A LETTER TO A BLACK GIRL: REFLECTIONS ON BEING BORN BLACK AND FEMALE

BY

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THESIS
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Abstract

This thesis serves as an exploration of my personal lived experiences and contextualizes them within broader discourses of Black Feminist Thought. The purpose of this paper is to interrogate what my lived experiences say about the culture of being marked in a body that is Black and female (Brown, 2009). Supported by literature on meaning making based off of lived experience, this paper outlines specific life events and situates them within Black Feminist Theory, and standpoint theory. Patricia Collins, a contemporary scholar of Black Feminist Thought theorizes that “Black feminist literary criticism, Black women’s history, and Black cultural studies all remain centered on Black women’s subjectivity or “voice”, [which] contain space for Black women intellectuals to draw upon their own experiences as touchstones for developing race, class, and gender intersectionality”—which are often exemplified in personal narrative, stories and critical social theory (Collins, 1998, pp. 119). What is significant about this research is the connection that is made between lived experience and theory—thus establishing a methodology for culturally and personally relevant scholarship.

Key words: Black Feminism; Narrative; Methodology; Lived Experience
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INTRODUCTION

When thinking about how to go about writing about what I am supposed to know or what I have permission to say, I realize that Black feminism has allowed me the ability to speak from my lived experiences and make meaning out of what I have lived. It is not book smarts, although influenced by the literature within the Black feminist tradition, race, class, gender, sexuality and the like. What I am here to talk about is my life. I am arguing for placing value on my lived experience. Renowned Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins supports the lived experience as the “criterion for meaning”. She infers that using lived experiences as a criterion for credibility, is at the center of making knowledge claims for Black women in the U.S. context (Collins, 2009).

There have been specific incidents in my life that have served as a framework for how I view and interpret the world, race, class, and gender have been staples in my identity formation and construction. These factors will continue to have an impact on all aspects of my life. Having no control over being born Black, female, being born in the projects, growing up in the suburbs, and struggling for my identity, I have come to be critical and reflective of how societal forces act upon me and influence the fibers of my being.

For the purpose of this paper, I am going to do a brief autobiographical narrative, highlighting how individual instances of race, class, gender, and sexuality have informed, been informed, and transformed how I have come to know who I am as a Black woman, scholar, daughter, etc. This process I argue can be seen as a methodology—thus contributing to Black Feminist discourses and qualitative methodologies at large.

In an effort to express this initially, I decided to write a poem that was published in The Public I, a local Urbana, IL Newspaper. Written anonymously in order to protect my family members associated and sexual predators, I wrote the following piece with pride. I was
introduced to writing this poem because *The Public I* approached my academic advisor with the opportunity for anyone she knew to write a submission related to Black History Month. The submission called for new and interesting writers to submit pieces of their choice. They were also particularly interested in focusing on wrings from a local, Black girlhood experiences. Further, after thinking about what I could possibly write about—I decided that story that I would submit would be that of my experience being sexually harassed by a family member.

The conception of the poem was drawn from a real lived experienced, however, the inspiration for deciding to write on sexual harassment was—as my advisor reminds me—linked to my experience in the Black girlhood celebration group, SOLHOT (Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths) I have been a part of for the past three years. When talking in one session a girl expressed her discontent for her mother’s boyfriend. She expressed that she did not like him being around and that he gave her a weird vibe—but that she knew that her mother would continue to see the man.

After she casually continued to talk, and almost immediately start talking about a completely different subject, I sat with her feelings. I remember thinking to myself that I was pained that she had to live with a similar feeling within her heart—and that she spoke alone in that moment, as I did not chime in and assert my own experiences of being sexually harassed as a young person.
CHAPTER 1: THE POEM

Letter to a Black Girl

To Whom It May Concern (and those who may think it doesn’t):

So, when exactly did it start? As I sit and ponder on when I can recall my first moment of interaction with sexuality, I realize I can’t do it. I can’t remember. It’s as simple as that.

Sooner than later, I come up with the idea that I first came across sexuality when it was taken from me. I had never realized who I was sexually or if I was even a sexual being when a man decided he was confident in his sexuality enough and would affirm his ego. At that moment, sexuality had me. I didn’t have my sexuality.

The moment after my sexuality was taken, I wasn’t aware of exactly what was happening, but believe it or not, there was a secret decline in my spirit. My own personal sexual identity was stripped before it bloomed. At 6 years old. I hadn’t even realized that I had it, never got a chance to use it, identify it, locate or plan for it. Instead, mine was chosen by someone else and used strictly for his disposal, with no regard to the fact that I was his flesh and blood.

