Rock’s (1981) anthem, “Oughta Be a Woman,” which Scott (2017) describes as capturing “the lived experiences of Black women” and reflecting social justice concerns and activism. Sweet Honey in the Rock sing:

Washin' the floors to send you to college,

Staying at home so you can feel safe.

What do you think is the soul of her knowledge?

What do you think that makes her feel safe?

Biting her lips and lowering her eyes

To make sure there's food on the table.

What do you think would be her surprise

If the world were as willing as she's able?

Hugging herself in an old kitchen chair

She listens to your hurt and your rage.

What do you think she knows of despair?

What is the aching of age?

The fathers, the children, the brothers

Turn to her.

And everybody white

[Turns to her]

What about her turning around alone

In the everyday light?

There oughta be a woman can break down,

Sit down, break down, sit down.

Let everybody else call it quits on a Monday,

Blues on Tuesday, sleep until Sunday down.

Sit down, break down, sit down.

*A way out of no way*

It's flesh out of flesh,

It's courage that cries out at night.

*A way out of no way*

It's flesh out of flesh,

It's bravery kept out of sight.

*A way out of no way*

It's too much to ask

It's too much of a task for any one woman

Since the release of the popular song, and numerous renditions, Black women have reclaimed the saying as a belief and as a means for navigating challenging experiences of the domestic and professional spheres to showcase their strength. However, in many

instances, there is nothing to make something out of, or there is no way; no matter how strong and hardworking a Black woman is, there is simply no solution. All people are subject to this possibility of not being able to follow through, but for a Black woman who takes on a superwoman persona, not being a superwoman and doing what she can do is considered to be a failure in one sphere and justification for continued inequality in another.

Ultimately, the Strong Black Women narrative can be a complicated cultural characteristic to unpack and deconstruct. The Black woman serves as a symbol of empowerment for men and women that look like her. Her spirit is unmatched. However, the continued pressure to be strong can be harmful and destroy her spirit. Walker-Barners (2009), note that strength is cultural decree for Black women. The meaning of strength has shifted to meaning emotional resilience amid suffering that goes unnoticed or is glorified. Asking for or seeking help is considered a sign of weakness and this feeling contributes to stress, anxiety, depression and loneliness. A study by Donovan & West (2015), that examined Strong Black womanhood, found that the adoption of this narrative increased the positive relationship between stress and depressive symptoms and that Black women should exercise caution when choosing to base their lives on the narrative.

Watson and Hunter (2015) further elaborate the point, “African American women may perceive professional psychological services to facilitate emotional expression, a consequence that is inconsistent with the expectation of strength, self-reliance, and self-silence” (p. 605). Even in the presence of pain and marginalization, Black women are given little room to express their emotions because displays of emotion are considered to be signs of weakness or inadequacy (Abrams, Maxwell, Pope, & Belgrave, 2014, p. 504).

The feelings associated with being a Strong Black Woman then are very real and all consuming. While Strong Black Women are desperately in need of support, they are placed on a pedestal to be admired for what they can “overcome” or “survive”. Though she is applauded for her strength to overcome struggle, sympathy is also directed at her for being so strong, and for having kept going no matter what. The legacy of strength hails the Black woman for surviving a multitude of challenges as she directs her energy to care for her family and community and often times her oppressors (Scott, 2017). I hear this in Janay, who at only 32 years old speaks with a knowledge of her situation, and an uncertainty of how to cope:

...Black women, we're so loyal as opposed to securing our own bag...I'm not going to sit here and lie like I never thought about leaving or had other opportunities potentially, but I was like, I have to navigate the best way I can right now. (Janay, student services)

The myth to be strong and the requirement to be strong, compels Black women to focus on others needs before their own, neglecting self-care, and focusing on “strength” as a coded charm that keeps her going despite feeling burnout or being neglected.

The continuous practice of this exhausting cycle is represented in everyday lived experiences, where even microaggressions require additional physical and emotional energy, and can diminish good physical and mental health. Black woman having to navigate college and university campuses that continue to marginalize and diminish them and their contributions on multiple levels, often requires more than self-gratification or simple self-care (a massage, indulging in food, etc.) in order to survive or persist.

### **Strong, Unseen, Unheard, Unfelt: Microaggression and Invisibility**

We just know people come and go on this campus. People of color come and go, before you know it. By the time you learn that they were here, they leave, and there's a lot of that. Or people just leave quietly in the steal of the night...I feel like Black women go unseen. We're swiftly moving in the background and people have no idea. None. (Daisha, 45 years old, at MAPU for 15 years)

Stories of being a Strong Black Woman in predominantly white workspaces often narrate confrontations with racism, but many others are characterized by unsupported challenge and the fatigue of coping with daily microaggression and invisibility. Corbin et al. (2018) write that the subtle, cumulative mini-assault of microaggression is the substance of today's racism. These mini-assaults are "racial slights, recurrent indignities and irritations, unfair treatments, stigmatization, hyper surveillance, low expectations, and personal threats or attacks on one's well-being" (Corbin et al, 2018, p. 5). Sue (2010) would later define microaggression as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (p.5). Haynes, Stewart and Allen (2016) define microaggression more succinctly, as "interactions people of color experience that communicate a disregard or even contempt for one's presence based on race-based bias, discrimination, and prejudice" (p. 383). In all cases, microaggression is characterized as the communication of dehumanizing messages to a person based on their positionality and being a part of a marginalized group (Corbin et al., 2018).

Holling (2018) writes that much of literature examining microaggression has focused on creating taxonomies for classifying communicative acts into different but interacting forms, noting invisibility as a form of racial and/or gender oppression (p.100). Her study concluded that three forms of microaggressions were found to be experienced by women of color at predominantly white institutions. The first form was environmental microaggression, and was related to invisibility experienced over the course of women's careers on various campuses, their professions and in the local community. But participants also experienced two forms of interpersonal microaggression. The first being experienced through professional invisibility, where they were treated as if they were invisible to their colleagues. Janay, who is 32 years old and has been employed at MAPU for 5 years, provided this experience of invisibility:

...it kinda made me feel like the contributions that were made were...went without any acknowledgement, right? Like it wasn't really worth all the work that was put into it...it kinda reminds me of how parents buy all these gifts for their kids and their kids believe in Santa and it's like, "*Uh, I bought all those gifts! Santa ain't do all that work!*" And that's kinda how I feel sometimes because it's like, "*No. I did that!*" You know? I remember some of those projects, the amount of time it took, how I had to sacrifice in other areas of my life because I was working on something else, you know? Um pulling time from here or there or having to stay really late at work or come in really early or whatever. It just kinda made me feel like, "*Dang! None of that time you spent really mattered,*" and so, shoot, sometimes it made me feel like I didn't matter. Like, "*Oh okay, you really didn't matter in that scenario.*"

Janay's storied experience also helps to illustrate the second form of interpersonal microaggression, leadership invisibility, where women are felt invisible as leaders. Holling (2018) found that women who held high-level positions hoped that their titles would reduce their experiences with invisibility microaggressions, but even participants who were in senior-level academic and staff positions felt as if their status was dismissed or invisible to others.