The interesting thing about all of this is that, it was
someone old enough to understand and realize exactly what he was doing. See, he knew. I didn’t.

As I sit on this plane, I realize exactly how pissed I am. I’m deeply hurt actually. I mean, think about it. It’s disgusting. A grown man decided to introduce a 6 year old to the harsh realities of life. I wasn’t born on July 4th, 1988. I was born into society on that day, in my day bed, at 6 years old.

I didn’t have the opportunity to make my own decision on whether or not I was even ready or able to engage in such behaviors.

It troubles me sometimes to think that at such a young age, something can be bestowed upon you like that, but I realize that it is a part of a broader narrative that other black women face as well; young black girls in their adolescence, all the way up to grown black women in their dealings with the real world.

I realize it’s not only a struggle I had alone, but it’s also a struggle that unifies us, silently of course, because we never seem to be able to talk about things like that. Even as I write this, I realize I wasn’t able to talk about it, my mom wasn’t able to talk about it for me. My family still has no clue about it. Now, its time to talk about it.

I’M TALKING ABOUT IT.
As I reflect, I realize that I didn’t know how that experience shaped how I think about my sexuality and things in that regard.

It’s almost like, after that happened, I went through years of a frozen consciousness so to speak; of thinking and feeling and realizing that experience was essential to how I thought and felt about sex and sexuality.

It’s only now that I can remember, not remember as in recount the past, but remember and realize how that experienced shaped, shapes and influenced certain decisions and opinions about sex for me.

You know, it’s almost scary.

I wonder what that frozen period is called.

Is it blocking out the memory of pain?

Is it simply not existing in the consciousness of what happened to me sexually?

What is that?

Is that being silenced?

You will be surprised to know that I still don’t know what that is.

To all US Black girls who still don’t know what THAT is or are still lost there, remember:

They have ignored what we say.
Our hopes.

Our truths.

The tangled web that’s woven.

For us, on behalf of us.

Know that their ears and minds cannot comprehend
the navigation.

Instilled in the fibers of our being.

To possess the power to dismantle the matrix.

WE speak a language, seldom translatable.

In the name of ourselves.

In the name of being Black girls, speak and know.

And to society and everyone else involved, Recognize

The Revolution.

In complete openness, honesty and humility,

—A Black Girl¹

The act of writing and expressing the words; my feelings—recalling the act of being sexually harassed as a young girl was revolutionary and yes, in doing so, I felt in solidarity with the push for liberation of my feelings about sexuality. By publishing this poem—I also am in solidarity with the girl in SOLHOT. Now she doesn’t have to speak first (shout out to Dr. Brown for making that visible to me). In an effort to push harder—this thesis was drafted. The following

pages serve as a catalyst theorizing from my lived experiences and interrogating what they may mean in referenced to Black Feminist discourse and discourses around Black women’s lives.
CHAPTER 2: INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF TAYLOR-IMANI

I was born at the weight of 2 lbs. at 6:14 am on July 4th, 1988 in the neighborhood of Hyde Park in Chicago, Illinois. I was born to a Black, single woman with 2 kids—a girl of 6 years and a boy of 3 years—a family who was considered working class, or working poor. It is not rare in present day, and was not rare in 1988 that the household was taking on a different look in terms of family structure. This was true for my family at the time—and was also true for a progressing society in 1988. The emergences of single female-headed households were becoming even more prevalent. In fact, growing numbers of women are living alone or rearing children independently. According to Stevi Jackson, in 1991, 19 percent of families with children were headed by single parents, most of whom were women (Jackson, 1997). So, in essence being born into a family that was singly headed by a woman was not an necessarily exception—it was becoming the norm.

I came into this world premature with under-developed lungs, and the doctor’s projection that I would never have hand and eye coordination or be able to walk. I went home from intensive care four months later on a breathing machine. By November of 1988, my biological mother was overwhelmed with the struggle of taking care of three children, all under the ages of six, without the support of family, a helpmate, and hardly any finances. As a result of those combining factors, she decided to give me up for adoption. As I am in touch with her in present day, she reminds me that at that time in her life, she was struggling. It is hard for me to separate her trials of being a single mother with three small children—one needing such intense attention and observation—from the broader discussion on how the definition of family has evolved (Jackson, 1997). Jackson outlines how Black feminists have been critical of white feminists’ preoccupation with the family as a basis of women’s oppression—highlighting that although in
Black feminist literature acknowledging the family as a site of subordination is apparent. Also central is the view of the family as a support system (Jackson, 1997).

November 14th, 1988, I was renamed from Shelise Brown to Taylor-Imani Andelisa Linear by the selection of my adoptive mother. I was given up for adoption by a Black single woman and adopted by a Black, single woman—with no previous children—living in a middle class suburb of Chicago. Often times, when asked about my adoption story, people are surprised that in 1988, not that a Black single woman put me up for adoption, but that a Black, single woman was able to adopt me. I assume the minor astonishment speaks to the ability of adoption agencies to accept the stability of a single headed household in relation to the more “stable” or “traditional” family structures ensured to help raise productive citizens (Jackson, 1997). The slight astonishment could also be attributed to literature’s tendency to highlight parenting and adoption practices for non-same-sex partners. Charlene Gomes’, 2003 article, “Partners as Parents: Challenges Faced by Gays Denied Marriage”, complicates the family dynamic of gay partners struggling to become parents in a society that is progressive, yet still has not fully acknowledged non-traditional family structures (Gomes, 2003). The fact that Gomes brings attention to the hardships of gay partners denied marriage in their quest to become parents, in a feminist anthology is not in question or up for debated. What I do want to call attention to, however, is that it affirms the idea of who is adequate enough to parent—without consideration of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.

The adoption was an advantageous one—being placed in a home that was financially stable, a family with no other children, a family with a Master’s as the net education level, and a family with a support system—all to support a physically struggling infant. Race, class, gender and sexuality having the ability to inform family make-up, matters. The intersecting of the above
categories shapes the environment of the child. Being brought up in a family with same sex parents creates different dynamics for a child within American society and abroad. The same is true for family environments headed by single mothers.

As far as my biological family environment was concerned, there were real and tangible ramifications of being born into a working poor family—lack of adequate treatment for my medical issues, dilapidated housing conditions, few financial resources, etc. My biological mother did not have many resources, but as a Black woman, operating within her own matrix of intersection race, class, gender and sexuality, decided to use her agency. She chose adoption.

Being a Black child and being put up for adoption was nothing new (Roberts, 2002)—however, actually getting adopted and not being placed in foster care is up for debate. One of the leading Black feminist scholars, specializing in area of adoption and the family is Dorothy Roberts. Roberts analyzed the foster care system in relation to Black feminist epistemology in her article entitled, “Feminism, Race and Adoption Policy”. She outlines that there needs to be more attention paid to why there are so many Black children put up for adoption, primarily, and then secondarily, why Black children are place in the foster care system at twice the rate of their white counterparts (p. 42).

She further highlights that child foster system in the United States does more than just mirror the inequitable social order—it helps to maintain it. Roberts concludes her article with a critique of present day feminist scholars to lean too heavily on the support of the foster care system favoring new adoptive homes for Black children over maintaining biological family structures—as to assume that Black family structures are in need of constant government intervention (Roberts, 2002). When talking with my biological mother about her choice to give me up for adoption, she reminds me that she would have wanted most for me to be able to stay
with her and be raised with my other siblings, however, she was overwhelmed and decided that adoption was the best option for herself, our family dynamics at the time, and the possibilities for her children’s futures.

As a direct result of my biological mother’s agency, her knowledge of adoption option funneled through the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS), my biological mother’s intersectionality of race, class, gender and sexuality acting upon her own life, the Socio-Economic Status (SES) of my adoptive mother, her intersectionality, and willingness to be an adoptive mother, I was afforded the opportunity to grow up in Park Forest, IL, a southern suburb of Chicago, IL. Gaylynn Burroughs, in her 2008 article, “Too Poor to Parent”, interrogates how Black children are the most overrepresented demographic in foster care nationwide, and that in 2004, “Black children were twice as likely to enter foster care as white children” (p. 572).

Her research explains that the leading cause for the high rate of Black children being put up for adoption is attributed to poverty, stating that “nationwide, Blacks are four times more likely than other groups to live in poverty” (p.472). Thus, the exchange of family SES that occurred when I was put up for adoption and then adopted, is an interesting exchange to explore. It speaks to the predisposition of class and through mechanisms like adoption, how class position can be altered, and shifted. I do not know what my life chances would have been had I in fact grown up in Hyde Park. When discussing the class politics of my life and how I have been ushered into class by both birthright and adoption, it shows how inevitable talking about class positionality within my geographic, environmental and economic context is.