Holling (2018) also found that leadership invisibility was manifested when colleagues and supervisors failed to see women of color as potential leaders. Bethany has been at MAPU for only 2 years, and yet she speaks with exhaustion over her dismissal as a potential leader:

I just think about a meeting that I was in and, I don't know what it was...racism...sexism...it was just, whatever. But it was a meeting with a committee, and a higher up was questioning me. Like, the whole committee is pretty much based off of my work, but they were just questioning me about what I'm doing in my programs. And normally I feel like sometimes I get this imposter syndrome, like I'm new here, I'm doing this job and I don't know if I'm doing it right or whatever. But in that moment of this person questioning me, I was like, *"How dare you?"* Like, *"I know what I'm doing. I got paid to do this. I'm doing a really good job at it, so don't. And you might think because I'm Black or whatever, I don't know what I'm doing?"* ...The lack of advocacy when there are employer, employee issues that you know have an undertone of like some racial discrepancies, but it's not, it's not overt. So you really can't call it out and it is not

enough for you to file a grievance against it but to not be able to have anyone's voice that can advocate on your behalf, that's been hard.

While a number of [White] feminist scholars have written on how to navigate acts of dismissal in leadership situations, the experience for Black women is often altogether different. When I think back to that experience in my graduate seminar, it wasn't simply that the work of Collins (1990) was being dismissed as unimportant; my opportunity to share my experience was also dismissed, rendered unimportant and made invisible to my white peers and the class curriculum. I found myself in a room without an ally, and the strain to maintain my anger and composure was exhausting. And yet, I know that I'm not alone in this Black experience .

Realistically, there are days where I may not see another woman of color all day.

Realistically, there are days where I don't see another person of color all day. And it's so difficult in that way, in that community. It's hard to or difficult to find, and it's hard to be surrounded by it. It's just hard to submerge in a community of people that doesn't look like me, you know. It just is. (Blossom)

Invisibility is itself then is a layered affect experience marked by a number of feelings toward internal and external sources. One way that invisibility has been conceptualized is through the Invisibility Syndrome Paradigm (ISP) developed by Anderson Franklin and Nancy Boyd-Franklin. Their modelling of ISP emerged from research seeking to categorize microaggressions experienced by African American men over time (Haynes et al., 2016). ISP is comprised of seven components as a result of confronting such interactions over time: (a) one feels a lack of recognition or acknowledgment; (b) one feels there is no satisfaction or gratification from the encounter;



(c) one feels self-doubt about her or his legitimacy; (d) one feels no validation from the experience; (e) one feels disrespected; (f) one's sense of dignity is compromised and challenged; and (g) one's basic identity is shaken, if not uprooted (Haynes et al., 2016).

Key components to Franklin & Franklin's modeling of ISP is the role society contributes the development of Black identity, a Black individual's personal choice to be visible, and society's comfort with that visibility (Haynes et al., 2016). When Black people perceive their treatment by White people as racially motivated, such as based on stereotypes of Blackness, then feelings of invisibility can intensify (Haynes, Stewart & Allen, 2016). For Black women and girls, invisibility stems from being reduced, in a master narrative that situates White femininity as the more desirable narrative thus placing Black women low the race and gender hierarchy (Haynes et al., 2016).

Wyatt (1999) looked at the effects of invisibility on Black women. Their study found that the prolonged effects of invisibility can result in Black women attempting to avoid operating in racialized lenses, or not see race. Described as risky behavior, Black women may institute boundaries to keep the cultural, psychological, and physical representations of Blackness out to cope with racial stress (Wyatt, 1999). Black women are forced to deal with racism and sexism that allows white men, white women and even Black men to not acknowledge the work and the existence of Black women (Hayes, Stewart & Allen, 2016).

The lack of acknowledgment of Black women creates isolation and loneliness that, as Strong Black Women, they are expected to carry on and press forward with. Failure to recognize Black women is further addressed in a study conducted by Sesko and Biernat (2010). Their two studies addressed whether Black women go unnoticed and

unheard by examining memory for Black women's faces and speech contributions. The first study determined that White participants were least likely to correctly recognize Black women in comparison to the other groups. They were rarely able to distinguish a Black woman they had seen before from a Black woman that they had not seen before (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). The second study determined that Black women's contributions were confused with those of other Black women, and of every other group. Ultimately, the study determined that Black women were seen as relatively interchangeable and their contributions were misattributed to others and others' comments misattributed to them (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Black female scholars have written about the invisibility that Black women experience for years but having empirical data further supports the writings and experiences of these Black scholars.

The sense of invisibility can in turn lead to serious psychological issues and stress. The consequences of psychological stress, resulting from racial discrimination, may contribute to racial health disparities in conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and other age-associated diseases.

I'll be really honest and transparent, and not many people know this, but...I'm on leave and it is because I went to the doctor last week for something completely unrelated, and my blood pressure was through the roof to the point that she sent me to the E.R. Went from the office, went to the E.R. She said, "I'm writing you out of work, and a lot of that [high blood pressure] has to do with work." And she looked me in the face and she said, "You need to find a new job because this job is gonna kill you." (Daisha)

Szanton (2011) found the psychological stress of racial discrimination to be one of the factors that explains racial health disparities for conditions such as high blood pressure, obesity and cardiovascular problems. Donovan & West (2015) identified an increase of stress and depressive symptoms by individuals who adopted a self-narrative of being a Strong Black Woman. These continued stress and psychological issues can have an effect on life expectancy, as Madock-Gatison (2015) noted that for Black women “life expectancy is not only about how long we are expected to live, but is an indicator of how we are meeting the enormous challenges of society, as compared to other women” (p.xiv).

Invisibility and other forms of microaggression compel Black women to try and determine what trigger the aggressive act, what it was motivated by (race, gender, or both) and how they are to react. Husband (2016) explored the impact of student affairs professionals’ working constant physiological, cultural, and emotional coping with racial microaggressions in less-than-ideal, racially hostile or unsupportive environments. Coining the term racial battle fatigue, Husband writes that “the constant use or redirection of energy for coping with mundane racism depletes psychological and physiological resources needed in other important, creative, and productive areas in your life” (p.95) Corbin et al. (2018) contend that racial battle fatigue is experienced at both individual and group levels simply by being a part of a racially oppressed group. More critically, they contend that the experience is “oftentimes communicable, as pain is shared among family, friends, and the larger racial group” (p.5); and, thus, racial battle fatigue has the

“potential to be spread across generations through collective group memories, racial socialization, and coping processes” (p. 5).