As I cannot divorce being born to a woman struggling financially, from being born Black, I cannot separate how I have been socialized as Taylor-Imani without outlining the factors that shape it. Being classed or born into inherent economic strata has the ability to place powerful
ramifications of access for human beings. So, being adopted by a middle class woman—characterized by her attainment of a Master’s Science degree 1956-- no doubt afforded me the potential for different economic and educational access. However, it is important to acknowledge that in terms of class, I would have received what Pierre Bourdieu (1986) describes as “cultural capital” AND “social capital”, from either family make-up. Cultural capital can be discussed as non-financial, social assets that may be educational or intellectual, which might promote social mobility beyond economic means. Social capital then, can be discussed as the capital derived from social networks—in this case, my Single parent, biological family. So in essence, I would have received advantageous capital from either family structure—based off geographic location, economics, education level, family structure, age difference between both mothers—and a host of other factors.

Growing up an only child with many extended relatives, I often found myself feeling grateful for the life I was given. My adoption was never a secret; my adoptive mother and I consistently embraced my origins and to this day celebrate my biological family as true family and annually celebrate November 14th as “Gotcha Day”. Although my mother did her best to shield me from being blind-sided by experiences that would give way to my knowledge of being raced, classed, gendered and sexualized, these constructs were inevitable to avoid. As I was aware at a very early age of how class and SES affected my life, I would soon become aware of how body politics, sexuality and sexual harassment were prevalent within the lives of my family members—specifically the Black women of my family.

At the age of six, my gender and sexuality were made explicitly visible. Up until this experience in my life, gender and sexuality informed who I was, however never discussed after. There had never been a moment when my mother and I would connect so explicitly on the basis
of being gendered and sexualized. I woke up out of my sleep to the noise of what I remember as a belt buckle. I opened my eyes to see my cousin removing his pants and getting in the bed with me. Just as his hands touched my legs, the door of my room flew open. It was my mother, screaming at the top of her lungs. She picked me up out of my bed and quickly removed me from my room. She placed me in her room, told me to wait there and shut the door as she rushed to confront my cousin.

For the next hour our so I heard yelling, commotion and struggle. When it was all over, my mother came in to console me and talk to me about what had just happened. It was not until I was old enough to name the actions of that night that I realized that I was gendered and sexualized. I was not just simply a cousin, or a daughter. My ideological and interpretive framework shifted. My understanding about what was appropriate for family interactions and body politics was being socially constructed. In my mind as a 6-year-old girl, gender and sexuality were defined as being an object of allure—a possession of someone else’s.

This idea of allure and desire is not new. This single incident has impacted how I view sexuality, relationships with men, my body, notions of worth and value, and notions of childhood—profoundly impacting my well-being and survival (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). I also learned later in life that my mother had brushes with sexual harassment, and my other aunts and cousins—Black women and girls—had also lived through being born Black and female. Black girls and women’s relationship to body politics—sexuality, violence, etc.—has been a tumultuous relationship since its inception. Beverly Guy-Sheftall charted this relationship in her introduction to the section, *The Body Politic: Sexuality, Violence, and Reproduction*, in her edited anthology, “Words of Fire” (1995). She maintains,

“Black women’s bodies have been sites of contestation since Europeans first set foot on African soil to appropriate free labor for the brutal system of slavery. Myths about Black
female sexuality, born on the African continent, would follow Black women to the “New World” and help to justify their sexual exploitation for generations thereafter” (p. 359).

Although here, Beverly is speaking on a larger scale of the system of exploitation of the Black body, the notions that such a system will have ramifications for generations is directly linked to my experiences of being sexually harassed by my cousin, and the broader dialogue about sexual harassment of Black women by family members.

It was then when my mother came into her room to console me that I started to cry. When I think about why I hadn’t cried while in my room, it makes me wonder about if I knew what was going on… and what was the reason I cried when my mother joined me again? I can’t remember what happened immediately after or how any events from that night immediately affected my life, but looking back, that experience manifested itself in different ways.

I found myself in fear of that family member. Even as an older girl, making sure to stand on the opposite side of the room from him seemed unconscious—but see, I was conscious. The fear I felt was real. I wasn’t in fear that he would somehow “get me” again or do something. Instead, I was in fear of the reality that someone that was considered my family and loved one had a special look in his eye for me. He thought differently about my body then my other male cousins did… or did he? I never had to question what my other male family members thought of my body or my sexual behavior or sexual being, up until those events. All of the sudden, my senses were heightened. I knew to be aware of what I wore, what I looked like, what I said, when I knew I had to be within the vicinity of him. As an older, wiser woman, aware of the implications of my body, I have an, “I will fuck you up” (I will fight for my life, because my life depends on it) attitude when I see him. I am no longer afraid, because I will fuck him up if he or anyone else ever tried doing anything to me sexually without my consent.
I have claimed the power over my body. In doing so, though, I cannot help but question the power afforded to my cousin not only to think that what he was doing and about to do was appropriate, but that I would and should receive it. Wendy Harcourt, in her book “Body Politics in Development: Critical Debates in Gender and Development”, discusses how gender-based violence is played out in all levels of power. She asserts that gender-based violence is manifested within both the private and public; the home and the community (Harcourt, 2009). Harcourt’s perspective brings to the fore how the bodies of Black women and Black girls have assumptions and representations attached to them. Even as a six year old, my premature body had images, and representations attached to it.

As it is important for me to highlight that I was not raped; yet I was a victim of unwanted sexual behavior and sexual suggestion. I make this point, not to devalue what happened; however, I do think that rape and sexual harassment are different branches of the same tree—but need to be fleshed out. Sexual harassment, defined by ‘daily behaviors’ such as ‘cleavage-gazing’, personal remarks, squeezing rubbing or patting, becomes hard to define due to the tendency to regard such behaviors as acceptable parts of everyday life for girls and women (Skelton, 1997).

Through my encounter with being sexualized as a result of being the object of desire of someone who did not have my consent, I cannot help but think about the Black female body and how practically I am to navigate the politics of my body. As an object, the Black female body operates as if there isn’t a soul or identity attached to it. Further, characteristics were attached to this object/ image, and it starts to grow arms, legs, feet, and even a personality—for the desire of another—my body began to be stereotyped as wanting of sexual behavior—only then legitimized by my cousin (a young Black man at the time) for sexual exploitation (Marshall, 1996). I am not
stating here that as a Black woman, I do not rejoice in my body and its sentiments, or that my body should not be desirable, and admired, however I am making explicit the nature of my position in it all and asserting that I should have control over such politics.

Additional politics that I would soon learn that I had no control over—were the politics of race. Just as class, and gender had become visible to me before I had even learned the Constitution of the United States, being raced was made tangible to me by the age of seven. I was in the second grade and attended a Catholic, private school that was approximately 97% white. It was the end of the day in Mrs. _____ class and she was giving out report cards. After most of the students had left the classroom, I realized I was the only student left, without a report card. I proceeded to tell Mrs. ______ that I had yet to receive a report card. She insisted that I had indeed received one. After some debate and contest, she stated, “Now Taylor, I gave you a report card. That’s why I can’t stand you people”.

I ran out of the classroom to my mother waiting for me in the parking lot, tears streaming down from my face. At the moment, I was more upset that she raised her voice and gestured to me in such a violent manner. I told my mom what happened and she immediately sprang into action, took my hand in hers and almost sprinted to Mrs. _____ classroom. After much yelling commotion, and my report card—that she did indeed still have—we left the school and had a conversation about this thing called “racism”, or as my mother described it, “difference that people show towards other people who don’t look like them”. That following year, I was in third grade and had started school at another school. In an effort to combat racial tension, she removed me from the Catholic school and placed me in the public school down the street from our house. Years following, she made conscious efforts to discuss with me how to recognize, respond and cope with what I now know as the “isms”; racism, sexism, classism, etc. My mother and I still
have these discussions. It is a part of our moral fiber to recognize how race, class and gender shape our worldviews, relationship to each other and so forth. Initially it seems that Mrs. _____ made a decision about the honesty of one of the 2nd graders in her class. Even giving her the benefit of the doubt, and thinking that she was simply frustrated that one of her students was forgetful, didn’t work. Her remark and specific emphasis on “you people” did not allude to my youth, that fact that I was her student, or my gender. It was clear to my mother that within Mrs. _____’s remarks were racial undertones.

Having to talk about race alone or set apart from gender is hard for me to do here. As I embark upon finding literature to discuss and help flesh out the complexities that are associated with my experiences in 2nd grade, I find that I cannot think about being Black without being gendered. Historically this has been identified as being triply oppressed or possessing “Double Jeopardy”. Brought to Black feminist literature in 1970, Frances Beale’s essay, “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female”, addressed the double burden of race and gender that Black women confront on a daily basis. She states,

“let me state here and now that the Black woman in America can justly be described as a “slave of a slave.” By reducing the Black man in America to such abject oppression, the Black woman had no protector and was used, and is still being used in some cases, as the scapegoat for the evils that this horrendous system has perpetrated on Black men. Her physical image has been maliciously maligned; she has been sexually molested and abused by the white colonizer; she has suffered the worst kind of economic exploitation, having been forced to serve as the white woman’s maid and wet-nurse for white offspring while her own children were more often than not starving and neglected. It is the depth of degradation to be socially manipulated, physically raped, used to undermine your own household, and to be powerless to reverse this syndrome” (p. 148).