As a communication construct then, the experience of racial battle fatigue may compound the strain and challenges experienced by students and professionals charged with wearing the armor of the Strong Black Woman, or who look to that image for coping with their situation at home, work, and in the community. Janay’s reflection on the unspoken reality of “work-life” balance for Black women in university settings offers a summation of that experience:

I experience fatigue. Literal fatigue because the work, the work I feel like never ends. But there also can be, like, this battle fatigue, cause you’re, cause you know, you’re at a, this predominantly white institution. So you’ve got this over here, and then also you’ve got everything playing on the media everyday about what’s happening in our community, and then you have to go to work not only at a PWI but also be in a department that deals with this type of work. And so you’re like, “Woah, when do I as the individual ...get to rest,” right? Like when do I get the opportunity to separate like life from work, cause sometimes it’s like, it kinda all blends, ‘cause it’s like, I’m a Black woman in America having to see you know on the news. Sandra Bland, um...You know? Mike Brown...All these people, right? Um, and not even just that but everything else that’s going on. And so it can get very tiresome. Then, you know, especially like, for example with the Trump election, our office was kinda like a mourning room pretty much. Like, students just piled in there and we’re just trying to help students try and process what’s happening. We’re trying to process students who feel like their parents are

going to be deported, their families are, you know, gonna be separated. Like major, major things. Um, and so, you know, as a person you're trying to process everything that's happening in your world, but then you also have to bring that to be able to do the work that we do, which again, is people work. So, um, yeah. So that can be challenging. The fatigue of it all.

Collectively, these routine experiences and coping responses featured in Black women's storying of their social and professional experiences at the PWI also point to the urgency of communication and advocacy research that inquires how Black women choose to discuss these issues, how Black women navigate their environments because of these issues, and ultimately how Black women are able to endure these experiences in ways that are healthy and transformative of the PWI culture. In order to explore these matters further, I returned to the interviews to explore particular communication structures that seem to characterize these storied experiences.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Storying the Lived Experience

Stories are narratives that people use to share about their experiences, memories or aspects of their biographies (Vannini, 2009, p.934). Stories can be communicated orally or can be written. Stories can be shared to self, others or to those doing research. Vannini (2009) describes the functions of stories as instruments human “use to create meaning in their own lives. Stories and storytelling are communication tools used to organize and interpret collective and individual phenomena as well as to make sense of personal and shared experiences and to experience dialogue” (p. 934).

Storytelling is performative in that it is used to understand ourselves and others. It can also be used as a means of connecting various individual stories together to generate larger collective narrative amongst a group who have a similar or common background. In the case of this research, the commonality being Black womanhood. Stories place a spotlight on realities and identities and allow people to make sense of self and their positionality. I chose to share my own personal story in the introduction of this thesis in order to showcase collective experience and positionality. It is also one of the reasons I chose to share excerpts of stories shared throughout this thesis.

Several stories of experienced racism and sexism on the university campus tended to cohere around narrative dimensions of relational identities and time. In this section, I illustrate and interpret these as telling stories of SHEros and villains, and telling stories of passing time. I then outline and illustrate what I heard to be stories of persistence that might be explored as a sense-making act for responding to and perhaps even challenging

limiting images of the Strong Black Woman and dominating cultural narratives of survival.

### **Relational Identities in Time**

#### **Telling Stories of SHERos vs. Villains**

In the telling of narratives and shared experiences, there was often the “villain” and the “hero”. Villains can be literal harmful people or oppressive forces that one has to overcome. Heroes help victims, which can be themselves, to overcome villains either through their direct response or through leadership. Across accounts presented in the interviews, a collective narrative of Black women in higher education is that of SHERo vs. Villain. This can be heard in excerpted accounts told by Jasmine:

In the first department meeting...it was clear I was there to be discriminated against. When one of my so-called colleagues came into the room reeking with tobacco smoke and bourbon...He went to the back row behind me and said, once he sat down, “To those coming into the meeting,” *[pause]* Now I’m the only Black person in the room. *[continuing]* “Come on back here to the Jim Crow section.”...So I sat there with my mouth open. And then he said, after most people were in the room, as though that didn’t rattle me enough...he said, “Come on back here with us niggers.”...So I sat there and realized that I could not listen to anything that was going on. I had to calculate what I was going to do once that meeting was over...As soon as the meeting was adjourned...I stood up and told him, I said, “If I ever hear anything like that from you again, you’re not only going to need a lawyer, you’re going to need a doctor. And I mean it, from the bottom of my East side Baltimore heart...I decided that I wasn’t going to grieve

it, so that the whole time I would be in judicial meetings and all that. I decided, “I’ll take care of this. I’ll take care of this myself.”

In this story, Jasmine rises to the situation as her own SHEro against the obvious villainy of a vile and boozing patent racist. While Jasmine refuses to ever be set as a victim in this encounter, she does recognize the effort of the Villain to victimize her through degrading comments intended to “rattle” her. But other characters in this story include bystanders (i.e., individuals caught in the drama), witnesses (i.e., individuals willing to provide testimony in support or against the SHEros account), and colluders (i.e., individuals who silently condone, if not outright assist the villainy perpetuated against the SHEro).

In their individual and collective storytelling, participants also told of SHEroes who are forced to fight an invisible battle every day with a villain that cannot be defeated. Black women are not fighting an individual but rather an ideology, that Black women who are in the system and of the system are and forever will be less than. This sentiment was expressed by Blossom:

And like, we’re fighting against systematic things; we’re fighting against stereotypes and stigmas. Then we’re fighting a lot of different things and the challenges that surface as a result of that.

Invisibility in Blossom’s account takes at least three forms: the unseen everyday fight by Black women against the relentless and oppressing villainy of racist and sexist acts; Black women’s very visible fight against oppressing racist and sexist systems that are felt everywhere, but cannot be directly proven to exist; and the deep and unseen toll that Black women experience physically, mentally, and emotionally from such encounters. These points were illustrated in an account told by Janay:



We have to pick and choose when we take on the battle, or when we take on the burden of work, or even sometimes I feel like black women go unseen. We're swiftly moving in the background and people have no idea. None.

When Janay speaks of "swiftly moving in the background," I hear her to be saying the embodiment of the SHEro is different from that of the superhuman, Strong Black Woman, at times choosing to be invisible. That is, she is strategic and intentional about how she chooses to fight the villain. Moreover, the SHEro is aware that she is fighting a battle and is in tune with the complexity of her emotions. Rather than hide behind the mythical strength of the Strong Black woman, the SHEro weaves together pieces of herself in attempt to press on and engage in the battle, *on her terms*.