It is clear here that Frances Beale is highlighting the position of the Black woman in relation to Black men, white men and white women. Therefore, when thinking about my race position within society, it is hard to divorce it from my class position, gender position, etc. At different
times, one category may appear to take priority; however, they are all linked and have intermingling parts.
CHAPTER 3: A DISCUSSION

The categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality—as single categories are by no means mutually exclusive or exhaustive in discussing the complexities of being who I am—Taylor-Imani. This intermingling, alluded to by Frances Beale, is most presently discussed as Intersectionality. Intersectionality lies on the same continuum of “Double Jeopardy” (Beale 1970) and “Multiple Oppressions” (Collins, 2000). Coined by Kimberlie Crenshaw, Intersectionality, is a term used to explain how multiple oppressions like race, class, and gender are intermingled—to create a way of knowing/being/living, experiencing. Crenshaw (1993) uses the term intersectionality to,

“denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences. My objective [here is] to illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately (Crenshaw, 1993 pp. 1244).

Further, often linked what is known as the “Matrix of Domination”, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2000) posits this term as “how intersecting oppressions are actually organized” (p. 21). So, on a macro level, the intersectionality of race, class, gender and sexuality have broad and overarching consequences that situate girls and women in particular places. This placement—ascribed in nature—shows how intersecting paradigms are in conversation with each other. Crenshaw speaks to the recognition of such identity politics and calls for a proactive approach, thus positioning the use of categories like race, class, and gender within the social-historical context of society. She maintains,

“race, gender and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or domination—that is, as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different [and ] according to this understanding, or liberatory objective should be to empty such
categories of any social significance...yet implicit in certain strands of feminist and racial
liberation movements, for example is the view that the social power in delineating
difference need not be the power of domination’ it can instead be the source of social
empowerment” (Crenshaw, 1993, pp. 1242).

Being a student of feminism causes you to be critical of gendered notions about yourself
and gender binaries, etc., so I guess initially writing this paper, I made the false assumption that
such critical lenses were created in simply reading and researching about Women’s Studies.
What I have come to understand is that at the center of my knowledge and wisdom is my
identity; my personhood; my womanhood. I have lived experiences that speak to theory and joins
broader discourses of violence against women, racism, poverty, sexuality, discrimination, etc., to
together into the most tangible form—life. In searching for this connection, I have come to
realize that this process of self-awareness and reflection is not only ethnographic in nature, but
that such a process embodies the aims and goals of Black Feminism.

Falling in line with the intellectual tradition of Black Feminist literary tradition, in
recounting my lived experiences and theorizing about them, it is my goal to explicate what Zora
Neale Hurston highlights, in her autobiography “Dust Track on a Road”, being aware that people
are prone to build a statue of the kind of person that it pleases them to be. To that end, I do feel
that there is a distinction between writings done by Black women, and slightly differently, Black
Feminist writings. Underlying the distinction between writings by Black women and Black
Feminist writings are the political micro-movements and cites of individual agency that are
imbedded within the text.

In Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s article “My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of
Afro-American Women”, she outlines what specific elements to autobiographical narratives by
Black women speak to Black Feminism. As applied to my writing process, Elizabeth confirms
that centering the experiences of being Black and female, politicizing my lived experiences,
periodizing my lived experiences, situating my lived experiences between the text and the author, writing for an audiences that will influences the discourse around Black women’s issues, writing in common (everyday) language, and finally, the fact that contend that I what I have written is my truth—all categorize my writings as Black and Feminist in nature (Fox Genovese, 1990).

Similarly, bell hooks’ analysis of white feminism, in her piece, “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory”, calls out Black women writing on our own accord, by highlighting white feminism. She maintains, “if these distorted images of feminism have more reality than ours do, it is partly our own fault” and that “we have not worked as hard as we should have at providing clear and meaningful alternative analyses which related to people’s lives” (hooks, 2000, pp. 137-138).

What I would add to bell hook’s statement is that more meaningful work needs to be analyzed, related to OUR lives. This single statement seemed to get to the core of who I am and what I honor as a self-identified Black feminist scholar: contributing to the intellectual tradition of Black feminism—both for the community of Black Feminism and myself. I feel it is my responsibility to employ the things that I have learned in my lived experiences and academic trajectory, to the body of phenomenal works that is Black Feminism.