As discussed in an early chapter, Black woman are often not given the opportunity nor are spaces created that allow for genuine, authentic expression of the Black female experience to be seen, especially in an institutionalized setting. This might raise the question: What was it about the environment that allowed for such transparency and storytelling in my research? What was it that empowered these SHEros to share their fight in the light of day, instead of hiding their battles and battle wounds like the superhuman Strong Black Woman? I believe that it was participants' willingness to freely share their stories and experiences which worked to create the empowering environment in and of itself, ultimately fulfilling one of the purposes for using interview groups.

In a sense, the interview groups were therapeutic. Participants communicated they were able to express how they really felt, as if the interview setting allowed them to release suppressed emotions they could not share with family, friends or peers. There was shared emphasis of not sharing with peers due to the fact that many were working with

people who looked nothing like them, therefore that lived daily experience could not be relatable. And even if their peers could possibly communicate empathy, that alone is sometimes simply not enough for Black women who are trying to process their traumatic experiences. What was needed was a shared vulnerability, bodily experienced and free from judgement against ideal images or role obligations.

But in another sense, the group interviews also served as a means of raising consciousness. Sowards & Renegar (2004) write that in early practices of consciousness raising, women would meet in small groups to share their experiences through personal testimony in order to relate to one another and generalize experiences. Consciousness raising today “is typically thought of as a rhetorical strategy that enables women to share their personal experiences of gender discrimination in conversations and meetings designed specifically for these purposes” (p. 535). This typically serves as a means of uniting women by empowering them to understand that their individual experiences are not isolated events, nor are they to blame themselves for their oppressing situation (Sowards & Renegar, 2004).

It was this spirit among Black women that motivated participants in my interview groups, such as Janay, to reflect on how the battles in stories of SHEroes and Villains aren’t necessarily about issues of the immediate context.

[S]ometimes you feel like you have to fight your way through in order to get your voice heard and for people to take you seriously.

And while it’s worth noting that consciousness raising associated with the second wave of feminism, did not welcome or seek to create space for Black women to participate, I

nonetheless see how consciousness raising as rhetorical strategy is applicable to the stories presented in this thesis.

The ability for the participants to be able to share their experiences of racism, sexism and microaggressions, then served as a means of uniting the Black women and helping them to understand the invisible battle that they face is a collective struggle. The participants ultimately decided the how and in what way the collective speaking voice came into existence, thus creating a collective consensus around the issue.

### **Passing Time**

Time is an important device to use to frame the narratives of the Black women on the campus of MAPU. Time has a transformative impact on the environment (i.e., the university campus) and thus determines how the campus allows the women navigate. Time determines what the experiences of women are during their time at the university and contributes to how the women make sense of themselves and being Black and woman. This is illustrated in Jasmine's account of herself in past and present day:

Well, my typical day now is pretty much a joy. I mean I have arrived at the time in my life where I have come towards the end of my career as a teacher period. Not just at MAPU. I have been working in the academic world since 1971. So that's a long time to be working in academe and I have been working in the academic world teaching classes and also directing programs since then. When I came to [MAPU] in 1985 I was certainly not welcomed, So, it was a difficult time, very difficult time. They did not want a Black woman in the department and now these revelations about what was going on into 1985 with people still wearing Black face and thinking it's funny...you can sort of see the environment

that I entered into. I've made my environment conducive to what I can deal with. It has been a very wonderful experience for the most part. Certainly there have been ripples of concern that I've had but because I've been in charge of my environment, it has been a good experience. Over the last 30 years, MAPU has become a much more welcoming place and I think that I've had a lot to do with that because I not only made it so I could be here in a comfortable way and encouraged an environment that I can live in but I've also helped to encourage other Black women and Black men and people of color to stay here. Being on the campus of MAPU, it is more of a welcoming environment. I'm thankful for that. We are now at a place where we want to be champions for diversity and so it works sometimes to the benefit of the underserved population because it seems like for a moment in time we are put at the forefront. It seems that way.

What I hear Jasmine to be saying is that time—the literal passing of years spent on the campus—aided her in establishing agency at MAPU. Years of service and years of duration could be drawn as a resource for transforming the environment (i.e., the climate and population on the university campus). More importantly, reflecting on those years of service was necessary for seeing herself as a SHEro, a champion put at the forefront in the battle for diversity and the needs of underserved populations.

Some stories by participants who had worked on campus for long periods of time seemed to (10+years) evoke a feeling of their “cycle”/ time on campus being worthwhile. Their stories also seemed to evoke a feeling of wholeness despite the challenges. They did not simply survive but rather persisted through the transformation of campus culture

and climate. Having been able to persist through bouts of racism and microaggression's thus contributes to strength that Black women are supposed to embody.

Westerhof, Bohlmeijer & McAdams (2017) explain how ego integrity coupled with time impacts experience. Ego integrity refers to an "acceptance of [one's] one and only life cycle as something that had to be" and as a "sense of coherence and wholeness" (p. 400). However, this cycle can bring about various reasons for experiencing despair, because of the difficulty in integrating past, present and future experiences into wholeness (p. 400). Ego integrity is typically associated with a model of life-span development and for exploring late life, but this theory could be applicable to the close of one's career, as they prepare to leave an institution. In her story, I hear Jasmine attempting to make sense of her initial racist experiences on campus and her current state of agency and self-empowerment, and how they contribute to the culmination of her "cycle", and self.

Furthermore, a focus on time creates a timeline of resilience and adaptability. This timeline determines how women story their persistence on campus based on their status or position. Where one finds themselves along that timeline is important for marking one's identity, such as that of a "veteran" or a "newcomer" on campus. Likewise, uncertainty about that timeline leads one to not only question their place in the university, but their place in the timeline. We can hear that uncertainty by Blossom:

"I've just started and so you know sometimes I wonder if there is another setting in which my gifts and talents could be used towards another purpose. You know like I appreciate the journey that I'm on right now and if I do stick to it then I'll put my best foot forward but knowing that I'm just starting out and sometimes I

do think about you know well maybe this isn't the space. Especially knowing that it's just not here but other institutions too. (Blossom)

The uncertainty of identity, of one's place on the timeline, may also lead to uncertainty about how one is supposed to feel about their situation. This can be heard in Janay's reflection:

"...but I think sometimes the longer you're here you get a little more jaded and you could be and then you could not..."

The concepts of time and position/status shared in these excerpts situates time as days, weeks, months and years. While time is the context itself, time can also be understood as number of "times" or instances of racism, sexism and microaggressions. The number of instances situated in one's timeline can serve as a means of establishing position as the "wise veteran" who has learned the complexities of the university and how to navigate or the "newcomer" who is learning the complex web of the university.

### **Storytelling as Resistance**

If storytelling is conceived as the sharing of a personal experience, then narrative framing might be considered as a projecting of the cultural experience. This is because narrative frames are culturally produced, disseminated and valued, if not honored.

Master narratives project frames that support a hegemonic structure and typically promote social cohesion. "The American Dream" is an example of a master narrative that projects a story frame for promoting "prosperity, which is supposedly accessible to every citizen through hard work and determination" (Haynes et al., 2016, p. 381). The American Dream encompasses an ideology rooted in the ideas of liberty, opportunity, and

equality. As a master narrative, the American Dream is not just relevant just within the U.S but there is a global understanding that America is the land of opportunity.

Master narratives “perpetuate cultural and identity politics that behave as pedagogical sites on which identities are formed, subject positions are assigned, and social agency are constructed” (Haynes et al., 2016, p. 381). Master narratives are in turn “produced, transmitted, and consumed, sometimes unconsciously, at the institutional, cultural and social level for political and educational purposes” (p.382).

A culturally dominant narrative might be considered a storytelling framework that is both pervasive and persistent within communities and among groups. The rags-to-riches success story of Horatio Algers might be an example of a culturally dominant narrative that illustrates the American Dream as something that can be personally realized. Where the master narrative of the American Dream is abstract and intangible, the features of a culturally dominant narrative allow both speakers and hearers to come to some real sense of the idealized outcome; speakers and audiences are moved toward some direct experience with the values being promoted.

The survivor narrative might be another example of a dominant cultural narrative. The framework works to lead the audience to follow a plotline where “a survivor must not only survive the crisis but also come to terms with the consequences of having survived” (Duncan, 2008) and that surviving allows the survivor to situate their identity by telling and reliving the traumatic experience (Duncan, 2008). We see survivor narratives in stories like *The Life of Pi*, where the protagonist in the story survives a treacherous journey at sea, encountering unimaginable challenges. The protagonist develops an improved sense of self and understanding of the world, in the retelling of

their time at sea. The survivor narrative also marks an individual's evolution from victim to survivor. Through evolution, the survivor seeks to restore an ordered sense of self.

There is some evidence of elements the survivor narrative having been successfully used by Black students and faculty members to move from storying a victimizing experience on white campuses. For example Rice Jordan (2003) describes her survival after working years of isolation at a PWI. She describes her journey as moving through three developmental stages as Token, Pioneer, and Crusader. Rice Jordan notes:

...throughout each of them I learned survival skills and engaged in behaviors which clearly communicated to my White colleagues that I fervently object to their absolute lack of interest in or concern about diversity...After having passed through the stages of a Token and a Pioneer, I am now in a stage where I define myself to be a Crusader. A Crusader needs a mission, and mine is to change the complexion of not only the school in which I work, but also the entire university.

Rice Jordan presents her journey as filled with perils and her actions her responses as risking of tenure. But through self-reflection she comes to terms with her choices and how they contributed to her current status as a Crusader, one who has lived to retell of her story and journey.

While applied to identity stories of overcoming unsurmountable odds and challenge, such as surviving wartime violence in 1990s Bosnia (Basic, 2016), or as a means of understanding the influence of gender when processing abuse-related traumatic events (Krause, DeRosa & Roth, 2002), a survivor narrative may be ill-fitting to the experiences of Black women in higher education. Survival or surviving suggests that there is a conclusion to the traumatic experience. For Black women in higher education at



predominately white institutions there is no end to their experiences of racism, sexism and microaggressions unless they leave the institution, however due to the racist and sexist foundation of society those experiences are not erased but rather manifest themselves in other ways and other areas.

### **Storying Persistence**

In contrast to survival, elements of persistence can be heard in the storied experiences of Black women I interviewed, as well as in the published literature that characterizes the image of the Strong Black Woman as complex. By moving through the stories, published literature, and even my own writing in this thesis, a simple table of differences between stories of persistence can be contrasted with narratives of survival.

Table 1: Contrasting Stories of Persistence and Survival Narratives

<b>Persistence</b>	<b>Survival</b>
Strong Black Woman as SHEro	Strong Black Woman as Superhuman
Fragmented self	Whole and evolved self
Time experienced as or defined in terms of continuous/continuity	Time experienced as or defined in terms of moments/momentary
Complex in human emotion	Stoic and emotionless
Collective front	Solitary fighter
Ongoing battles (over time)	Single instance/traumatic even
Systemic villain (ideology)	Interpersonal villain
Creating and resisting	Coping
Attends to self and collective	Attends to others
Challenges the invisibility of work, accomplishments and humanity	Can inadvertently sustain invisibility of emotional and organizational labor

The contrast between storied persistence and survival is illustrated in making sense of accounts, such as that told by Jasmine:

I would never let a person run me away from something I love, so you know I'm not leaving until I want to. I know that I'm supposed to be here as a teacher. I know that I'm a leader. I know that I was destined to do the work that I'm doing. I also didn't realize this but that path to the [delete] program put me in a position so I could do this work that I'm doing now. I love the work that I was doing with the [delete] program. It was like my baby that I handed over. I have made a real difference in the whole [stated area of national prominence]. I love it. I enjoy the students and know I was brought here not only for the Black students and the brown students but the white students as well.

Stories of persistence seem to be marked by psychological continuity which can contribute to the creation of self or understanding of self. Persistence can be used to make sense of attitudes and practices of self and others (Henderson, 2013, p.14). When applied to Black women's lived experiences, a story of persistence enforces a reading where, in spite of their experienced racism, sexism and microaggressions, Black women are presented as continuously pressing forward and pushing through with their lives.

Whereas a survivor narrative is structured as the evolution of a reconstituted and "whole" sense of self, storied persistence presents a self that is fragmented, composed of many pieces together like broken china, that can endure until the next break. The fragmented nature of that self is one that allows the teller to cull aspects of Black womanhood "as needed in the moment," to make a way of no way, so as to push on and push through. In such stories of persistence, Black womanhood draws from dynamic

tensions that create the intersectional experience, employing the synergy of *that* totality to move forward. The power and healing abilities of the Strong Black Woman as SHEro are thus made evident in stories of persistence, whereas the stressors, invisibility, isolating experience of the Strong Black Woman as superhuman are emphasized in survivor narratives.

Persistence also suggests that one does not simply survive the situation, challenge, or hardship and it is simply over, never to be experienced or explored again. Instead, storied persistence describes an ongoing battle internally and externally. The internal battle of upholding the Strong Black Woman narrative while managing the external battles of racism, sexism and microaggressions does not simply end because one navigated through one instance or situation.

Employing a survivor narrative situates Jasmine as a character in her story that is coping and sustaining through the scope of the Strong Black woman. It does not allow her to take ownership of her work nor does it allow her to be in tune with the complex emotions of doing work she enjoys while having to process the constant stressors. The survivor narrative is limiting in that it does not account for the depth and complexity of understanding self.

In contrast, a story of persistence allows us to hear Jasmine's own understanding of her authority and position as a teacher and leader to challenge the invisibility of emotional and organizational labor. She challenges the invisibility of her work and contributions to the university, while actively creating spaces that lead to individual and collective empowerment.