My sentiment blatantly mirrors the motivation for Black feminist scholars of the past to actively write, speak, act in solidarity to conserve a space of OUR own. As earlier Black feminist scholars, writers and activists like Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, bell hooks, June Jordan, Joy James, Patricia Hill Collins, Shani Jamila and Barbara Smith—all pushing for a realm outside of general feminism and actively contributing to the what we now know as the third wave of feminism (and beyond)—I had to look within and then return to the literature.
This thesis serves as one of my contributions to place my lived experiences within the dialogue about ourselves, Black Feminist Thought and Black feminist literature. It is significant because it is uncomfortable and it is uncomfortable because it is my truth. Audre Lorde’s seminal paper, “The Transformation of silence into Language Action”, delivered on December 28th, 1977 urged me to “believe that what is most important to me must be spoke, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood…[and that] for those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it” (Lorde, 1978, pp. 40-43). It is in this spirit that I write, speak, and am seeking to eradicate the silence of my lived experiences and truths about being raced, classed, gendered and sexualized.
CHAPTER 4: WRITING MY LIFE AS METHOD

Bodies of work that speak to the lived experiences of people of color, and specifically Black women, have traditionally validated Western or Eurocentric ways of knowing and epistemologies. These epistemologies in turn serve the interest of those in power—white men—supported by renowned feminist and poet, Audre Lorde (2007), as a norm that “is not me”. So, what does this mean in reference to Black Feminist literature? It means that those other than ourselves have historically told our stories—hence the need for and beauty of—Black Feminist Thought and literature—plain and simple.

The process of writing my lived experiences, and then theorizing them is considered a part of the Black feminist tradition. Placing my lives experiences at the fore and validating my knowledge as wisdom serve essential to Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Collins, 2009). Patricia Hill Collins agrees as she maintains, “living life requires wisdom because knowledge about the dynamics of intersecting oppressions has been essential to U.S. Black women’s survival” (Collins, 2009, p. 275). It is apparent through Patricia’s quote that my experiences of being all the things that make me Taylor-Imani, and all the things that have real implications like race, class, gender, and sexuality—are valid—they are my truth—and as I employ them, they are not only making new meaning, but deconstructing the prevailing notions of what it means to be a woman (Collins, 2009).

To that end,

“for most African-American women, those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences. Thus lived experiences as a criterion for credibility frequently is evoked by U.S. Black women when making knowledge claims” (ibid., p. 276).
Collins discusses how many Black women scholars invoke our own lived experiences in our works because it is fundamental.

My knowledge and understanding of Black Feminism is rooted within my personal context. I first learned of Black Feminism—without its proper name—in my home. I later was able to name it, upon sitting in classes at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Taking African-American Studies courses, Gender and Women’s Studies courses education courses, and courses whose curriculums were focused on race, class and gender allowed me to learn about theory and how my lived experiences could be represented by theory. I learned about dynamic women like Fannie Lou Hammer, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Sojourner Truth, Mary Church Terrell, Zora Neale Hurston, June Jordan, The Combahee River Collective, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks—all who included their lived experiences within their work. Their livelihood became their work, and vice versa.

Center one’s own personal experience within a work is key. Anthropologist, Ruth Behar centers herself in her work and illustrated this in her seminal book, “The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart”. Behar (1996) discusses the process of participant observation, asserting that one should “lay down in the mud in Columbia…and write down what you saw are heard…relate it to something you have read by Marx, Weber, Gramsci or Geertz and on your way to doing Anthropology” (p. 4-5). Although Behar is describing the art of participant observation—a well-known practice of the field of Anthropology, I find it as equally reminiscent of the process I have had to go through in writing this thesis. I experienced different things in my life, wrote about them, and then discussed them in relation to the broader discussions on race, class, gender, sexuality, and themes within the Black Feminist tradition—racism, sexism, politics of the body, etc.
In doing so, one of the major challenges that I have faced in writing about my lives experiences is over-subjectivity. I fully understand that writing about my life in reference to theory can be dangerous. It is dangerous in the sense that I will never know to what extend I may call what I do ethnography by being completely subjective—using my own thoughts, experiences, etc. Ruth Behar (1996) grapples with this issue when questioning if there is every a time when while being self-reflexive, there is something that is ever “too personal”. Part of my apprehension and procrastination for writing this piece has been linked to how difficult it is to write about the moments that you don’t what everyone to know, and the difficulty of not knowing what such an open writing of this kind may do to my personal and/or professional life.

Armed with my want to push myself through when I didn’t want to write about what is not accessible to the outside world, Dr. Brown, my advisor told me I had to. I struggled with trying to name what I was actually doing—as if naming what I was doing would make it somewhat easier to do. However, what I have come to realize is that this thesis lies somewhere between a case study, auto-ethnography and an autobiographical narrative.