In short, Jasmine's storied persistence continuously navigates the uncomfortable, stressful and tiring experiences day in and day out, in order to prove oneself worthy of taking up space. Just as navigating racism, sexism and microaggressions are not isolated to instances, stories of persistence are not bound by time or a timeframe. They serve as blueprints, maps or guides for Black women to navigate the white dominated institutions and structures that their lives are entwined in. Exploring a story of persistence as a formal theoretical framework then has potential as a means of further analyzing stories of Black women's lived experiences.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Reflection

You know it isn't just an issue for us. We hear echoes of this nationally. (Blossom)

The Strong Black Woman Collective (SBWC) framework was developed by Shardé Davis (2015) to promote the idea that “Black women construct strength through communal communication practices by imbuing their assembled voices with might and fortitude” (p. 20). As noted in previous chapters, research has tied the strength that Black women experience in their daily lives to various social and systematic structures, however the SBWC framework examines how Black women construct strength through communal communication practices (Davis, 2015). Davis notes that the reframing of the strength of Black women, allows for a resistance against oppressive forces and serves as a means of celebrating a communicative style and identity that is unique to Black women for telling their own story.

SBWC framework relies on standpoint theory (Collins, 1990) to focus on the positionality of Black women (that of being Black and being a woman) and how this positionality structures the way in which they communicate and form a collective. Davis (2015) outlines the framework as functioning on four propositions:

- (1) Black women communicate strength through the use of distinct communication practices (i.e., code switching, assertive and direct verbal messages, and culturally nuanced speech codes); (2) the assemblage of Black women communicating strength composes the SBWC; (3) members of the SBWC participate in the collective by reinforcing one another's virtues of strength; and

(4) communication patterns of strength enable the SBWC to confront and retreat from oppressive structures outside” (p. 21).

By communicating their shared position, Black women are empowered to generate communal space as a means for collective communication.

When of thinking of communal spaces where a strong Black woman narrative is shared, I immediately thought of beauty shops and churches. Growing up, the beauty shop and church were the few spaces where Black could congregate and speak freely about their daily lived experiences. From the simple exchange of recipes and household hacks, to the hardships and experiences of racism and sexism, Black women are indeed a collective. Jasmine similarly reflected in those communal spaces where she has experience herself as collective:

There are many women out there that you can find sisterhood with...I have a collection of writers, a group of women that I put together...because I knew [others] did go through some of that same stuff...so there's circles and circles of women who support me and I support them.

When I initially sat down with the Black women to conduct interviews, I was not fully aware of the impact it would have or what was being created. Through the use of group and individual interviews, we were able to create a space for Black women to talk and share their common experiences. Our communal space allowed us to freely share our consciousness raising of Black womanhood. We did not need to code switch, and felt free to use everyday colloquialisms. We became less rigid and moved comfortably through our communication, and it seemed as if we basked in our Blackness and womanhood. It dawned on me that no matter where Black women congregate to share, consciousness is

always being raised. Black womanhood is being established and affirmed. In doing the interviews, we affirmed the “strength” of the collective and, most importantly, ourselves.

It was then that I realized the promise of the SBWC framework for realizing the reflexivity of my research process. It was empowering just to sit with women who look like me and know that I was not alone in my experiences. Janay also talked of the experience of strength in a collective:

Your network is really a sense of value to the work that you do but also sometimes for affirmation or just people you can talk to.

Listening to the experiences of the collective validated all the emotions that I felt during my graduate experience and in the experiences shared throughout this thesis. I had become a part of the core network of strong Black woman and the Black womanhood that was being shared and established through the communal voice. As they shared and I listened it dawned on me that we were all sisters in the battle, we were all SHERos fighting the villain that is institutional racism. As much as it was therapeutic for them, it was therapeutic for me.

When deciding to embark on this research journey, I knew that the topic was important. I knew that it was essential for me to shed light on the experiences of Black women who chose to be a part of a system that eliminates them or deems them unworthy of representation. What I did not realize was that in exploring and analyzing the experiences of Black women in higher education, I would in turn be coming to terms with my own experiences and positionality as a Black woman who was of the system and also benefiting from the system.

Through the conducting of this research, it can be said that regardless of title (director, assistant director, graduate student, etc.) all Black women in higher education are forced to navigate the realms of their identity through the frame of the Strong Black woman. The exploration of the experiences of Black women at PWI, serves to reveal an aspect of reality that is often overlooked or misunderstood. It was my goal to generate research that would be thought provoking, produce transformation, as well as attempt to convey the emotions experienced by these women. I chose to challenge the narrative of the strong Black woman as being a positive foundation for Black womanhood and rather argued of its detrimental effects on Black women' health and the understanding of self.

This thesis illuminates important elements for the communication field as well as the exploration of the voices and narratives of Black women. Additionally, this research highlights the power in story sharing, developing a collective narrative, and sense making through stories of persistence. The strength and the use of persistence storytelling serves to challenge the master narrative, survivor narrative. I argue that the experiences of Black women in higher education, do not make them survivors but rather persisters.

The adoption of a survivor narrative suggests that the various experiences of Black women at predominately white institutions, are lived in a single moment. A moment frozen in time that they must endure and afterwards the battle or struggle is over. This narrative erases or ignores the fact that these experiences are not isolated and in fact are the cumulation of a lifetimes experience, but for the case of this research the culmination of the experience working at a predominately and history white institution.

Stories of persistence challenge survivor narratives, and rather states that Black women, rely on the Strong Black Woman narrative/model in order to push through or



endure their time on campus. Furthermore, storied persistence presents that there is an ongoing invisible battle for Black women and the villain, is not the racist, sexist or ignorant people they work with but rather, the villain is the system, oppressive structures and ideologies that are imbedded into institutions. Places of higher learning are not excluded from being impacted by these ideologies. They simply trickle down and feed, and thrive off their environment. Predominately and historically white institutions are the perfect breeding environments for these ideologies, considering that they were never intended to be places to serve people of color, whether student, faculty or staff. They certainly were not meant to serve Black women. Institutions' history of excluding Black women is not a thing of the past but serves as their underlying legacy. So what does this mean for Black women in higher education? It means that they will have to continue to persist and use their positions to challenge this legacy and structures of oppression, while maintaining the collective narrative and voice of Black womanhood.

### **Reflections on the Trustworthiness of My Qualitative Research**

By adopting a phronetic iterative approach to my qualitative research process, I cycled between existing theory and guiding research questions on the one side, and the emergent qualitative data of my interviews on the other, with my own lived experience in between. I wish I could say it was a smooth writing process, but at times I found my writing to be more of a messy text (Tracy, 2020, p. 311) of stories just waiting for me to add to. And then there were all the number of times I played with just the order of my chapters. Still, I think I can reflect on the quality of my research and writing process as trustworthy and transformative.

Tracy (2013) outlines eight criteria, or end goals, for students and scholars to adopt when working through their qualitative research project or when evaluating the work of others. These goals are: pursuing a topic that is timely, relevant, significant, and interesting; demonstrating a rigorous process of thoughtfully moving through theory, data, and interpretation; demonstrating sincerity and self-reflection; creating credibility for your interpretation of data; writing so as to achieve resonance with the reading audience; articulating the significance of contribution being made by the work; following standards of ethics for working with participants; and demonstrating meaningful coherence across all phases of the iterative process (p. 230).

Worthiness of a topic is demonstrated by the timeliness, relevance and significance of its question. Worthiness is also established when a topic highlights an “area of life that has been overlooked, misunderstood or mistaken or because they provoke transformation or elicit emotion in the reader” (p.231). This thesis was an exploration of the lived experiences of Black women and their strategies for communicating place and worth, with a particular focus on exploring experiences of being Black women in higher education. This topic addresses the voices that are often silenced or misunderstood by the duality of being Black and woman. However, rather focusing on experiences alone, I sought to shift the discussion to consider the communicative practices adopted during these experiences. The timeliness of exploring this topic may be one that directs institutional attention to how inclusion for Black women is cultivated on campuses. Institutions tend to cultivate spaces for diversity (racial diversity) that often amounts to tokenism of people of color. Institutions rather need to focus on the creation of authentic community, space and voice.

Rigor refers to the “care and effort taken to ensure that the research is carried out in an appropriate manner. Rigor asks whether the researchers have applied due diligence and done their homework” (Tracy, 2013, p.231). Rigorous practices include “collecting enough data to support significant findings, spending enough time in the field to gain trust, identifying theoretical goals that are well aligned with your sample or context, practicing appropriate procedures in terms of writing fieldnotes, conducting interviews and analyzing data” (p.231).

In Chapter 1, I addressed two major hurdles experienced when trying to conduct this research. I adapted the methods of analysis to focus on a larger narrative scheme, which placed emphasis on storytelling. Having effectively and reflexively moved through the published research literature, data, and narrative inquiry, a good follow up would be for me to return the published literature on the narrative structures of survivorship and “persistentship” that may have been authored by Black and African scholars. Doing so might help future scholars to better understand and hear how these narrative structure are connected to cultural forms of storytelling.

Resonance is a feature of the text that “meaningfully reverberates and impacts an audience” (p.238). This can be accomplished through transferability, naturalistic generalization or aesthetic merit. Transferability occurs when readers believe that the research findings correspond to something in their own world (p.238). Readers who identify as Black women or Black women in higher education may connect to the findings of this research. The themes found throughout the literature are reflective of the experiences of Black women at various institutions across the country, therefore it is possible for there to be a correspondence to their lived experience. However, for readers

who do not identify as such, the level of transferability will be low. Empathy can be generated but the literature and findings are not reflective of daily lived experience. All readers are able to develop a naturalistic generalization. A naturalistic generalization means that readers are able to “appreciate a study’s findings and intuitively apply them to their own situations” (p.239). In the case of this study readers can potentially feel and understand how the struggles of Black women in higher education at PWIs can be detrimental to the sense of self. Lastly, aesthetic merit is the act of making research “imaginative, artful, beautifully written and capable of emotionally affecting the reader” (p. 239). The use of personal narrative and storytelling throughout this thesis was a means of attempting to capture the emotional stress associated with instances of racism, sexism, microaggressions and the need to be a strong Black woman that is experienced by the participants of this study and myself.

Lastly, a qualitative study should be meaningfully coherent. In order for a study to be meaningfully coherent it should “achieve their stated purpose, accomplish what they espouse to be about, use methods and representation practices that partner well with espoused theories and paradigms and attentively interconnect literature reviewed with research foci, methods, and findings” (p.245). The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of Black women in higher education and how these experiences contribute to their sense of self. Through the use of literature, personal narrative and data analysis I was able to capture these experiences and instances of sense making.

### **Take-Aways and Gifts**

Through the use of phronetic iterative approach outlined by Tracy (2020) I answer my initial research question that was focused on the common features found in the stories of Black women at PWIs. This thesis explored the experiences of Black women at PWIs and how they communicated these experiences and their sense of self through various frames and structures. Additionally, this thesis determined how women understood their situation and made sense of their relation with others. This in turn helped to inform my selection of the major themes (Strong Black woman, microaggressions and invisibility and racial battle fatigue) reviewed from the published literature of Black women's experiences in the workplace. I further explored how these lived experiences were storied, noting how participants work around and make use of themes regarding persistence. The exploration of SHEROs and villains as the main characters in the stories and narratives of Black women addressed my remaining set of research questions that focused on narrative structure and how narratives communicate the individual and collective self of Black women.

I explored the narrative of the Strong Black Woman as unquestionably praiseworthy and argued its potential for generating harmful effects among Black women. I argued that a survivor narrative is ill-suited for the storied lived experiences of Black women and that a narrative of persistence may be more fruitful. Since persistence narrative is not a formal theoretical framework within communication, further inquiry should be done to expand its framework and application in the narrative analysis of marginalized persons who push back against the everyday practices of oppression.

The research also highlighted the Strong Black Woman Collective (SBWC) framework and how that serves as a mean of establishing communal voice and space. Since SBWC focuses on the communal and collective voice of Black women, future research could be conducted to examine whether status of women affects how SBWC constructed.

As stated in the introduction of this thesis the experiences and stories of Black women in higher education often goes unheard by those who need to hear them most.

This thesis is important and a gift. The stories shared by myself and the Black women at MAPU provided insight into a reality that is experienced in the shadows of the dominant reality at predominately white institutions. We allowed ourselves to be vulnerable and transparent to retell and relive pain that we often suppress and continue to endure, in hopes that those who do not look like us have a small glimpse into our daily lived experience. This thesis is a gift, in that it addresses the complexities of Black womanhood and how we choose to present in society and within our various positions on university campuses.

However, this gift of transparency and vulnerability is not simply for the consumption of white people in higher education. It is my hope that this thesis provides Black women with the tools to story their experiences in a way that empowers them and highlights Black womanhood and the ability to persist, despite society's desire to dim their light.

## APPENDIX A

### EMAIL TO PARTICIPANTS

This email, along with the consent form, will be sent to those who have been identified to participate in the study:

Hello,

My name is Zelda Tackey and I am a second-year graduate student in the Communication and Advocacy program at James Madison University working on my thesis project for my M.A. degree. As I am learning, there are relatively few Black women in faculty and administrative roles at universities. Therefore, I would like to invite you to participate in a focus group discussion with 3-5 other women so that I may better understand your views as a Black woman in higher education and how that attributes to your self-care. I will be facilitating the discussion and expect that the group will meet for between 90 minutes to 2 hours. I will provide light snacks at the discussion.