What makes it ethnographic in nature is its ability to “study” or theorize my lived experiences (Babbie, 2007), which focuses on detailed and accurate descriptions. What makes this work auto-ethnographic then, is the intentional use of a personal stance (Babbie, 2007). The components that make this work autobiographical in nature are the life facts. The autobiographical information that I have provided for this paper happened just as they have been discussed in chronological order with real dates, times, places, and recall of events, to my present knowledge and recollection.

What makes this paper narrative in nature is my writing style—I employed a conversational tone, highlighted with my personal feelings, reactions and insights. I believe that
when someone shares their lived experiences, and knows them to be true, they are fact, however, there are critiques of how people report their experiences of reality. For example, Alfred Schutz, the founder of Phenomenology argued that reality was socially constructed rather than being “out there” for us to observe, and further, people describe their world, not “as it is”, but as they make sense of it (Babbie, 2007).

Although this may be the case, within the Black feminist tradition—which both influences and is influenced by social science research—my experiences, however I know it to be true, is valid—and truth and should be at the center (Behar, 1996; Collins, 1998; Collins 2009; De Preez, 2008; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). It is precisely this attribute that contributes to what is significant about this research and it is the connection that is made between my lived experience and theory that establishes its own methodology that can be acknowledged as culturally and personally relevant scholarship.
I have always had a critical eye and an affinity for Black Feminist Thought, not because it is inherent within my genes or psyche, but because of the context in which I grew up and am/was molded—it is a part of my social and cultural fiber. My Mother’s experiences are inextricably hers and thus, mine. The power of legacy through child rearing (on behalf of both my biological mother and my mother) has shown in this example and analysis of my lived experiences, that the conscious mind and lived experience shaped my identity formation and being in a body marked as Black and female (Brown, 2009), matter. My mother’s experiences of poverty, racism, rape, education, discrimination, etc., helped to create a Black feminism—in practice.

We as Black women and girls are equipped with a critique of the status quo because we have never been the status quo and we were never meant to survive. We are in solidarity and support of equality because we historically have never been considered equal. We actively promote agency and consent up against sexual harassment, and rape because we were never asked permission for the use and production of our bodies. We collectively, “struggle against the pervasive oppression that defines Western culture. Whether taking aim at gender equity, homophobia or images of women, it functions to resist disempowering ideologies and devaluing institutions. [We use Black Feminism to] merge theory and action to reaffirm Black women’s legitimacy as producers of intellectual work and reject assertions that attaché our ability to contribute to these traditions” (Jamila, 2002, p. 390-391).

My mother embodies Black Feminism. I embody Black Feminism. Through this process of writing my experiences, it is hard for me to express how my life has been intrinsically attached to Black Feminism without referencing my mother, another Black woman, with lived experiences that relate to theory. As Black Feminism respects the experiences of Black women and our allies, likewise, I cannot separate my everyday lived experiences from Black Feminist Thought.
Interpreting my lived experiences took on a world of its own. Adams and Holman (2011), allude to this balance as they maintain:

“such interrogation involve[d] a rigorous call for reflexivity—to reflect not only on the self, how the self works, and how others are implicated by the self and the self’s desires, but also on how [I] represent—in writing, performance, film, and so on—the process and challenges of reflection. It means making ourselves vulnerable to critique, by risking living—in language and in life—the terms we keep in question by embodying their possibilities without fixing or determining their movements (p. 111).

It is clear that in order to be involved in the work of theorizing and people’s lived experiences, I had to be reflective of my lived experience and vulnerable to sharing (Du Preez, 2008). So it is inevitable in this work to reflect on my own personal understandings of what it means for me to operate in society as a Black girl/woman, in order to genuinely theorize the lived experiences of what it means to be Black and female. I believe that this process of reflection creates an environment conducive to learning as well as inserting and implicating myself within my writing.

Submitting an article to *The Public I*, served as a catalyst for both contributing to Black feminist literature and to academic writing in general. Opening up my personal experience with sexual harassment helped broaden the scope of what it means to be critical of the world around you, examine the role of the self, and challenge the status quo as it relates to race, class, gender and sexuality. It showed that the personal in fact is also the political (Betsch Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003), and by the sheer use of my personal life accounts, contributes to feminist dialogue within the community of Black feminist scholarship, feminism scholarship and the broader academy.

Black feminist literature has accomplished this task and more through the decades, my work shares a common thread—expressing real lived experience of being born Black and female. Both my poem and this thesis are intended to be honest and open reflections on what it means for
me to be a Black woman, identify as a Black girl, a daughter, heterosexual, a scholar, a cousin, etc. It is important that writings, speeches, dialogues and expressions of our own individual experiences are shared, in order to continue to propel both critical and honest personal, political and academic growth.
REFERENCES