With so few Black women in leadership roles at universities, the findings from my research has the potential to be very useful in understanding the tensions and experiences that Black women face on a daily basis. Therefore, I hope you will please contact me ([tackeyzn@dukes.jmu.edu](mailto:tackeyzn@dukes.jmu.edu)) if you are willing to participate in a focus group.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Zelda Tackey

## **APPENDIX B**

### **FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM**

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Zelda Tackey from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Black women in higher education and how that attributes to their maintenance of self. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her SCOM 685 Qualitative Research Methods class semester project and be examined in her thesis project for the M.A. in Communication and Advocacy.

#### **Research Procedures**

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of an interview that will be administered to individual participants through small focus groups of 3-5 individuals. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to being a Black woman in higher education and your self-care. The interview will be audio-recorded.

#### **Time Required**

Participation in this study will require 90 minutes to 2 hours of your time and will be completed in one session.

#### **Risks**

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

#### **Benefits**

There are no direct benefits from participating in this focus group other than the potential benefits from participation in this study include contributing to creating a better understanding of how Black women in higher education talk about their experiences in higher education and how that relates to self-care practices. This study lends itself to the greater academic conversation about diversity in academia in relation to race, gender, sex, etc. and the practice of self-care.

#### **Confidentiality**

The results of this research will be presented within the classroom setting and may be presented at any Communication Studies conferences or published in related academic journals. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the



right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, data will be presented to reflect themes of the responses as a whole; individual comments used to illustrate the themes will be presented in such a way that unique or identifying circumstances will be removed or changed to protect the confidentiality of the participants. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. The digital audio files will be encrypted and transferred to a password protected computer until the transcripts are made, at which time the audio file will be destroyed. While responses will be protected from being identifiable, the researcher cannot guarantee that information shared within the group will not be repeated by other participants to outside parties

### **Participation & Withdrawal**

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

### **Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Zelda Tackey  
School of Communication Studies  
James Madison University  
[tackeyzn@dukes.jmu.edu](mailto:tackeyzn@dukes.jmu.edu)

Dr. Melissa Aleman  
School of Communication Studies  
Studies  
James Madison University  
(540)568-7034  
[alemanmc@jmu.edu](mailto:alemanmc@jmu.edu)

Dr. Carlos Aleman  
School of Communication  
James Madison University  
(540) 568-6496  
[alemancg@jmu.edu](mailto:alemancg@jmu.edu)

### **Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject**

Dr. Taimi Castle  
Chair, Institutional Review Board James Madison University  
(540) 568-2834 [castletl@jmu.edu](mailto:castletl@jmu.edu)

### **Giving of Consent**

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory

answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

I give consent to be audio taped during my interview. \_\_\_\_\_ (initials)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (Signed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher (Signed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX C

### FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

*Hello everyone. My name is Zelda Tackey and I will serve as the facilitator for our focus group. I want to thank you all for being here. I'm looking forward to having a wonderful conversation and hearing about your experiences during your time here at JMU. We have all agreed to be here for about 90 minutes today. Is that still reasonable for everyone? As you look over the informed consent form, feel free to ask any questions that you might have. I would also like to note that any disclosures of sexual misconduct involving JMU employees, students, or visitors that are shared during this focus groups will be reported to Title IX in accordance with Title IX policy and procedures and that in response Title IX will reach out to the individual described as experiencing the harm with information about resources and options available through the university including options to have the harm addressed through law enforcement and campus conduct processes as applicable. Additionally, I will also be providing a list of resources as well. Just a reminder that today's session will be audio-recorded. Is everyone okay with being recorded? [Opportunity for questions and signing of the consent forms; once all have signed, proceed]*

*Much of our conversation today will be about your personal experiences, leaving room for some 'deep' discussion. With this being said I will like this space to be a safe space where people can share freely. Can we agree on what is said in this room stays in this room and not sharing anything that was expressed in this room with anyone else? (Moderator makes eye contact with each person in the room to get their nonverbal consent. Response: Okay great, wonderful, etc.)*

*Before I begin with the questions I would like to get know you all better and for you all to know each other so could we go around and say your name, position/title and how long you have been working at JMU*

Moderator:

*Thank you all for sharing! Now that we've had a chance to meet, we're going to spend the remainder of our time today talking about your experiences as a Black woman working at JMU. Remember, we're interested in learning about your experiences – there is not a right or wrong answer to any of these questions. Sometimes you will find that many people in the room have your opinion, and other times, you will be the only one with that opinion. But it is important for us to learn about all the opinions, because even if you are the only one in the room who holds that opinion, there may be other people within the community who feel just like you do. Most importantly, every opinion counts, so please feel free to share your thoughts. So throughout the discussion, please feel free to respond to one another's ideas, adding to them or talking about points where you disagree. We're going to start off our conversation by talking about your different personal and cultural experience as a Black woman in higher education here at JMU.*

Sample Interview Questions:

- 1) Could you describe a typical day in life of your work here at JMU?
  - a) What are some typical encounters you have with students, faculty, and staff?
- 2) What factors contributed to your decision to peruse a career in higher education? Please share with us a little bit about your path to your current position.
- 3) Can you please describe some of the personal and professional challenges you face as a Black woman in higher education?
  - a. Have any of these challenges forced you to make changes to the way in which you manage or organize your life? If so, please explain
- 4) In what ways have you experienced racism and sexism, if at all, in your work life that have made you reconsider being in higher education?
  - a) How do you manage situations of racism and sexism that you experience in the workplace?
- 5) I'd like to switch gears now and talk about work-life integration. What are some specific ways that you balance work-life tensions?
  - a) Outside of work hours, what are your personal obligations and interests?
  - b) How do you interpret the term "self-care?"
- 6) In what ways is self-care something that you feel is applicable to your daily life? If you could describe one activity that helps you maintain your "self," what would it be?
- 7) Earlier we discussed your personal and professional networks. In what ways, if any, do those networks help you to manage work-life or professional goals?
- 8) Are there any topics that we didn't cover that you'd like to expand upon?
- 9) What did you all feel was the most insightful or important thing that we covered today?
  - a) Why do feel that way?
- 10) Once I write up the data, I'm going to be using pseudonyms for your responses. Is there any particular name that you'd like to be identified by?

Moderator:

*Once again, thank you all so much for participating today. You have provided some really insightful information so let's make sure we respect each other and keep this information confidential. If there is anything that you'd like to discuss with me about the study you can reach me by email (provide email address—tackeyzn@dukes.jmu.edu) or you can reach me by phone (provide phone number 540-266-2506). Your time is highly appreciated; I honestly could not complete this research without you!*

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